

# Using Humor in the Classroom

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## TEACHING TIPS

The students entering colleges and universities this fall were most likely born in 1981. Some have called them the "nintendo" generation. They do not know what life was like before every household had personal computers, video games, VCRs, and cable television. Therefore, it is widely perceived that this generation of students has the shortest attention span. As educators we must recognize this fact and incorporate more entertainment into our classrooms. (We need to catch their attention and while we have it try and educate them, often without their realizing they are in fact learning.)

There are many ways to entertain someone; I have found humor to be the best method for me. There are several forms of humor. I first tried jokes. My father was a member of the Lion's, Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. He was always selected to be the toastmaster and main speaker of large events, mainly for his joke telling abilities. Unfortunately I have found that not to be an inherited gene. Even with the joke-of-the-day web sites ([www.joke-of-the-day.com](http://www.joke-of-the-day.com) [www.jokeaday.com](http://www.jokeaday.com)) and e-mail lists, from oracle ([www.oraclehumor.com](http://www.oraclehumor.com)) and other Internet sites I found my material was always missing something and was mostly unsuitable for all audiences. Even with a good joke like this one, I'd find some way to mess it up or lose the students somewhere along the way:

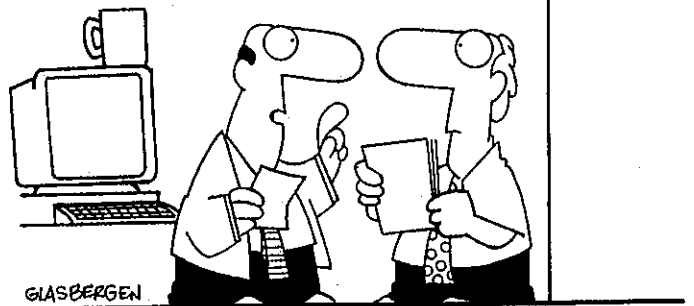
At a recent computer expo (COMDEX), Bill Gates reportedly compared the computer industry with the auto industry and stated "If GM had kept up with technology like the computer industry has, we would all be driving twenty-five dollar cars that got 1000 miles to the gallon."

In response to Mr. Gates' comments, General Motors issued the following press release (by Mr. Welch himself, the GM CEO) "If GM had developed technology like Microsoft, we would all be driving cars with the following characteristics:

1. For no reason whatsoever your car would crash twice daily.
2. Every time they repainted the lines on the road, you would have to buy a new car.
3. Occasionally, executing a maneuver, such as a left turn, would cause your car to shut down and refuse to restart, in which case you would have to reinstall the engine.
4. Only one person at a time could use the car, unless you bought "Car95" or "CarNT". But then you would have to buy more seats.
5. Macintosh would make a car that was powered by the sun, reliable, five times as fast and twice as easy to drive.
6. The oil, water temperature and alternator warning lights would be replaced by one "general car default" warning light.
7. New seats would force everyone to have the same size bottom.
8. The airbag system would say ("Are you sure?" before going off).
9. Occasionally for no reason whatsoever, your car would lock you out and refuse to let you in until you simultaneously lifted the door handle, turned the key, and grabbed hold of the radio antenna.
10. GM would require all car buyers to also purchase a deluxe set of Rand McNally road maps (now a GM subsidiary), even though they neither need nor want them. Attempting to delete this option would immediately cause the car's performance to diminish by 50% or more. Moreover, GM would become a target for investigation by the Justice department.
11. Every time GM introduced a new model car, buyers would have to learn how to drive all over again because none of the controls would operate in the same manner as the old car.
12. You'd press the "start" button to shut off the engine.

Story telling is another method of humor. Some faculty are famous for their story telling abilities. Buzz Hensel at UT Arlington likes to tell the story of when they opened the DFW airport and the passenger tram kept going round and round without letting people off for a couple of hours to make a few good points in

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**"Sports analogies are a powerful way to inspire teamwork, Fred. But next time use football, basketball or baseball—not duck-duck-goose."**

his System Development Classes. Another good story Buzz tells is about the first time one of the military's jet-fighters went over the equator on autopilot and abruptly inverted. I like to tell the story about how we got the standard for the width of our railroad ties (from the width of two Roman Chariot Horses behinds) to illustrate how standards are often set and never changed. (Some people have a knack for story telling, others of us can find a way to lose the audiences with those too!)

Cartoons are another method of humor and the one I find the easiest to manage. They are all around us and easily found (see the Philadelphia News website <http://www.phillynews.com/comics/>, [www.glasbergen.com](http://www.glasbergen.com), or united media's site at [www.unitedmedia.com](http://www.unitedmedia.com)). They're easy to tie into the material to be presented that day in class. I know if I am going to discuss management I can always find a good Dilbert cartoon for that topic. I have found the best humor is based in a lot of truth and Dilbert's cartoonist Scott Adams draws from his years at Pacific Bell to put his humor dead on target. You can find cartoons all over the place, and I even allow the students to gain some minimal extra credit points by

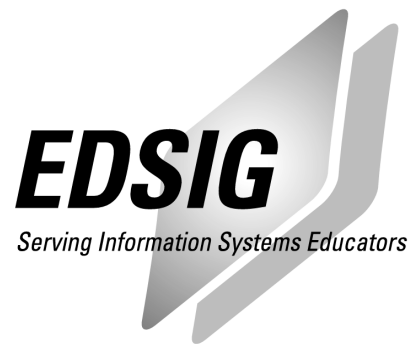
bringing in their own, or trying to write their own captions for one of mine. (The students who try the humor themselves see how hard it is to find humor that fits in with the lecture. They see that it takes planning and resources to do a good job. And it does not take too much time to add it into the lecture. Not to mention the fact I love going through the cartoons everyday anyway.)

If you have something to add to this discussion of Humor in the classroom (like a good site, joke, story, or cartoon) please forward it to the editors and we will add the best to the new web page for teaching tips at the JISE homepage (<http://over.to/JISE>).

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### **Call For Teaching Tips:**

The Journal of Information Systems Education is soliciting teaching tips for this column. Contributors will be acknowledged by having an edited version of their tips with their name and affiliation published in the Journal. Tips should be from one paragraph to two pages long and should address the contributor's experience using the tip (both what works and what didn't work). To contribute via Internet, address it to **Dr Kevin Lee Elder** at [elderk@ohiou.edu](mailto:elderk@ohiou.edu). To contribute via regular mail, address it to **Craig Van Slyke, Ph.D Associate Editor**; JISE, Management Information Systems Department, Copeland Hall 236, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701-2979.



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