

Laughing with the Past: Humor in Historical Sources

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Introduction

I have long observed anecdotally that students enjoy and retain knowledge better, and therefore process and use it more effectively and creatively, when they enjoy the material itself. Even when the ideas are complex or the topic is obscure, enjoyable delivery – whether via a lively lecture, interesting activity, or striking primary source – seems to be a strong predictor of engagement, and performance on related evaluations. I am therefore interested in ways that this effect could be measured, and ultimately harnessed more intentionally in the classroom, and especially in online offerings. For this purpose, using humorous or satirical primary sources appears promising for capturing and retaining student's attention, engaging them with materials that can often seem dry, and encouraging deeper awareness of the historical context that structures the humor.

Methods

Students in two Fall 2018 sections of GenEd 120, "Historical Perspectives," a survey of 20th century world history, read primary sources with elements of satire or humor. Their retention and higher-order learning was assessed in quizzes and essay responses. Section 1 was comprised of 27 students from Learning Communities focused on Special Education, while Section 13 was an online section of 31 general-enrollment students.

In Week 5, Section 1 read selections from a British soldier-published satirical newspaper, *The Wipers Times* (more or less *The Onion*, by trench soldiers), while 13 read letters and "straight" reports from the front. In Week 13, Section 1 read selections from a memoir by a Croatian woman who lived behind the Iron Curtain, while Section 13 read a compilation of jokes from East Germany and the USSR. Both sections then took quizzes over the week's general content, and unit essays gave students opportunities to incorporate evidence from the readings. Quiz scores, and the extent of humorous sources' inclusion in essays were evaluated to gauge content retention as well as higher-level engagement.

Design Lessons and Future Improvements

Though there were many useful indications from this first study, some key elements of design and implementation limited the applicability of the findings.

Most evidently, the differences in formats between the two courses was simply too great to control for in this analysis. I had anticipated a need to account for some level of variation between an in-person setting and an online offering; however, the ability to explain context, address confusion, and broadly "read the room" in a face-to-face meeting was a greater difference than I had anticipated.

The gap between online and in-person offerings was further exacerbated by circumstance: this was my first semester teaching a 15-week course online, and the first semester that UWW had used Canvas as its LMS. As a result, there were human and technical glitches or oversights on both my own and students' parts throughout the semester, as we all adjusted to the new technology.

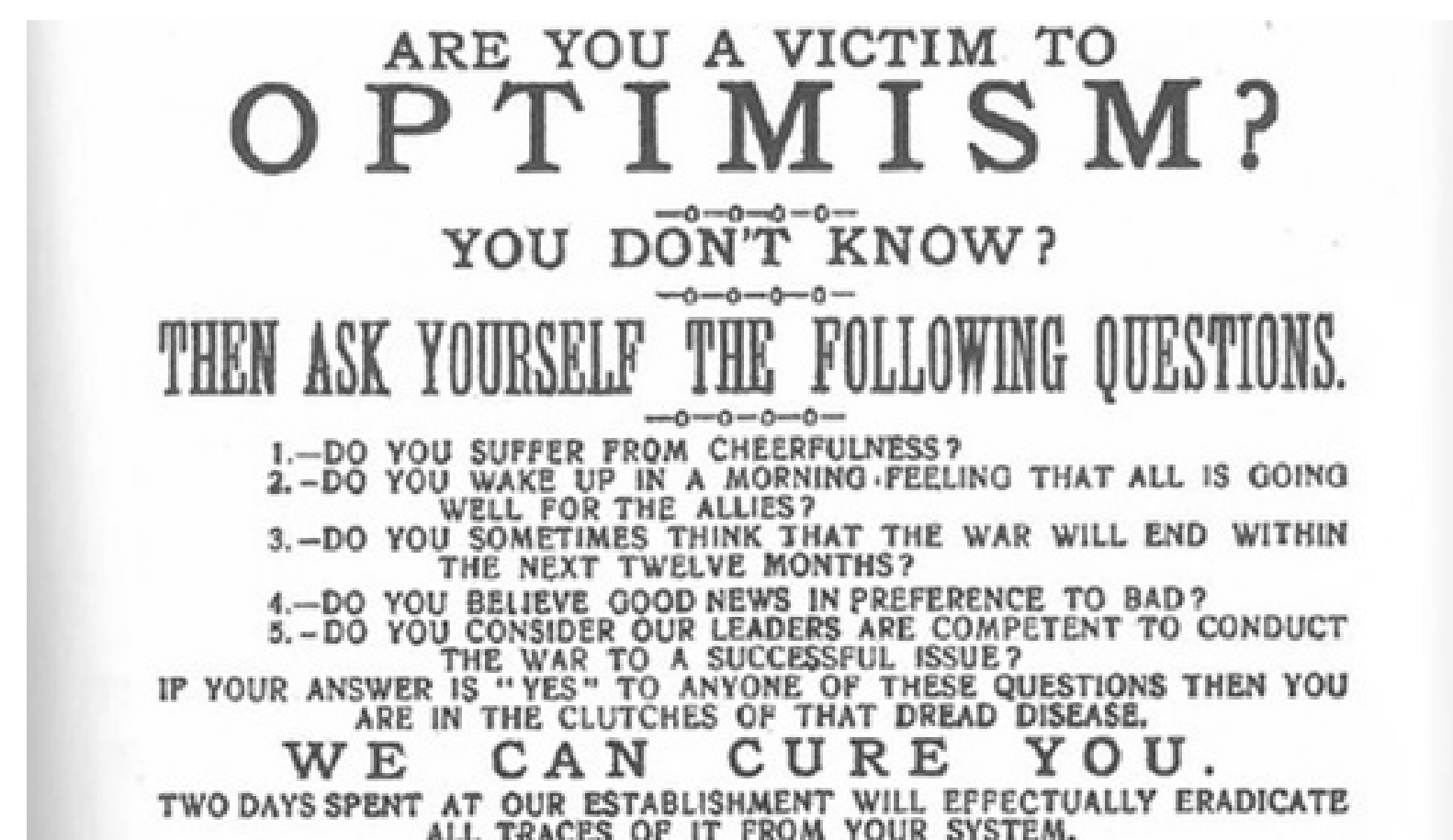
Finally, the eight-question quizzes that assessed retention were likely too short to serve as indicators of meaningful differences. Statistical jumps from week to week introduced a level of "noise" that may drown out the significance of effects from primary source readings.

Results

It is clear that humor can be a powerful tool to help students in grappling with complex ideas in history, even (perhaps especially) from unfamiliar cultures, and in online offerings.

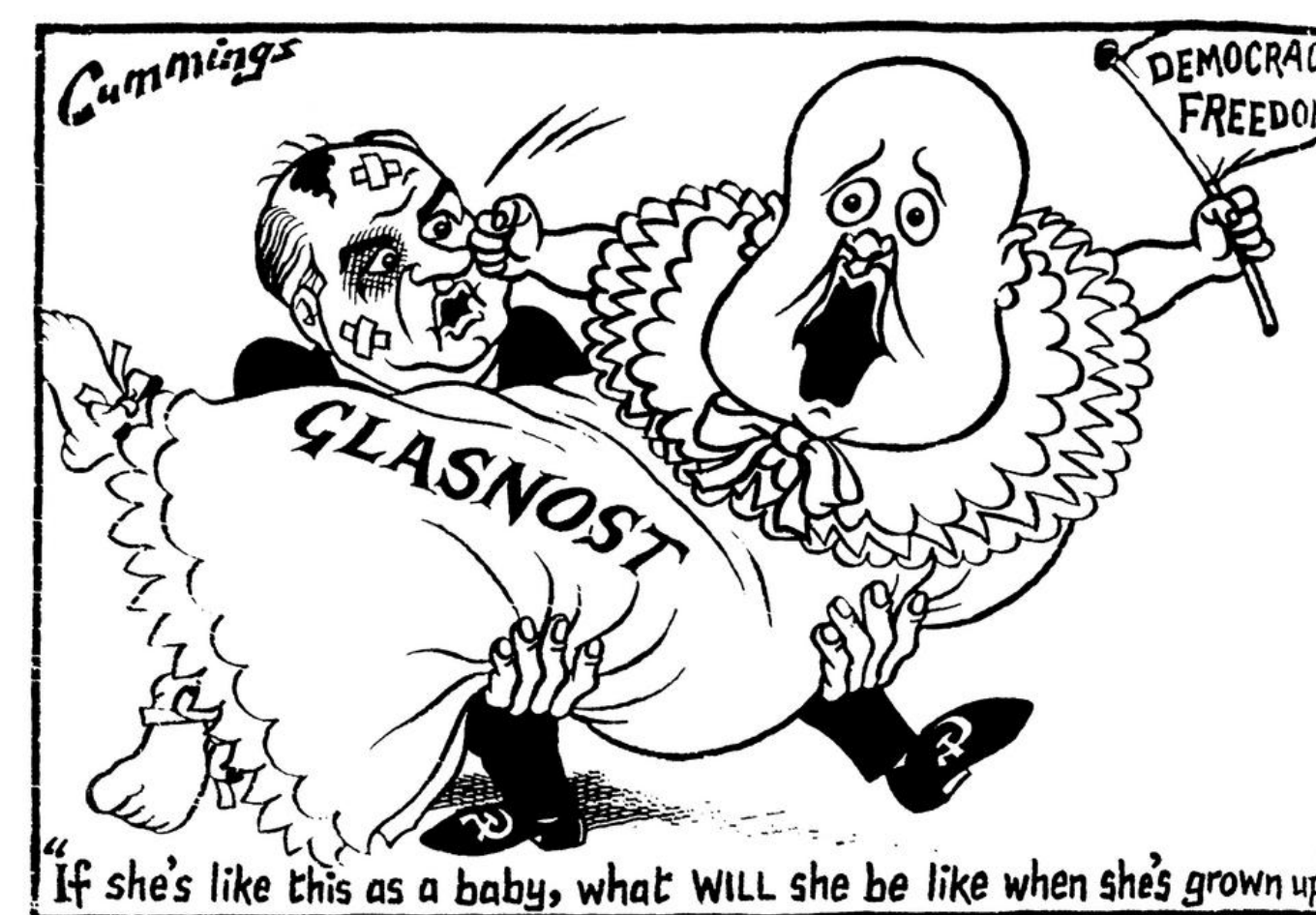
Scores on quizzes were slightly higher in weeks featuring humorous readings: in Section 01, the average score for all quizzes was 6.85 out of 8, while the quiz in Week 5 had a 7.53 class average; however, none referenced *The Wipers Times* readings in essays. In Section 13, the course average was 6.28, and Week 13 was 6.06 (though this seems to have been artificially depressed by late-semester doldrums, for some students – Week 13's scores were higher than all but two of the prior seven quizzes), and the satirical sources were used in several students' papers.

Notable headlines from *The Wipers Times*, mocking the absurdity, faulty leadership, length, strategy, and general sense of despair bound up in infantry soldiers' experience of the Great War.



American political cartoon mocking, or perhaps celebrating the outpouring of criticism under Gorbachev's push for "openness":

"If she's like this as a baby, what WILL she be like when she's grown up?"



Iconic cover of West Germany's *Titanic* satirical magazine (comparable to *MAD* Magazine), November 1989:

"Gaby from the [Eastern] Zone (17 years old), Finds Luck in the BRD [West Germany]: My first Banana"

[Her name, clothing, and hairstyle are all comically backward, by Western standards, and her banana is a cucumber.]

Results (continued)

More than quiz scores, the potential of humorous sources became clear in more open-ended formats: especially discussion posts, and unprompted feedback from course evaluations, from Section 13.

For the discussion boards concerning Cold War humor, the class average score was 8.03 out of 10 – the highest of any week in the semester, and .5 higher than the average of all weeks.

Further, and more powerfully, students volunteered in course evaluations comments such as "the jokes were funny," and "I really enjoyed the communist comedy," especially contrasting those to the course textbook and "long, dry" primary readings. Tellingly, no such comments were made in Section 01.

Discussion

Beyond the apparent potential of comedy as an aid in learning, the most significant lesson seems to be: not all comedy is created equal.

I had anticipated the *Wipers Times* opening students' eyes to the humanity and coping mechanisms of Great War soldiers; however, students seem to have barely engaged with it at all. For "Communist Comedy" readings, however, interest was obvious, even enthusiastic.

I ascribe the difference mainly to language and familiarity. Despite its comedic intent, *The Wipers Times* is written in a difficult idiom for twenty-first century undergraduates, and the nature of its humor is somewhat obscure. Simply, students didn't get it. The jokes about Soviet power, however, were more relatable and more modern, which allowed students to approach them without confusion in the face of difficult language or an unfamiliar culture.

Conclusion

The efficacy of humor in the classroom might best be summed up in a paraphrase of communications scholar Brian Fontana: "Fifty percent of the time, it works every time." That is, while humor is not a magical or automatic facilitator for learning, it can be a powerful aid when it does work – via careful planning, preparation, and implementation.

Students' exposure to jokes from Soviet regimes illuminated the fine points, daily realities, and human experience of an utterly foreign world. This was accessible to them, I perceive, because the language was relatable, and because the course had thoroughly prepared them to engage with ideas just at the edge of their comfort zone. But for reasons of language, general background knowledge, and relative lack of discussion of the specific subject, the *Wipers Times* texts did not make the same impact.

Going forward, I will use and further study comedic primary sources with a clearer sense of the conditions that promote students' understanding, as well as high expectations for its benefits to their learning. Though inconclusive on the specifics, this study has shown clearly, if impressionistically, that comedy can be excellent pedagogy.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars program for this opportunity, and for generous support, training, and community.

IRB-FY2018-2019-27