

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Creating humour in learning spaces: DIY videos for teaching difficult concepts in methods of research

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Expansion of technology-mediated learning spaces creates opportunities for disrupting traditional learning and teaching norms and practices. Combining technological affordances and humour in online learning environments offers potential gains in student engagement and learning. Current research reports effectiveness of using humour for teaching but less on practical guidance for educators in how to professionally develop this. This paper is a critical autobiographic narrative about the experience of developing short comedy videos for teaching concepts that students commonly struggle with in an undergraduate methods of research course. Insights for practice include a seven-step method and critical reflection for educators interested in developing skills and networks for disrupting traditional teaching methods to create targeted humorous videos for specific concepts in their courses.

Keywords: Humour, teaching research, undergraduate, professional development, smart phone video, critical autobiographic narrative

Introduction

Current trends in higher education force traditional learning spaces to adapt to greater diversity in students and methods of learning and teaching. Larger classes and technology enhanced environments require innovative presentation methods as smaller, in-person classes expand to online audiences (Smith & Pringle, 2021). Humour serves to increase student engagement (Erdoğdu & Çakıroğlu, 2021), challenge students to think critically about societal norms (Dhillon, 2022), and help online students feel more connected (McCabe et al., 2017). Despite the growing awareness of advantages of new technologies and structures of comedy for teaching there is limited research in the literature on use of humour in online learning environments, more studies are required in its development and application (Pryce et al., 2024; Erdoğdu & Çakıroğlu, 2021). In addition, faculty fear of change due to the tension of moving from areas of expertise to new practices can create barriers for innovation (Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024). Therefore, identification and development of good practice for preparing staff to work with technology (Fisher & Baird, 2020) and principles of humour is needed.

As production culture moves away from the highly trained professional to a wider range of people wanting to create their own projects, individuals connect online and offline through the making connections with things and ideas rather than passively consuming pre-made materials and concepts (Gauntlet, 2018). These learning spaces disrupt sociocultural norms of higher education by bringing in other modalities not typically associated with the formal tones of traditional academic culture. Research is beginning to include the evaluation of stand-up comedy principles on student learning and experience in various disciplines (Bonsack et al., 2024; Gravey et al., 2017; McCarron & Savin-Baden, 2008; Smith & Pringle, 2021). Stand-up comedy requires script writing, a single performer and interaction with an audience. Other forms of comedy such as improv (improvised) comedy relies on a team of performers creating scenes on the spot from audience suggestions. Sketch comedy is short, pre-written pieces exploring concepts or situations. It has long been suggested that professional development of humour for teachers is desirable (Powell & Andresen, 1985); however, with the development of mobile phones, educators have an option to use comedy without it having to be a live performance in their teaching. More research is needed on how faculty can develop comedy practices into their teaching skills and resources. In this study. This study offers insight into the construction of humours videos to teach targeted concepts that students commonly have difficulty with in an undergraduate methods of research course.

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The context and research questions

Having taught on the methods of research and enquiry course for four years, I noticed concepts that students regularly had difficulty understanding (e.g., the difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches). Furthermore, these concepts were central to the subject and appeared in the summative assessments. The concepts were (in order appearing in the course): 1) The difference between quantitative and qualitative research approaches, 2) The difference between recruitment and selection for a research study, 3) The difference between privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, 4) In ethical terms, issues of mental capacity and power imbalance when determining vulnerable groups, and 5) What is meant by implications for practise when applying research in the real world. This is a fully online course with video recorded lectures hosted on a CANVAS LMS. Planned some short videos based on a workshop facilitated by Max Schleser, who founded the Mobile Innovation Network & Association, on using a smart phone for filming and editing. The aim of this study is the development of a guide for educators to create humorous videos. The first research question addressed here is what can be learned by the teacher from the experience developing comedy videos for teaching specific concepts. The second research question to be addressed later in the semester is: what ratings did students give of the videos for their effect on engagement and learning? This will feed forward into subsequent video development.

Method

The first phase of this study uses a critical autobiographical narrative inquiry approach (Hickson, 2016) to explore the process of developing a series of humours videos to teach difficult concepts in methods of research. During the process of development, I noted the tasks, errors and successes as they were planned or emerged from experience. I also critically reflected on my own background and assumptions in the research process its outcomes. In future, the second phase seeks student ratings and perceptions of the videos through an online survey and interview or focus groups.

Findings

The findings are presented here as a developed guide that addresses the first research question. The first phase is presented as six steps leading into the later second phase and seventh step.

Phase 1: Step 1 Determining the focus topics

As a pilot study, this first phase of the project involved course staff determining a limited number of commonly misunderstood content focus points as evidenced by frequent student questions and error rates in assessments. This was done anecdotally by experienced staff but could be measured through data analytics. Consultation with other educators teaching research methods at higher levels confirmed the importance of the chosen concepts. Other practical tasks included: setting writing and filming dates, creating an online Zoom meeting, booking a suitable filming space, getting video camera assistance from an in-school staff member, and recruiting four performers (plus myself).

Step 2 Assessing existing knowledge and help seeking

This step can be emotionally fraught as it requires the educator to step outside their comfort zone by assessing one's expertise and seek development where needed. I have performed improvisational comedy for 20 years. For those who do not have such experience, recruiting writers/performers is advisable. For those wanting to build their skills, enrolling in a local improv comedy course and reading books on the structure of comedy (e.g. Charles, 2024) provides a user-friendly foundation. My knowledge of filming is limited to basic smartphone use and editing of videos for course content. Two staff from the School of Communication Studies advised me to check light and sound before starting, and to make sure that my smart phone footage was shot outside of the 20-to-30-degree angle of the main camera to avoid editing looking clumsy and unnecessary (see Figure 1).

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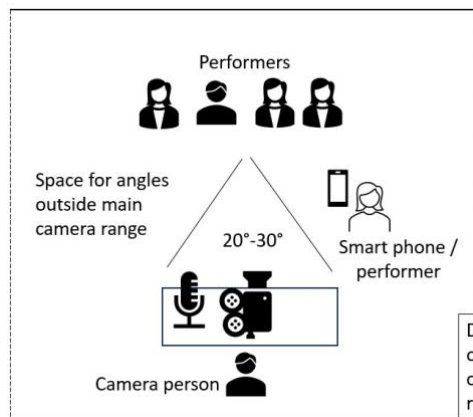
Step 3 Choosing performers and writing script outlines

One week prior to filming, I had a one-hour Zoom session with three of the performers where I explained the target research concepts, and we developed ideas and characters to demonstrate the concepts. The performers were paid for their script outlining and performing time. Performers signed a consent form to appear in videos that would be shown within university classes and scholarly presentations. Performers should be people who are skilled with using facial and body expressions. The use of humour always requires consideration of not causing offense (Charles, 2024; Powell & Andresen, 1985). I was aware of the demographics of my performers, so we only played up these characteristics and kept our language family friendly. In filming retakes, we often shifted performer positions around to rotate age and gender roles.

Step 4 Room set up, filming, and directing

The venue should be well lit with even light – ideally without direct sunlight, so window blinds should be drawn if possible. As this was my first attempt to develop live-action video material, I included a camera person as a ‘safety net’ scaffold for the work. The camera person stood with a Sony 4K camcorder and a Sennheiser zoom microphone at the back of the room. Sound check is also vital as creaks in chairs and floors get easily recorded and must be removed with editing. The camera should aim forwards and not follow performers off the stage, otherwise it breaks the reality of the scene and makes editing more difficult. I directed the performers to do the scenes outlined from the writing session. We did these a few times to get comfortable and see what might be improvised in the moment. A few props relevant to potential characters and scenes are useful for vivid portrayal. Watching the replay on the video camera screen is necessary to check determine whether another take is needed. I used my smart phone to film performers from a different angle (see Figure 1). This is helpful for close-ups of facial expressions to emphasis the humour when editing. The filming session required four hours and produced film for 11 videos under 2.5 minutes (including a comedy group intro and outro).

Figure 1. Diagram of the filming room setup



Step 5 Editing

I downloaded the raw footage from the Sony camera and my iPhone onto my laptop and used Camtasia 8 editing software that I was familiar with for making online lecture content. In some videos, the main camera footage was sufficient. I used Pixabay.com for adding sound effects to increase the emotive comedy effect (e.g., crash or scene end soundbite) and Nightcafé - a free AI image generator for introducing evocative theme images. PowerPoint slides with icons and designer features added to the introduction and end credit images. Figure 2 illustrates the construction of a short video (1min 48) showing the non-verbal use of social power when recruiting research participants. This uses the comedic acts of character status and change (Charles, 2024). The teaching point was that in vulnerable groups, although people can be mentally capable of deciding to participate in research, they may be pressured into it by social power (intro and end credits are omitted).

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Figure 2. Example of a video using social status change to demonstrate social power in research recruitment

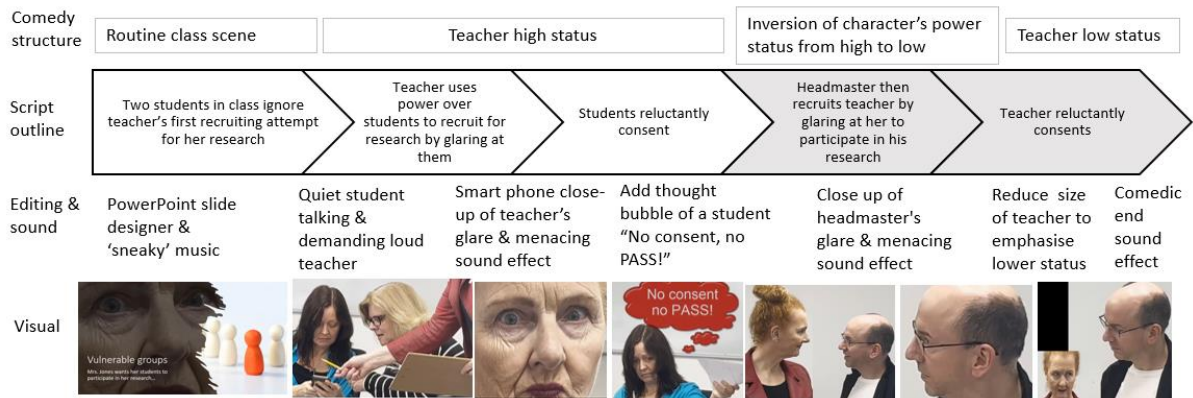


Figure 2 shows the concurrent streams of concepts for creating the video. The central point of social power imbalance suggests potential humour in social status change. The script outline shows that structure while the additional comedic elements and presentation were added with software visual and sound features.

Step 6 Implementation

The videos sit alongside the main lecture videos containing the identified difficult concepts. All videos are hosted on Panopto and embedded within the CANVAS learning management system in the second semester of 2024. I developed a logo called "comedy spot" featuring a red-filled circle with cat ears to align with the short nature of the videos and the existing appearance of cat videos as micro-rests during the main lecture videos.

Phase 2: Step 7 Future evaluation & development

In the second phase, ethical approval will be sought to view LMS data analytics of video view numbers and survey students about their experience of watching the videos as engaging and/or helpful for learning. Modifications based on feedback will inform the next round of videos in an action research cycle of iterative development.

Conclusions

The exploration of using humour for online teaching and how we can share our insights with others is important to facilitate development of good practice (Pryce et al., 2024). In response to educator fear and uncertainty around using humour, this study shares practice as a collective to help others provide stepping stones to initiate change (Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024). It also exemplifies network building to support change in use of technology (Schleser, 2021). Educators can build a supportive network people and technologies with cross-disciplinary staff consultation, comedy or staff performers, a camera person, a smart phone camera person, communications educators, educators teaching similar courses, sound/visual effects websites, and later with previous students of those courses, data analytics (views, assessment scores) and evaluative researchers. By targeting specific concepts, the use of humour is not over done and can be analysed for engagement and learning at the end of the course. The affordances of mobile technologies and blending principles of stand up, improv, and sketch comedy offer additional experiences to embody learning and teaching. This study presented an unfolding of a local process of developing educational movies for specific, difficult course concepts and offers guidelines. Educators can unfold their own process of discovery as they take initial steps into new learning spaces and networks for learning and teaching.

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