

The risks and rewards of teaching with humour in Western Sydney: Adapting pedagogy to complex demographics

ADRIAN HALE*
Western Sydney University

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ABSTRACT

EN The University of Western Sydney (UWS) services Australia's most multicultural region, where a large proportion of students are either migrants or the children of migrants, and many are from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is also an area of chronic social disadvantage. Apart from generic literacy issues, there is also what could be termed a deficit in student motivation. Thus, teaching in this context requires a more creative approach to engage and retain students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Humour, as used in topical content and delivery, has been very successful as a vehicle for these aims. This paper will present a summary of central findings over four years of teaching with humour in two courses. It will be asserted that negotiating students' literacy levels is best performed through effective use of humour: students are more motivated to learn when they feel that humour use is in their best interests.

Key words: HUMOUR, FACE THEORY, MOTIVATION, AFFECT, SOCIAL-LITERACY DISADVANTAGE

ES La University of Western Sydney (UWS) presta sus servicios a la región más multicultural de Australia, donde una gran parte del alumnado es extranjero o de padres inmigrantes y, además, en su mayoría, proveniente de contextos no anglófonos. Asimismo, se ubica en un área de marginación social crónica. Aparte de problemas de alfabetización genérica, se añade lo que se podría denominar un déficit de motivación en el alumnado. Enseñar en este contexto requiere un enfoque más creativo para involucrar y retener a los estudiantes en los niveles de grado y posgrado. El humour, tal como se viene utilizando en los contenidos y en la instrucción, ha resultado de gran éxito como medio para conseguir estos objetivos. El presente trabajo proporciona un resumen de los principales hallazgos obtenidos a lo largo de cuatro años de enseñanza con humour en dos cursos. Se concluye que la negociación de los niveles de alfabetización del alumnado es más eficaz si se usa el humour de forma efectiva: los estudiantes se sienten más motivados para aprender cuando ven que el humour se usa en su beneficio.

Palabras clave: HUMOUR, TEORÍA DE LA IMAGEN SOCIAL, MOTIVACIÓN, AFECTO, DESVENTAJA SOCIAL EN LA ALFABETIZACIÓN

IT La University of Western Sydney (UWS) serve l'area più multiculturale dell'Australia, dove una larga fascia di studenti e studentesse è costituita da immigrati/e di prima o seconda generazione e molti/e di loro provengono da contesti in cui non si parla inglese. È anche un'area socialmente svantaggiata. Peraltro, oltre ai generali problemi connessi all'alfabetizzazione, esiste, in quest'area, quello che potremmo definire un *deficit* nella motivazione delle studentesse e degli studenti. La didattica in tale contesto richiede un tipo di approccio creativo che coinvolga e trattienga gli studenti e le studentesse durante i percorsi di laurea e post-lauream. Il comico, usato come contenuto disciplinare e come strumento espressivo nell'esposizione delle lezioni, si è rivelato un mezzo molto indicato per il raggiungimento di questi obiettivi. In questo lavoro presentiamo una sintesi dei risultati più significativi ottenuti in quattro anni di insegnamento usando il comico in due corsi. Sostengo che la negoziazione dei livelli di alfabetizzazione degli studenti e delle studentesse si verifichi meglio se accostata all'uso efficace del comico: studenti e studentesse sono più motivati a imparare quando si rendono conto che l'umorismo è usato nel loro interesse.

Parole chiave: COMICO, TEORIA GOFFMANIANA DELLA "FACCIA", SVANTAGGIO SOCIALE E EDUCATIVO

* Contact: a.hale@uws.edu.au

1. Introduction

This paper will address the complex problem of humour as a vehicle not only for general, theoretically-informed pedagogical practice, but more contextually as a tool for making an actual difference in what is, effectively a difficult university teaching environment. To do so, demographic information will be provided to frame the specific learning situation for students at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The paper will then present university-generated statistical data relating to two linguistics-based subjects taught at UWS, which will evidence that humour has been instrumental in engaging students. That is, it will be asserted that when humour is deliberately employed both as an attendant-incidental feature of content presentation (often typically improvised) and as a strategic feature of textual choices (often student-directed), students are heuristically intrigued and motivated to attend classes and to engage with assessment tasks. It will be postulated that this strategy has aided in retention of enrolled students and in pan-cohort grade improvements. This data is more significant, perhaps, because of the diversity and large-scale enrolments involved in the student population.

1.1. UWS student demographics

UWS is a university which serves a unique geographical region of Australia. This region, officially referred to as *Greater Western Sydney* (or GWS), comprises around half of the population of Australia's largest city, Sydney (or 2.3 million of a total population of 4.39 million), but it occupies around 9,000 square kilometres, or $\frac{3}{4}$ of the entire Sydney metropolitan region by area (NSW Trade & Investment, 2013). UWS is a multi-campus university, which is spread across a large area of Sydney's suburban sprawl, from semi-rural fringes to suburban centres in the wider Sydney basin. As a university that is only 25 years old, UWS tends to target residents from its catchment area only, and it lacks the lure of the four other publicly-funded, and older, more prestigious, and wealthier universities in the eastern half of the city. It is thus, perhaps by its very nature, more flexible and more responsive to its particular region than these other universities are, or have to be. This is due, at least in part, to the very distinctive demographical features of UWS' student catchment area, to which the university must respond.

In many ways, UWS' spatial presence is emblematic of the demographics of its region. Spread over multiple campuses separated by significant distances (often 30-40km of suburban separation, and without any direct public transport links), the reality for many students is that they typically need to physically travel long distances, by private vehicle, just to attend lectures and tutorials. Sydney's eastern universities are more typically one-campus based and very well serviced by public transport options, which are also concentrated around the urban hub where general amenities, services and employment opportunities are in greater supply. Overall, the eastern half of Sydney is typified by a population, which is more educated, ethnically homogenous, and advantaged for economic and employment factors (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013; Western Sydney Region of Councils [WSROC], 2013). In terms of multiculturalism, eastern Sydney is below the national average; in terms of economic and educational advantage, it is well above the Australian average (ABS, 2013). It is not, perhaps, a generalisation to argue that the metropolis of Sydney is a city of two very different halves.

Greater Western Sydney is distinctive not only for its below-average household income; it is also the centre of Australia's multicultural society and social disadvantage. It has been, for more than half a century, dominated by large-scale patterns of immigration, social disadvantage (including welfare dependency, lower educational attainments, and poorer options for public transport), and higher diversity for language spoken, culture, ethnicity, and religion than anywhere else in the country (ABS, 2013; WSROC, 2013). While this part of the city does attract skilled "immigrant entrepreneurs" (Collins, 2006, p. 135), it also attracts the majority of Australia's intake of refugees and family reunion migrants, and these categories of new arrivals are distinguished by high social disadvantage and non-English speaking backgrounds (ABS, 2013).

Indeed, and overall, GWS is the single biggest destination of choice for Australia's immigrants, with over 40% of all newly arrived immigrants settling in Western Sydney (WSROC, 2013). Adding to the existing "pool" of decades of migration, these newer arrivals boost the diversity of GWS, such that almost 60% of Western Sydney's population consists of either 1st or 2nd generation immigrants (Collins, 2006, p. 135). The source nations of this population are also linguistically and ethnically diverse, such that GWS is a region where 180 nationalities and at least 100 different community languages are represented (UWS Pocket Profile, 2009; Collins, 2006, p. 135). A significant number of these migrants arrive in Australia with inadequate English language skills (ABS, 2013).

1.2. Demographics as a deficit-obstacle

What this signifies is a population area with a significant number of homes where English is a second or other language. Even when English is a first language for the children of migrants, it is frequently not the language spoken in the home. In the 2011 census, for instance, respondents were asked to self-define for English language proficiency: “128,617 [adults] in the WSROC Region who speak another language report difficulty with speaking English” (WSROC, 2013). This figure is representative only and it suggests a much wider English language deficit across the region. Another figure, which relates to the language spoken at home, indicates that around half of GWS’ population, or 42.7%, speak a language other than English in the home (ABS, 2013). There is some potential, therefore, for linguistic capital in the English language to be diluted, depending on how bilingually (or multilingually) competent these persons are. This potentiality is extremely difficult to assess, but it is important to consider at this point that the potential for English language deficit, for UWS students, is quite high.

To exacerbate this deficit-potentiality, there is some evidence from internal UWS data that the best students across GWS do not choose to study at UWS. While there are five universities in Sydney, in reality, the prestige and higher-level entrance requirements (for literacy, as rated by secondary school leaving exams) for the four eastern suburbs universities mean that these universities attract the better-performing students from across the entire region (University of Western Sydney [UWS], 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). To put it another way, UWS effectively is a second choice university for the more literate, or linguistic-capital-rich, students. By extension, UWS is also the only option for students with poorer linguistic capital, since they are excluded by the higher entrance requirements of the other institutions. Thus, a general index of inequity is further entrenched by a linguistic-educational divide: “education is political and its relationship to other social institutions is readily defined in a system that works more effectively for social groups that already have cultural and social power” (Jones Diaz, 2004, p. 98).

This divide can be further defined for a type of ethnic “selection.” A corroborating feature of the demographic data produced internally by UWS is that while many students are born in Australia, they come from families where English is either not spoken at all, or it is only one of two or several languages spoken at home (UWS, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Some of these major community languages include Arabic, Hindi-Urdu, Chinese (typically Mandarin, but also Cantonese), Vietnamese, Bengali, Farsi, Spanish, Greek and Italian (Cardona, Noble, & Di Biase, 1998; UWS, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). With up to 80% of all UWS students growing up in homes where the English language is a relatively new acquisition, it is apparent that UWS’ students are actually more linguistically and ethnically diverse than the general GWS population, perhaps even double the rate for either of these distinguishing features (UWS, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). One conclusion is that ethnically “Anglo” students from GWS are more likely to enrol at an eastern university, rather than at UWS, further concentrating this ethnic-linguistic diversity among UWS’s student body. It can be meaningfully referred to as a pattern of “white flight” (Frey, 1979) which simultaneously dilutes UWS’ linguistic capital. That is, the students who are ethnically mainstream, and who typically also have a greater linguistic tradition in the English language (that is, they are more likely to be native speakers and expert users of the language) are least likely to attend UWS. The students who are neither native speakers nor expert users of the English language are most likely to enrol at UWS.

This translates into a major linguistic-capital challenge for both students and educators at UWS. What is a little more difficult to quantify is the extent to which these linguistic differences impact academic performance. However, once the failure rate is factored into the equation, there is some more corroborating evidence: at between 25-30% failure rate for all first years (a failure rate 5-10% above the national tertiary average), UWS students are clearly underprepared for the linguistic demands of university (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008).

One explanation for this inflated rate of failure is that there exists an educational under-achievement culture across GWS. This culture of under-achievement is tied to various deficits, which are very difficult to dislodge. These include a general cultural deficit of educational aspiration that is linked to a typical lack of confidence, both regionally and individually. This is representative of a culture of deficit which begins with generally poor educational (cohort) attainments prior to commencement at university (UWS, 2013c). For example, almost 60% of ARW students begin university without having completed high school (UWS, 2013c). It is hardly surprising then, that most students (up to 80%) who start at UWS in the 1st year cohorts are also the first in their family to have ever attended university (UWS, 2013a/b/c).

UWS students are also more likely to face challenges including a higher than average rate of disabilities or other life circumstances, such as migrant experience of dislocation or refugee trauma; fulltime

or insecure casual work responsibility; and transient accommodation issues (UWS, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). It is also probable that UWS students are sensitive to being “marked” for difference. Apart from cultural or ethnic differences, such markedness might be as simple as an accent or phonic intrusion from another language. Accent, even for the competent or expert user of English, is a limiting factor in self-esteem for many people (Hale, Bond, & Sutton, 2011; Lippi-Green, 2012). In general, the person with a variant accent experiences the “grim reality of limitations imposed by a standard language ideology” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 253). Rather than confront this reality for the construct that it represents, UWS students may very well decide that they cannot conform or succeed in the wider professional environment. This is despite the fact that, given the general demographics of UWS, it is logical to assume that a diversity of accents is actually the norm, or at least it would be generally considered to be *un*-remarkable, in the university environment at UWS. However, UWS students are likely to be sensitive to the fact that language/accent discrimination is common in the wider community, and this is true even for the professionally qualified individuals (Hale, Bond, & Sutton, 2011; Lippi-Green, 2012).

If these factors are regarded as a collective challenge, not only to the commencement of tertiary education, but also for the continuation of study, it is hardly surprising that the participation rate for residents in GWS in tertiary institutions is at least 20% below the national average (UWS, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; WSROC, 2103). There also appears to be an awareness, or expectation, of educational under-achievement for residents of GWS, which students are sensitive to. That is, the general Australian community, and in particular, the wider community of Sydney, considers tertiary success for GWS residents as the exception, rather than the rule. This only enhances the student’s chances of being discouraged from pursuing study, since the student, already aware of a wider community expectation of academic failure, is especially prone to feelings of being an institutional “impostor” (following Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001).

Collectively, this set of deficits contributes to what can be called an overall deficit in intrinsic motivation. A student at UWS is less likely to share in the “optimal experience of individuals being fully engaged in a given task and pursuing whatever they are doing for its own sake” (Waring, 2013, p. 192). This deficit, in the context of UWS demographics, is even more apparent if we define academic motivation as a student’s ability to achieve autonomous control over—and sustain—study habits and learning where there is clear enjoyment and satisfaction derived from the process *and* the end result. Aspects of motivation include a student’s ability to internalise, personalise, attend classes, be self-directed/autonomous, seek higher grades, integrate, and socialise. Whether the student taps into this intrinsic motivation depends largely on whether the student is acculturated into the university environment at an early stage. General deficits in capital, including linguistic capital, are powerful drags on any student’s ability to acculturate and to develop motivation (Delpitt, 1988; Nesi, 2012; Waring, 2013). As a form of linguistic capital, this means that many of UWS’ potential students will demonstrate competence in the English language, which may not be adequate for the literacy demands of university.

1.3. Humour as yet another educational hurdle

Students at UWS are thus largely unprepared for the general literacy demands of the university setting. In addition to literacy demands, however, students may very well find one, additional educational hurdle, which is extremely challenging: the use of humour by educators at university. While there is some evidence for pedagogical benefits from the use of humour in the educational setting (see, for instance, Gardner, 2006; Nesi, 2012; Zhang, 2005), these studies seem to rely on the assumption that students already possess the linguistic capital required to process such instances of humour.

In the case of UWS students, however, this assumption cannot be made, since a general linguistic capital-deficit in English necessarily underpins the ability to process humour. One important literacy deficit is the ability to process humour as presented by educators in the context of a lecture or tutorial. Indeed, for too many students at UWS, the presence of humour in the academic setting is both unexpected and challenging. There are various reasons why these students may fail to negotiate humour in this setting. One reason is that students experience an increased cognitive load of university-level subjects in general which demands complex “processes at many different levels [interacting with] reading or listening, syntactic and semantic analyses, knowledge integration, as well as reasoning processes” (Kintsch, 2005, p. 127). It is hardly surprising, then, that the processing of humour in this context seems to present an unexpected and additional challenge for UWS students. This is because so much humour taps into “a large chunk of semantic information surrounding a [word] or evoked by it” (Raskin, 1985, p. 81). That is, students will not necessarily be familiar

with the specific background knowledge of the English language variety they are being asked to reference, especially since this knowledge differs “from culture to culture” and it is, at least potentially, always “local in some way” (Vandaele, 1999, p. 265). Another reason is that a humorous text makes pragmatic demands on literacy for the processing of schemata, which are complex and non-literal (Attardo, 1994; Bertoff, 1999; Hertzog & Anderson, 2000; Raskin, 1985). Indeed, the contradictory schemata of humour draw on “underlying inferential processes [requiring] a wide range of sources of knowledge (linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, world knowledge, social knowledge, etc.)” (Mayerhofer, Maier, & Schach, 2015, p. 4). For UWS students, an obstacle is found not only in the specificity of general English language background knowledge, but also the cultural styles of humour, which characterise Australian humour in the Australian variety of English. Students lack the experience of many Australian cultural references, where schemata rely on culturally specific references. For these reasons, processing the pragmatics of humour, as with other expert-user demands of English, is simply very difficult and intimidating for many of these students. A student who is not capable of processing these demands is likely to experience discouragement in pursuing study. This is because the student who generally feels excluded from the experience of university study will specifically resent the use of humour, which they cannot participate in, thus tainting the overall tertiary experience.

2. Theoretical framing

Taken together then, these aspects of UWS student demographics indicate that the average UWS student is extremely vulnerable to discouragement. Being under-motivated already means that it takes little to discourage a student from persisting with studies in an environment that is already unfamiliar, alien to home culture, and (potentially) toxic to personal and ethnic-cultural identity. Any educator’s use of humour which inadvertently or deliberately targets a student in one of these sensitive areas can therefore be viewed as a critical trigger, which, while not necessarily (or primarily) causative, is at least associative (and thus integral) to a student’s acculturation and academic success overall. An educator’s use of humour, whether merely insensitive or deliberately caustic, cannot be underestimated for its affective influence on a student’s discourse/motivation. It can be stated that the use of humour by an educator carries enormous weight, and thus the onus of responsibility must be primarily the educator’s.

This focus can be rephrased, therefore, as an equation of power in a university lecture-tutorial setting. The success (or failure) of humour can be viewed as a pedagogical outcome, which is, at heart, contingent upon a “power differential” (Beck & Malley, 1998; Delpit, 1988; Smith, 2007). For UWS students, the power differential is particularly salient. At the macro level, the power differential is embedded in the university’s *Ideological Discursive Formations* (or IDFs, following Fairclough, 1985), which are constituted in opaque institutional structures of privileged subject-curricula-study foci and in unfamiliar pedagogical expectations. These IDFs prove especially intimidating for UWS students because these students have little cultural, personal, or familial experience of Australian tertiary education settings. Indeed, the concept of IDFs seems to be especially pertinent when describing an educational setting where relationships of power are obscured in cultural norms, which are framed, or treated, as unexceptional. That is, UWS students are typically underprepared for the acculturation demands of university. This is particularly true when it comes to contrasts of power. As per Delpit’s codification, UWS students encounter a tertiary situation where:

- 1) Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
- 2) There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power.”
- 3) The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power [...]
- 4) Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (Delpit, 1988, p. 282)

Thus, UWS students experience a culture shock when attending classes on campus in their first year of study. As a reinforcing and enacting expression of a power differential, the implicit knowledge-capital gap between the university educator (typically a career educator with multiple degrees, including a Ph.D.) and the student (either a first-year undergraduate or an MA first year) is allied with the rather confronting, and typically unfamiliar, institutional nature of university. Considering the demographics of the typical UWS student, many of whom have not completed secondary schooling, there are multiple cultural-literacy deficits which magnify this potentially enormous power differential. For instance, a complicating factor, which

activates the pre-existent and latent power differential is the typical UWS student's general ignorance of student-educator relationship norms. The university setting typically endorses, and thus provides, an excellent example of the latent inverse power relationship between "populations of relatively powerless people" and those who exercise social control or "power [across] many dimensions" (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton & Richardson, 1993, pp. 89-90). It is a setting where the educator can select forms of content, delivery, and discourse style at an autonomous or discretionary level, without being necessarily responsive to student sensitivities. This is generally true when humour is employed by the educator but particularly effective when the educator knowingly, or deliberately, transgresses social taboos. In the case of many UWS students, where conservative traditions dominate, these transgressive actions can therefore be especially confronting. As a form of "activism" or "criticality," such an application of humour can enact moments of superiority, aggression, and transgression, where "humour involves immorality, reckless and extravagant behaviour, and gaucherie" (Carroll, 2014, p. 21).

Indeed, any such aggressive instance of humour, for at least some students (especially students who are socially vulnerable), will contextually represent authoritarianism, and an educator's humour may very well be regarded as a token of self-aggrandizing indulgence or, discursively, anti-student militancy. It may certainly be taken personally. In some cases, educator humour, which disregards students' discursive sensitivities could very well constitute a form of bullying. Prime examples include humour topics, which denigrate ethnicity, religion, or social status. This is consistent with Koestler's (1964) reference to humour's "impulse [for] aggression [...] manifested in the guise of malice, derision, the veiled cruelty of condescension [since humour's] common ingredient [is] the aggressive-defensive or self-asserting tendency" (Koestler, 1964, p. 52). To regard humour as benign, or serving a higher pedagogical need to affront in order to engage, is perhaps, therefore, naïve at best or, at worst, a type of class-based arrogance. This naiveté relies on a "mirage of innocent humor" (Gruner, 2000, p. 147).

A useful frame for measuring the extent to which humour can offend and exacerbate a pre-existing power differential is Face Theory, as developed by Goffman (1967) and expanded by Brown and Levinson (1987). Additionally, Partington (2006) offers some insights into the application of *face theory* to real-life situational humour. Thus, the linguistic transaction of an educator's humorous text (whether deliberate or inadvertent) presents a face-threatening act (FTA) since the text, as an act of interpersonal, unexpected aggression—potentially at least—offers a destabilizing challenge to "the public self-image that every [person] wants to claim for [himself/herself]" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61).

The notion of the FTA is generically relevant for situational, negotiated discourse where parties have capital to bargain with or to collaborate in conversational goals under "normal" or "unexceptional" conditions (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014, p. 41). Even under these "normal" conditions, there is a serious potential threat to a person's face needs, since "face is extremely sensitive, volatile and vulnerable" (Partington, 2006, p. 87). It is even more applicable to situations where a pre-existing imbalance in linguistic and social capital is exposed, and amplified, by the humorous actions of educators who cannot negotiate, or accommodate, the face needs of their students for whom "sociological variables" require more politeness and tact (Partington, 2006, p. 88). When students are already marginalized across aspects of social-linguistic capital, as is the case with the majority of UWS's students, face loss is especially confronting.

Ironically, some educators represent more of a FTA, since they see themselves as "politically engaged, working [with] disenfranchised social groups" (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014, p. 29). Humour as enacted by such an educator can backfire, because the educator, with every good intention, may draw attention to aspects of life, which students resent being "spotlighted" for; that is, students may simply suffer embarrassment, rather than any feeling of solidarity. On the other hand, careful work performed in building trust, rapport, and solidarity over a space of time across social-economic divides can easily evaporate when an educator presents a failed and highly sensitive blunder with humour. This attempt at humour can be viewed as an act of disloyalty or betrayal, and its failure affects the "in-group" solidarity, which is highly sensitive to any act of negative "affect face" (Partington, 2006).

In any of these scenarios, it is rare that an educator will lose the most face. That is, in a UWS context, FTA humour offers a very clear example of a social (or speech) event, which is far more than merely a failed teaching moment. The face investment by the socially vulnerable—in a situation where they stand to lose even more face—is a critical example of where the educator needs to attend closely to the face needs of the students. Or, to put it another way, the teaching situation is a site for careful, collaborative, face tending, since it requires consistency and trust in the maintenance of a lop-sided relationship. It is a site of "interpersonal rhetoric—the way speakers and writers accomplish goals as social actors who do not just need to get things

done but attend to their interpersonal relationships with other participants at the same time" (Kasper, 1997, p. 105).

Another aspect of this relationship between students and the educator, which is constitutive of an FTA, is the variegated literacy competencies of students, which are rarely in line with the educator who typically qualifies as an *expert user* of English (following the usage of Rampton, 1990). This can be summarized as the gap in *pragmatic competence* (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 3) between students and the educator. In practical terms, this means that when the educator employs humour, students may feel excluded on several counts. The first is a cultural literacy tied to the use of humour as a teaching practice, such that students may be puzzled by the purpose of humour in the educational setting, and may feel alienated by this as a practice that seems to have no explicit pedagogical purpose. That is, much pedagogical humour seems to be completely incidental to the setting and topic, and it is a practice, which is culturally unfamiliar for many students (Hofstede, 2001; Peng, 2007; Rao, 2002). Not understanding why humour has been used in the teaching situation is immediately confusing and destabilizing as a FTA, regardless of its linguistic accessibility. Closely allied to this cultural literacy is the student's inability to process propositional content when it requires the higher-order, pragmatic-level literacy of an expert user of English. Apart from the natural inability of many UWS students to process this level of language, there is also the implicit message which they take from the experience, which is that jokes which unintentionally (or even intentionally) exclude persons on the basis of pragmatic competence are explicitly read as exclusive out-group or in-group triggers. Humour, in this situation, which might accrue face to the educator, is a linguistic transaction, which is necessarily at the expense of students' face needs.

Little wonder, then, that students resist humour when it offers a FTA for any or all of these reasons. Apart from the natural, discursive hesitance about unfamiliar humorous situations, the student will experience anxiety. Discursive resistance to humour has been identified as a type of *affective filter* where a participant will invoke cognitive-emotional defenses (Waring, 2013, p. 192). Ineffective humour can not only fail at the cognitive level; it can arouse strong, affective, associative reactions which are very difficult to dislodge and which can be permanent or at least long-term (Strick Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg, 2012, p. 219). This is simply more evident, or pronounced, in the context of a student who is only too painfully aware of literacy deficiencies or of discursive-power differentials. Such a student, perhaps also feeling coerced into a discursive position which runs counter to their own (say, if a text covers material which is offensive to a student's conservative background), will respond with natural defense mechanisms to the humorous text which has been identified as an act of persuasion or undermining of a student's ideology: "Resistance stems from a basic need to restore freedom in response to a persuasive attempt" (Strick Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg, 2012, p. 213).

This perspective provides a possible interpretation for the mixed findings reported by Suzuki and Heath (2014), who conclude that students respond most favourably to, and have their "recognition performance" improved by, "humor that is relevant" (p. 99), but that there are enormous variables for context and across student samples. This is particularly interesting as an equation of what constitutes relevance, since this would naturally foreground the interpretation from the student's perspective. It thus applies particularly to the notion of humour as being contextually variegated for UWS students, given that there are very significant variables in student backgrounds and discursive formations and that these serve as sites of resistance when confronted by the performance of humour by the educator. Simply put, there is much at stake for the less powerful interlocutor in a university setting, and this imbalance is particularly acute for the UWS student. Humour in this context, as instigated by an educator, is a high-stakes gamble. It is also true that, given these elements of affective, cognitive and discursive defense, the successful outcome of an attempt at humour seems to have the odds stacked against it.

However, there is also an opportunity for humour to be productive. If humour is at the service of the student's discursive needs, rather than those of the educator, it follows that the investment in successful humour can bring about great dividends. It has, for instance, been recognized that in the workplace, the power differential between leaders and subordinates can be managed through humour: "humor, a ubiquitous human interpersonal behavior, can help initiate and perpetuate a cycle of individual and social-level positive affect" (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012, p. 1072). Indeed, it is argued that the careful utilization of humour can overcome language gaps, generate affective links between staff, and facilitate productivity, by "improv[ing] performance... humor creates positive affect [and] suggests a shared set of personal values...and increases trust" (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012).

In the educational context, theoretically at least, this reorientation of affect could be at the heart of the humorous linguistic transaction's purpose. The focus in much of the literature has been on whether humour is productive in improving memory recall or in directly improving learning. Indeed, there is no consensus in the literature that the use of humour can actually achieve this end anyway (see for instance, conflicting results from Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980; Ennis, 2003; Fields, 2011; Fowler, 2006; Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008; Hellman, 2007; James, 2004; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Kuhrik, Kuhrik, & Berry 1997; Nesi, 2012; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006).

Rather, what is generally agreed upon is that the use of humour by an educator can be directly instrumental in an affective re/orientation, so that students are more disposed towards the educator and/or the institution. It would appear then, that the role of student perception of humour is paramount. So, for instance, students report that a careful use of appropriate humour creates "the effect that the instructor took the extra effort [to] make the class more enjoyable [and] reduce anxiety" (Garner, 2006, p. 180). Similarly, Zhang (2005, p. 115) reports that humour can "enhance students' affective learning, create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere, lessen students' anxiety, increase affect and liking for the instructor and the course, and facilitate students' willingness to participate." In other words, while there seems to be some evidence that an appropriate use of humour can produce the *conditions*, which are conducive for learning, humour is not causatively linked to the process of learning itself. By extension, it should be a fairly straightforward matter to decide what usages of humour would be counter-productive for the conditions of learning.

It is not difficult to define types of humour, which are likely to transgress these student needs. Fields (2011) recommends that "put-downs, sarcasm, ridicule, sexual or profane jokes, and sensitive issues should never be sources of humor in an educational setting [including] humor based on disabilities [or] physical appearance." (p. 63). Similarly, Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) argue that educators should avoid humour "targeting a particular student or group of students [or] joking about a student's intelligence, personal life/interests, appearance, gender, or religion [or] using sexual or vulgar types of humor" (p. 193). It can be argued, then, that if these conditions are met by the educator, the students will be more likely to feel safe and welcomed in the educational setting with the result that student motivation to learn in a more general sense is enhanced. That is, students are more likely to feel positive about themselves and to be more active learners if the educator uses humour which communicates a sincere concern for their students.

Indeed, it would appear that humour is not only an asset to teaching, but it can also be endorsed as a powerful motivational tool. A seamless and successful humorous transaction can offer face rewards for students, it can engage for affect, offer scaffolded and accessible literacy learning (cognitive outcomes), and it can provide an incentive for learning at the discursive level. This blend of rewards can result in an internalisation of motivations, producing a more lasting effect of student learning autonomy, where a sense of empowerment through active participation can be developed. The key seems to be in locating the type(s) of humour, which can be productive for both student and educator as a mutually beneficial exchange, where the student is actively involved in the reception of the "joke" and consents to it. This is, after all, by definition (and contextually) the nature of successful humour, where what is "intended by the speaker to be amusing" must be equally "perceived to be amusing" by the student (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 1693). Indeed, it is feasible in the educational setting, where UWS students are involved, to produce what Holmes (2006, p. 33) refers to as "jointly constructed or conjoint" humour. Such a collaborative effort is even possible when the educator is performing a purely "monologic" (Nesi, 2012, p. 80) lecture, if the educator is actively working to put their humour at the service of their students.

It is this premise, which the balance of this paper will address. The study which will be presented offers evidence that humour, when successfully implemented as part of teaching strategies, can be used to engage, to be inclusive, to produce affective connections between the educator and students, and to offer vulnerable students a positive environment in which they can develop motivated, autonomous learning.

3. Overview of subjects, method and study

The two courses, which are referred to in this paper are both linguistics-based units of study. The discussion of these courses covers the four-year period between 2010 and 2014. One course, *English Text and Discourse*, or ETD, is a discourse analysis course in the Linguistics/Interpreting Translation program, with an average enrolment of up to 120 students, some of whom are post-graduate. This course is dominated by international students (around 50% of all students), the majority of whom (at least 90%) are from mainland China. The rest of the cohort is very representative of the diversity of UWS' student body. The other course,

Analytical Reading and Writing, or ARW, is designed to address literacy issues for 1st year students. It is also offered as an elective across all years of undergraduate study, and is therefore available to students across 15 degree programs (from Nursing, to Business, Law, and Arts). During the period studied, it had an enrolment of between 1800-2000 students annually, with an average of 25 students per class/section. This course cohort is highly representative of UWS' student diversity. There are two areas of data collection. The first is the collection of student feedback across four years of the courses being offered. The second is the measurement of grade distributions across the same period for various cohorts.

The period of data collection was the calendar period between the start of 2011 and the end of 2014: a period of eight complete semesters for ARW and four semesters for ETD (which was offered once a year). One variable is the fact that ARW was offered across one or two campuses the first two years, and then rolled out across all three campuses in the next two years. This is not considered to be important, however, since the diversity of students across all three campuses is roughly equivalent: ethnic backgrounds might vary by campus, but grade distributions indicate an equivalence of educator abilities. So, for instance, while Lebanese and other Middle-Eastern backgrounds may dominate at one campus, other ethnic-cultural backgrounds dominate at other campuses, and all are surprisingly comparable for educational outcomes and socio-economic disadvantage (cf. UWS Pocket Profile, 2009; UWS, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). With an enrolment of up to 2000 students per year, there is also the variable of having up to 32 tutors/teaching staff with inconsistent teaching styles across the subject. This can be discounted, however, since the surveys on courses (SFUs) are consulted for the unit ARW, where almost all lectures are delivered by the same person, and it is the lecture, as emblematic of the course, that students are responding to. Surveys on teaching (SFTs), by contrast, were not consulted for ARW, because most of the teaching was performed by tutors (in tutorials). SFTs were consulted for the course ETD, however, because this course was taught by only one lecturer and one tutor (the same person). Therefore, surveys on course (SFUs) and teaching (SFTs) are consulted for the course ETD, while only SFUs are consulted for the course ARW. This selection tends to narrow the samples, in order to demonstrate the trajectory in improved results as various aspects of humour are refined and experimented on, as confined to the feedback for one educator.

One variable which should be considered is that the collection system switched to online (the link was student-email delivered) from paper in second semester 2013. The response rate fell from an average of 61% to 26% before lifting to 33% in second semester 2014. While this is a significant drop in responses, it still represents, at its lowest point, a minimum of 497 unique student returns, which is considered to be a viable sample. Also, the fact that the surveys became more optional for completion tends to indicate that only highly motivated students completed the surveys. Considering that the surveys managed a fairly uniform pattern during this period, regardless of medium of return, indicates that they are reliable.

3.1. Data from UWS institutional student surveys and grade distributions

Data is supplied from two end-of-semester, UWS institutionally-generated student surveys: Student Feedback on Unit² (SFU for both ARW, ETD) and Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT for ETD only). These surveys are standardised across the university for question types and for methods of data collection. Data for the unit is then compared against data for UWS and the School. Reproductions of these 2 different surveys are attached to this paper as Appendix A and Appendix B. This paper will present data from these surveys for both quantitative results (rating of Likert-scale responses across various categories, where the maximum rating is 5.0) and open-ended qualitative results. In both SFUs and SFTs, the qualitative questions asked if the student had any further comment to make. The actual wording for these qualitative questions, which is identical in both the SFT and SFU, is as below:

- *Please indicate the important characteristics of this lecturer/class that have been the most valuable to your overall learning experience.*
- *Please indicate the particular characteristics of this lecturer/class that you feel are important for him/her to improve.*

² Note that nomenclature at UWS may be different to other institutions: unit means course or subject, while course refers to degree or degree major/area

Note that the wording is quite generic in that there is no explicit prompt for the criterion of humour. Student responses to these questions were assessed for the presence of humour as explicitly mentioned without any prompting. This unprompted presence of humour as a variable in the student feedback is asserted to serve as evidence that students notice the presence of humour and report favourably on it as a successful pedagogical/affective factor in teaching. That is, if students consider humour to be an important associative factor in their engagement and learning, then it is. Note also, that surveys are conducted well before grades are released to students, so students complete their feedback without actually knowing what their grades will be. This is corroborated by the nature of the wording in the SFU quantitative questions, where student responses were collected using the following question types in the SFU (samples are provided):

- 1) *The unit covered what the learning guide said it would.*
- 2) *I was able to see the relevance of this unit to my course.*
- 3) *The learning activities in this unit have helped my learning.*
- 12) *This unit helped me develop my skills in critical thinking, analysing, problem-solving & communicating.*
- 13) *Overall, I've had a satisfactory learning experience in this unit.*

Note that none of the questions in the SFUs offered any prompts or direct propositional content relating to the category of *humour*. Therefore, the responses offered in the open-ended category of the SFU survey indicate that any student mention of humour was completely unprompted, and not suggested or tainted by association. Key words were assumed to be from the semantic field of humour if they included the lexical items or collocations which contextually offered a comment on affect (in references to the lecturer, lectures, or textual items), and included any of the following: *fun, funny, humour, laugh, engaging, humorous, enjoyable, easy-going, enthusiastic, friendly learning environment, humour and respect, approachable, inspiring and welcoming, or down-to-earth*.

Humour was found as a constituent of, primarily, positive feedback: instances relating to negative feedback at no stage constituted 1% or greater. Further data for rating distributions during the same period are supplied as a comparative item. The following tables split the data between subjects ARW and ETD.

Table 1 represents the trajectory of SFU results for ARW across the years 2011-2014, or eight full semesters.

Table 1

Student Feedback on Unit (SFU) for the subject ARW with incidence of humour as an explicit item in feedback

		2011		2012		2013		2014	
		Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2
Responses	Frequency	646	536	950	210	474	84	497	91
	Percentage	53%	47%	50%	61%	26%	25%	33%	25%
Average course rating	ARW	3.9	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.1	4.5	4.0	4.4
	UWS	3.9	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.0
Comments mentioning humour	Positive	+0%	+9.8%	+11.8%	+14.7%	+ -	+26.4%	+ -	+30.4%
	Negative	-0%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Grade distribution	HD (High Distinction)	3%	2%	4%	2%	3%	2%	2%	4%
	D (Distinction)	9%	7%	9%	10%	8%	15%	8%	12%
	C (Credit)	13%	17%	21%	26%	23%	22%	21%	27%
	P (Pass)	42%	43%	39%	37%	37%	35%	38%	34%
	F (Fail)	33%	31%	27%	25%	29%	26%	31%	23%

In Table 1, the data indicate three general trends. The first is that, as measured against university-wide feedback (UWS average for all courses), students' satisfaction with the course ARW is steadily improving, to the point where it is, overall, registering at a level, which is significantly higher than the UWS average. The second trend is that positive feedback on the educator's use of humour has steadily increased as a percentage of all feedback in qualitative responses, such that it constitutes more than 30% of all student responses. This is significant since the SFU does not explicitly solicit feedback for the presence of humour, but students proactively identify it as a factor in their experience. Negative feedback for the same criterion during this period has not significantly altered, and it remains a very minor component of overall feedback. The third trend is that during the same period, the number of students failing the course has dropped significantly. Related to this figure is the fact that the number of students in the Pass range has also dropped, while the number of students achieving results in the Credit to High Distinction range of results has steadily increased. The data suggest that there is an association between these three trends: student grades are improving, the student feedback on the subject is improving, and students increasingly, and without any prompting, are identifying humour as being a significant factor in their positive experience. There is, at least, an associative likelihood that humour—in lectures and in textual content—was identified by students as a positive aspect of their learning experience (if they perceived it as being present). It is suggested also, that this affective response enabled students to transition to a cognitive engagement with content and in managing their own study. Quite simply, if students feel less vulnerable, more welcome, and part of the pedagogical experience through the successfully affective use of humour, they will identify this use of humour as being important to them. As a comparative exercise, data were assembled from a combination of SFUs and SFTs for the course ETD. Significant differences in this sample were: a smaller cohort (up to 120 students); the fact that students had the same educator for all lectures and tutorials, and in the fact that the SFT contained an explicit question which asked students to evaluate the educator on the basis of humour used in classes.

Table 2 represents the trajectory of SFU and SFT results for ETD across the years 2009-2012, which is a period of four full semesters (the subject is taught once a year, and where the maximum course/subject rating is 10.0 and 5.0 respectively). Note that, unlike the SFU, the SFT had a specific question, which prompted students to respond for the category of humour.

Table 2		2009	2010	2011	2012
<i>Student Feedback on Unit (SFU) and Teaching (SFT) for the subject ETD with incidence of humour as an explicit item in feedback</i>					
Average course rating	SFT	8.2	8.3	8.4	8.6
	UWS	7.2	7.3	7.4	7.4
Average course rating	SFU	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.4
	UWS	3.8	3.8	3.9	4.0
Humour rating SFT	Frequency	77	75	35	87
	Percentage	74%	78%	74%	73%
Grade distribution	HD (High Distinction)	2%	4%	2%	3%
	D (Distinction)	15%	13%	12%	17%
	C (Credit)	28%	28%	33%	24%
	P (Pass)	43%	44%	46%	51%
	F (Fail)	12%	11%	7%	5%

In contrast with Table 1, Table 2 assembles data from a course with a much smaller cohort, where the same staff member lectured and tutored all students across four consecutive instances of the same subject. It maps the variations in teaching (SFTs) and unit (SFUs) survey returns. It would appear that the data in Table 2 not only corroborates the trends in Table 1, but points to a greater significance for the same

trends. That is, firstly, as measured against university-wide feedback (UWS average), students' satisfaction with the course (as measured by SFUs) in the course ETD is not only steadily improving, it is at least one full percentile higher than the UWS average for all courses. Secondly, and with greater specificity, the quantitative question from the SFT (Question 7), which explicitly seeks student evaluation of the educator on the basis of humour used in teaching, also registers a positive rating. Indeed, not only does this rating steadily improve over the period surveyed, it consistently registers at a full percent higher than the average across the university for all educators. General feedback from the qualitative questions in the SFU for this course confirms this, with a pattern similar to that in Table 1 for unprompted, positive comments on the educator's humour.

One caveat can be imposed here: while SFUs are a good indication of results for unprompted student references to humour, SFTs explicitly make mention of humour as part of an educator's teaching style. There is some expectation that because the two surveys were delivered to students at the same time in the course ETD, there could be some cross-suggestion which would taint any spontaneity. This can be countered, however, by arguing that if humour was a problem, then it would also be strongly suggested, and thus marked, as a distinctly negative response across both types of surveys. A positive relationship, therefore, seems to be more likely. In the subject ETD an even stronger correlation between humour and positive feedback was found, where it was present in up to 50% of all comments.

This is also borne out by the third trend, which is that student grades improved during the period surveyed. While there was not a consistent improvement across all grades, there was noticeable improvement across the Fail and Pass grades: Fails were halved and Pass grades improved by eight full percentile points. The smaller variations across the higher grades might be merely related to a smaller cohort, or to intrinsic features of the subject itself, perhaps as a matter of academic-course integrity. Together, it is possible to claim from these data that there is some evidence for students being more engaged, motivated, and achieving positive outcomes in the subject ETD during the period surveyed, and that these data are clearly linked to positive feedback from students.

4. Discussion of negative feedback, tables and data

Overwhelmingly, student feedback relating to the use of humour was positive. However, it should be noted that negative feedback was received and that this feedback was considered to be valuable because it informs best practice for teaching. For instance, even though some minority negative feedback relating to humour (around 1% of all comments) was made, it was indicated by students commenting that they did not understand the humour itself. Comments also negatively remarked on the ways in which the respondent surmised that humour might negatively affect *others*. Examples of these negative comments are:

- a. *Maybe we should consider the fact that some international students can't understand humour appropriately due to the lack of background knowledge.*
- b. *Sometimes please talk about something [humorous text] in detail because students sometimes don't understand.*

This type of comment was valuable in reassessing instances of humour in response to student needs, particularly when students failed to appreciate higher levels of humour. As part of an ongoing reflexive practice, the comments are a valuable resource, but should be contextualised as a minor problem overall.

The positive comments in both surveys indicate that students have associated humour with a pleasant learning experience and that they judge it to be a factor in their motivation to learn (samples are offered below, from both subjects):

- c. *The humour used in the lectures - was effective [educator identified by name] to ease first year students into what was a fairly difficult subject and this made it pleasurable to attend. This was one of my hardest and most feared subjects at the start of semester, but due to the teaching staff became one of my favourite subjects by the end of semester.*
- d. *The Excellent lecturer, his ability to present the course material and interact with humour and respect.*
- e. *The lectures were interesting because the teacher used humour.*
- f. *The humour involved in class really allowed for deeper learning.*

One aspect of the descriptive statistics is that, overall, there was a steady but measurable improvement in student responses and in grade distributions over the two subjects and over the period studied. In particular, the number of Fails was reduced while the number of Passes increased as an overall portion of all grades. Higher-order grades, across Credit to High Distinction, were not substantially different. It is asserted that this reflects the integrity of the subjects' curricula and marking standards across assessment tasks, so that little difference was made to the grades of students who were already equipped linguistically and motivationally. The difference, it is claimed, was with the students who were "borderline" or "at risk": for these students the atmosphere of steadily more welcoming humour assisted greatly in their motivation to persist with education. This is especially significant, given that the cohorts' demographics did not alter substantially in any way over this period, so it is clear that one major factor came into play. Allowing for other, unrelated factors, such as ongoing improvements in curricula and in subject delivery, it can be asserted that the difference occurred because the educator learnt from the students how to use humour more productively (not the other way round). The educator moved from a tentative, experimental phase of humour with students in early manifestations of the subjects, to a more confident, and informed, use of humour as the subjects progressed. That is, there were obviously failures and successes in the use of humour initially, but as the educator got to know the students better, and became more sensitive to their face-needs, choices were made to put the educator's humour at the service of the students.

It appears, then, that humour can be an important factor in student engagement and enjoyment of the course, given that the students themselves identify it as relevant and that feedback is overwhelmingly positive when it is present. Trends in the data suggest that students' grades may have been positively affected by the judicious use of humour. Indeed, it might be possible to refer to the type of humour, which creates the positive, affective conditions for learning as positive humour. This type of humour addresses the face needs of students such that they are oriented towards their educational environment and their educator/s as a primary focus. Another way of defining positive humour is to regard it as humour, which is at the service of the recipient (or interlocutor), and which the recipient can feel some ownership of.

4.1. Discussion of textual collaboration as a proposed measurement

There is another principle suggested by this research, which is indicative of its potential for future enquiry: the question of ownership of the humorous transaction might be further developed. This extension was prompted by an observation during the period of data collection, which is that students' confidence could also be measured by their willingness to be interactive in the production of humorous exchanges. For instance, we probably should not assume that humorous exchanges are always unilateral, meaning that they are characteristically initiated by the educator with the passive acceptance of the students. Indeed, it was observed during the period studied, that as students felt increasingly confident, they became proactive in the collaboration of humorous text production. That is, it was noted that many students themselves actively contributed to the sustaining of a humorous exchange which the educator had initiated, and that a number of students even felt comfortable enough in the lecture and/or tutorial, to initiate a humorous exchange themselves, without any prompting from the educator.

One example, hopefully, will be illustrative of this principle. In the course ETD, the educator presents a variety of texts, which are used for discourse analysis (DA); many of these are humorous. Students are then assigned to find their own text for a final assessment task, which they must analyse at length for DA concepts. There is nothing in the marking rubric or in the instructions to indicate genre or if the chosen text should have humour in it. Quite unpredictably, therefore, a group of Muslim students selected the Jeff Dunham (US puppeteer-ventriloquist) skit featuring the character, *Achmed the Dead Terrorist* (Dunham, 2015), as a text to demonstrate the positive aspects of humour. The text itself can be regarded as highly face-threatening for Muslims in general, since the character presents as a failed Muslim terrorist. This was unexpected for several reasons: because of the textual content, because of the American author of the text, and because of the post-9/11 global environment in which it occurred. It was felt that the autonomous student choice of such a text was evidence of great trust in the educational environment where students felt entirely comfortable in presenting (and by implication, identifying with both in-group and out-group relating to) a humorous text. The implications of this type of event may be significant, not only for future research into the operation of humour as a positive factor in student engagement, but also for positive humour as a vehicle of wider social engagement.

5. Conclusion

This paper sought to discover if the affective use of humour in teaching could make a real, and positive, difference in student learning—and whether this could be measured. In order to do this, it was necessary to define humour itself, especially in terms of the ways in which humour works as social transaction. Using face theory, it was determined that humour works as a transaction of power, and that there is, therefore, no such thing as humour without risk or reward. In other words, for every act of humour, there is also a face-threatening act (FTA). This means that, potentially at least, someone must gain face, and someone must lose face, in a humorous exchange. Thus, in the educational setting, where the educator typically enjoys an incumbent position of power, and students, almost by definition, are relatively powerless, the educator's use of humour is a high risk strategy. Therefore, if humour is used by an educator in a negative way to further entrench (or even exacerbate) this power differential, the FTA will naturally be at the expense of the students, who risk losing what little face or power they had in the first place. We can refer to this use of power as negative humour, in that it removes power from those on the receiving end of a humorous exchange. However, it is also evident that when used appropriately, the FTA of humour can be rewarding. If an act of humour by the educator does not target students in unfair ways, but rather seeks to produce rapport, emotional connections, and a supportive learning environment, it can be referred to as positive humour. Positive humour invites humorous exchanges, which are produced and used conjointly to establish affective relationships and an environment of collaboration. Positive humour also works to minimize the power differential between educator and students. In this sense, the use of positive humour is probably more of an FTA for the educator than for the students, since the educator will be allowing students to take more control in the classroom.

The question then is whether this performance of humour can be measured, and in particular whether it can be measured as a type of student outcome. In response to this question, it was proposed that we can establish if humour as a classroom strategy is working effectively to improve student satisfaction within a course by measuring student feedback and grade distribution. More specifically, this research paper applied this measurement to a very challenging educational environment: a university setting in the western suburbs of Australia's largest and most diverse city. The students at UWS are typically underprepared for the demands of university, with many coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, refugee and migrant experiences, weaker English-language competencies, and poorer educational qualifications. For these students, the university experience is already challenging enough; to negotiate humour in the context of a university lecture or tutorial is, potentially, an unexpected and even more discouraging obstacle. In terms of obstacles, humour presents an additional FTA for these students. It was also asserted that for students with little social and linguistic capital, the humorous act by a capital-rich educator in the university setting can be enormously destabilizing.

Data were collected from student feedback on courses and teaching (SFUs and SFTs), and the results were encouraging. Quantitative feedback, which specifically solicited responses on whether the educator used humour appropriately indicated that students were more than satisfied with the educator's use of humour in the educational setting. Similarly, quantitative feedback, which sought generic feedback on student satisfaction with the course itself and the educator's teaching style, respectively, indicated that student satisfaction was well above the average for the university overall. In addition, both areas of feedback indicated that satisfaction improved consistently over the four years of data collected in these areas. Perhaps more interestingly, qualitative feedback, which had no explicit prompts for the topic of humour, was dominated by student feedback that explicitly mentioned humour as a positive factor in their experience. The association in students' minds between a positive overall experience and the positive presence of humour in the educator's teaching style seems to indicate that, as an unprompted response, students feel that the presence of humour was a significant factor in their satisfaction at university.

We can then compare this feedback with the measurable (and more objective) outcome of student grade distributions during the same period. Data indicated an upward trend in student grades overall, which coincides with improvements in student satisfaction. This suggests that students who experience positive humour as part of an overall satisfactory experience will associate humour as being contributory to that overall experience. We can argue, therefore, that perhaps the conditioning influence of positive humour will may provide a more welcoming environment for the student, and that this may enable a student to develop more engagement with the courses studied. If students feels as though they have more control over the use of humour in the classroom setting, this affect will probably contribute to an overall feeling of control in the educational experience. The reverse is also likely to be true: if students are confronted by face-threatening

humour in the classroom, it will detract from their overall experience. The significance, therefore, of humour in the university experience is that it can be considered to be a powerful factor in a student's overall satisfaction. It is also likely to factor in a student's performance at university.

We can contextualise humour, then, as being part of an institutional experience for students at university, but yet part of the experience which students are probably not expecting. If we view the university as an institution, which relies on a type of generic trust between educators and students, then humour becomes more significant. In the context of a university like UWS, there is a very fragile bond of trust, which needs to be negotiated between students of more vulnerable social status and the educators who use humour as part of their teaching style. This is a bond of trust, which, it can be argued, is both personal and institutional. At the personal level, students can be quite easily destabilised by humour, which targets them in front of other students. By contrast, humour as used by an educator which positively favours a student's face needs, is more likely to strengthen the relationship between the student and the educator. Since the educator is a representative of the university, it is likely that students conflate their experience with an educator as being their experience of the university. At the institutional level, this experience of trust is very significant. It can, quite possibly, mean the difference between a student feeling disposed towards the institution or feeling alienated by that institution. That is not to say that humour, by itself, is a deterministic cause of affect or trust, but that it is a significant element in that relationship between the educator and the student.

There is one other, very significant point of measurement, therefore, which this paper suggests. It is premised that humour as used by the educator is effective if it can be demonstrated that students actively seek out opportunities for, manage, and initiate, successful humorous exchanges between themselves and the educator. These exchanges would be instances of collaborative humour, and they could not occur without the groundwork of positive humour as laid down by the educator. Indeed, it can be surmised that if this happens, it is because the students "read" an environment of positive humour from the educator as an invitation to reciprocate. If this were to occur, it would provide evidence that the educator's use of humour is at the service of students since they would feel empowered enough to venture an exchange, which presupposes a measure of equality. In an environment of affect and trust, even the most vulnerable students might hazard face-loss by instigating a humorous exchange with their educator.

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Appendix A

ITEM 1: FULL LIST OF STANDARDIZED QUESTIONS AS LISTED IN THE UWS SFU SURVEY

(Note that nomenclature at UWS may be different to other institutions: *unit* means course or subject, while *course* refers to degree or degree major/area)

1. [Unit Content] - The unit covered what the learning guide said it would.
2. [Relevance] - I was able to see the relevance of this unit to my course.
3. [Learning Design] - The learning activities in this unit have helped my learning.
4. [Assessment Activities] – The assessments in this unit have helped me learn.
5. [Assessment Feedback] - I was able to learn from feedback I received in this unit.
6. [Assessment Guidelines] – There were clear guidelines for all assessment tasks in this unit.
7. [Learning Resources] – The learning resources provided for this unit helped me to engage in learning.
8. [Learning Flexibility] - The unit provided a reasonable amount of flexibility for study.
9. [Learning Spaces] - The teaching & learning spaces used for this unit were adequate.
10. [Workload] - The amount of work required in this unit was reasonable.
11. [Equity/Fairness] - In this unit people treated each other fairly & with respect.
12. [Generic Skills] - This unit helped me develop my skills in critical thinking, analysing, problem solving & communicating.
13. [Overall Experience] - Overall, I've had a satisfactory learning experience in this unit.

Appendix B

ITEM 2: FULL LIST OF STANDARDIZED QUESTIONS AS LISTED IN THE UWS SFT SURVEY

Learning / Academic Value (summary)

1. You found the class intellectually challenging and stimulating.
2. You have learned something which you consider valuable.
3. Your interest in the subject has increased as a consequence of this class.
4. You have learned and understood the subject materials in this class.

Staff Member's Enthusiasm (summary)

5. Staff member was enthusiastic about teaching the class.
6. Staff member was dynamic and energetic in conducting the class.
7. Staff member enhanced presentations with the use of humour.
8. Staff member's style of presentation held your interest during class.

Organization Clarity (summary)

9. Staff member's explanations were clear.
10. Class materials were well prepared and carefully explained.
11. Proposed objectives agreed with those actually taught so you knew where the class was going.
12. Staff member gave presentations that facilitated taking notes.

Group Interaction (summary)

13. Students were encouraged to participate in class discussions.
14. Students were invited to share their ideas and knowledge.
15. Students were encouraged to ask questions and were given meaningful answers.
16. Students were encouraged to express their own ideas and/or questions to the staff member.

Individual Rapport (summary)

17. Staff member was friendly towards individual students.
18. Staff member had a genuine interest in individual students.
19. Staff member made students feel welcome in seeking help/advice in or outside of class.
20. Staff member was adequately accessible to students during office hours or after class.

Breadth of Coverage (summary)

21. Staff member contrasted the implications of various theories.
22. Staff member presented the background or origin of ideas/concepts developed in class.
23. Staff member presented points of view other than his/her own when appropriate.
24. Staff member adequately discussed current developments in the field.

Examinations / Grading (summary)

25. Feedback on assessments/graded material was valuable.
26. Methods of assessing student work were fair and appropriate.
27. Assessment/Examinations tested units content as emphasised by staff member.

Assignments / Readings (summary)

28. Required readings/text were valuable.
29. Readings, assignments etc. contributed to appreciation and understanding of the unit.

Overall Rating (summary)

30. Overall, how does the class compare with other classes at this institution?
31. Overall, how does this staff member compare with other staff members at this institution?

Adrian Hale, University of Western Sydney
a.hale@uws.edu.au

- EN** **Adrian Hale** is a native of the Western Sydney region. With degrees across Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, English and Applied Linguistics, he has taught in the Literacy, Linguistics and TESOL programs at the University of Western Sydney for the past 10 years. As a successful researcher and practitioner, he seeks to create positive educational outcomes for the students of the most diverse, and disadvantaged, community in Australia. One feature of his teaching is the use of humour, which he considers to be most effective when it is used to communicate, educate, and empower.
- ES** **Adrian Hale** es natural de la región occidental de Sídney. Sus títulos universitarios cubren áreas de la Lingüística, Análisis del Discurso, Inglés y Lingüística Aplicada, lleva impartiendo docencia en los programas de Alfabetización, Lingüística y Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera de la University of Western Sydney durante los últimos 10 años. Como investigador y docente de éxito, busca obtener resultados académicos positivos en los estudiantes de la comunidad más diversa y desfavorecida de Australia. Una característica de su enseñanza es el uso del humour, que considera más eficaz cuando se utiliza para comunicar, educar y capacitar al alumnado.
- IT** **Adrian Hale** è originario della regione di Western Sydney. I suoi titoli di studio coprono vari ambiti della linguistica, analisi del discorso, lingua inglese e linguistica applicata e da dieci anni insegna all'interno dei programmi di Alfabetizzazione, Linguistica e TESOL dell'Università di Western Sidney. Ricercatore e insegnante di successo, il suo obiettivo è portare gli studenti della comunità australiana più disomogenea e svantaggiata a ottenere risultati positivi in campo educativo. Il suo metodo d'insegnamento è caratterizzato dall'uso dello humour, uno strumento a suo avviso particolarmente efficace se usato per comunicare, istruire e responsabilizzare gli studenti.