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Professor Walks into a Bar: Using Humor and Q-Score to Determine Instructor and Department Appeal

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Building on existing research on humor in the classroom, the authors propose a research design that examines the effect of humor on a professor's effectiveness in the classroom. The concept of Q-Score is applied to academia, which is a popular rating used by advertisers to measure source attractiveness and determine celebrity appeal. Several factors leading to teaching effectiveness and "favorite prof" status are explored in addition to overall effects of humor in the classroom. This study combines evaluations from popular student-viewed websites, student evaluations, and a Humor Orientation scale. An awareness and application of this metric can assist professors in marketing themselves, the discipline, and the major.

INTRODUCTION

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"
- William Shakespeare, *As You Like It (Act II)*

The students wait impatiently, fidgeting with their smartphones while glancing up to see if the professor is ready to begin class. Based on their insights, this is the section to attend, the professor who won't bore, the course that they'll actually learn something in. "Will this hour feel like the longest of my life?" questions one of the attendees. In fact, many have conducted research prior to attending the performance – a simple Google search provides a wealth of information that determines whether this particular class is full or empty. Finally, the professor walks to the lectern, clears his or her throat, and proceeds to bore the audience by reading 150 slides on the minutia of prospect theory.

The role of the professor in the 21st century has moved from one of all-knowing lecturer to one of entertainer, with students looking for a show from professors who were given no formal training in this art. Recent articles bemoan the traditional lecture style in response to an increasing demand voiced by students begging professors to ban PowerPoint presentations, talk less, show more videos, and do anything to make the time in class entertaining. What is a professor to do? Material still needs to be covered, and many feel that there is not enough interactive material to span across an entire semester.

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However, there is one trait that can assist professors in delivering quality education in a way that engages students, invites audience participation, encourages learning, and increases retention of course material – humor. We propose a qualitative analysis to identify how students perceive professors who are funny, to examine if being humorous leads to success in the classroom, and if students’ opinions of the instructor results in quality learning in addition to being entertained.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humor, defined as “the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2015), is a trait that can be beneficial in the classroom. Prior research has established that humor can increase learning and help students engage in course material (Mills, Robson, and Pitt, 2013), deepen student retention (Kothari and Khade, 1993), and create a more relaxing classroom atmosphere (Garner, 2006). Duverger and Steffes (2011) explore edutainment for millennials and recommend showing a humorous video before class to lighten the mood. In addition Steffes and Duverger (2012) find that matching a video’s content to the day’s topic increases retention.

Martin, Puhlik, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) explore the basic nature of humor and identify four sub-types: 1) cognitive ability (e.g., developing and remembering humorous material), 2) aesthetic response (appreciating humor), 3) habitual behavior pattern (being seen as a funny person), and 4) temperament trait (being seen as a happy person). The authors also develop a scale that established four different types of humor: self-enhancing (a person uses humor to make themselves feel better), affiliate (a person using humor to amuse others and be more inclusive), aggressive (a person using humor to make themselves feel better at the expense of another), and self-defeating (a person uses self-deprecating humor to make others feel better).

Given the different types of humor, it is important to consider what is and is not appropriate in a classroom. Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) analyze three types of humor that could be added to a lecture: 1) concept humor, which is humor related to the material in the course; 2) non-concept humor, humor that is unrelated to course material; and 3) mixed humor, which combines elements of course-related and non-course-related humor. An assessment just after and six weeks after the interjection of humor find that students exposed to concept humor fared better during the test six weeks after the lecture in terms of retention of course material.

Research by Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillmann (1980) establishes a positive relationship between humor in the classroom and positive student evaluations by analyzing open-ended student responses. It is important to avoid limiting humor to joke-telling or stand-up monologues in front of a class. Terms like “cheerful”, “happy”, and “good-natured” all contribute to students’ views of a professor as being funny. By taping lecturers, tallying the number of humorous activities, and matching student evaluations to the instructor, the authors examine the potential effect humor has in contributing to a positive classroom experience. An interesting finding of the study is that students respond more favorably to spontaneous humor than to scripted humor, indicating that humor in the classroom is more effective than a rehearsed “pitch”.

Wanzer (2002) shows that humor increases attendance and attention in the classroom, and might affect memory. Furthermore, she proposes that humor can be used to reduce tension and to promote a classroom that is inclusive of communication between students and the professor. Tomkovick (2004) suggests bringing humor into the classroom as a means to improve positive thinking in students, which leads to better performance. Recommendations include using self-deprecating humor, beginning each lecture by making the audience laugh, or playing music to encourage positivity and laughter.

Martin et al.’s research (2003) mentions the possibility of using a Q-score-type measure to determine level of funniness. The Q-Score, a metric developed by Marketing Evaluations, Inc., is traditionally used to measure celebrity popularity. “Q-Scores are rankings determined by the company that have become the industry standard for measuring familiarity and appeal of performers, characters, sports and sports personalities, broadcast and cable programs as well as company and brand names” (Costanzo and

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Goodnight, 2006, p. 52). Extremely useful in advertising, Q-Scores assess not only familiarity of a source (e.g., celebrity or brand), but also where that source ranks in terms of being a “favorite.”

NEXT STEPS AND DISCUSSION

In the proposed study, we encourage marketing professors to use an evaluative measure similar to the one they often teach about during their advertising and promotion courses—the Q-Score. Considering that a degree in marketing is based on communication, we seek to explore the effectiveness of professors’ communication styles relative to students’ perceptions of them—as a top professor or not. Students share professor recommendations with their network through word-of-mouth and also provide feedback to sources beyond their network by rating professors on websites, such as RateMyProfessor.com and myEdu.com. These websites allow students to view professors’ ratings and to identify their top choices. While many students acknowledge that these websites are not always reliable, most of the same students also acknowledge that their course selections are often influenced by the ratings they read online. Thus, being among the top rated professors can grow enrollment in class sections and program areas.

The academic version of a Q-Score may encompass multiple factors. While the Q-Score for celebrities used in the advertising industry considers the percentage of people who would say the celebrity is a favorite divided by the percentage of people who are familiar with the celebrity, the Q-Score for academia should avoid asking students for familiarity and favoritism. Instead, we posit that familiarity can be developed through assumptions based on the number of years a professor has taught at the institution, the number of different course titles he or she teaches, the average number of students he or she teaches each semester, and the amount of service that professor is involved in (e.g., advising, student organization advising, or recruiting to name a few). Favoritism could be identified through a qualitative analysis of evaluations from popular websites such as Ratemyprofessor.com and myEdu.com. Ratemyprofessor.com provides annual lists of “top professors,” which can be sorted by scores. The comments for many “top professors” indicate that these professors apply humor in their classrooms, which supports the underlying proposition for this study. While these suggested measures would not create a perfect score, it would provide a starting foundation for research in this area.

Once Q-Scores are established, we believe student evaluations can be combined with a Humor Orientation scale to determine how effective professors are based on entertaining the classroom. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield’s (1991) 17-item humor orientation scale measures the frequency and effectiveness of humor in communication. While it is a self-assessment scale with items such as “I regularly tell jokes and funny stories when I am in a group,” “People often ask me to tell jokes or stories,” or “Of all the people I know, I’m one of the funniest,” it can be revised for students to evaluate their professors. Use of the Q-Score metric and student awareness of perceived professor humor can assist professors in marketing themselves, the discipline, and the major. Additionally, cognitive effects found in extant humor research provide substantial evidence that integrating humor into the classroom can aid marketing professors in getting their message across and engaging students in their educational experience.

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AUTHOR-SUPPLIED MANUSCRIPT

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