

2022

## Student perceptions of humour in teaching politics and international relations: a focus group study

Alexander P. Martin

*Mediterranean Institute of Technology, South Mediterranean University, Tunisia, alex.martin@medtech.tn*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp>

---

### Recommended Citation

Martin, A. P. (2022). Student perceptions of humour in teaching politics and international relations: a focus group study. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 19(5). <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss5/08>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Student perceptions of humour in teaching politics and international relations: a focus group study

## Abstract

Politics and International Relations (Pol & IR) lecturers can capitalise on the established relationship between comedy and political analysis by using humour techniques to enhance the student learning experience and to develop students' critical analysis skills. Using collected data from focus groups with 21 British and International undergraduate students from four UK universities, this small-scale empirical study advances a methodology that enables participants to engage in collective meaning-making without being restricted by a closed-ended question survey. This research highlights student perceptions that humour attempts can make concepts memorable, improve student-lecturer rapport, and increase student engagement and motivation when lecturers consistently adopt a friendly persona and use humour to supplement high-quality lecture content. Mild self-deprecation by lecturers improves the student-lecturer relationship. Lecturer "banter" with students is risky, but might be acceptable if the lecturer's persona is consistently humorous and sufficient student trust is developed. Participants considered that analogies and pop culture references are beneficial explanatory tools, especially for complex Pol & IR concepts or theories. Memes were considered to be most effective when used as a summarising or concluding point, thus corroborating the "educate before subvert" principle.

## Practitioner Notes

1. While this paper corroborates literature arguing for the benefits of the use of humour in teaching, it fills a methodological gap in this literature by advancing student-centric research methods. Student-led focus group research on humour provides in-depth and nuanced perspectives that interviews with academics overlook and survey research can only superficially capture.
2. Humour is a bonus: participants thought that lecturers should focus on being good teachers that provide high-quality sessions before attempting to use humour techniques.
3. Adopting a consistently friendly and approachable persona facilitates rapport-building with students, which will subsequently make all humour attempts more acceptable.
4. Using analogies and pop culture references facilitates explanations and deploying memes after explanations of concepts to ensure that students 'get' the joke.
5. Mild, professional-level self-deprecation and opening jokes help students feel comfortable and increase both subject interest and willingness to participate.

## Keywords

Pedagogy, Education, Politics, Humour, Focus Group research.

## Introduction

Political comedy, an internationally popular genre, uses mockery and satire to deliver critical analysis of political events. Comedians that address political issues can conduct a style of critical inquiry that journalists are implicitly expected not to utilize. However, can Politics and International Relations academics borrow from political comedians and integrate comedy techniques in their content delivery to provide more critical political analysis? In addition, would this approach pedagogically benefit students or improve student engagement? To address these questions, this study centres on students' perspectives of lecturers' use of humour by undertaking focus group research designed to interactively elicit individual and collective attitudes. First, this article outlines political comedy's capacity to provide critical analysis. Second, it demonstrates how humour in teaching has social and emotional benefits in addition to how humor, as part of a critical pedagogy, can develop students' critical analysis skills. Third, it rationalises the focus group methodology and use of hypothetical scenarios as an original approach to understanding student perspectives on humor. Fourth, data collected from focus groups with Pol & IR students corroborates existing literature on humour's pedagogical benefits. Finally, it summarises the focus group finding into eight separate but interconnected points.

## Political comedy's critical analysis function

Humor has intersected with politics since "pharaohs in Egypt and emperors in China first appointed court jesters" (Morreall, 2005, p. 63) and Aristophanes and Socrates were able to critique concepts of status, power, and war through satire (Schutz, 1977). This is a connection that Pol & IR teaching can exploit. Mockery, parody and satire allow political comedians to entertainingly scrutinize politicians and mainstream political views while providing more critical analysis than mainstream journalism. This explains the popularity of infotainment-comedy programs as a source of political information, such as *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*, where viewers are presented with jokes and a "deep-dive into a story supported with facts and evidence and reporting...often in far more depth and detail than they'd get from a news article" (A. Wilkinson, 2019). Furthermore, non-English language iterations of political comedy show - e.g. *The Heute-show* (Germany), *Gato Fedorento* (Portugal), *ArmComedy* (Armenia), *Olacak o Kadar* (Turkey), *Al Bernameg* (Egypt), *Albasheer Show* (Iraq), and *Greg News* (Brazil) - demonstrate the global popularity of the genre.

Political humor can challenge existing power relations as it "conveys criticism against the political status quo" (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p. 2). When addressing politicians' actions, it can promote critical thinking by drawing attention to "problems and the trickery that covered them up" (Morreall, 2005, p. 78). This critical function is apparent in political comedy that mocks political actors' decisions or behaviors thus encouraging critical engagement with those who hold power and their discourses. This is important as "mocking the establishment is a crucial form of political discourse" (Shally-Jensen et al., 2018, p. 535), while censorship against satirists is an indicator of authoritarianism. Satire, the use of ridicule, irony or sarcasm to expose a vice or to lampoon an individual, is intimately related to politics as a form to criticize the powerful and can allow people to "laugh at political figures and institutions that palpably affect our lives" (Vanderheiden, 2007, p. 206).

Political humor comedians and shows, therefore, can simultaneously criticize political decisions and figures, and entertain the audience (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, pp. 7–8). This also has an educational role because it has "made politics more accessible, leading to more informed viewers who have the potential to form more educated opinions and discuss those views with others" (Thai, 2014). American political comedians Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*) and Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*) "epitomize the breakdown of old distinctions between

entertainment and political journalism. Even if they cannot shape political outcomes, they have considerable power to inform voters, expose and shame politicians, and increase political engagement” (Lynch, 2013).

Political comedy can also highlight absurdities in political discourse. Michael Moore compared gun registration to dogs and cars; *“what’s the problem with registering guns? We register our cars and we register our dogs. I don’t hear anyone saying Obama is gonna come and take my dog”* (Real Time with Bill Maher HBO Episode 16 Season 11 May 17, 2013). Highlighting the nonsensical in politics with humor has the pedagogical advantages of helping students engage with recent developments or events but also prompting critical analysis of what is “taken for granted”.

## Humor and teaching

Despite caveats on delivery and appropriateness, existing literature on using humor in teaching states the unequivocal benefits for students’ enthusiasm and engagement in the subject. Humor can facilitate comprehension (Özdoğru & McMorris, 2013) maintain student interest (Hellman, 2007), increase students’ interest and retention (Shatz & Helitzer, 2005), improve student perceptions of learning (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999), motivate students (Goodboy et al., 2015), facilitate rapport (Granitz et al., 2009), and make lecturers more approachable (Appleby, 2018). In addition, using humor can relax the students (Kher et al., 1999) reduce anxiety and improve learning and performance (Berk, 1996, p. 88), and students preferred humorous instructors (Fortson & Brown, 1998).

Using humor in teaching aligns with the critical pedagogy teaching philosophy that emphasises the development of critical thinking skills. Critical pedagogy is “fundamentally concerned with understanding the relationship between power and knowledge” (Hayes, 2016, p. 253). Informed by critical theorists that seek to deconstruct knowledge (Derrida, 1978) and critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy features posing problems so that “students learn to question answers rather than merely answer questions” (Hayes, 2016, p. 254). Satire, the use of humor with an underlying critical function (Declercq, 2018), can be a tool for conducting critical pedagogy. Through its reliance on acute observation and deconstruction, satire can help to challenge a taken-for-granted reality or reality presented as natural. When utilized in an educational setting, it can help develop students’ critical thinking skills. One approach is to show a relevant video clip by a comedian and begin a subsequent discussion by asking “why is this funny?” to “unpack the meaning and intention of what is taken for granted as “this is the way things are” (Hayes, 2016, p. 259).

Using humor in teaching politics highlights the absurd. Beavers (2011) and Hayes (2016) both demonstrate the pedagogical benefits of delivering courses that embedded *The Daily Show*, a political infotainment show that “uses humor to point out unique angles of criticism ... some of which would have otherwise been overlooked” (Beavers, 2011, pp. 418–419). The show’s format uses “satire and parody as a means of social and political critique” (Vanderheiden, 2007, p. 205) and deconstructs the “spin” used by politicians (Morreall 2005). MacMullan urges that intellectuals “study and emulate Jon Stewart if they want to be relevant to the public” (2007, p. 57). Pol & IR lecturers cannot realistically be expected to compete with professional comedians who are supported by a team of writers and graphic designers. But they can emulate Stewart’s philosophy which encourages “critical thinking across an enormous audience” and “defends democratic principles from erosion by partisan punditry and the government’s apparent disregard for genuine debate” (MacMullan 2007: 57). Furthermore, he also employs “a wide range of tools, especially irony, to make his audience think while they laugh” (MacMullan, 2007, pp. 57–58).

Studies on humor and teaching highlight risks and what does not work; namely offensive and prejudice-based humor, overly intellectual and unrelatable jokes, out of date cultural references, or irrelevant remarks. Apart from building a module around “The Daily Show”, by including short writing assignments regarding political comedy (Beavers, 2011) or showing clips and asking students “why is this funny?” to unpack what is taken for granted (Hayes, 2016: 259). this research seeks to understand what techniques Pol & IR students appreciate, improve their interest in the subject matter, and can make them “think while they laugh” (MacMullan, 2007, p. 58).

## Methodology

Humor is highly subjective thus a dialogic and interactive method is required to elicit an understanding of what humor attempts students find appropriate and effective for enhancing their learning. Existing studies on medical (Burgess et al., 2015) and high school (Osborne & Collins, 2001) students’ perspectives of humor employed Focus Groups (FGs) to allow participants to collectively deliberate their perspectives. Social Sciences studies, however, have predominantly used non-interactive, mostly close-end question surveys (Appleby, 2018; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Beavers, 2011; Berk, 1996; Tait et al., 2015; Torok et al., 2004; Wanzer et al., 2006). These fail to empower participants, facilitate debate, or capture understandings of humor beyond individual responses. Therefore, FGs are the most conducive method for conducting a dynamic and “in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known” (Stewart et al., 2007, p. 109) prioritizing both collective and individual meaning-making processes, and contributes unique data to the literature on humor in higher education.

Three FGs with 2nd and 3rd-year Pol & IR undergraduate students from the Universities of Durham, Nottingham, Swansea, and London South Bank were conducted over 2 semesters in 2020-2021. All participants had taken introductory and specialist politics modules. The sample (n=21) consisted of 7 men and 14 women, 11 British and 10 international students. Consequently, findings may be biased by the small sample size and gender ratio. Focus groups were conducted on Zoom, lasted between 60-90 minutes, and contained between four and nine participants. Transcripts were anonymized and participants were assigned aliases.

Participants were asked their opinions on six hypothetical scenarios (see Appendix), in where lecturers make “humor attempts” in learning settings. The scenarios were designed from issues raised in a literature review (see Table 1)

**Table 1: Literature used to inspire scenario design**

Scenario	Literature
1. An opening joke	“Rule 1: Whatever it takes, get their attention.” (Davis & Arend, 2013, pp. 78–79). Work harder to better engage your students (Hammer et al., 2010). “Modern students have a shorter attention span than their predecessors, and expect to be entertained” (Johnson, 2018).
2. Lecturer mockery or banter	“interviewees generally stated a willingness to tease their students; however, only when they had reached a point in the pedagogic relationship when it was obvious that the mockery is relatively benign, and where trust had developed” (Tait et al., 2015, p. 10). Teachers using their status and power to humiliate “can have a very negative impact on students and on their approach to learning” (Powell & Andresen, 1985, p. 83).
3. Memes	“Memes work better. Since they come with a preloaded meaning, they tick the shared common ground box. They can even be educational” (Tregoning, 2018). Memes are “very quickly and easily produced and circulated via online social networks, thus allowing individuals to offer their (humorous or not) creative

	perceptions and comments on current (political or other) events (Avidar 2012)” (Tsakona & Popa, 2013, p. 2).
4. Pop culture references	‘Humor that is out-of-date’ as a failed humor attempt (Appleby, 2018) “I always look for humorous sorts of things to exemplify points that I’m making, whether it be from the Simpsons, or other forms of popular culture” (Tait et al., 2015, p. 11). “cartoons of suitable type (e.g. visual puns’) can be used with the intention of serving a direct teaching function such as facilitating the learning of definitions and symbols and promoting insights into difficult concepts.” (Powell & Andresen, 1985, p. 87)
5. Satirical analogy	“Stewart uses humor to point out unique angles of criticism, which essentially forces viewers to see different views, some of which would have otherwise been overlooked” (Beavers, 2011: 418-419). Use of absurdity to develop critical thinking (Torosyan, 2007, p. 114). “In presenting politics as the theatre of the absurd, Stewart seemingly simplifies it.” (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, p. 362). Satirical comedians can use jokes as “a method of critical inquiry... to address societal norms, mores, and injustices” (Hayes, 2016, p. 256).
6. Self-deprecation	“self-deprecation serves to signal modesty and approachability” (Nesi, 2012, p. 87). self-deprecation “had the advantage of appealing to those who, while enjoying and valuing laughter themselves, lacked confidence in their own ability to make students laugh” (Tait et al., 2015, p. 11).

Next, participants were asked to recall positive and negative experiences of lecturers using humor to clarify what humor techniques or approaches are effective and thus how lecturers’ humor techniques and teaching materials can be improved.

The data analysis process used inductive thematic coding for a systematic content analysis. This featured a two-level, meaning-making process that simultaneously accounted for collective understandings and individual experiences to ensure that “the ‘spirit’ of the group” is not ignored and guarantees the “specific context within which the material was generated” is not missed (S. Wilkinson, 1998, p. 196).

## Findings

### Scenario 1 – a joke at the beginning

FG participants thought that a lecturer telling a joke at the start of a session could be an effective ice-breaker, help the students and lecturer relax, or improve students’ perception of the lecturer. Participants thought that a friendly and approachable lecturer would make them feel more relaxed and comfortable. Consequently, students would find their lectures more enjoyable or perceive these sessions as a more comfortable learning environment. Participants noted they would also appreciate the lecturer’s willingness to improve the student-lecturer relationship.

- Zara (FG1): *“even if it’s not related to the content of the lecture, I think it can still be beneficial as previously the other two said that it can bring a relaxed environment to the classroom.”*
- Emma (FG2): *“I think that having a lecturer that you like more or that you think is more approachable is better because you’re engaged more with the content when they’re teaching. I think it would probably be helpful.”*
- Victoria (FG3): *“I would think ‘at least they’re trying’ so I don’t mind if it’s bad (the joke) because it’s just to warm you up.”*

### Scenario 2 – lecturer mockery or banter

While FG participants agreed lecturers mocking or bantering with students can be inappropriate and demotivational, they also identified particular conditions under which this type of humor attempt would be acceptable. As Emma (FG2) noted, *“I think it would be wrong to just put a*

*standard blanket (ban) on everything because that just gets boring and dry.*" Participants, therefore, concluded that lecturers must be consistently friendly, approachable, and build rapport with the students, before attempting this type of humor.

- Natalie (FG3): *"if it's from someone who's more humorous, and maybe is quite funny, and maybe tells jokes that mock but are not inappropriate or whatever ... it would kind of go down better because they have a bit of a rapport with the room ... But if it's a serious lecturer, I feel as though you'd probably be taken aback."*
- Sarah (FG2): *"It depends on how you perceive your seminar leader to be. So if I know or get the vibe that they're a nice person, or that obviously wouldn't try to embarrass you, that they'd have a joke with you, then I think that's completely different to maybe not really liking your seminar leader or thinking that they're just kind of a bit of an idiot. I think that's quite different."*

Zara (FG1) also commented on the importance of familiarity between lecturer and student in making this type of humor work. *"If it's a student that they know pretty well, it might translate a bit better"* and *"it would make a difference if the persona was more friendly...it gives more leeway."*

David and Amy (FG2) discussed a lecturer/seminar leader who consistently made jokes which made banter more acceptable and less surprising.

Amy (FG2): *"I would be fine when he mocks me about something that I got wrong because of the tone that he set for the entire module. So if he didn't start (the module) with making crude jokes about historical figures in the lectures, then if in the seminars he mocked me with humor when I ask a question, that would be unacceptable for me."*

Emma (FG2) had a similar experience and corroborated the importance of consistency.

*"my seminar leader... constantly makes jokes against herself, political figures, and people in the group who she knows can take it. And she's built that rapport with us. So ... the tone that the person sets consistently reflects the appropriateness of using humor or even mocking people, but ...you have to be consistent with how you act and how you treat people, rather than being a serious person and then mocking someone"*

Secondly, after building a rapport, participants noted a lecturer should know which students would be "thick-skinned" enough to take the joke. Ryan (FG1) thought that mocking would be acceptable *"if the student takes it as a joke, and replies with a joke or something else."* James (FG2) recalled being mocked for making a mistake: *"I laughed at it. I can appreciate the joke and its value, and thought yeah, I probably should have known that."* However, he also recognized that *"a lecturer shouldn't feel completely comfortable to do that constantly."* Alternatively, as the line between banter and mockery are blurry and subjective, Liam (FG3) suggested that depersonalized banter is more suitable and less likely to offend. *"I've got a seminar tutor who's into football. So he makes a lot of football analogies, and sort of mocks different teams you support and relates that to politics. For me, that's the banter side of things, and I'm not offended."*

### Scenario 3 – memes

Participants recognized the enjoyment and pedagogical effectiveness of well-placed and appropriately-timed memes.

- Angela (FG2): *"I love it. I think it's really funny. A lot of lecturers have done this before. And it always goes down pretty decently."*
- John (FG3): *"I think that memes are maybe the most useful thing, humor related, that a lecturer could use."*

As a visual device, the use of memes does not require the lecturer to be adept at comedic delivery. As Zara (FG1) noted, *"this is a visual, so it's harder to get wrong. It doesn't matter*

*how the lecturer delivers the joke.*” Also, Natalie (FG3) considered memes to be *“quite easily digestible, because you read it at your own pace, especially if the lecturer doesn't refer to it.”* Participants in FG1 and 3 noted the value of memes in helping to explain a concept or make key points in a lecture more memorable.

- Anika (FG1): *“when you have a meme, in the middle of the lecture, it helps you remember what you were learning about, especially if it's content-related.”*
- Laura (FG3): *“sometimes you associate the PowerPoint slide or what's being said in the meme and it kind of sticks in your head.”*

FG2 and 3 also acknowledged memes were effective for summarizing a point.

Amy (FG2): *“I think memes are a good way to get the information in without it being too serious because memes are funny ... they still carry the same kind of content [as a] whole chunk of words on a PowerPoint. With cute pictures and funny images, I find it easier to understand the content.”*

Primary Investigator (FG2): *“So this has pedagogical benefits? You're saying it helps you digest the information?”*

Amy (FG2): *“Yeah”*

Jenny (FG2): *“Yeah, I would agree with that. I think I remember things from pictures, like a doodle on my notes. So if I see a picture, I tend to remember the information better. And it helps my understanding it. So yeah, I agree with that point.”*

However, as with comedy, the timing of meme usage was highly important. Participants thought that memes were best placed at the end of each lecture ‘section’. Ryan (FG1) and Emma (FG2) saw memes as an effective pacing device which helped to pause to recollect thoughts as well as re-stimulate engagement. The frequency of meme use was crucial as participants thought that overuse has a detrimental effect on their learning.

- James (FG2): *“entire lectures were filled with all the memes. Every slide had one. And it was funny. It did initially help to remember the information, but I also found that I took the module a little less seriously, just because every time I was looking at a slide, it was a joke.”*
- Eve (FG1): *“If you put five memes in a row, the students will probably think this is a bit over the top. So it depends on the quality as well as the quantity of memes that you put in a slide.”*

Overall, moderate meme usage was viewed positively. As with Scenario 1, the effort made to include a relevant meme in a slide was appreciated from a student engagement point of view.

#### **Scenario 4 – pop culture references**

Participants thought pop culture references could make lecture content more memorable.

- Eve (FG1): *“I would remember the class and the topic if there was a pop culture reference, that was properly placed” (Not simply “grabbing an episode of the Simpsons that has nothing to do with what has been taught”) “it can be quite helpful, especially to memorize a part of the lecture. You would remember, oh, there was a connection made to a pop culture reference”*

Laura (FG3): *“for ‘Introduction to Political Theory’ we were looking at Machiavelli and [the lecture] goes on talking about how Tupac liked Machiavelli's theory. And then he said how he started off liking his philosophy. To be honest, that stuck in my head.”*

John (FG3): *“That Tupac reference stuck with me as well. Or during a global politics seminar, we were talking about realism, and we referenced Game of Thrones a lot because a realist philosophy underlies the show.”*

Victoria (FG3): *“I think it can be quite engaging when they do it that way (use pop culture).”*

Pop culture references were also considered to be especially useful for breaking down difficult or complex theories.

- **Natalie (FG3):** *“So the application of pop culture to some rogue (obscure) theory might make it easier to help explain and would probably make it a bit more accessible and understandable and relatable.”*

However, for the references to be widely understood, and thus memorable and/or effective at explaining a point, they would ideally come from current popular culture.

- **Zara (FG1):** *“not everybody is going to know or understand the reference. But I don't think that's a waste because I think probably half of the class will understand. So I don't think that's a major weakness.”*
- **John (FG3):** *“It might not necessarily work if it's an obscure show. But if it's very mainstream, then hopefully some people have watched.”*

While contemporary references are ideal for mass appeal, participants thought that older or less-known references can still be valuable, if they are relevant for clarifying a particular point or theory in the lecture/seminar, and if it is appropriately explained. As James (FG2) summarized, *“If you're going to mention it, then you have the responsibility of explaining yourself. But if it's worth mentioning, I don't think lecturers should shy away from it.”* Therefore, participants thought it would be beneficial for lecturers to add the films or series used in these references to an additional reading (viewing) list. FG2 Participants mentioned how discovering these new films/shows was helpful to their learning process.

- **Angela (FG2):** *“the summative assignment was based around applying the theory we learned to a famous movie. And the one that I got was super English. It was ‘In the loop’. I was clueless while I was watching it. But then it helped me to understand the theory because all of the movies and things, especially as politics is based on reality. So it's easy to sort of map the things that you learn onto all of these different things.”*
- **Frederick (FG2):** *“the lady who was teaching ethics last year was making these pop culture references when she had complex theories to explain. And she got this pop culture reference to illustrate the theory. So you can go and watch the movie about the theory to get it better. So it works educationally too.”*

International students Jenny and Angela (FG2) noted how not understanding references initially made them feel excluded but also provided an opportunity to learn. Therefore, adding the pop culture sources to the additional viewing/reading list would be especially useful for international students who may not “get” British, Euro, or Western-centric references. Furthermore, FG3 participants recommended that lecturers use a range of pop culture references to maintain student engagement.

**Laura (FG3):** *“not everyone relates to those references. So, if you're going to use “beer” this time, next time try something else, like football, or Game of Thrones. It's of subjective interest to students.”*

**Natalie (FG3):** *“I agree with you (Laura). If it's overdone and the analogy is used throughout the whole module, and you don't understand that, it would be less engaging.”*

Overall, participants would appreciate that the lecturer was trying to find interesting ways of explaining concepts; *“like we've already said, it can help make them a person and not just someone delivering the content”* (Victoria FG3) and *“And I would still appreciate that the lecturer is trying to engage rather than just sticking to a textbook style of teaching.”* (John FG3)

### **Scenario 5 – an absurd (satirical) analogy**

Participants' views reflected the subjectivity of humor, as opinions varied on the use of absurd analogies and comparisons. Some participants found “Brexit is like Pompeii if the citizens voted for the volcano” - the analogy about the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union from Last Week Tonight - amusing, while others did not appreciate the silliness. For example,

Eve (FG1) said *“That's a brilliant joke”* and *“it would make me understand the class and as well remember the class”* while Anika (FG1) thought that *“Some people may not find it so funny or may not even get the joke”*. However, participants in all FGs agreed that satirical analogies would be memorable. But, as with most humor attempts, timing and frequency were important factors. FG participants thought they should be used sparingly to prevent diminishing lecture quality.

- Emma (FG2) *“I think it's good to use them (satirical analogies), even if sometimes some students won't like them. Because if you do them with different topics, then there's a point where everybody will get one of your jokes. As long as you don't do them constantly.”*
- Courtney (FG3) *“I wouldn't mind it. Obviously not loads of it. But one every other lecture or something ... that's nice and memorable.”*

Just like the pop culture reference, FG2 participants thought that an analogy can be a useful device to simplify a complex idea. Sarah (FG2) thought seemingly unrelated analogies were useful for simplifying complex theories. Kelly agreed (FG2) and pointed out that the summaries in “analogy form” helped to clarify the material. However, Kelly and Sarah thought that putting the analogy on the slides, as a visual, would be more of a distraction than help explain the concept. Jenny agreed, adding *“if I don't understand it, I will spend a lot of time trying to figure it out rather than listening to what she has to say that was more important.”*

The use of satirical analogies led FG2 and 3 to discuss what subjects are suitable for this type of treatment. Kelly, Emma, and David (FG2) thought the “Brexit is like Pompeii” example could be divisive. *“Britain made a massive mistake voting for Brexit, but then I know other people in my lectures, that would think that's not the case. So sometimes you will like it and sometimes you won't, but I think it is a good thing to do.”* (Emma FG2). David thought its use would *“reinforce cleavages... those who think it's really like they voted for the volcano will still think the same and laugh about it, and the others won't like it”*. FG1 participants had a similar disagreement; Anika (FG1) thought that *“if someone supported Brexit, they could find it a bit inappropriate”* but Zara (FG1) thought the joke was reasonably tame, arguing *“it's quite light-hearted.”*

FG3 participants thought that satirical analogies were unsuitable for serious subjects like the war in Iraq, Palestine, genocides, and the Holocaust. In particular, Laura, an international student, highlighted the importance of the lecturer’s positionality when making satirical analogies.

Natalie (FG3): *“Dr\* (who is British) was doing British party politics. And that's relatively easy to joke about. It's not a particularly difficult topic to talk about. And he was a bit silly and did this kind of silly stuff. And it worked.”*

Laura (FG3): *“making fun of Brexit is OK because he's British. But I'm (redacted- different nationality). And if a lecturer made a stereotypical joke about (my global region) that would offend me, especially because you could be putting forward a biased opinion that the students will then believe.”*

FG2 participants discussed the effectiveness of relatable, rather than comedic, analogies.

Sarah (FG2) *“one of the analogies that we had in political psychology was about priming and framing of how decision-makers present decisions and how you can influence who you're presenting it to. The lecturer used the example of when you want your housemates to order a pizza but then no one else wants to, so then how do you present it in the way that you'll get the desired outcome of ordering the pizza. We spoke about this for 20 minutes in seminar groups, ... it was really beneficial because it was the same concept behind the decision-making and framing but a completely different scenario.”*

Kelly (FG2): *“That's partly why I enjoy her classes, she just makes things simple. From there, you're able to get more into theory.”*

Even if participants did not love this style of humor, they appreciated its use as it indicated the lecturer was making an effort to find interesting ways of teaching. This finding is similar to the use of memes.

- Natalie (FG3): *“if you put in stuff like that (satirical analogies), you’ve got to be a bit of a quirky character. I love stuff like that, and even though it probably would be quite embarrassing (like Victoria said), I think it kind of becomes lovable and quite sweet, and because it’s a silly humor attempt, I feel as though it’s quite safe.”*
- Zara (FG1): *“one of my lecturers used memes from a page called “IR through cats”. It was funny because he seemed quite serious. But ... obviously a lecturer can’t be that serious if they use cat memes. So that made me feel a bit more relaxed and think he’s not that intimidating.”*

### Scenario 6 – The self-deprecating lecturer

Participants noted how a lecturer engaging in self-deprecation helped to construct a comfortable and safe learning environment. A key theme across the FGs was how self-deprecation both reduces the distance and improves the rapport between lecturer and students because it shows the lecturer does not take themselves too seriously.

- Ryan (FG1) *“it’s a faster way of making a connection between students and lecturers. So it feels like they’re at your level.”*
- Kelly (FG2) *“I think that self-deprecating humor, almost brings you down to the same level. it makes the lecturer relatable and makes you think Okay, they’re not this perfect person that has everything together. I feel like that makes them quite fun.”*
- John (FG3) *“I also think it humanizes the lecturer. We see the titles like doctor and that can be quite intimidating, especially for international students whose first language is not English. And it brings them down to earth.”*

Furthermore, FG3 participants thought the improvement of rapport through this technique helped to create a safe learning environment. Liam appreciated the opportunity of being able to contribute without fear of ridicule for being wrong, Eliza thought seeing the lecturer get something wrong, in moderation, made people more comfortable contributing, and Natalie thought it was limited as a humour tool, but saw humility and relatability as important for building rapport.

Successful examples of self-deprecation related to lecturers mocking their work or their intelligence and participants noted the effectiveness of this ‘learn from my mistakes’ tool.

- Natalie (FG3): *“He (my seminar tutor) said I wrote a book on this and if you want to fall asleep at night, go read this book, and you’ll be fine. This was quite refreshing ... and it made me warm to him a bit more because he didn’t take himself too seriously and it makes it (the seminar) a bit more relaxed.”*
- Angela (FG2): *“Usually it is quite funny because this time when my lecturer messed up a slide he said “Oh, me and my one brain cell aren’t cooperating this morning” which was funny.”*
- Anika (FG1): *“she showed us one of her essays... and (was) poking fun at herself, like, ‘Oh, this is so bad’ and, ‘don’t do anything like I did’... it makes you relate with them and think, ‘you know what, they’re not perfect’.”*

Participants drew the line at self-deprecation that was “too personal”. They considered jokes about appearance, personal life, or mental health to be unprofessional, inappropriate, and awkward.

- Victoria (FG3): *“if you’re saying ‘Oh, my undergraduate dissertation was crap, I thought I knew it all. And then I got my PhD and I realized I know nothing. So here’s a piece of crap work, you can read if you want’ that’s funny. But if it’s personal, you can cross the line and make it awkward.”*

- Zara (FG1): *"She was quite a big lady and she made fun of her weight... I felt a bit uncomfortable because you don't know how to respond to that."*
- Ben (FG3): *"if they're making fun of their mental health ... that might affect other students that are facing similar issues"*

As humor is subjective, some were entertained by the prospect of awkward humor. However, participants in FG2 disagreed on what they considered to be appropriate. Jenny recalled feeling uncomfortable when a lecturer compared something collapsing to *'how my marriage is falling apart'*. *And he said it with a smile and wanted all of us to laugh. And we all were just like 'do you want us to comment? Or do you just want us to write the essay and not reply to that?'*. However, both James and Emma were amused; *"Yeah, I was laughing. I thought it was great."* James (FG2). Natalie (FG3) captured the overall sentiment towards self-deprecating humor; *"Showing you have a level of humility and relatability is important... but any more and it becomes pitiful."*

### Open discussion results

Open discussions revealed other perspectives that lecturers could replicate and integrate into their course delivery. Firstly, quality is more important than humor.

Angela (FG2): *"When lecturers are really funny, or sarcastic, or they have these big personalities, at the same time, the lectures are really good. So if it's a combination of both of those things, then they're viewed in a good light, even though sometimes people might not find their jokes funny or find their humor divisive, but if the actual material is taught well, and they're good teachers behind all of that, then it's sort of complimentary."*

Primary investigator: *"Because if they were not a great lecturer, then maybe the comedy wouldn't work?"*

Angela (FG2): *"Yeah, I think it would just really annoy people."*

Emma (FG2): *"Yeah, I would be really annoyed if a bad lecturer was already not teaching me properly. And was just making jokes that are possibly not even funny."*

John (FG3) also considered that a lecturer's attitude and passion is more important than humor'; *"some other lecturers don't make jokes and they're not humorous but you feel like they really care about what they're teaching. They're passionate about it. So I think that's important as well."* Recounting the approach and persona of a favorite lecturer, Ryan (FG1) noted an appropriate balance was essential – *"he was humorous and serious at times that we needed to focus"* - and Ben (FG3) emphasized that humor should always serve an educational purpose.

Participants thought that memes and pop culture references are the most suitable humor attempts for Pol & IR. Memes were considered an easy-to-execute humor attempt, less subjective and less likely to offend than other types of humor, an interesting contrast between something relevant and something about philosophy, and good for summarizing a concept. Pop culture references were considered helpful for connecting abstract concepts with reality.

Eve and Anika (FG1) discussed a lecturer whose online sessions, during Covid-19 lockdowns, started with a student-led discussion that mocked current affairs before starting 'serious' lecture content. They noted how this enabled the students, rather than the lecturer, to determine the type and tone of humor they perceived as appropriate.

Finally, participants said they would appreciate that lecturers are making the effort to engage with them, even if their jokes were not hilarious. As Courtney (FG3) summarized *"I feel like the worst thing that can happen is that it's not funny, but if it does work, then that's amazing! I feel like you can only really gain from the situation. So go ahead, try."*

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that students recognize the pedagogical value of Pol & IR lecturers exploiting the connection between politics and comedy to enhance their content delivery and the student experience. The FG data corroborates existing research on the effective use of humor but contributes to this literature by presenting student perceptions of how humor attempts can be pedagogically beneficial. The research findings are summarised systematically as eight separate results, however, participants recognised that these points are frequently interrelated.

### **I. Quality before humor**

Participants identified that humor is no substitute for high-quality teaching and course design. The funny or sarcastic lecturers were also considered to be excellent teachers that provided great material. Even if humor attempts were not universally accepted or considered divisive, the students would still be satisfied with the lecture content. Participants did not equate humor with good teaching but noted that enthusiasm for the subject and the use of relatable content were also important. If lecturers were ineffective teachers, participants thought that their humor attempts would be annoying.

### **II. An approachable persona**

Participants noted they would be more receptive to lecturers' humor techniques if they consistently adopt a friendly persona. When a lecturer "sets the tone", at the beginning of the semester, that they are approachable and a form of humor is part of their repertoire, their attempts are more likely to be well-received. Conversely, participants thought they would likely be surprised and less responsive to a serious persona lecturer's unexpected use of humor techniques.

### **III. Building rapport**

In addition to adopting a suitable persona for students to be receptive to humor, participants noted that lecturers who want to use humor should work on reducing the student-lecturer relationship's power imbalance. This can be achieved through techniques that reveal aspects of the lecturer's personality, like an introductory joke or mild self-deprecation. Building rapport serves an important educational purpose and is pedagogically advantageous, as participants considered that having a connection with their lecturer enhances their engagement and learning experience. Participants also saw rapport as an essential prerequisite to 'bantering' with students.

### **IV. Professional level self-deprecation**

FG data revealed that humor attempts, even if unsuccessful, indicate a lecturer's willingness to develop a 'connection' and participants believed that having a connection with the lecturer improves students' learning experience. Participants thought self-deprecation is an efficient way to build the desired connection because it reduces the student-lecturer power-imbalance and creates a safe, relaxed learning environment. However, participants preferred self-deprecative comments that present the lecturer as professionally or intellectually humble. Comments that are too personal are likely to make students uncomfortable.

### **V. Education before subversion: Memes after content**

FG data corroborated a finding from Appleby's 2018 survey; lecturers need to provide students with the necessary background information to understand the concept and thus find their meme amusing. Therefore, participants considered memes to be most effective, and memorable, when used as a summary point as students are more likely to 'get' the joke.

### **VI. Integrate analogies and (pop culture) references in explanations**

Despite the literature that emphasizes political satire's critical pedagogy value and the international popularity of political comedy, participants thought that satirical analogies would be unsuitable for delicate or divisive subjects and that lecturers' should be sensitive to the power/knowledge relations they seek to critique. Participants thought that they were pedagogically effective when used in an explanation process, particularly for difficult concepts as they can connect the abstract with reality and deconstruct a complex idea.

## VII. “Perfectly balanced, as all things should be”

While some students will know the above quote is by Thanos, the chief antagonist from ‘Avengers: Infinity War (2018)’, others will not. However, its message about balance and moderation is indicative of how participants thought lecturers integrate humor techniques. Participants thought that lecturers should use a broad range of memes, analogies, and references across the course to appeal to different students’ comedic preferences or pop culture knowledge. While relevant comedic devices are ideal, such as accusing Thanos of stealing Aristotle’s Golden Mean concept or showing a clip from Billy Elliot to emphasize the impact of deindustrialization, if the point being made is pedagogically effective, lecturers should use them. Regarding frequency, overuse of any comedic device is also not recommended. Memes on every slide, references to the lecturers’ favourite show or self-deprecation in every lecture are likely to make students perceive the module and/or lecturer as the joke.

## Appendix

The six imaginary scenarios where hypothetical lecturers make “humor attempts” in their lecture and seminar situations, were presented to focus group participants.

### Scenario 1

#### Lecturer persona

Friendly and approachable

#### Context

At the beginning of the lecture, the lecturer tells a joke. The joke gets a small laugh from about half the audience.

#### Humour attempt

The joke is unrelated to the content of the lecture.



8

### Scenario 2

#### Lecturer persona

Serious

#### Context

In the middle of a seminar, a student asks the lecturer a question. The lecturer responds to the question.

#### Humour attempt

The lecturer’s response is relevant and humorous but targets the student with mockery/banter.



9

### Scenario 3

#### Lecturer persona

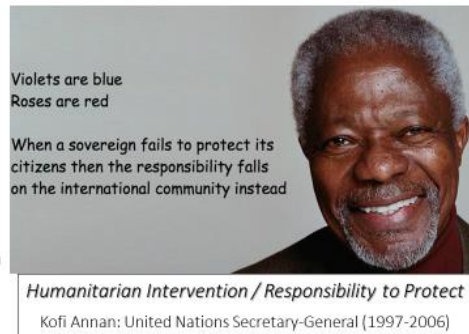
Mostly serious but also personable/friendly

#### Context

During a lecture with a supporting PowerPoint presentation.

The lecturer is serious while delivering the lecture but uses a “funny” meme or cartoon to illustrate the point

Humour attempt- A relevant meme



10

### Scenario 4

#### Lecturer persona

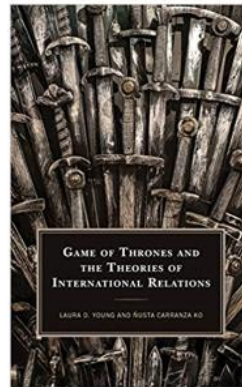
Serious when lecturing but friendly in one to one situations

#### Context

During a lecture, the lecturer uses a ‘pop culture’ reference as an analogy or comparison to explain a concept. The comparison is made using humour.

#### Humour attempt

A pop culture reference



11

### Scenario 5

#### Lecturer persona

Serious and Funny

#### Context

Your lecturer delivers informative and well-researched lectures that highlights key issues but supports the content with silly or comedic analysis, absurd analogy or comparisons or makes light of serious topics.

#### Humour attempt

Silly or comedic comparative analysis



"Brexit is basically Pompeii,  
if the citizens voted for the Volcano"

12

### Scenario 6

#### Lecturer persona

Mostly serious but often humorous through self-deprecation.

#### Context

Your lecturer delivers informative and well-researched lectures but does not take himself/herself too seriously and often pokes fun at themselves.

#### Humour attempt

Self-deprecating



13

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to the undergraduate students from the Universities of Durham, Nottingham, Swansea, and London South Bank (UK) for participating in the focus groups.

### Ethical Approval

Granted by The School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, UK.  
Reference: *SGIA-2020-08-05T16:38:01-nctz71*

## References

- Appleby, D. (2018). Using humor in the college classroom: The pros and the cons. *Psychology Teacher Network. American Psychological Association*, 28(1).  
<https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2018/02/humor-college-classroom>
- Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J., S. (2006). The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth. *American Politics Research*, 34(3), 341–367.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X05280074>
- Beavers, S. L. (2011). Getting Political Science in on the Joke: Using ‘The Daily Show’ and Other Comedy to Teach Politics. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(2), 415–419.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511000266>
- Berk, R. A. (1996). Student ratings of 10 strategies for using humor in college teaching. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 7(3), 71–92.
- Burgess, A., Goulston, K., & Oates, K. (2015). Role modelling of clinical tutors: A focus group study among medical students. *BMC Medical Education*, 15(1), 17.  
<https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1186/s12909-015-0303-8>
- Davis, J. R., & Arend, B. (2013). *Facilitating seven ways of learning: A resource for more purposeful, effective, and enjoyable college teaching*. Stylus Publishing.
- Declercq, D. (2018). A Definition of Satire (And Why a Definition Matters). *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76(3), 319–330. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12563>
- Fortson, S. B., & Brown, W. E. (1998). Best and worst university instructors: The opinions of graduate students. *College Student Journal*, 32(4), 572–576.
- Garner, R. L. (2006). Humor in Pedagogy: How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha! *College Teaching*, 54(1), 177–180. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.54.1.177-180>
- Goodboy, A. K., Booth-Butterfield, M., Bolkan, S., & Griffin, D. J. (2015). The Role of Instructor Humor and Students’ Educational Orientations in Student Learning. *Communication Quarterly*, 63(1), 44–61.  
<https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2014.965840>
- Granitz, N. A., Koernig, S. K., & Harich, K. R. (2009). Now It’s Personal: Antecedents and Outcomes of Rapport Between Business Faculty and Their Students. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(1), 52–65. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1177/0273475308326408>
- Hammer, R., Ronen, M., Sharon, A., Lankry, T., Huberman, Y., & Zamtsov, V. (2010). Mobile Culture in College Lectures: Instructors’ and Students’ Perspectives. *Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects*, 6(1), 293–304.
- Hayes, N. (2016). Satire as an Educative Tool for Critical Pedagogy in the Public Affairs Classroom. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 38(4), 251–266.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2016.1240464>
- Hellman, S. V. (2007). Humor in the Classroom: STU’S Seven Simple Steps to Success. *College Teaching*, 55(1), 37–39. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.55.1.37-39>

- Johnson, J. (2018). *Top tips on how to make your lectures interesting*. Times Higher Education (THE). <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/top-tips-how-make-your-lectures-interesting>
- Kher, N., Molstad, S., & Donahue, R. (1999). Using Humor in the College Classroom to Enhance Teaching Effectiveness in ‘dread courses’. *College Student Journal*. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Using-Humor-in-the-College-Classroom-to-Enhance-in-Kher-Molstad/aa1c7cfeebd88514c0b4e8c77dc40a4699d3754a>
- Lynch, D. (2013). The Stewart-Colbert Factor. *Harvard Political Review*. <https://harvardpolitics.com/the-stewart-colbert-factor/>
- MacMullan, T. (2007). Jon Stewart and the New Public Intellectual. In J. Holt (Ed.), *The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News* (pp. 57–68). Blackwell.
- Morreall, J. (2005). Humour and the Conduct of Politics. In S. Lockyer & M. Pickering (Eds.), *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (pp. 63–78). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Nesi, H. (2012). Laughter in university lectures. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 11(2), 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2011.12.003>
- Osborne, J., & Collins, S. (2001). Pupils’ views of the role and value of the science curriculum: A focus-group study. *International Journal of Science Education*, 23(5), 441–467. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/09500690010006518>
- Özdoğan, A. A., & McMorris, R. F. (2013). Humorous cartoons in college textbooks: Student perceptions and learning. *Humor*, 26(1), 135–154.
- Powell, J. P., & Andresen, L. W. (1985). Humour and teaching in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 10(1), 79–90. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/03075078512331378726>
- Schutz, C. E. (1977). *Political humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Shally-Jensen, M., Jelen, T. G., & Rozell, M. J. (2018). *American political culture: An encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO.
- Shatz, M., & Helitzer, M. (2005). *Comedy Writing Secrets* (2nd Edition). Writer’s Digest Books.
- Stewart, D., Shamdasani, P., & Rook, D. (2007). *Focus Groups*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Tait, G., Lampert, J., Bahr, N., & Bennett, P. (2015). Laughing with the lecturer: The use of humour in shaping university teaching. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 12(3), 15. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.53761/1.12.3.7>
- Torok, S. E., McMorris, R. F., & Lin, W.-C. (2004). Is Humor an Appreciated Teaching Tool? Perceptions of Professors’ Teaching Styles and Use of Humor. *College Teaching*, 52(1), 14–20. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.52.1.14-20>
- Torosyan, R. (2007). Public Discourse and the Stewart Model of Critical Thinking. In J. Holt (Ed.), *The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News* (pp. 107–120). Blackwell.

- Tregoning, J. (2018). *Top tips on how to make your lectures interesting*. Times Higher Education (THE). <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/top-tips-how-make-your-lectures-interesting>
- Tsakona, V., & Popa, D. E. (Eds.). (2011). *Studies in political humour: In between political critique and public entertainment*. John Benjamins Pub. Co.
- Tsakona, V., & Popa, D. E. (2013). Editorial: Confronting power with laughter. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 1(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2013.1.2.tsakona>
- Vanderheiden, S. (2007). America (the book): Textbook parody and democratic theory. In J. Holt (Ed.), *The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News* (pp. 205–216). Blackwell.
- Wanzer, M. B., Bainbridge Frymier, A., Wojtaszczyk, A. M., & Smith, T. (2006). Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of Humor by Teachers. *Communication Education*, 55(2), 178–196. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/03634520600566132>
- Wanzer, M. B., & Frymier, A. B. (1999). The relationship between student perceptions of instructor humor and student's reports of learning. *Communication Education*, 48(1), 48–62.
- Wilkinson, A. (2019). *How Last Week Tonight became one of the most influential shows on TV - Vox*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/2/14/18213228/last-week-tonight-john-oliver-hbo-season-six>
- Wilkinson, S. (1998). Focus group methodology: A review. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 1(3), 181–203. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/13645579.1998.10846874>