Putting the Ha! In Aha!: Humor as a Tool for Effective Communication

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Advisor: Dan Tomasulo

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Abstract

Speakers, trainers, and leaders are challenged with delivering important messages aimed at informing, persuading, and influencing audiences; audiences that are already overwhelmed with information, daunted by problems, or stuck in old patterns of attitudes and behaviors. Until recently, humor has been viewed as something that merely makes us feel good and distracts us from our daily drudgeries. Positive psychology offers empirical data that show that humor is a serious tool that creates connection between people, enhances charisma of communicators, engages attention, enhances memory, leverages people's willingness to shift attitudes and behaviors, and increases the resilience of communicators and their audiences. Humor does all of this, not despite the fact that it is enjoyable, but in large part, because it is enjoyable. Most research has used pre-produced humor (cartoons, stories, and videos), showing that communicators need not be producers of humor themselves, but can leverage the power of pre-produced humor to engage and delight audiences. This capstone includes a business plan for the creation of humorous video vignettes that can be utilized by the author, as well as other communicators, to bring speeches and trainings to life and make a message shtick.

Keywords: humor, communication, positive psychology, mindfulness, memory, resilience

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Introduction

Throughout the centuries, theories of humor have abounded. Superiority theory supported by Aristotle, Plato, and Hobbes, proposes that we derive pleasure by deriding others (Berger, 1987). Relief theory, put forth by Freud (1905), proposes that humor is an attempt to mask id-like impulses of sexual hostility and aggression. Incongruity-resolution theory proposes that we laugh when we have resolved the absurdity or incompatibility of concepts in a joke (Weems, 2014).

Like most abilities humans possess, humor can be used for ill or for good. Most of these earlier theories focus on the neutral or negative aspects of humor. However, Freud later highlighted one of the positive uses of humor, stating that it is the "representation of parental forgiveness that enables an individual to gain perspective and relief from the emotions attendant upon disappointments and failures" (Freud, 1928 as cited in Lefcourt, 2005, p. 621). Maslow (1954) considered humor to be a function of a self-actualized person, or one who has achieved his fullest potential. Vaillant (1977; 2000) found humor to be a mature coping mechanism in healthy older adults. When used to cope with the world at large and connect with others, humor is considered a virtue (Beermann & Ruch, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Indeed, ask any single person nowadays what they look for in a potential mate and you're likely to see "sense of humor" towards the top of the list, with humor being a socially attractive trait used in mate selection (McGee & Shevlin, 2009).

In the realm of education, humor has often been viewed as a waste of time, "an unnecessary and undignified embellishment" (Korobkin, 1988 as cited in Boverie, Hoffman, Klein, McClelland, & Oldknow, 1994). But research shows humor can create a positive connection between teacher and student (Weaver & Cottrell, 1987), engage students' attention in

complex concepts (Lomax & Moosavi, 2002), and increase retention of material (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977). Research in the field of psychotherapy shows that humor can increase people's willingness to change their attitudes and behaviors (Gandino, Vesco, Benna, & Prastaro, 2010). And positive psychology research shows that humor can positively impact physical and psychological well-being.

In the world of adult education and organizational communication, trainers, speakers, and leaders must inform and persuade audiences to think and behave differently for the sake of the organization and its longer-term viability. Humor is an effective tool to help communicators achieve this goal. This capstone aims to illustrate the positive impact humor has on audiences and communicators. It also aims to allay any fears communicators have about needing to be a comedian in order to use humor effectively. If communicators are to effectively get their message across to audiences, humor must be treated as, not just a feel-good technique, but an essential tool in communicating serious messages.

What is positive psychology?

Thousands of years ago, the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, claimed that a person's chief aim in life is to increase happiness (Melchert, 2002). By using reason in the application of virtues, such as temperance and bravery, one could guide their behavior to the point that is "just right" in any given situation (Melchert, 2002, p. 193). By employing reason and intentional action, one could live a good and virtuous life, thereby increasing happiness.

In the 1800's, the psychologist, William James, echoed Aristotle's sentiments that one must build character (virtue to Aristotle) by, not just feeling an emotion, such as bravery, but by acting upon it. James argued that we are not at the whim of our emotions as drivers of our actions, but rather, "by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will,

we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not (James, 1899/1983, p. 118). This concept of volition over our actions as a means to change our emotions is arguably the beginning of the movement towards a positive psychology.

In the 1950's, Dr. Aaron Beck (1976), one of the leaders in the field of cognitive therapy, proposed that negative emotions were caused by cognition and that by changing the way one thinks about a situation, they can change how they feel about it. For example, the anger you may feel at being cut off in traffic, can be mitigated by changing your belief about that situation. By altering your assumption from "they purposefully endangered me" to "they might not have seen me in their side mirror", your anger may lessen or even dissipate. Beck's work with patients affirmed to him, that those who were best able to deal with the ups and downs of life were those who could create more positively framed beliefs about the events in their life.

Albert Ellis (1962), best known for Rational Emotive Therapy, contributed the ABC model as a tool for discovering and changing irrational beliefs. The ABC model allows one to evaluate an activating event, beliefs they associate with that event, and the emotional consequences of the belief. Ellis' work showed that by examining our often irrational beliefs, we can change them and therefore change their emotional consequences to ones that lead to better psychological functioning.

In the 1960's, Martin Seligman, of the University of Pennsylvania, began his seminal work on learned helplessness (1998). His initial experiments showed that dogs who had been given shocks that they could not escape in the first phase of the experiment did not attempt to escape the shock in the second phase of the experiment, even though the dog had only to jump a shallow wall to do so. These dogs, realizing that nothing they did in the first phase could make a difference to their fates, assumed the same in the second phase. They had learned to become

helpless regardless of the circumstances. However, Seligman wondered if the same dogs that learned to be helpless could also learn to help themselves. Indeed, by showing the dogs repeatedly that they could jump the wall to escape the shock, the dogs learned that their actions made a difference. One of the most interesting findings was that one out of ten dogs acted helpless from the start. Recognizing the parallel in human behavior, Seligman began researching learned helplessness in humans, showing that some people when they get knocked down by life, stay down, while others get back up and try again.

What makes the difference in people who feel that life just happens to them versus people who feel that taking action can alter their circumstances? How people explain the events that happen to them makes all the difference. People with a pessimistic explanatory style attribute negative events to a personal failing that will affect them forever in all areas of their life (Seligman, 1998). People with an optimistic explanatory style attribute negative events to circumstances outside of their control that are specific to only that one event and are confined to one area of their life. Seligman saw an opportunity to help those with a pessimistic explanatory style by focusing on optimists, those who seemed to naturally bounce back and lead productive, meaningful, and happy lives.

In 1998, as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Seligman called for the creation of the field of positive psychology. Since World War II, the field of psychology has followed the disease model of medicine, focusing on weakness, deficit, and pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While the disease model has helped many people over the last several decades, the field of psychology may only be able to claim that it "can make miserable people less miserable" (Seligman, 2004).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, a founding member of the positive psychology movement, called for the study of positive experiences, positive traits and positive institutions in order to study how people thrive in the face of setbacks (2000). Csikszentmihalyi's seminal research on flow added depth to the initial concept that well-being was nothing more than happiness or pleasure. Flow is defined as the experience of being so immersed in a task that one loses the sense of time passing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). People often report feeling a sense of well-being after they have completed a flow-inducing activity such as writing, listening to music, or working on a challenging task. This may be because flow-inducing activities bring about two complex psychological processes; differentiation and integration of the self. While a person is working on a challenging task, they use their unique strengths and abilities to overcome a challenge and increase their sense of competence, creating a sense of themselves as a unique individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). At the same time, consciousness is ordered by focusing attention and effort solely on the task at hand. There is a sense of one's self dropping away and becoming one with a greater purpose or entity.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's call for research on human strengths lead to one of the most helpful tools in the field of positive psychology. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), sponsored by the APA, has successfully classified mental disorders and their treatment strategies. Taking lessons from the success of the DSM, Seligman and Peterson created the Character Strengths and Virtues Classification, affectionately known as the "Un-DSM", for the field of positive psychology. It focuses on a classification system of human strengths and virtues that are moral in nature and universally endorsed throughout the world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The virtue of wisdom, for example, is related to the character strengths of curiosity, creativity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective. Character

strengths such as these can be strengthened, though it may not be easy to do so. And certain strengths seem to come to each of us more naturally than others. Signature strengths are those that we express most intuitively and naturally (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The establishment of the field of positive psychology has opened the door for positive psychology researchers, like Barbara Fredrickson (2009), to explore the world of positive emotions and show that positive emotions should be taken just as seriously as negative emotions. Many have theorized that negative emotions serve important purposes such as safety and reproduction; in short, human survival. However, Fredrickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions shows that positive emotions help us to broaden our perspective on possible actions and thereby build skills and resources needed to survive and thrive in the future (2009). Since much of our lives are spent with others, Fredrickson's (2013) work shows how positive emotions, like love and amusement, can bond even strangers, creating social support that helps individuals, groups, and communities thrive.

Positive psychology seeks to understand what makes people, groups, and communities thrive and how others can replicate their results. The concept of happiness is difficult to define and most researchers have yet to agree on how to operationalize it for consistent research purposes. Lyubomirsky (2007) proposes that each of us knows what happiness is and whether or not we are happy, while Seligman (2011) proposes that happiness is not just about being happy but about living a good and meaningful life where we connect to others and contribute to their well-being. But can we actually increase our own happiness or does happiness happen to us? Research shows that 50% of our happiness is attributable to our genetic set point, while 10% is attributable to our circumstances such as material wealth (Lyubomirsky, 2007). That leaves 40% of our happiness to be determined by our own "intentional activities" (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p.

39). Doing the math shows that a substantial amount of our happiness may be within our control.

The field of positive psychology studies and creates positive interventions that use positive methodologies to build or increase positive emotions, thoughts, behavior, or habits. These positive interventions are effective at increasing well-being and treating depressive symptoms particularly for depressed individuals, those who self-select to participate in positive interventions, and for those who are in older age groups (Sin & Lyubomirsky 2009). Interventions such as using one's signature strength in a new way each day for one week and "three good things", where one focuses on three good things that happened each day and the cause of those things, have been shown to enhance well-being and decrease depressive symptoms for up to six months (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013). Positive interventions work in two ways: one, by giving people tools to increase their happiness; and, two, by creating an "upward spiral" of positive emotions that begets positive behaviors and increases positive emotions more lastingly (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Indeed positive psychology aims to leverage its research to put tools in the hands of every person, group, and community to affect its own well-being for the better.

Johnny Mercer unwittingly summed up positive psychology when he sang, "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative…" (1944). However, that it not to say that positive psychology is about putting on a happy face and feeling good all of the time. There are those who believe that positive psychology is nothing more than glorified self-help; a Tony Robbins in academic regalia. Positive psychologists acknowledge the reality of human suffering and the need to relieve it. Indeed, traditional psychology has done well in this regard, and yet, the absence of disease does not equal health. Researchers in the field of positive

psychology use rigorous empirical methods to measure and test the effectiveness of how people can live their best lives through, not just the reduction or elimination of anxiety, depression and other pathologies, but through the cultivation of well-being via positive emotions, relationships, and other positive methodologies and points of application.

The role of humor in well-being

It has been a long time coming, but humor is now finally being considered an important and serious topic of research in the field of positive psychology (Ruch, 1996). Positive psychology has classified humor as one of 24 character strengths, moral and universally endorsed traits that, when used in conjunction with practical wisdom, lead to a good life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Humor is one of the character strengths that correlate highly with satisfaction with life (SWL) (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013) and is regarded as on par with strengths such as wisdom, courage, and love.

The VIA assesses an individual's signature strengths, or character strengths that feel most intuitive, authentic, and energizing. For those with humor as a signature strength, the use of humor increases satisfaction with life, the ability to attain goals, and a sense of self-efficacy (Gander et al., 2013). Even if humor is not one's signature strength, the use of humor is beneficial to well-being. Humor is typically the seventh most highly correlated character strength with SWL (Proyer et al., 2013). Positive interventions to enhance humor, and other character strengths (curiosity, gratitude, zest, and hope) increased SWL for all participants and even more so for those whose VIA assessment showed that humor was not a well expressed character strength (Proyer et al., 2013). The research strongly suggests that a sense of humor is an important component of well-being for everyone.

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being is widely known in positive psychology and consists of: positive emotions; engagement; positive relationships; meaning; and, achievement. I propose that humor may be able to positively influence each of these components and, therefore, enhance well-being. Humor, and its emotional cousin amusement, allows us to lighten up when faced with a problem or challenge, thereby broadening the range of possible actions we can imagine and ultimately building our skills for dealing with future problems and challenges (Fredrickson, 2009). Engagement is the feeling of flow we get when we are able to make order out of the everyday chaos inside of our head (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The use of humor mirrors that of other flow-inducing activities by calling on complex cognitive processes to resolve incongruities within humorous material (Weems, 2014). Positive relationships may be one of the most important components of well-being as those who have a broader social network and are more socially active are healthier and live longer (Seligman, 2011). Humor is a socially attractive trait which helps us attract mates (McGee & Shevlin, 2009) and facilitates connection with other people (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) which helps people broaden their social resources and increase well-being (Fredrickson, 2009). Meaning is the ability to see that one's life has a purpose or meaning. For those who have humor as a signature strength, the ability to create or enjoy humor regularly helps to increase satisfaction with life (Proyer et al., 2013). Additionally, humor can help us to put the stresses and strains of life into perspective in order for us to focus on what is truly meaningful to us (Beck, 1976; Vaillant, 2000). For example, a parent may use humor to deal with the stress of raising a child in order to be able to focus on the aspects of parenthood that are meaningful. Achievement of one's goals contributes to well-being. Humor can help people achieve their goals by relieving the stress they may incur from persistent work towards those goal. As most goals are accomplished with the

help of other people, humor's ability to connect us with others who may help us achieve our

goals, can be valuable to goal attainment.

Humor as a tool for communicators

Research in the fields of positive psychology, human resource development, and adult

learning reveals that humor is an exceptional tool for communication (Boverie et al., 1994).

Speakers, trainer, and leaders are asked on a regular basis to communicate with people in

organizational settings. This communication may take the form of disseminating information,

teaching new skills or tasks, or encouraging people to change their attitudes or behaviors. Both

individual and organizational success is often on the line. The challenges of communicating and

teaching adults in organizations are many. Professionals are often stressed, overwhelmed,

distracted, and downright disengaged from their jobs. To illustrate this point, a Gallup Panel

study revealed that only 19% of people could strongly agree with the question "Do you like what

you do each day" (Rath & Harter, 2010). Gallup's latest findings show that organizations that do

not focus on employees' strengths have only a 9% chance of engaging its workforce. It can be

challenging to get people's attention and engage them in information that they may not want to

hear, think they already know, or have heard but have not found helpful. To make matters worse,

organizations are often hotbeds for ambiguity and incongruences that can have professionals

turning a deaf ear on what speakers, trainers, and leaders have to say.

Humor is a powerful tool for speakers, trainers, and leaders; people that need their

audiences to listen when they speak and take appropriate action (Boverie et al., 1994). Humor is

a tool that can help them do that effectively while making it enjoyable for everyone involved.

But before one can use a tool, they have to understand it. What is humor, exactly?

Defining humor

To repurpose the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart's, remarks on obscenity, we cannot define humor, but we know it when we see it. Psychologists and researchers have yet to agree upon a universal definition of humor. This is mostly likely due to the multi-faceted nature of humor which includes: cognitive ability (the ability to understand and create humor) (Feingold & Mazzella, 1993); aesthetic response (the ability to appreciate humor) (Ruch & Hehl, 1998); habitual behavior pattern (laugh frequently, tell jokes, laugh at other's jokes) (Martin & Lefcourt); emotion-related temperament trait (Ruch & Carrell, 1998); attitude – perspective (a bemused outlook on the world) (Svebak, 1996); and, coping strategy or defense mechanism (Valliant, 2000). In attempting to simplify the definition of humor, McGhee stated that humor is a "form of play - the play with ideas", making playfulness the key element of both creating and enjoying humor (1979, as cited in Ruch & Carrell, 1998, p.552). Indeed, only those with a playful attitude will be able to make light of or see the incongruities or various humorous perspectives of serious situations (Martin, 2007). Research in the field of human resource development defines humor as "any communication that leads to laughing, smiling or a feeling of amusement (Weaver & Cotrell, 1987, p. 177 as cited in Boverie, Hoffman, Klein, McClelland, & Oldknow, 1994). While the multi-faceted definition of humor is true, it is hard to hold onto. And while playfulness is a key element of humor, it may be too simplistic of a definition. Peterson and Seligman (2004) offer the following definition of humor:

> "(a) the playful recognition, enjoyment, and/or creation of incongruity; (b) a
> composed and cheerful view on adversity that allows one to see its light side and
> thereby sustain a good mood; and (c) the ability to make others smile or laugh".
> (p. 584)

This definition is not overly complex but manages to encapsulate the trait, affective, and cognitive aspects of humor; humor as a disposition, an emotion, and a skill. This definition suits the purpose of this capstone as the ability to maintain a cheerful mood, whether by having humor as natural trait or simply by conjuring a cheerful mood in the moment, in order to overcome adversity, will serve communicators well as they deal with the stressors of public speaking (Vaillant, 1977; Berk, Tan, Fry, Napier, Hubbard, Lewis, & Eby, 1989). Delayed flights, disengaged audiences, or inevitable speaking faux pas are some of the many challenges for which a humorous disposition or mood will prove helpful to communicators. The skills of recognizing incongruities and making audiences smile or laugh helps communicators to create or select humorous material that can enhance their ability to get their message across. Yet, not all humor is created equal when it comes to well-being and effective communication.

Effects of various humor styles

If you remember that kid on the playground who teased you, or the co-worker that made humorous remarks that were really just snarky comments in disguise, you may be wondering if humor really is a "virtue". The answer is yes, if positive styles of humor are used along with wisdom in their application. Research shows that people closely associate positive uses of humor, such as being receptive to what happens around us and the ability to appreciate the absurdities of life, as virtuous (Beermann & Ruch, 2009). Whereas, negative uses of humor, such as "socially cold humor (e.g., inappropriate smiling or fixed smiling without sincerity) and an inept humor style (e.g., chuckling or laughing in an exaggerated way in order to hide one's fears and uncertainty) were regarded as vices" (Beermann & Ruch, 2009, p. 533). People seem to naturally understand the difference between humor that helps and humor that hurts.

Martin et al. (2003) identified four styles of humor: self-enhancing (humor that helps one cope with the ups and downs of life); affiliative (humor that seeks to enhance relationships); self-deprecating (humor at the expense of one's self); and, aggressive (humor at the expense of another). Self-enhancing and affiliative styles of humor are positively associated with well-being, whereas aggressive and self-defeating humor styles are potentially threatening to well-being (Martin et al., 2003). For purposes of this capstone, where the aim is to enhance connection, communication, and learning, we will use the term humor to refer to humor that is positive in nature. So how exactly does humor work as a communication tool for speakers, trainers, and leaders?

Connection

Maslow said that "humor is education in a palatable form" (cited in Hebert, 1991, p. 14). Communicators seeking to educate and inform audiences would do well to make their message palatable as they are faced with the challenge of getting people's attention, influencing people's attitudes and behaviors, and inspiring them to take action. Speakers, external topical experts hired by an organization, must establish rapport with an audience and credibility that convinces the audience that the speaker has worthwhile information to share. Trainers, internal or external educators, aim to teach or reinforce knowledge and skills to help audiences meet personal or professional goals. Leaders must communicate important information to share a common vision to inspire and influence employees. But it's not just the information that is communicated that makes an impact on the audience; speakers, trainers, and leaders themselves are a part of the message.

Digby Wolf, former writer for the television show, "Laugh-In", stated that communication is a sharing of oneself at the intellectual and emotional level; by denying humor

in a message, communicators are denying themselves to their audiences (Wolf, personal

communication, October 12, 1992 as cited in Boverie et al., 1994). When it comes to getting a

message across, effective communicators would do well to incorporate the findings of positive

psychology to communicate with humor so as to create positive connections with their audience

as well as among audience members (Avner, Gorenstein, & Moris, 1986; Herbert, 1991).

Connecting Speaker and Audience

A communicator's job is often to persuade audiences to listen to information or change a

behavior or attitude. Persuasion is "effort at influencing another's mental state through

communication, assuming the person to be persuaded has some measure of freedom" (O'Keefe,

1990 as cited in Lyttle, 2001, p. 207). When a message is not important to an audience member,

they are more likely to be persuaded by factors other than a compelling argument; factors such as

likeability of the communicator rather than his expert status (Mill & Harvey, 1972). Lyttle

(2001) found that self-deprecating humor, the type of humor that good naturedly pokes fun at

one's self, is the most effective style of humor when it comes to persuading people. In the

classroom or boardroom, the use of affiliative humor, can also reduce perceived gaps between

the communicator and the audience (Weaver & Cottrell, 1987). The use of affiliative and self-

deprecating humor can increase a communicator's likeability, and therefore, their ability to

inform and persuade audiences.

Humor is a socially desirable trait in American culture (Apte, 1987) and those with a

good sense of humor are often perceived as charismatic. Though use of humor will not

necessarily cause the audience to think the communicator is smarter, it may cause them to think

that the communicator is more appealing and original (Avner et al., 1986). These traits may be

seen as components of charisma. Charisma is referred to as a magical quality, particularly of

leaders, that often creates an attraction that results in others attending to and following the charismatic person. Charisma also carries a component of confidence; a sense of being comfortable in one's own skin. The use of humor in general, and self-deprecating humor, specifically, may increase charisma as those who are psychologically healthy use humor as a mature defense mechanism to deal with the ups and downs of the world (Vaillant, 1977; Vaillant, 2000). And sharing humor with others creates a "positivity resonance" or shared feelings of loved generated between people (Fredrickson, 2009, p. 79).

Langer states that humor requires mindfulness and mindfulness leads to increased charisma (Langer, in-person communication, October 2013). Mindfulness is "a flexible state of mind - an openness to novelty, a process of actively drawing novel distinctions" (Langer, 2005, p. 214). Mindfulness, like humor, leads us to interact with the world in a way that opens us to multiple perspectives instead of categorizing things as good or bad (Langer, 2005). Those who are more mindful in their interactions with others are perceived as more charismatic. In an experiment with theatre actors, one group of actors was given a script and asked to perform it as consistently with the script as possible. Another group was asked to play their parts in as novel a way as possible without deviating from the script (Langer & Sviokla, 1988). Audience members, unaware of the actors' instructions, rated the charisma of the "novel" group as higher than the control group. A similar experiment with salespeople revealed the same results. Two groups of salespeople were given the same script, but one group was instructed to approach each customer in a novel way, such as thinking of them as the first customer of the day, but without deviating from the script (Langer & Sviokla, 1988).

The subtle shifts in our attention create behavioral differences that, though minute, can be perceived by audiences. Langer, Russell, & Eisenkraft (2009) performed an experiment wherein

they asked a symphony orchestra to play Brahm's Symphony No. 1 by remembering the best

performance of the piece. They then asked the same orchestra to play the same piece and to do so

by adding subtle nuances to the way they played. Audiences were asked to evaluate recordings of

both performances. The audience enjoyed listening to the mindful performance, wherein the

orchestra played with subtle nuances, significantly more than the non-mindful performance. The

musicians themselves enjoyed playing the mindful piece significantly more, with one musician

stating it was because he was creating the piece instead of re-creating it.

The world of speaking and training can be repetitive. Speakers may find themselves

delivering the same speech several times a week to different audiences. This repetition is a

breeding ground for mindlessness, where connection with the audience suffers as does the

enjoyment of the communicator. By "offer[ing] subtle nuances to your performance" (Langer,

Russell, & Eisenkraft, 2009, p. 127), communicators can enhance the satisfaction of audiences

and keep themselves fresh and engaged in the moment.

Humor styles

It is important to understand and recognize the various styles of humor that one might use

when communicating with an audience. Some humor styles are more helpful in their ability to

create positive connections with others and their ability to increase the well-being of the person

using humor. The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) is a 32-item, self-report questionnaire that

measures four types of humor: self-enhancing; aggressive, affiliative, and self-defeating (Martin

et al., 2003). The underlying model of the HSQ assesses two dichotomous components of humor;

enhancement of self versus relationship, and benevolence versus hostility. Self-defeating humor

uses one's self as the butt of the joke and is positively related to depression and anxiety and

negatively related to positive relationships, well-being, and self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003).

Aggressive humor uses sarcasm, teasing, and disparagement aimed at others to make one feel better about themselves in contrast to another person. Aggressive humor is positively related to anger and aggression and negatively related to satisfaction with relationships, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Martin et al., 2003). Both self-defeating and aggressive humor styles have a negative effect on either the producer of the humor or the person on the receiving end. These unhealthy styles should be avoided in general and specifically when the goal is to connect and communicate with audiences.

Self-enhancing humor is more of a humorous outlook on life, a way of reframing so as to be able to cope with negative emotions and events. Self-enhancing humor is negatively related depression and anxiety and positively related to well-being. Self-enhancing humor is helpful for individuals in general, but since it can often be used by one's self, it is not always the best humor style for connecting with others. Victor Borge, the Danish comedian, said, "laughter is the closest distance between two people." Victor may have unwittingly been talking about the affiliative humor style which is one of the best humor styles as it facilitates connection and group cohesion (Martin et al., 2003), as well as increases the well-being and life satisfaction of the communicator (Martin et al., 2003; Kazarian & Martin, 2004).

Affiliative humor greases the wheels of social interaction, creating a sense of common ground and lessoning perceived social gaps between people (Vaillant, 1977; Hoption, Barling, & Turner, 2013). Witty banter, light-hearted comments, and jokes that contain a commonly understood or experienced topic, act as a sort of mental and emotional handshake with others. It is important that the focus of the humor be a subject that the audience can relate to in order to feel that the communicator understands them, their issues, and the culture of the organization in which they operate.

Using affiliative humor to open a speech or training session can create a more relaxed atmosphere and a feeling of connection between the communicator and the audience. For example, opening with a light-hearted remark about how difficult it was to obtain an organic soy latte at the local coffee shop may work well in San Francisco, but may fall flat in Wyoming. This is because the joke highlights the gap between the communicator's experience of the world and that of the audience's, thereby creating a feeling of disconnection between them. When attempting to employ humor it is imperative to understand your audience; a concept with which any good speaker, trainer, or leader is familiar. However, the joke may work well in Wyoming if it makes clear that the communicator understands how foreign their concept of coffee is compared to the audience's. The joke then becomes a self-deprecating joke which can help audiences to feel as though the communicator understands them, even if the communicator is not one of them. Self-deprecating humor, a type of affiliative humor (Vaillant, 1977), can create a connection by lessening perceived social gaps between the communicator and the audience. Self-deprecating humor has been shown to lessen the perception of positional power between leaders and employees and create a more positive perception of the leader (Hoption et al., 2013). However, a positive connection is not all about the communicator and the audience; it is also about the connection between the audience members themselves.

Connecting Audience Members

Sharing problems and acknowledging a lack of skills can often be the focus of speeches and training in an organizational context. This can be anxiety producing for adult learners who need to feel a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to be intrinsically motivated to achieve goals (Brown & Ryan, 2004). Since both positive and negative emotions in groups are contagious (Barsade, 2002) it is helpful to use humor to lighten the mood and put

audiences into a positive emotional state. Learning is enhanced when audiences are in positive

emotional states more so than when they are in negative emotional states (Merriam & Caffarella,

2007). Humor can create and enhance group cohesion (Herbert, 1991) and increase the overall

positive affect of the audience. This allows audience members to feel more comfortable with

each other, thereby improving their ability to listen and learn. But is getting the audience to like

you and feel comfortable enough to get a message across?

Attention

Speakers, trainers, and leaders, face enormous challenges in engaging audiences in their

message. Most people are inundated with information, having ready access to more than they

could ever practically apply to their lives. Challenges include cutting through "infobesity" as

well as making complex concepts easily understandable for audiences. Humor can help to focus

people's attention by engaging them in complex cognitive processes (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990;

Weems, 2014) and making them more mindful (Langer, in-class communication, October 2013).

In these ways, humor brings enhanced attention and renewed energy. Lomax & Moosavi (2002)

used humor in college-level statistics classes and found that it was an effective method for

attracting the attention of students in the complex concepts of statistics and made the class more

interactive and engaging.

Attention is psychic energy that we either focus intentionally or as a matter of habit

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When we focus our attention on a task, a story, or a piece of music,

the chaos of our consciousness is ordered and we experience a pleasurable state of flow where

time seems to fly by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Though time does fly when you're having fun, I

prefer Kermit the Frog's saying, "time's fun when you're having flies." But exactly how does

humor engage attention?

Humor engages attention by surprising us with incongruity and then requiring our brain

to make sense of the difference between what we expected and what we actually got (Staley &

Derks, 1995; Seligman & Peterson, 2004). An example of incongruity is the classic joke, "I just

flew in from L.A., and boy, are my arms tired!" The first part of the joke makes us think of the

person as flying on an airplane and so we make assumptions about how the person might finish

the statement. However, when we hear the second part of the sentence, our brains must deal with

the fact that the person was implying that they flew like a bird. Koestler's work on creativity

points to bisociation as the reason for this joke's humorousness. Bisociation is "the perceiving of

a situation or idea…in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of

reference…"(Koestler, 1964, p. 35). Koestler provides the following joke as an example of

bisociation:

> "Chamfort tells a story of a Marquis at the court of Lousis XIV who, on entering
>
> his wife's boudoir and finding her in the arms of a Bishop, walked calmly to the
>
> window and went through the motions of blessing the people in the street. 'What
>
> are you doing?' cried the anguished wife. 'Monseigneur is performing my
>
> functions,' replied the Marquis, 'so I am performing his." (1964, p. 96)

This joke is humorous because it initially surprises and then plays on the idea of tit-for-

tat, or reciprocal behavior. After the initial surprise, one can see that the action makes no

sense within the frame of reference of a man catching his wife in the act of adultery, but

makes perfect sense in the frame of reference of a man who seeks to perform a reciprocal

act.

Researchers are opposed on what actually makes a joke funny when it comes to

incongruity resolution. Some assert, that similar to other flow-inducing activities, jokes that are

too easy will not be appreciated as they do not require as much cognitive engagement (Zigler, Levine, & Gould, 1966; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Other researchers and some professional comedians suggest that the easier and faster it is for a person to understand a joke, the funnier that person will think it is (Cunningham & Derks, 2005). It should be noted that the definition of humor as two disparate ideas and their resolution may be putting too fine a point on what humor is and how it is created (Veale, 2004). If the creation and enjoyment of humor were so easily put into a formula, we might all be stand-up comedians. Though research has shown conflicting results regarding the level of incongruity that is optimal for humor appreciation, incongruity resolution focuses attention.

The idea of incongruity resolution is so compelling that, in his book, Ha!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why, Weems (2014), a neuroscientist, proposes that humor exists solely to help us deal with complex and contradictory messages not easily handled by our minds. Indeed, researchers have observed that people naturally deal with ambiguity and incongruity in organizations by using humor and humor can serve as a red flag for ambiguity and incongruity, alerting leaders to important issues that need to be resolved (Hatch & Ehrlick, 1993; Grugulis, 2002). Other researchers have theorized that surprise is the key element of humor. Indeed, the emotion of surprise, though pleasant, makes people feel more uncertain and therefore gives them a strong desire to pay attention to what is going on around them (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Weems (2014) sees this as only part of the answer to how our brains engage in humor and proposes a three-step model (constructing, reckoning, and resolving) of recognizing and resolving incongruities, not just in humor, but in everything we encounter in our environment. Our brain first constructs theories and expectations of the information it receives, then it reckons with any mistakes it may have made in its interpretation, and finally, it works to figure out why

the actual information did not fit its original frame of reference. For example, you may have laughed initially at a joke that sounded funny, but found yourself shaking your head at the end of it saying, "I don't get it." Weems's theory of humor shows us that, while the element of surprise in a joke gets our attention, it is the resolving of our initial understanding and the actual intention of the joke that engages us cognitively.

Humor's ability to surprise us and engage our brains in complex cognitive processes not only gets our attention, it also renews our mental and physical energy. Mindfulness, as a prerequisite for humor (Langer, in-class communication, October 2013), cuts through "mental satiation" which is the stress and fatigue that comes from performing tasks repetitively within the same context (Karsten, 1928). Experiments were conducted wherein subjects were asked to perform a task, such as writing their name on a piece of paper, over and over until they reported they were weary. At that point, the experimenter asked them to write their name to sign a check. Subjects were clearly able to perform the same task in a different context without signs of fatigue or stress (Karsten, 1928). Similar tasks showed the same results, with subjects clearly able to perform similar tasks in different contexts. Perhaps this explains the propensity to be full after dinner but easily enjoy dessert. Regardless, humor often presents information in a different context, requiring audiences to attend mindfully to the humorous material in order to resolve any incongruities. Humor has the power to focus attention and bring renewed mental and physical energy and create a positive circle whereby attention begets energy which begets further attention. Humor is therefore a powerful tool to engage the attention of audiences.

Memory

Research seems to point to the incongruity of humor as not just a method for capturing attention, but also for enhancing memory. Incongruity in humor takes our brains by surprise and

we use more elaborate mental processes to resolve the incongruences in humorous materials (Schmidt, 1991). Research shows that recall of humorous sentences is greater than non-humorous sentences (Schmidt, 1994). An experiment showed that when it came to humorous, non-humorous, and weird cartoons, humorous cartoons were remembered best. The within-subject design of the experiment effectively removed sense of humor as a moderating factor. However, there is no need to make all of one's material humorous as a mix of humorous and non-humorous sentences were remembered better than a list of all humorous sentences (Schmidt, 2002).

Some may view humor as a distraction from a serious message, when in fact; humor helps people to remember the central point of a message as well as other, supporting details. Humor enhances memory through emotional stimulation (Schmidt, 2002). Emotional arousal "promotes retention both of information central to an event and peripheral details" (Heuer & Reisberg, 1990, p. 503). This is contrary to the claim that emotional arousal creates a narrowing effective of observation and memory (Easterbrook, 1959). An experiment with university students showed that, while immediate recall of material was not affected, recall of material six weeks later was significantly higher for those who were taught the material with relevant humorous material (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977). Indeed, students of teachers with social intelligence, zest and humor scored higher on standardized tests in a longitudinal study (Park & Peterson, 2009).These findings strongly suggest that humor not only gets people's attention but helps them to recall the information. Humor is a serious tool for helping make a message shtick.

Changing attitude and behavior

The goal of most speakers, trainers, and leaders when they communicate with their audience is to illustrate the existence of a problem and how it can be resolved by a change in

attitude or behavior or both. The essayist, George Saunder, said that "humor is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to". Weems states that "humor is by nature confrontational – sometimes cognitively, sometimes emotionally, and sometimes both" (2014, p.25). This confrontation can easily make adults defensive or dismissive of the message being communicated. Humor can help. But by using humor in the form of characters in a video or story, those characters become "surrogates for ourselves" and "in essence, we become the potential targets of the humor being described, and we can do so without taking offense" (Lefcourt, 2005, p. 629).

It can be challenging for adults to see that they need to adopt more productive attitudes and behaviors, but humor can soften the blow of shedding light on our own shortcomings and foibles as those who have developed a healthy sense of humor as a mature defense mechanism are able to look directly at what is painful (Vaillant, 2000). Therapists have begun to use humor as a technique for unmasking and disarming clients' defenses in order to help them see representations of themselves or their reality that might otherwise remain hidden (Gandino, Vesco, Benna, & Prastaro, 2010). The use of humor in music therapy "creates intimacy and distance simultaneously, thus allowing the client to take a closer look at a specific matter" (Amir, 2005, p. 19). Humor creates a psychological and emotional distance whereby we can see the truth with open hearts and minds. To quote famed comedienne Lily Tomlin's character, Edith Ann, "the truth can be told if you know how to tell it. And that's the truth."

Surprise may be the underlying reason why humor seems to ease the sting of uncovering a problem. Appreciating humor relies on insight problem solving (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010), which involves a sudden and unexpected sensation of "aha!" rather than a sense that one is progressively getting closer to a resolution (Gick and Lockhart, 1995). This sense of "aha!" is the

emotion of surprise. Surprise is a low effort and pleasant way to come to a new idea or to re-evaluate misperceptions (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). The pleasure of surprise may come from the brain's own reward and motivation system. The brain rewards surprise and novelty with dopamine, a neurotransmitter that make us feel good. Our brain actually rewards us for enjoying humor.

Humor can show multiple perspectives on a situation or ask us to question our own thinking and certainty about people and situations. The famous comedian, George Carlin, was known for amplifying everyday behaviors and beliefs to such ridiculous proportions that audiences couldn't help but laugh along. Carlin's classic bit on "stuff" (1981) allowed audiences to question the country's materialistic culture from a safe enough distance that they could laugh along, and enable them to question their own assumptions and behaviors towards consumerism. Langer believes that we should "exploit the power of uncertainty" to learn how things really are and not just what we have come to believe they are; mindlessly applying out of date or out of context paradigms to people and situations (2005, p. 215). Political cartoons have long used humor to shift assumptions and beliefs in order to bring about social change. Nina Allender, political cartoonist for the National Woman's Party, used humor to exaggerate and elucidate current political thinking and opinions. Perhaps because of humor's ability to bypass our natural defense mechanisms, Allender's cartoons were instrumental in illuminating the archaic political thinking of the time and ushering in a new paradigm of women in society. Humor draws attention to serious problems in an enjoyable way and engages the brain in higher order critical thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Borchardt, 1989). Humor puts the "ha!" in the "aha" of problem solving.

Speakers, trainers and leaders can employ humor and humorous stories to paint a picture of human behavior that is distant enough from the individual to feel safe and unthreatened but close enough for the individual to see them self in the situation. The video "It's Not about the Nail" (Headley, 2013) is a humorous look at the different communication styles between men and women. The satire allows audiences to identify similar conversations that have been unproductive because of a misuse of communication style. Humor is an effective tool to allow people to discuss sensitive issues, like differences in communication styles, while saving face and maintaining positive relationships (Grugulis, 2002). Use of this video, among couples for example, may help them to identify a common communication challenge in a way that may stimulate an emotionally safe and light-hearted discussion of a serious issue.

When we are laughing, we open ourselves to new perspectives and insights that help us to identify problems and solutions. In his lecture on creativity, the former Monty Python cast member, John Cleese (1991/2012), posits that creativity requires us to be in "open mode" whereby we are relaxed and curious rather than in "closed mode" where we are hurried and anxious. Cleese claims that humor is a way to help us switch from closed mode to open mode. This aligns with Barbara Frederickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotion which shows that positive emotions do not just feel good, they broaden our scope of possibilities (2009). When we are open and feeling good, we can see our problems and challenges as less daunting. We can also see more and unique solutions. Humor can show us how to reframe our situations in order to gain a different perspective and try a new behavior in search of a different result (Browne, 2013).

With all of these amazing benefits of humor, why don't more communicators use humor in their trainings and speeches? The answer may lay in the expectations communicators have about their own comedic abilities.

Can you become funnier?

When I ask speakers, trainers, and leaders why they do not use humor in their talks or trainings, many reply with "but, I'm not a comedian!" They have a point; few studies have been done on increasing humor production and the ones that have hold little promise for those seeking to become funnier. However, there are compelling reasons to try, other than telling a good joke.

The chances of significantly increasing one's humor production are small. Humor production may be linked to intelligence and personality traits, both of which are relatively stable throughout a person's life. Howrigan & MacDonald's (2008) experiment with 185 college students showed that intelligence positively predicted the ability to produce humor while extraversion, as measured via the Big Five personality assessment, did so as well but to a lesser extent. Ruch and Carrell's (1998) research shows that trait cheerfulness is strongly related to sense of humor over good mood and seriousness (temporal states), with trait cheerfulness significantly correlated with the ability to laugh at one's self. The production of spontaneous verbal humor may rely on insight-like processes suggesting it also is a trait-like ability (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). These studies indicate that humor comes more easily to some than to others, as humor may be a personality trait.

McGhee's (1999) eight-step humor program was designed to increase humor production over an 8-week period. Participants self-reported their ability to produce humor as higher after the program. However, the small sample size of 20 and the fact that participants self-reported on their ability to produce humor, makes this experiment's result less than compelling. Results of

later testing of McGhee's eight-step humor program, done with 101 Israeli school teachers, showed that the program did not increase participants' ability to produce humor. However, participants were rated by their peers as higher in humor appreciation (Nevo, Aharonson, & Klingman, 1998). The limited results of McGhee's program seem to indicate that interventions designed to increase humor may be better at helping people enjoy a laugh rather than getting a laugh.

Some experiments give a small amount of hope to those who wish to become funnier. In one experiment, participants who took more time crafting humorous captions to cartoons were judged as funnier, though the effect was small (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). Another experiment showed that subjects who wrote 10 captions to the same cartoon instead of 2 produced funnier captions as rated by judges, suggesting that the production of written humor may have more to do with generating many ideas and later editing them to find the best (Derks & Hervas, 1988). Perhaps humor, like other crafts such as songwriting and acting, must be honed. However, there are compelling reasons to attempt to increase your humor production ability, even if you never test out your material on an audience.

Crawford & Caltabiano (2011) found that participants who completed McGhee's 8-step humor program had increases in positive emotions and decreases in negative emotions at the post-test and three months later. Participants in this study had higher than normal levels of stress, anxiety, and clinical depression at the start of the program. After completing the 8-week program, only 4% of those in the humor group still had clinical levels of depression. In fact, the post-test and 3-month follow up showed that positive affect continued to increase, suggesting that practicing humor creates sustainable skills for increasing positive affect. It seems worthwhile to attempt to increase one's humor production even if the only one laughing is you.

Humor has a powerful impact on physical health as Norman Cousins (1979) famously showed when he viewed humorous videos daily as part of a plan to help cure a debilitating illness. Humor has been shown to lesson anxiety and increase positive affect better than listening to one's favorite music or 20 minutes of aerobic exercise (Szabo, Ainsworth, & Danks, 2005). Patients who were given the choice to watch humorous videos after surgery requested less mild, pain-relieving medication (Rotton & Shats, 1996). Humor acts not just as an aid to help the body recover, but to keep the body resilient against potential infection or disease. In one study, the saliva of participants who viewed humorous videos contained significantly more infection fighting immunoglobulin A than those who did not (Dillon, Minchoff, & Baker, 1985). A later study with breast feeding mothers confirmed these findings (Dillon & Totten, 1989). Even the anticipation of viewing humorous material is enough to produce these kinds of changes in the immune system (Humphreys, 1990). Humor can bolster the immune system giving strong motive to laugh our way to good health. But humor not only improves our physical well-being, it improves our psychological well-being too.

Though "professional speaker" did not make the list of top 10 most stressful jobs of 2014, a list populated by jobs such as active military personnel, firefighters, and cab drivers, the job is not stress free (Kensing, 2014). Hostile or apathetic audiences, cancelled flights, time spent alone in cookie-cutter hotel rooms, and the pressures of public speaking can create stress for even the most hardy of professional communicators. Humor helps to create a psychological barrier against stressors by functioning as an "emotion-focused coping" tool (Lefcourt, 2005).

The Coping Humor Scale (CHS) measures people's ability to use humor in direct response to stressful life situations (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). The Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ) focuses on the behavior of smiling and laughing in both positive and

negative life situations (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984). Both of these humor assessments are strongly

correlated to self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor as measured by the HSQ (Peterson &

Seligman, 2004; Martin et al., 2003). As previously mentioned in this capstone, these positive

forms of humor are positively associated with well-being (Martin et al., 2003). Though the CHS

focuses on the intrapersonal use of humor and the SHRQ focuses on the interpersonal use of

humor, both are important to well-being. Research employing the CHS shows that the ability to

produce humor in stressful situations moderates stress related to hassles and negative life events,

creating a psychological buffer (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). While the outward symptoms of

humor, such as laughing and smiling, can signal to others that we are safe and would enjoy

connecting with them (Fredrickson, 2009).

Stress is a major issue for most people today as "society is viewed as making stressful

demands on the individual and as imposing constraints on the ways such an individual might

deal with these demands" (Lazarus, 1984, p.226). Resilience is the ability to not only bounce

back from stressful demands and adversity, but to go beyond traditional expectations of success

(Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Resilience allows us to face challenges and continue to

grow in a positive direction (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Initial research on resilience showed that

some children were able to overcome challenging situations and go on to be healthy and

productive adults, whereas other children were not (Masten et al., 2009). But how does this

related to speaking to or training adults? Resilience is related to humor and adult learning

because "adult educators understand the alignment between living and learning" and humor is a

tool that can be used to help us do both (Brown, 2013, p. 58).

Perspective-taking humor is an emotion-focused coping technique that allows people to

gain an emotional distance from issues that might otherwise cause stress. One experiment found

that those who scored high for perspective-taking humor had less affective distress when dealing with death-related tasks (Lefcourt, Davidson, Shepherd, Phillips, Prkachin, & Mills, 1995), while another experiment found that perspective-taking humor was positively associated with being an organ donor (Lefcourt &Shepherd, 1995). Breast cancer patients who used humor in helping them to accept the reality of their disease experienced lower levels of distress; the lower level of distress they had, the greater their optimism (Carver, Pozo, Harris, Noriega, Scheier, Robinson, . . .Clark, 1993). Not only can humor can create a safe psychological distance from stressors, it can help us to cope so that we might gain hope in the face of some of our biggest challenges. Humor can help us positively deal with the biggest stressor of all, the thought of our own mortality.

Humor can also help us deal with smaller, every day stressors. A study showed that students who scored highly on the CHS viewed an upcoming exam as a positive challenge instead of a negative stressor and adjusted their performance expectations to be more realistic on a second exam based on factual information from the first exam. Students who scored low on the CHS experienced more stress and less ability to accurately adjust their expectations of the next exam based on realistic data from their previous performance (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993). Individuals with higher measures of humor on the CHS and other scales were found to have higher positive affect even when faced with negative life events (Kuiper, Martin, & Dance, 1992).

I often hear people comment that they like a particular speaker for their good sense of humor. "When we refer to someone as having a humorous personality, what we mean is that this person sees the ambiguity, confusion, and strife inherent in life and turns them into pleasure" (Weems, 2014, p. 196). Speakers, trainers, and leaders can model the use of humor in their

communications for audiences who may benefit from using humor to help them reframe their

own stressful situations. Ellis argued that most people were distressed because of their irrational

beliefs about situations and issues, exaggerating their significance. He espoused humor as just

the sort of tool that could get us to lighten up and put those issues in their right place (Ellis,

1977).

Communicators need not wait for a stressful event to befall them; the power of humor is

prophylactic in its ability to create a psychological cushion. One experiment found that watching

a humorous video before or after an event that provoked depression or anger actually heightened

mood. The same experiment found that anxiety, on the other hand, could only be decreased by

watching the video before the anxiety provoking event (Cann, Calhoun, & Nance, 2000). By

proactively adding humor into our lives, we can guard ourselves against stress and increase our

resilience.

How to incorporate humor?

Though research has not proven the ability to increase a person's humor production in

order to get more laughs, there are powerful benefits for both communicators and audiences in

trying. Speakers, trainers, and leaders who want to get a laugh from audiences need not produce

humor to leverage humor's effectiveness in delivering their message. Indeed, most of the

scientific literature on humor and its effects on communication and learning are done with pre-

produced humorous materials such as cartoons, stories, and videos. The thoughtful selection of

relevant, pre-produced humorous cartoons and jokes can help to increase retention of material.

Ziv (1988) asserts that this may be due to the fact that those who use humor tend to focus on and

prepare longer for material that is humorous. Norton (1983) proposes, that in a classroom setting,

the use of humor gives a clue to students that something significant is about to happen and that

they should pay attention. Regardless, when it comes to using humor, communicators should choose humor that is most relevant to the message being communicated, as it is most effective at helping to retain information (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977). Humor should be used judiciously throughout a presentation as humor used too often in the classroom has been found to decrease students' respect for the teacher (Powell & Andresen, 1985). The effective use of humor isn't just for laughing, it's for learning.

There are challenges, though, in finding appropriate humorous materials for speaking and training. The appendix in this capstone reveals these challenges and proposes a business plan for creating humorous videos that can be used to enhance the communication of speakers, trainers, and leaders.

Future directions

The evidence is clear; humor works as an effective tool for communication. It is not only effective; it is pleasurable and enhances well-being at the same time. Research is lacking in the area of increasing people's humor production (Lefcourt, 2002). What little research there is focuses on written humor in the form of humorous captions for cartoons. While being able to produce written humor is a valuable skill, spontaneous verbal humor is a skill that would serve communicators even better. Anyone who has ever been in the audience when something off-script happens, like a waiter dropping a tray full of dishes, has experienced the awkwardness that ensues if the speaker ignores the situations. Understanding and finding ways to increase spontaneous verbal humor production, or rather, the ability to make a funny quip in reaction to something that happens in the moment, will help communicators enhance mindfulness and strengthen the connection with their audience.

Martin Seligman's newest area of exploration in the field of positive psychology in the coming years is creativity (in-person communication, October, 2013). Perhaps through his future work and that of other positive psychology researchers, we will come to understand how humor is created and be able to teach it to others. Until then, communicators must let go of their attitude of "not being a comedian" and replace it with the understanding that humor is a powerful tool for communication and well-being.

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Business Plan: Flip the Switch Productions (Humorous Video Vignettes)

Background: The use of pre-produced humor such as jokes, cartoons, stories, and videos can be an effective tool for speakers, trainers, and leaders when they are communicating with audiences. However, there are challenges to using pre-produced jokes, cartoons, and verbal stories. Finding a relevant joke, cartoon, or story may be easy with the assistance of a Google search, but the memorization and delivery of the material may prove difficult for those without a natural sense of comedic timing. Communicators also run the risk of telling jokes or stories that the audience has already heard. Since surprise is part of what makes a joke funny, a joke previously heard will not be as funny as one heard for the first time.

Videos can quickly immerse audiences in a story where a problem or situation is illustrated in a humorous way. The visual natural of video provides a lot of information in a short amount of time due to its ability to communicate through sub context. For example, a furrowed brow can instantly communicate concern on the part of a character in a video. However, since facial expressions can often mean various things, video may allow for multiple interpretations of a situation – as in real life. Therefore, a video, depending on how the communicator chooses to frame it to the audience, can be presented as making a discrete point, or stimulating thoughtful discussion of multiple interpretations and perspectives. Because of these multiple interpretations, one video may be able to make multiple points.

High quality pre-produced humorous videos can be difficult to find, with many too expensive or too long in duration. While there are some relevant and useful videos that can be shown for free via the internet, such as It's Not About the Nail (Headley, 2013), content may be removed at any time and producers of such videos do not always abide by copyright laws.

Formally produced humorous training videos that can be bought through companies such as Video Arts, owned by former Monty Python cast member, John Cleese, are expensive and therefore out of reach for the average self-employed speaker or trainer. Based in London, Video Arts training videos are filled with accents and cultural references that can be difficult for American audiences to understand. Video run times are 15 to 30 minutes and are aimed at being a "training class in a box" for organizations who do not have formal training staff. These videos take too much time from short communications and training classes.

Proposal: My proposal is for a video production company that creates, humorous video vignettes illustrating positive psychology concepts and organizational challenges. These vignettes are brief in duration, scalable in cost, open to multiple teaching points, and come with debrief questions for speakers and trainers. The use of humor will illustrate situations, challenges, attitudes, and behaviors in a playful way, helping audience members to safely identify themselves or others in the scenario and to consider new perspectives. Humor is an enjoyable way to see one's self and reflect on potential changes in attitude and behavior.

The average video is 2 minutes in length. Often, communicators simply need a video to present a challenge or situation, or to emphasize a point. This must be done quickly so that the communicator does not lose the audience's attention and keeps the flow of the presentation going. This also makes it possible to use multiple videos throughout a short presentation in order to enhance the message rather than taking too much time away from the message.

A library of video vignettes, categorized by positive psychology and business concepts, will be available to those who purchase a license. In order to serve both organizations and individuals who may wish to use the videos, a range of purchasing options will be available. Licensing for complete access to the library of video vignettes may best suit organizations who

conduct several speeches and trainings each year. While licensing of only a select number of

vignettes may suit speakers and trainers who focus on only certain topics such as leadership or

communication, for example.

Vignettes are purposefully left open to multiple interpretations so that they can be used to

make multiple points within a concept. Each video vignette comes with suggested learning points

and debrief questions that can be used to enhance a speaker's presentation or to facilitate a

conversation during a training class.

Potential video categories: The first stage of production will focus on videos aimed at

highlighting positive psychology concepts. Martin Seligman's PERMA model of well-being

provides a backbone for other concepts related to well-being. These video vignettes should be of

practical use to the positive psychology practitioners who deliver speeches and workshops

throughout the world. A map of the proposed positive psychology concepts are listed below in

the table 1. As the business moves forward, more concepts and vignettes will be added based on

feedback from positive psychology practitioners, a model based on that of Second City,

producers of training videos. Second City has recently begun to asked potential customers for

input on videos before they are even created. This may be a model I can use going forward by

crowdsourcing the positive psychology community for ideas for videos that they would ideally

like to use.

Positive emotion	Engagement	Relationships	Meaning	Achievement
•Optimism (pessimsim) •Emotional contagion	•Flow •Mindfulness	•Communication •Active constructive responding	•Reframing of work •Finding purpose	•Resilience •Self-determiniation theory

Table 1: Positive psychology concepts for video vignettes