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-level engagement were evaluated to gauge content retention as well as in essays. In Section 1, 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.

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.

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 communism 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.

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