

Humor-Driven Test Prep: Helping Students Study Via In-Class Game Shows

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Review sessions are often offered by college educators to prepare their students for exams while reducing test apprehension. These additional sessions, sometimes scheduled outside of the allocated class time, may be poorly attended or filled with anxiety as students worry if every word of the review will appear on the test. This instructional article discusses an alternative approach to ease test apprehension and encourage attendance through in-class trivia gameshows grounded in applied humor theory.

Introduction

Students throughout time have feared tests, their performance anxiety sometimes impacting their ability to recall information and focus during examination periods (Doctor and Altman 563; Keogh et al. 241). To reduce apprehension and aid the learning process, many educators have tried alternative approaches with testing such as take-home, open book, or online examinations that can be retaken without penalty (Bengtsson 267; Green et al. 19; Kortemeyer et al. 235). Furthermore, educators may also offer optional test review days where students ask questions and discuss material with the instructor without any new material introduced (Gilbert 164). However, on such review days with no assignments due or points rewarded, attendance can be lower than standard class periods (Menz et al. 74; Gottfried and Kirksey 119).

This article discusses my strategy in helping students prepare for examinations, a team-based trivia game “Prepardy” that is driven by applied classic humor theories, roleplay, and active participation. Uses of humor in the classroom have been shown to create enjoyable experiences, stimulate

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enthusiasm, and foster positive teacher-student relationships by reducing stress (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 259; Makewa et al. 1). It is my belief that these light-hearted and interactive sessions not only reduce student test anxiety in a similar manner to prior research, but also increase students' understanding of class content through the creative nature of the trivia questions.

Enhancing Student Participation During Reviews

Student participation in classrooms has traditionally been reported as less than desired by instructors despite its positive benefits in discussion and test review (Johnson and Johnson 22; Fleck and Zhu 5). Possible remedies to low participation rates, such as crossword puzzles and short quizzes preceding exams, have been found to be effective preparation techniques (Weisskirch 198; McDermott et al. 3). However, such exercises do not always foster student excitement or positivity about education at the same levels that roleplaying exercises can provide in active learning classrooms (Stone 1). With similar improvements for student engagement, technology such as clickers used during classroom review has also been found to create interactive classrooms and overall higher test scores than those without it (Hubbard and Couch 2).

In-class reviews face other challenges such as recall-oriented questions lacking critical thinking, unequal participation of all students, and minimal student-to-student interaction. When instructors hold review sessions, students may focus on asking clarifying questions instead of seeking information on how the material connects to the “bigger picture” (Wininger 164). These review sessions are also prone to be dominated by extroverted or outspoken students as participation is typically not required by everyone attending (Dancer and Kamvounias 445). Similarly, prior research has shown that students are less likely to come to class prepared if they know that their instructor will not ask them direct questions about class content, thus traditional lecture-based reviews may not be the most effective approach to prepare students for large assessments (Karp and Yoels 421).

Building on this research, I propose an interactive approach to in-class review that encourages students to not only attend, but also prepare for the roleplaying trivia game. By evolving test reviews beyond their typical lecture or conversation formats, I have aligned this exercise with active learning approaches that require students to speak effectively, think critically, roleplay scenarios, and take risks

(Peterson 187). A trivia game approach to class review incorporates all of those prior elements described by Peterson: they must speak and think effectively to answer questions; they must roleplay as gameshow contestants; and, during the final round where they must wager points on a last question, they must take risks to try and win the game.

The game scenario also succeeds in overcoming challenges of any student dominating a review session while others remain silent. As every student plays the game over multiple questions, each participant has an equal opportunity to think critically and speak. Students therefore arrive at the session with an understanding that participation is required, thus encouraging them to study in advance of the session to be confident in their performance. Though there is a gap in the research regarding gameshow style trivia sessions during in-class instruction, my innovation also takes inspiration from a prior Good Behavior Game (Cheatham et al. 277). In this game, a teacher splits the class into teams throughout the term. The instructor then informs the class that all behaviors perceived as good, such as raising a hand to participate and not being distracted by a smartphone, will be tracked until a prize is awarded to the winning team at a later date.

The last way in which my trivia game Prepardy evolves the standard review approach is its inclusion of humor throughout the session, my performance as the gameshow host, and the classroom roleplaying as if they were participating in a real gameshow with clickers. Because students often avoid asking questions as they fear embarrassment, the humor included in this gameshow reduces apprehension through creating a positive atmosphere with additional classroom management benefits (Powers 1). Much like how interactive experiences and breathing exercises can reduce anxiety in days leading up to tests (Clinton et al. 92), this humor-driven Prepardy attempts to ease students' participation apprehension while helping them actively learn.

Through my cheesy gameshow host delivery, I am able to create positive connotations of learning while also providing formative feedback on answers that serve as a necessary component of assessment (Tekyiswa 5). This comedic energy seems to enhance constructive criticism that students can sometimes find to be uncomfortable. As humor's incorporation in the classroom has shown to increase student's motivation to learn and participate (Bakar 137), a comedic game therefore serves to foster an interactive and engaging method for test review.

In the next section, I will review the specific setup and execution of Prepardy to prepare students for exams as well as its connections to leading humor theories.

Prepardy Trivia Game and Humor Connections

One week prior to every test in my classes, a mandatory trivia game is conducted during the regular meeting time. I split students into groups of three to four to make the game more manageable, all teams competing in the same room for irrelevant prizes such as candy or fruit. Each team picks a question and then has 30 seconds to answer before another group may steal the point by offering the correct response. A group may only answer two correct questions in a row, and only non-dichotomous trivia questions may be stolen by rival teams via clickers. Once the rules are introduced, I then morph into the role of a gameshow host who navigates the class through 50 trivia questions covering past content. Trivia games have been used in a variety of fields such as Chemistry and Management (Adair and McAfee 416; Swain et al. 210), and I have seen similarly successful results with Prepardy in my media classes over the last 15 years as well.

As I make my way around the room throughout the performance, I ask students where they are from and how their trip was to the show set that day. Students are actively encouraged to play along and answer if they desire participation points. This concept of agreeable playing, sometimes referred to as a “yes...and” approach in improv comedy, is another connection to the humor-driven nature of this classroom exercise (Benjamin and Kline 130). Though play studies have predominantly focused on preschool and K-12 children (Ashiabi 200), research also shows that its incorporation in the college classroom can lead to increased engagement and assist with attention (Tews et al. 16; Reddington 22). This improv component enlivens my classroom as students visibly become less stressed. At the same time, the silliness seems to diminish the potentially heated competition for candy or fruit prizes that I have experienced when hosting trivia review sessions without it in the past.

Once the introductions end, a customized PowerPoint of an interactive gameboard is displayed on a projector screen. The questions are arranged into two rounds of five humorous categories containing five questions hidden by point values. While it is less time intensive to copy and paste example test questions into the prompt areas, I find that students appreciate the creative thinking required to locate comedic connections to different concepts throughout the semester. To

illustrate this strategic design, I will briefly review two example categories implemented in all of my Preparady sessions: (1) Real or Onion and (2) Might Have Messed Up. Both example categories are grounded in leading humor theories to create goodwill with comedy's ability to alleviate stress for those experiencing it (Ocobock et al. 436).

For example, in my Real or Onion category questions, I write a headline and students must evaluate its accuracy in describing an event or development in my Intro to Mass Communication class. One such headline is as follows: Aliens Kinda Invade Earth with Mixed Effects. This headline accurately represents the events of Orson Wells' original radio broadcast on October 30, 1938 when his troupe performed an audio play while acting like extraterrestrials invaded Earth (Heyer 149). Panic set in with some listeners who did not perform external data checks while others remained calm, leading to a new concept of how media impact us at the individual level. This understanding is referred to as the Mixed Effects model rather than the previous mass effects approach known as the Hypodermic Needle Theory (Thibault 67).

Students playing Preparady who receive this prompt must then recall if we talked about this topic and then, if so, evaluate the headline to judge if it accurately conveys the news story. If students believe the headline is based on a real development, they will lock in their answer as "Real." If they believe it to be fabricated, then they must answer "Onion" like the satirical news website. The type of humor grounding this category is referred to as Incongruity Theory, based on the element of surprise. As the human brain is led down one pathway and then shocked with an unexpected twist, the switch leads to a playful trick that encourages laughter (Aristotle 81). Summarizing important ideas into such clickbait-like news titles is surprising, as well as the double meaning wordplay throughout the War of the Worlds example.

In my second question category titled Might Have Messed Up, I provide a short scenario of a notable person in media using a term from the class. Students must then evaluate if that figure properly used the term and, if not, provide the correct answer. For example, in my Intro to Mass Communication class, I discuss Forced Perspective as a media production concept. Forced Perspective is a visual trick through the placement of objects close to or far from a camera that causes skewed interpretations of the true size of those objects (Zettl 160). My Preparady question that includes this term is as follows: "In an interview about The Lord of the Rings film trilogy, director Peter Jackson said that he used Forced Perspective

to allow the films to play back at 24 fps during the epic orc fights. Did he mess up when describing that? If so, correct it.”

Students presented with this question are then challenged to use both recall and critical thinking to develop the proper answer. To be correct, students must respond that Peter Jackson made a mistake in my imaginary interview and provide the correct definition for Forced Perspective. When students experience the opportunity to play along and judge such a famous director for making a mistake, they may laugh from this temporary glory that aligns with a second leading theory of humor, Superiority Theory. In this theory, humorous moments can emerge from taking joy in others' failure or pain when those individuals deserve it (Kant 306).

Conclusion

As students have been shown to better perform information recall after learning from instructors who use humor and rate such classroom experiences as more engaging than those that do not (Smith and Wortley 18), humor and test review seem to be an effective combination. My suggested tactic of creating a Prepardy review session aligns with such research on humor's positive impacts in the classroom. This engaging and comedic approach to test preparation creates a lively experience for students, allowing them to review material in a manner that reaps the benefits of comedy and play in the classroom. With required attendance, only one or two students are typically absent on these review days, a number similar to my average attendance for lectures. Those who skip Prepardy tend to perform worse on the exam than those who attended as much as one full letter grade on average. Additionally, those students who participate seem to be far less anxious about the test in days following Prepardy than those who were absent.

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