**Debating the role of humour in teaching the HEALTH sciences: Humour Extremely Assistive, Laughter Thoroughly Helps!**

***“****What did the Healthcare Scientist bear say to his co-worker? Get your claws cut! You keep breaking the pipettes!”1*

Here Dr. Gulcan Garip (GG) a health psychologist and lecturer at the University of Derby and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky1 (FGS) previously her MSc student, contemplate: 1) Why using humour in the classroom can be a good idea; 2) The natural link between humour to healthcare; 3) How to use humour effectively; and 4) The joy of laughter

1. **Why humour in the classroom is a good idea**
	1. *It smoothes the way!*

GG: Teachers strive to inspire and engage students on their academic journeys. The more entertaining an academic can make a lecture, seminar or workshop, the more likely students are to engage with the teacher and learning materials. Healthcare sciences may literally include topics of life and death on the curriculum, and being able to use humour appropriately can be difficult. When humour is used well, it can enhance the student experience with the academic and the course.

FGS: Yes. In a nutshell humour facilitates learning. The right sort creates a warm and positive environment that can increase goodwill and support learning. Humour can relax teachers and students, reduce anxiety, and increase enjoyment and motivation [1, 2]. When used to interpret and communicate information, and welcome new thinking, the learning atmosphere is easier, more interactive and interesting.

* 1. *It gets our attention!*

FGS: Many of my memories of lectures were of professors droning on endlessly; so those that built in humorous insights really caught our attention. Humour can help us retain things more easily [1]. So if say you want your students to understand p values: just remember that a joke can be significant! I also believe there was some humour involved when learning the definition for amnesia, but I’m not sure, as I may have forgotten!

GG: One of my favourite lecturer’s at uni put in a lot of preparation to making lectures entertaining. Going to class felt like going to a comedy gig, and for that reason, this was one of the most well attended lectures on the programme I was studying. That said, I’ve been to some very funny comedy gigs and I wouldn’t be able to recall any of the jokes now… Hmm.

* 1. *It’s rewarding!*

FGS: Whether lurking behind a snazzy on-line platform, or in front of a classroom, teachers who use humour benefit everyone. But it may mean being a little less solemn. Arthur Asa Berger sees teaching as a performance art that is more rewarding when academics take themselves a little less seriously [3]. When they do I find them also more open-minded and supportive. Gulcan I admired that about you when you supervised my MSc laughter research, it certainly motivated me.

GG: That’s very kind of you Freda, it’s a pleasure working with you. Each year, I meet hundreds of new students, and with some, such as yourself, a collaborative bond is developed that takes us on an exciting research journey. Although sharing a sense of humour is not a requirement for forming collaborations, academia and research are much more enjoyable if we can share a laugh.

1. **The natural link of humour to healthcare**
	1. *It’s healthy innit!*

FGS: The short answer is that humour is good for your health. And as the etymology of ‘teacher’ comes from to show, teachers who use humour are giving their students a practical demonstration and everyone benefits.

GG: That’s a nice way of putting it. It’s common to hear people say ‘look on the bright-side’ but less common to hear people say ‘look on the humorous-side’ in certain circumstances. Healthcare settings can be extremely challenging, particularly nowadays where services are stretched due to covid-19. It is important to make space to experience and embrace the full range of emotions. I do believe that training oneself to see the humorous-side may be a good personal skill to develop. I like to think we’ve got a humour ‘muscle’ that we can work-out and strengthen.

FGS: Yes! While building that muscle let’s also focus on our funny bone. No not what you are thinking guys. I am talking about the humerus; in fact we have two so let’s strengthen our humerai! Got a bone to pick with me?! Go ahead! How humerus! McGhee conceived the ‘7 Humor Habits Program’ to train humour [4] and it looks like fun: Step 2 is to cultivate a playful attitude, and Step 4 is to create your own verbal humour. OK how about: What’s the different between a humorist and a umorshit? One is dyslexic. No, that isn’t funny, it is just merde! Anyway programs like this may bring more humour to teaching, until which a ‘humourless teacher’ is a ‘properly ridiculous’ oxymoron.

GG: I hear you saying ‘practice what you preach’ when it comes to humour. For people to be humorous, there needs to be the headspace for people to come up with the humour. Unfortunately many academics across the globe are facing very heavy workloads, which adds a challenge for them to be humorous.

* 1. *Evidence is mounting!*

FGS: For those reading this and thinking about their next research project, why not add to the evidence of how humour can benefit us! And how it can’t: the evidence for humour supporting learning is not all consistent, for instance one study found students exposed to humorous materials relating to their course-work performed less well on tests [5]. What exactly were those students exposed to I keep wondering?! The Personal Development Theory (PDT) of laughter and humour [2] was formulated after analysis of 240 primary research articles and 11 systematic reviews. PDT views laughter and humour as supporting Biological, Psychological, Social, Environmental, and Behavioural (BPSE-B) factors from cradle to grave. BPSE-B you say? That’s not FUN-E! Agreed the acronym is not hysterical. But being able to use humour for multiple benefits including life-long learning is FUN-E.

GG: One of the classes I teach is called Health Promotion and Behaviour Change, and the assignment for this class involves students writing an intervention proposal to be submitted to a hypothetical funding body. Even though the funding body is hypothetical, it’s good to get in the habit of developing a cost-effective proposal, rather than assuming an unlimited access to funds.

FGS: That reminds me of the sage advice of Peanuts ‘every time you find some humour in a difficult situation you win’. Funding is one of those difficult situations. You know the joke about research funding? Well I won’t tell it as no one will get it! What about the joke about germs? Not telling it either, I don’t want to spread any around.

* 1. *Humour in healthcare is vital!*

FGS: We know that humour in healthcare and the medical professions be it between colleagues and with clients is really important for mental health, well-being, and for connection to patients [6]. Its role is also noted by the medical community during the COVID-19 pandemic [7]. But the appropriateness of the humour and its delivery needs to be well thought out. Paul Osincup suggests the best way to explore humour with a patient is to start with your own experiences and to be positive and inclusive [6]. Getting humour right takes practice and the classroom could be a good forum for that practice to prepare for more difficult real-world situations. Maybe that could be a way to encourage teachers to use it?

GG: Cultural differences and political correctness also come into play here. What most people may have considered a harmless joke 10-20 years ago, may now be perceived as sexist, racist or othering, to individuals from oppressed groups and their allies. Humour, as with most things, are bound in time and place; context is important. The topics of humour we choose to focus on will inevitably consist of issues we take for granted, just as those jokes made in the past that would now be considered inappropriate.

FGS: Innocuous healthcare and science jokes are out there, and accessing them more may enable mass inoculation! Anyone know any jokes about sodium? Na. Scientific publishing provides the odd laugh too. Miner’s [8] anthropological study of *latipso* ceremonies of the *Nacirema* merits a detour if you want to know more about American hospitals (there I’ve just given it away!). Freud’s book [9] on jokes too, but hardly a laugh a minute. Search and you will find, the good material is out there, and a lot more recent I hope! Also start developing your humerai. OK. Which jokes are not appropriate for Healthcare Scientist bears? The ones that are grizzly and the ones they barely get. Truth!

GG: In the classroom, as well as in other areas of life, it’s important that you’re laughing with people rather than at them.

1. **Using humour effectively**
	1. *Aim for Ha-Ha!*

FGS: Humour has been categorized in a range of ways. An easy way I ‘segment’ humour is between ‘ha-ha’ and ‘na-na’! You get my drift! For more complexity there is the HuLA model (Humour Laughter Affect, and you can think of a Hula hoop as there are lots of hoops in the model). It presents the interaction of six categories of laughter and humour: 1) positive humour without laughter; 2) negative humour without laughter; 3) positive humour with laughter; 4) negative humour with laughter; 5) positive laughter without humour; 6) negative laughter without humour [2]. Reading that list makes me dizzy! The visual model [2] is far better, honest!

GG: A good starting point for bringing humour into teaching is establishing your authentic humorous qualities as a teacher. If I’m not very good at telling jokes in my daily life, it’s probably not a good idea to rehearse a joke that I won’t be able to execute effectively in the classroom – that’s just painful for everyone involved. If you’re unsure what your authentic humorous qualities are, it could be beneficial to ask friends and family what they consider your humorous strengths to be. In talking to my father about this book, who’s also an academic, he relayed the following incidence to me – upon being asked a question from a student, on a topic which he had just explained in detail at length, he felt frustration, and without much thought, tugged the sides of his jacket, as you might if you were releasing a parachute, and made a ‘Boom’ sound simultaneously. While I don’t think I would’ve been able to pull off the ‘suicide bomber’ stunt in the classroom, the rapport my father had built with his students allowed his frustration to create a humorous moment that was shared with most of the classroom. It’s important though to remember the feelings and perceptions of the student who asked the question…

FGS. Yes, humour needs adapting to each situation, and thinking quickly on your feet like your father did. Usually the punch line comes to us too late. But sometimes it is better as biting comments aren’t always recommended! Ideally we focus on ‘positive’ humour which is affiliative and self-enhancing in the classroom, and avoid maladaptive or negative humour which is aggressive and self-defeating [10]. Having said that negative humour may benefit creativity, and ‘harsh humour’ may have benefits [2], but it may be tricky unless you have real comedic talents!

* 1. *Technical tips!*

FGS: If you want to plan in more humour in your class it is well worth consulting Berger’s list of 45 humour techniques [11]. These are divided into four categories and relate to using language (e.g. allusion, irony, ridicule, puns/wordplay, sarcasm), logic (e.g. analogy, comparison), identity (e.g. caricature, imitation) and action (e.g. slapstick). Sometimes we can think of great jokes but may not want to share them. For instance, PMS jokes aren’t funny. Period. But this is fine: Did you hear that oxygen and magnesium got together? OMG!

GG: There’s definitely a lot of humour techniques to choose from. Some people will pull off certain types of humour better than others. Investing time to experiment with different types of humour styles may be time well spent. If you’ve gotten in the habit of using certain types of humour, you might be missing out on other types of humour you’ve not tried.

FGS: Yes. Humour and laughter are influenced by motives, circumstances, and cultural and individual differences [2]. So it is important to tailor humour to the teaching material, learning audience, and teaching environment.

* 1. *Stimulating humour!*

GG: Bakar and Kumar [12] recorded five award-winning lecturers in a university in New Zealand, who were identified and nominated by students as having a good sense of humour in the classroom. These lecturers were observed while teaching and then interviewed using Stimulated Recall Interviews (SRI) to understand their reflections-in-action concerning specific humorous moments and specific humorous behaviours while teaching. The data indicates a number of different types of humour were used, either intentionally or spontaneously, to enhance student learning and to engage students' attention. This is a novel way of understanding the lecturers motivations in using different types of humour, as well as getting a sense of student’s responses and reactions to those different types of humour.

FGS: Humour can mean so many different things to people, but the one thing we likely all agree on is that it is stimulating when it leads to laughter. Laughter adds physiological benefits similar to those obtained through exercise [13]. Perhaps that’s why when one goes seven days without laughter it makes one weak?! It reminds me of the Mary Poppins song: ‘I love to laugh, loud and long and clear... And the more the glee, The more I’m a merrier me!’.

1. **The joy of laughter**
	1. *Laughter is the best medicine!*

FGS: As we’ve seen humour is fantastic but for those not born with the skill of delivering it in a classroom environment, which is probably the vast majority, there are many pitfalls to be aware of. The good news is that you actually don’t need humour to make you or your students laugh! Can you remember the six categories from the HuLA model? The last two do not involve humour at all. Laughter does not need to involve ‘cognitive funniness’ which can get us all into a lot of trouble! Robert Provine a gelotologist (someone who studies laughter) found that only 20% of all social laughter actually involved humour. So if my maths is correct, that leaves a whopping 80% that doesn’t [14].

GG: We laugh a lot less as we get older, compared to children and we’re more likely to laugh when we are with others, than when we’re on our own [2, 14].

FGS: Yes, and so it is a good idea to plan to laugh each day, even when we are on our own. We do lots of things alone that we also do with others, like dancing, and singing, and (no guys, this is a family book, I was not planning to say that) so why not laugh alone too? And the good news is that laughter is an exercise. Three minutes of laughter has been said to equate to 25 push-ups [15]. I know what I’d prefer to do!

* 1. *Laughter bonds!*

FGS: Teaching is about bonds, and I’m not talking about 007: laughter strengthens connections to promote learning [1, 16]. Most of us think that only laughter that is spontaneous counts, but self-induced laughter can be just as, or more, beneficial [17]. Also known as voluntary or willed laughter this is when we laugh when we want regardless if something is funny or not.

GG: We’re very good at distinguishing between authentic and fake laughter. I wonder whether this has an impact at a physiological and neural level in influencing our capacity to learn.

FGS: Good point. But it’s good to remember all laughter including social laughter can be fake. If you ever laughed at a shoddy joke you know what I mean. Conversely self-induced laughter can be authentic. Finding ways to self-induce joyful, natural laughter is more challenging for some people. It is really about the message we send ourselves when inducing laughter. Aiming for authenticity is best.

* 1. *Laughie laughter!*

GG: What’s interesting with the Laughie research is that it is demonstrating that there is potential to harness the benefits of laughter even when we laugh on our own.

FGS: Yes that opens up doors as people can’t always get together with others to have a laugh for a range of reasons. As our systematic review found laugher therapy to date has focused on group initiatives [18]. Laughing alone can be done at any time [19]! Try it: laugh alone for just a few seconds! Go for it! Can you feel how your face changes? Imagine doing this for one minute! The Laughie is a self-created tool: you record one minute of your joyful laughter on your smartphone. To use it you just play it and laugh along with it at any time; it acts as a prompt and a timer [19].

GG: Practice makes perfect, but not everyone may be keen to jump on the Laughie bandwagon. For those who may be more sceptical about recording their laughter on their smartphone, or perhaps those who may not enjoy listening back to sound of their own laughter, why not pair up with a friend, family member or fellow student. The Laughie is one way of increasing laughter in your classroom and life but experiment with what will work for your classroom.

FGS: You do need to be a bit adventurous to try it as it is a new concept. But it can be a great tool to be more playful and less serious [18]! With the Laughie it is OK to laugh alone! Or with others! It is a convenient way to increase well-being, as it only takes one minute [19]. For teachers wary of the pitfalls of cognitive humour, a Laughie before class, or for students as a break, may be an easy way of getting in some harmless laughs. What do you think Gulcan?

GG: That’s a really good suggestion Freda, what better way to set the mood for a lecture with a bit of laughter? I’ve enjoyed our chat about discussing humour in the classroom, and I’d like to end with a quote:

“There is something rather amusing about the idea of engaging in a serious discussion about humour: it reminds us of the professor who dreamt that he was giving a lecture and woke up to find that he was” [20].

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**Biographies:**

Dr Gulcan Garip is Programme Lead of the MSc Psychology programme and teaches on the MSc Health Psychology programme at the University of Derby. She is a registered Health Psychologist with the Health and Care Professions Council and a chartered psychologist with the British Psychological Society. I’m not sure why I’m referring to myself in the third person. My research interests focus on improving wellbeing and quality of life for people living with long-term conditions and their caregivers. Thanks to Freda’s enthusiasm and novel idea of the Laughie, I have also developed an interest in harnessing the benefits of laughter and humour for improving wellbeing in a range of contexts.

Freda: I’m an independent health researcher (not the day job) studying laughter, humour, well-being, healthy aging, and thalassotherapy (Xavier and I enjoy the sea!). I have an MBA (IMD 1989) and MSc in health psychology (2018), but my most recent diploma, Healthcare Scientist bear jokes with Bear University is still in the post. Being a gelotologist lets you laugh for science! No one had systematically explored laughing alone. So I created the Laughie one-minute laughter prescription. The healthy can self-prescribe, otherwise by a medical practitioner. Videos: 1) Me and my Laughie; 2) Laughing in French with Mum’s Laughie:

1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpFjroTtSYg&t=142s>

2) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fByy0xpZQuM&t=9s>