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Humor for graduate training
ACM inroads

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Humor for graduate training

Humor genuinely engages graduate students with their scientific training.

We have been graduating Masters and PhD students for nearly two decades. Over these years, we have come to realize that humour is an essential and often undervalued tool for graduate training. Today, we have integrated humour in multiple aspects of our supervision activity, taking the most serious stand on wit [14] as part of our scientific and training practice.

Formal training in academic humor is a possibility. Indeed, there has been four decades of research on the use of humor in academic settings [1,8]. Researchers have explored the psychological benefits of humor in learning, the physiological benefits of humor and its positive impact on classroom environments and relationships. In theory, humor works, what about the practice? How we engage students through humour has taken many forms over the years. In this paper, we introduce six examples of humor in practice, which we have integrated as a key part of our supervisors' activities.

As a first example, let us look at how humor can support training graduates for teamwork. We recently engaged in a paper with our students, on exploring how generative AI can generate funny data [2]. The paper's goal was in our domain – to invent novel processes to generate software testing data – with an additional touch of humor and culture. This project was a complete success: the paper got accepted; our students learned about each other's cultures, and the resulting bonding was very beneficial. For our readers in computer science, a similar effect can be achieved by writing a collective paper to be submitted to SIGBOVIK [6].

Another example is how our group handles peer-review tension through frequent references to a mythical "Reviewer 2", the archetypal reviewer who criticizes the best and the worst aspects of one's paper with the same intensity, named Demoman by Might [9]. Over time, when we mention "Reviewer 2" to our students, they directly get the point of taking a particular review with a humorous grain of salt.

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Fig. 1: Most reviews include one "Demoman" reviewer 2 [9]. Humor helps PhD students to cope with the dark side of peer review.

To break the monotony of writing, and trigger a creativity boost, our group has contributed to the Triskaidekaphobia LaTeX plugin [10]. This extension to BibLatex proposes an alternative way of numbering bibliography: if the paper includes more than 12 references, the plugin skips reference 13. The references are numbered sequentially from 1 to 12, and then again from 14 to the last reference (see figure below). Our PhD students loved this endeavor, which combines the unquestionable need to stand on the shoulders of giants, with inclusivity for our triskaidekaphobic colleagues.

[11] Alexander Kampmann and Andreas Zeller. "Carving parameterized unit tests". In: *Proceedings of ICSE-Companion*. 2019.
[12] Katja Karhu et al. "Empirical observations on software testing automation". In: *Proceedings of ICST*. 2009.
[14] Dong Jae Kim et al. "Studying test annotation maintenance in the wild". In: *Proceedings of ICSE*. 2021.
[15] Rick Kuhn et al. "Input Space Coverage Matters". In: *Computer* 53.1 (2020).

Fig. 2: All scientists have struggled with their bibliography. Together with our students, we developed the Triskaidekaphobia LaTeX/BibTeX plugin, which never uses the number 13 as a reference. Playfulness with typographic software is good for fostering scientific creativity in our students.

Self mockery is another essential example of our daily supervision activities. In our group, we use it on a regular basis as a vector for practicing humility. For example, we might say that “our next paper truly does change the face of software engineering research”, and our students would get that most papers are tiny stones in the cathedral of computer science knowledge. Only some of them would deserve the world fame of an IG Nobel.

In using humour, we train PhD students at becoming team-playing, humble and creative scientists. This is good because hard scientific problems can only be cracked by solid teams of collaborators who complement each other and value each others’ involvement. We believe that achieving operational excellence in humor contributes to operational excellence in technology [8].

Research is often done in international groups with high cultural diversity. In our group, we would never miss an opportunity of creating and laughing at jokes that are truly international, beyond language, religion and political background. This identifies a common substrate across cultures and contributes to building a strong group identity. This is fully backed by scientific evidence that humour contributes to team bonding [12].

Yet, there are topics that aren’t to be joked about, and a sense of fun can never be an excuse for bullying or demeaning behaviour. We create an environment of humour whilst protecting our students by training them to be open minded and inclusive. Hence, rickrolling [3] has become a key asset of our humor and training toolbox, as this inclusive prank is known in all cultures and scientific fields, from our own software research to economic research [5] and DNA research [4]. Rickrolling is humor without geographic or discipline borders, and appeals to the youngest students, starting in the latest years of K-12. Rickrolling can be practiced in numerous contexts, from links in emails, to hidden figures in reports and urls in plain sight as an example of a JSON object.

In academic life, the pressure is intense. A Darwinian view on pressure is that only those who can handle it make their way into the academic world. A formative view is that it is our responsibility as supervisors to train students to handle pressure. Humour is one of our best allies. The more we support our graduate students with emotionally supportive humour, the better. Sooner or later, coffee stains show up on PDF drafts [11] and we will eventually poke fun at ourselves as one of the most effective forms of scientific communication [7].

We wish that our students stay highly creative, despite the highly disciplined, rigorous and repetitive tasks that make up the bulk of some of their days in science. For this, we instill touches of humour at the core of the scientific routine, using appropriate jokes concerning protocols, data or source code, some becoming in-jokes that only our group would get. We have noticed that this maintains a genuine

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	}
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Listing 1: Rickrolling in a scientific publication (reproduced with permission).

interest towards the scientific ideal, keeping students curious and passionate, and protecting them from the delusion of publish-or-perish.

With humour, our group thrives. Humour nurtures our research group culture, it helps our students grow in an open and caring atmosphere. It is magically self-replicating: new students contact us because they have heard of the original blend of humour and science that we develop in our lab.

With this article, we encourage advisors and mentors to responsibly incorporate humour into their training toolbox This piece of advice is substantiated: we have validated this over two decades of graduate supervision. We never let a meeting go without a touch of humour; we leverage asynchronous communication such as email, teams or career pigeons for short humorous traits; we transform frustration with IT and bureaucracy into opportunities for creating bonding in-jokes (eISP would ring a bell to many colleagues in Sweden – and only to them).

To conclude, we encourage graduate advisors to responsibly incorporate humor into their training toolbox. There is a threat to the external validity of this finding though, because our first hand experience only applies to computer science students. This calls for more action research on the topic of humor and graduate supervision. Yet, we sincerely believe that humor helps students to do better science and to navigate with purpose in the mixed weather of academia. We believe that the profound benefits of humor are universal, carved in the same wood as universalism of universities.

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