Using Humor in the Classroom

Humor can help a teacher develop a rapport with students and develop community in a classroom, but it can also have detrimental effects. Here are some general guidelines to follow when considering using humor in classroom presentations:

**Telling Jokes**: Occasionally, a joke can provide a good opening for your presentation, or illustrate a concept that you wish to discuss in class. Jokes are about content and also about timing, and not everyone is comfortable telling them, so there is no need to put pressure on yourself to tell a joke if you are not comfortable. If you think the joke might offend someone (see below), consider avoiding it.

**Avoid insulting any of your students**. All humor is not necessarily humorous to all audiences. Different cultures find different things humorous. Also, if you have international students in your classroom, they may not understand humor that includes plays on words or cultural references. Different sexes and people of different sexualities do not always find the same things funny. People from different economic classes frequently may not have the same sense of humor. For humor to work in the classroom, you have to know your audience and especially know what they find funny—and not funny.

**Always avoid political, racial, ethnic, sexist, and homophobic humor**. A lot of humor comes at the expense of others—and some of those others might well be in your class or be friends/relatives of those in your class.

**Sarcasm**: Be especially careful in your use of humorous sarcasm. The humor in a sarcastic statement can be missed by some, who might think you are being serious.

Humor is not the only—or even the most effective—way to connect with students. Being affable—that is, friendly, approachable, good-natured, and polite—can be as effective or even more effective than being funny.

For more advice on using humor in teaching, see “Teaching Methods: Humor” on MSU’s Faculty and Organizational Development Office’s web site. Available: [http://www1.provost.msu.edu/facdev/instructionalresources/TeachingMethods/humor.asp](http://www1.provost.msu.edu/facdev/instructionalresources/TeachingMethods/humor.asp)