Ronald A. Berk and Joy Nanda, "A randomized trial of humor effects on test anxiety and test performance", *Humor* 19–4 (2006), 425–454

Summarized by Dr. Kareen Seidler

The authors of this study analyzed the positive effects that humour incorporated into exam questions can have on test anxiety and exam results.

Test anxiety is a serious problem for some students. It can impede their performance. Berk and Nanda define the phenomenon as follows: "Test anxiety refers to transitory apprehensive, uneasy, or nervous feelings (affect state) immediately before, during, and after taking a specific test." (426) The authors suggested that incorporating humour into exam questions could help to decrease test anxiety. In fact, it ameliorated the students' exam results.

The students participating in the study took a short test before and after the exam, to measure their anxiety level with reference to their psychological and physiological symptoms. The participants were then divided into six groups who received exams with or without humorous additions in three forms: "(1) humorous vs. serious directions, (2) humorous vs. serious test items, and (3) humorous vs. serious directions and items" (436).

The authors predicted that humour incorporated into exam questions would help the students to distance themselves from their exam anxiety. Similarly, humour can function as a coping mechanism. Humour could also help students in moments when their mind goes "blank" in exams.

It turned out that the study didn't work out quite the way the authors had intended: in fact, the students didn't have a lot of pre-test anxiety to begin with and they had very good test results even without humorous intervention. It was therefore somewhat difficult to measure the impact of humour.

Although the humorous exam-instructions did not decrease students' test-anxiety, they did have a positive influence on their results. The students had even better grades than before. The authors have two explanations for this: "humorous directions may have spiked their level of attention, interest, alertness, memory, or overall mental functioning as they began answering the questions, which produced an improvement in performance" (443). Alternatively, "the humorous directions may have primed or jump-started the students' right hemispheres, which translated into improved problem-solving performances" (443-44).

Examples

The most common technique of incorporating humour into exam questions is in multiple-choice tests. An additional multiple-choice item is added: it is clearly not the right answer, but adds a humorous component.

Humorous directions at the beginning of a test

"GENERAL DIRECTIONS
Sit down and make believe you're at the beach.
Place the ANSWER SHEET somewhere in front of you, but NOT in the sand. Print your name, social security number, current blood pressure and pulse rate, cholesterol level (HDL & LDL), triglicerides, and test booklet number in the upper right corner.
Read the directions for marking your answers.

Answer all questions as best you can. There will be no penalty for guessing, so guess away. You will have the entire class period to complete the test, which means you have 1.25 minutes per question. Pace yourself accordingly.
DO NOT begin the test until you are told to do so. I am going to let you sit here and sweat in the sun for about 30 minutes before letting you start the test. You are allowed to breathe; but nothing else. Watch out! Here comes a wave!"
(434)

Humorous multiple-choice problem

Examine the intercorrelation matrix below between 5 predictors and the criterion of Admission:

Predictor	2	3	4	5	Criterion (Admission)
1. Eenie	.31	.81	.15	.22	−.62
2. Meenie		.72	.58	.78	.42
3. Meinie			.21	.65	.59
4. Moe				.13	.38
5. Schmoe					.72

Based on these correlations, what is the probable order of entry of the first three predictors in a stepwise multiple regression analysis to predict Admission into the Master's Program?

A. Schmoe, Eenie, Moe
B. Schmoe, Eenie, Meenie
C. Schmoe, Meinie, Meenie
D. Schmoe, Meenie, Moe

(448)

Humorous matching stems

"Directions: Based on acceptable measurement and statistical practices, match the variables to be correlated in Column I with the appropriate correlation statistic in Column II. Mark your answers (A through G) in spaces 15–22 of your answer sheet. Each response in Column II may be used once, more than once, or not at all.

	Column I		Column II
15.	rankings (1–10) by 2 students of best to worst muffins at the Buzz Bistro	A.	point biserial
16.	gender (female-male; 1–0) and "Cocky" Self-Confidence Scale scores (0–50)	B.	biserial
17.	ranking of Common Sense Level (0–5) and chosen Sunscreen Protection Factor (1–50)	C.	Spearman's rho
18.	belief in aliens (yes-no; 1–0) and use of hallucinogens (use-no use; 1–0)	D.	Pearson
19.	pass-fail (1–0) on the Vegetarian Diet Test and Attitude toward Brussels Sprouts Scale scores (0–40)	E.	phi
20.	clinical ratings on peds (0–30) and Smack the Kid Scale scores (0–30)	F.	contingency coefficient
21.	pass-fail (1–0) on the Kidney Breath Test and above or below the mean (1–0) on the Dog Drool Puddle Test	G.	tetrachoric
22.	Preference for Ron (Love Him/Whack Him) and Final Exam Score Category (High, Middle, Low)		

(449)

Humorous constructed-response problem

"In a recent poll of 700 Johns Hopkins Hospital nurses to determine their favorite movies over the last few years, the following percentages were computed for their top two picks:

Fetal Attraction	*A Beautiful Hind*
57%	43%

6. What is the formula to compute the standard error of a percentage (sP)?
7. Substitute all quantitative values in that formula." [etc.]

- The serious problem had the following movie titles instead:

A Beautiful Mind	*Men in Black II*

(450)