



Humour and irony in higher education

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'Surely we can have a laugh?' – said by almost every open mic comedian in Flanders

Indeed, there's nothing wrong with laughter, even in education. Several studies point to the importance of humour in education, citing a number of **potential benefits** (Aboudan, 2009; Benjelloun, 2009; Jeder, 2015). Humour can contribute to a pleasant classroom atmosphere, help reduce tension and stress, increase student motivation, and reduce the gap between students and teachers. So humour certainly has its place in higher education and it has a number of positive effects.

One example of humour in education is the use of cartoons (Salomon & Singer, 2011). Here it is advisable to make the cartoon an essential part of the lesson, if possible. Be sure to give the cartoon a clear place in the lesson. You can use a cartoon to summarise certain learning content, to make a point, or to clarify a concept.

In this Teaching Tip, we will first discuss a specific form of humour: irony. We will go into what irony is – and what it isn't – and address a number of things to be mindful of if you want to use irony consciously as a teaching strategy. Then we will zoom out and focus on humour in education in general, sharing some possible approaches, thoughts and suggestions on using humour in your teaching practice.

Irony: what it is, and what it isn't

Humour and irony are not the same thing (Hutcheon, 1994), but they do overlap. Irony is a way of making fun of something or someone in a covert and mild way, by saying **the opposite of what is meant** or by **strongly exaggerating**.

An example of irony in which the opposite is said of what is meant: 'I'm so articulate today' (after you've repeatedly stumbled and tripped over your words).

An example of irony using strong exaggeration is what we said at the beginning of this teaching tip: 'said by almost every open mic comedian in Flanders'. Through ironic exaggeration, this statement pokes fun at open mic comedians.

Irony **differs from sarcasm** in how something or someone is mocked. While mildness is key in irony, sarcasm is characterised by a harsher, more biting tone. While sarcasm typically requires a victim, this is not necessarily the case for irony (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989).

Possible pitfalls of using irony in education

As mentioned above, irony is mild, while sarcasm is harsh and can hurt people's feelings. After all, humour can also take the form of biting mockery and can be used to express intellectual superiority (Jeder, 2015). This brings us to the first pitfall. **Don't let your irony become sarcasm**, potentially hurting specific students' feelings. A possible consequence of using sarcasm is that, by offending or deriding students, you make teacher-student interaction



more difficult. This may deter students from participating in discussions, thereby **hindering activating education**. More information on the prerequisites for activation can be found in [this Teaching Tip](#) from 2018.

Example: the lecturer asks for an explanation of a concept featured on a slide. The first situation contains an ironic remark, while the second tends more towards sarcasm.

Lecturer: 'What do you see on this slide?'

Student: 'Words and arrows.'

Lecturer (grins): 'Thanks for reminding me to ask better questions at the exam!'

Lecturer: 'What do you see on this slide?'

Student: 'Words and arrows.'

Lecturer (sighs): 'Well-spotted. Let's hope your interpretation of the questions on the exam will be just as astute.'

The important difference here is that in the first situation the lecturer is the subject of the mockery, while in the second situation it's the student.

A second potential pitfall of using irony in your teaching is the risk of students **misunderstanding or misinterpreting ironic statements**.

Example of an ironic statement in which the lecturer refers to a book:

Lecturer: 'This book, which an unnamed colleague wrote in the space of five minutes, ...'

The risk here is that some of the students may interpret this as criticism of that colleague (and the quality of the book), while others will recognise it as a form of irony where the opposite of what is meant is said. The latter students will conclude that it actually took a lot of work to write this book.

The above example illustrates that irony not only conveys information, but also one's attitude or disposition towards something. And then there's always the risk that students fail to interpret this attitude correctly. This is of course compounded by the fact that ironic statements often say the opposite of what is meant. In that sense, using irony in education is actually at odds with the educational ideal of clear, unambiguous communication. Nevertheless, we still strongly recommend using some irony in education, precisely because of the potential benefits cited in the

intro. To avoid the pitfall of possible misinterpretation, we recommend communicating clearly about the irony, by using the appropriate intonation and facial expressions.

Communicating clearly about irony means that it is best to discuss the norm or situation that is implicitly embedded in the ironic remark.

If you were to ironically introduce World War II in your lessons as 'a little detail in history', then be sure to mention in your summary of the learning content that this war was obviously not just a detail, but had major implications.

However, don't discuss the norm or situation right away. Nothing takes the fun out of irony quite like an immediate explanation and analysis of the joke. So allow for some laughter, and then be explicit and unambiguous about the ironic remark later on, making it clear to all students that the remark was meant to be ironic, ensuring a correct interpretation of the ironic joke. Don't assume that your humour is very obvious, because it might not be obvious to everyone. This applies primarily to situations where the learning content is the subject of the irony, or when a non-ironic interpretation of the statement may be perceived as offensive.

The correct use of **facial expressions and intonation** is important when using irony. People typically indicate that they are being ironic through certain facial expressions and intonation patterns, providing the necessary hints to the listener that the statement is not to be taken literally. Be sure to use facial expressions and intonation consciously when making ironic statements.

The statement 'My, we're all participating so actively today!' can be interpreted very differently depending on the facial expression used. When combined with raised eyebrows, a grin and rolling eyes, it is clearly ironic. When said with a straight face, it is less likely to be interpreted as ironic.

A third possible pitfall is that you make **too much** use of irony, or humour in general, acting more like an entertainer than like a teacher. While you can certainly include humour, don't try to be funny at all costs. Humour is part of human communication, but if it is overused, or if it feels forced, it can distract students and even hinder teaching. You should also consider whether humour fits in with your teaching style.



Finally, we would like to point out that it is always important to maintain an **atmosphere of trust** as a necessary precondition for the use of irony. This means that the use of humour should always go together with working on a positive classroom climate, for which other elements are also important (more information on creating a positive classroom climate can be found in [this ECHO Tip](#) from 2020). In addition, humour should only be used once you have properly gauged the ‘temperature’ of the student group. In other words, a joke may go down well in one group, while the same joke may elicit more negative reactions in another group.

Irony and humour in diverse student populations

Irony, and on a more general level, humour, is often related to a certain norm or assumption held by a group. It is the incongruence with an existing norm or assumption that is the very basis of a joke (Farber, 2007). Prior knowledge of said norm or assumption is therefore key in order to understand irony (and humour). Something that elicits laughter in one group may very well elicit an uncomfortable silence in another. Understanding irony and finding ironic statements funny can be **group specific**.

This notion has implications for education and the creation of a positive classroom climate. If your ironic remarks are understood properly, they can contribute to a stronger group feeling. Discussing the norm to which the irony refers can then create a sense of belonging to a group of insiders. On the flipside, people who do not get the irony (and therefore do not understand the norm of the group) may feel excluded (Hutcheon, 1994; Piirainen-Marsh, 2011). **So irony can connect, but also exclude people.**

In an educational environment, where diversity is a given, there’s always a chance that students with certain characteristics will feel excluded, because those **characteristics make it more difficult to grasp irony** (see also [this Teaching Tip](#) from 2018 on promoting the progress of disadvantaged groups in higher education and [this Teaching Tip](#) from 2021 on differentiated teaching in higher education).

Consider, for example, a student who has an autism spectrum disorder. This disorder is associated with difficulties in communication such as difficulty understanding irony (APA, 2013, p. 54).

For more information on helping students on the autism spectrum with assignments, see [this Teaching Tip](#) (in Dutch) from 2018.

For more information on supporting students with disabilities, see [this Teaching Tip](#) (in Dutch) from 2014. For more information on guiding and assessing students with disabilities, see [this Teaching Tip](#) from 2014.

Another example stems from the fact that humour and irony also have an important cultural component (Bell, 2009). As a result, the cultural background of students can make it difficult for them to interpret ironic statements that hinge on the cultural norms of the lecturer. What is considered funny in one culture is not necessarily funny in another culture. An example is whether or not cartoons with a deity or prophet as the protagonist are found funny.

After reading all this, you might conclude that ironic statements, and by extension humour, are best avoided altogether in a diverse learning environment. But that would be taking things too far. Just be sure to keep the points discussed here in mind. And if one of your jokes falls flat, it’s not always because of its quality: it can also have other causes.

While the use of irony has its pitfalls in diverse student groups, you can also use irony as a **teaching tool** in such groups. Since humour and irony also have an important cultural component (Bell, 2009) and are therefore part of a culture, you can use them to further clarify cultures or to highlight differences and similarities between cultures. Consequently, humour and irony can contribute to the socialisation process in education, by transmitting a certain culture. This can be done consciously by giving students examples of what is found funny in a particular culture, but it also happens unconsciously (Bell, 2009; Jeder, 2015). Humour and irony can also be used in language teaching, where wordplay and puns certainly have their relevance (Aboudan, 2009; Bell, 2009). [This Teaching Tip](#) (in Dutch) from 2017 discusses ways to deal with language errors made by non-native speakers of Dutch.

Humour, teacher-student interaction and classroom management

We mentioned earlier that mocking, disparaging types of humour can hinder interaction and activation. However, other types of humour can also have positive effects on interaction and classroom management ([here](#) are some



Teaching Tips on 'classroom management' (in Dutch)). Lecturers who use irony in a self-deprecating way can come across as approachable, spontaneous, and 'only human'.

An example of this is the previously mentioned situation where the lecturer, after repeatedly stumbling over their words, says: 'I'm so articulate today'.

Humour can help to **lower the student-teacher barrier** (Aboudan, 2009; Benjelloun, 2009), thereby facilitating interaction.

In addition, humour can be used in **classroom management**, to gently nudge students away from undesirable behaviour and to restore order. The advantage of using humour in classroom management is that you minimise the risk of negative consequences, such as a soured relationship with students.

One way of using humour to stop unwanted behaviour is to focus on positively reinterpreting unwanted behaviour. Example 1, with noisy students: 'I hear tremendous input from over there. Could you curb your enthusiasm just a little?'

Example 2, with students falling asleep: 'I see that my lesson is immediately being processed through meditation.'

Example 3, with students browsing the internet: 'Several students are already trying to download the PowerPoint from Blackboard as we speak. But I'll have to disappoint you, it's not there yet. So you can put your laptops away.'

When using humour in the context of classroom management, it is important to use general remarks or to address the remark to a group rather than to an individual (as in the examples in the text box above). As previously stated, irony turning into sarcasm is also a concern.

Humour and irony in a critical and creative teaching environment

Irony can be used in a teaching environment to stimulate creative thinking and critical reflection with students. For more information on stimulating and assessing creativity, have a look at [this Teaching Tip](#) (in Dutch) from 2015.

Irony can be used in **critical reflection** by pointing out absurd, contradictory claims in certain statements or opinions. It allows these claims to be examined critically and, if necessary, debunked (Sosa-Abella & Reyes, 2015; Szerszynski, 2007).

For instance, you could refer to the irony often used by activists or other critics when they denounce situations such as the establishment of 'green' industry in a former nature reserve, a 'climate-neutral' airport (Boussauw & Vanoutrive, 2019), or military action to bring peace. These kinds of ironic claims can be used in lessons to stimulate critical reflection and discussion.

Humour can also help stimulate **creative thinking**. It can encourage people to think of alternative solutions in creative ways and through unconventional associations (Benjelloun, 2009; Jeder 2015). By using humour consciously and communicating explicitly about it ('don't worry, it can be funny, or quirky, or different'), you ensure that students start thinking outside the box, beyond 'realistic' options and the barriers that these often create. Humour can lead to a more 'unbridled' creative brainstorming session that may lead to very innovative insights.

Using humour and irony consciously

We recommend using humour and irony consciously in your teaching practice. It can also come into play during **self-reflection**, when you evaluate your own teaching (Geyskens, 2015). You can think about the role and the use of humour and irony in your educational environment.

During self-reflection you could, for instance, examine in which teaching situations or for which assignments you used irony, and for what purpose. You could then also evaluate how the students reacted and to what extent these reactions were desirable. The previously mentioned idea that irony has a cultural component can also be the subject of self-reflection. Being aware of one's own culture and how it shines through in a programme component is important. The ways this culture influences the use of irony (or other forms of humour) and the extent to which it is understood can be an interesting theme to reflect on.

Of course, it is certainly possible to combine such self-reflection with input from students. You could occasionally ask them for feedback on whether or not you managed to use humour or irony successfully.



Want to know more?

Literature

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- [Culture of activation](#) (2018)
- [Positive vibration, yeah! A positive classroom climate](#) (2020)
- [Promoting the progress of disadvantaged groups](#) (2018)
- [Differentiated teaching in higher education](#) (2021)
- [Students with functional disabilities](#) (2014)

Expertise Centre for Higher Education (ECHO) — Teaching tips in Dutch

- Theme page '[klasmanagement](#)'
- [Begeleiden van studenten met autisme bij opdrachten](#) (2018)
- [Ondersteunen van studenten met een functiebeperking](#) (2014)
- [Hoe omgaan met taalfouten van niet-moedertaalsprekers Nederlands?](#) (2017)
- [Creativiteit stimuleren en beoordelen](#) (2015)