

Classroom antics: Fun with a purpose

David E. Deviney
Tarleton State University

John Crawford
Lipscomb University

Kevin L. Elder
Georgia Southern University

ABSTRACT

Student attention and engagement in the classroom is an ongoing problem that has generated a considerable amount of press in recent years. Some studies report that student attention begins to fade within 10 - 18 minutes (Weimer, 2009). While the statistics related to how long students stay attentive and engaged has been questioned (Wilson & Korn, 2007), most faculty will not argue that student attention and engagement can be a significant problem in the college classroom. The question then becomes, “how do we keep students attentive and engaged in course material?” This paper attempts to provide some of the solutions the authors use. It does not attempt to answer the complete question on student attention and engagement.

Keywords: Engagement, illusions, humor, video and attention

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

According to Downs (2009) student engagement has reached a critical mass among universities with schools putting more emphasis on keeping students involved in course material. Some studies suggest that student retention and success hinges on a number of factors including student engagement (THECB. n.d). Other research appears to indicate that the more time students spend involved in learning activities, the more they learn (AFCEC, na).

Student engagement has been defined as involvement in the activities and events offered by a course (Natriello 1984). Others have defined it in more scientific terms (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The literature does not seem to support one standard definition of student engagement. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper the authors have defined student engagement as “getting and keeping the attention of students in face-to-face classes.”

The preponderance of research into student attention spans seems to back the notion that student attention declines over time spent in the classroom and ranges from 10-18 minutes (Weimer, 2009). While attention spans have been an issue since students entered the classroom, attention spans seem to be declining in recent generations. Some findings on student concentration in the classroom indicate that they suffer from sensory overload (Moses, 2000). Others believe it is the ability of students to evaluate information quickly before moving on to other thoughts (Rushkoff, 1996).

The literature on student attention and engagement strongly suggest that classroom activities can help (Faculty Focus, 2009). Kher, Molstad and Donahue (1999) suggest the use of humor as a technique to get student attention and found research support for its use. Hoover (2006) found that the use of video clips can add value to the classroom. There is a growing use of illusions (magic) in classrooms (Deviney, 2010). It is used to regain attention, make a point and as an ice breaker. The following information provides a summary of how the authors use humor, video clips and illusions in the classroom.

HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM

Humor in the classroom can include jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments, cartoons and other humorous items (Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann, 1979). Humor seems to affect student attention and motivation (Bandes, 1998). The authors prefer the use of cartoons, humorous video clips and stories. However, humor should be used with some understanding. Below are some thoughts and guidelines on the use of humor:

1. Humor should be appropriate for the situation and topic (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992).
2. It should fit the personality of the instructor (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992)
3. It must never be directed at an individual or a group. (Snetsinger & Grabowski, 1993).
4. Avoid sarcasm and put-downs. (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992).
5. Don't be afraid to be funny (Powers, 2005). Lighten up on yourself.
6. Make it relevant to the topic (Powers, 2006).
7. Don't be afraid to experiment and even fail.

With the arrival of the internet, jokes, riddles, stories and cartoons are very easy to obtain. Of course, you should check out the copyright issues prior to using any copyrighted material.

VIDEO CLIPS IN THE CLASSROOM

Ted Powers suggests the following (Powers, 2009, para 33)

“You can facilitate learning by using funny movie or television clips to bring to life course concepts or by asking students if the example was accurate or not, and in what ways. Students often enroll in psychology courses expecting to see clips from *A Beautiful Mind*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Rainman*. Why not show them clips from *Me, Myself & Irene* (Dissociative Identity Disorder), *Monk* (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) and *Deuce Bigalo: Male Gigolo* (Narcolepsy)? Sometimes merely referring to a funny show can recapture students' attention. For example, during a discussion of brain structures you could note that anyone who has seen *The Waterboy* (a slapstick comedy about a simpleton who works for a college football coach as his waterboy and is found to be an excellent defensive player; he is then added to the team and must attend class) should be familiar with the medulla oblongata. If you could say it like Adam Sandler, the film's star, you may have students laughing out loud.”

Similar guidelines apply to video clip usage in the classroom as it does to humor. The authors would add one additional caution. Be aware of your audience and the morale and ethical norms that apply. Avoid the use of foul or offensive language. University policy must be taken into consideration also. Additionally, be aware that copyright laws may apply to some usage of videos.

YouTube (www.youtube.com) is a good source of video clips. Some are very professionally done. However, showing YouTube clips will require an internet connection. The authors suggest the use of a program entitled YouTube Downloader (http://download.cnet.com/YouTube-Downloader/3000-2071_4-10647340.html). This program allows you to download the YouTube video clip and store it on your hard drive. Therefore, an internet connection is not required. There are a number of video capture software packages commercially available for capturing clips from various media forms. These are relative inexpensive and easy to use. Conduct an internet search using the key words “video capture.” Amazon.com is also a good source for video capture hardware and software.

ILLUSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Illusions or magic has been a growing trend in classroom activities, especially at the K-12 grade level. David Levin and Kevin Spencer (Healing, n.d.) when working with students theorized that students benefited in the following ways:

- Rapport building – connecting with the student and delivering a lesson.
- Empowering the child and self-esteem – teaching the child the “secret” of the trick.
- Instilling hope – can symbolize optimism, possibility of change and indicate that solutions are not always as complicated as they appear.

- Metaphor – bring to the surface unspoken thoughts and feelings.
- Reframing – teaching the skill of reframing can help students look at things from a different point of view.
- Interpersonal skills – modeling appropriate interpersonal skills during the illusion and then allowing the student to practice the illusion using the same skills.
- Group cohesion – effective icebreaker for new groups.
- Assessment tool – used to assess learning disabilities.
- Academic learning – practice cognitive skills such as following complex directions, problem solving, etc.
- Trust building – revealing the “secret” can help a student open up during counseling.
- Recognition of boundaries – setting clear expectations about the illusionist’s personal space and equipment.

Often illusions purchased at magic supply stores will have a scripted patter. Beginners at illusions should start with easy tricks. There are literally hundreds of self-working devices (Forgaard, n.d.). The effect is built into the device. One of the best ways to find illusions is to visit a magic supply shop (Pogue, n.d.). Most shops have sales staff that can perform the illusions, make suggestions and train you on how to use the device. However, they will not reveal the “trick” until after you purchase the illusion.

The use of illusions in the classroom should be based on the following simple principles:

1. The illusion should not overpower the lesson (Linn, n.d.) – Know what you are teaching and find a trick that will enhance the message. There is some danger here since some students will spend time trying to figure out the trick rather than listening to the discussion. You can perform an illusion prior to break or just before the end of class which will reduce this possible negative impact.
2. Practice and then practice some more (Wilson, 95) – Practicing will help you both perfect the illusion and the accompanying message (the patter). Andi Gladwin recommends practicing using a digital movie camera (Gladwin, n.d.). He goes on to recommend viewing your performance from different audience angles.
3. Never repeat a trick for the same audience (Wilson, 95) – Repeating an illusion for the same audience increases the chance they will “catch you.” Additionally, often illusions are based on similar concepts and techniques (Linn, n.d.).
4. Never reveal the secret (Wilson, 95) – Revealing the “secret” is one of the cardinal mistakes that a beginning illusionist makes. It is really a disservice to your audience since it eliminates the mystery, excitement and fun of the illusion.

Illusions can be used for many purposes, but using them to get attention and draw the audience back and make a point about the lecture, seems to be most appropriate for instruction.

The following books and internet links are a good place to learn about performing illusions:

- Magic for Dummies (1998) published by Hungry Minds: New York
- The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Magic Tricks (1998) published by Alpha Books: New York
- Mark Wilson’s Cyclopedia of Magic: A Complete Course (1995) published by Running Press: Philadelphia

- About.com: Magic & Illusions
<http://magic.about.com/od/beginningmagic/a/act.htm>
- Parlor Magic (beginners) <http://www.selfworking.com/parlor.htm>
- MagicTricks.com <http://www.magictricks.com/>
- Daytona Magic <http://daytonamagic.com/>
- Amazon <http://www.amazon.com>

CONCLUSION

“One of the greatest sins in teaching is to be boring” (Baughman, 1979, p. 28). Effective use of humor, video clips and illusions will help teachers engage students and establish rapport (Powers, 2005) with them. With the increasing use of alternative educational delivery systems such as extended meeting times (e.g., all-day Saturday classes) or compressed teaching sessions (e.g., mini-mesters), students can become bored and drift off. Instructors need to become more creative in keeping and regaining the student’s attention (Gleason, n.d.). With new studies suggesting that the average attention span of college students is just ten minutes (Richardson, 2010), it is very important to re-energize the classroom. Our personal experience with these attention and engagement techniques has convinced us that they work. Students tend to mention these techniques in student evaluations and personal comments.

We have only mentioned a few of the techniques that are available for engaging students. A quick internet search will provide many others. We would like to encourage you to evaluate your current classroom activities and add to your toolbox.

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