


Humor as a pedagogical strategy: a short review /

O humor como estratégia pedagógica: um breve balanço

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ABSTRACT

Several theoretical research works discuss teachers' pedagogical practices, among which there are frequent intimations of lack of students' concentration and stimulation in the classroom. They are mostly the cause and consequence of boring lessons which do not yield results as from the contents of the subject matter developed. Educators strive for new methods for more agreeable and dynamic lessons. Humor may be one of the strategies that has been discussed and analyzed. However, humor is still a cause of discussions due to several issues involved and to the mode it is addressed within the classroom. A bibliographic survey has been developed to approach the use of humor in the classroom. Research comprised the contribution of authors (ABU BAKAR, 2018; BENEDICTO, 2013; ENGRÁCIO, 2008; JOSÉ, 2008; MARLOW, 2017; OTTONI, 2007; SANTOS, 2010; SOUSA, 2016) who studied the theme, its problems and applicability within the different disciplines to have a general view on the matter and which may foreground further research. It has been observed during the process that the strategy, if worked out properly, is beneficial for bonding between student and teacher, efficient learning, letting off steam within the classroom. It is also highly appreciated by students. Care must be taken not to go beyond the limits in pedagogical activities

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RESUMO

São muitos os trabalhos teóricos que buscam refletir sobre as práticas pedagógicas de professores. Dentre eles, é frequente a indicação tanto de problemas de concentração quanto de motivação dos alunos em sala, na maioria das vezes causa e consequência de aulas monótonas que acabam não produzindo um bom rendimento do conteúdo disciplinar desenvolvido. Em vista disso, educadores buscam novas formas de tornar as aulas mais agradáveis e dinâmicas com a presença do humor como umas das estratégias frequentemente estudadas. Entretanto, o humor ainda é motivo de discussão dadas as diversas problemáticas que o envolvem e também a forma pela qual é abordado dentro de sala de aula. Para buscar responder à demanda do uso do humor em sala de aula, foi desenvolvida uma pesquisa bibliográfica centrada no levantamento de contribuições de autores (ABU BAKAR, 2018; BENEDICTO, 2013; ENGRÁCIO, 2008; JOSÉ, 2008; MARLOW, 2017; OTTONI, 2007; SANTOS, 2010; SOUSA, 2016) que vêm estudando esse tema, sua problemática e sua aplicabilidade a diferentes disciplinas a fim de tecer um panorama do assunto que possa servir de base a pesquisas futuras. Durante a pesquisa, verificou-se que essa estratégia, se bem empregada, é bastante benéfica para o estreitamento de vínculos entre aluno e professor, para a efetivação da aprendizagem ou simplesmente para um alívio da tensão dentro de sala de aula. Além disso, também é bastante aceita pelos alunos. No entanto, há que se atentar para os limites de seu uso em atividades pedagógicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino, Humor, Escola.

1 Introduction

People who laugh somewhat preserve themselves; due to this, they laugh; sad people exhaust themselves (MINOIS, 2003, p. 527, translated by the authors).

It's almost a platitude to list the benefits of humor for one's health. Several research works have been undertaken to investigate the impacts that entertainment, playfulness, the comic, laughter and fun have on people. Luís de Sousa (2016) declares that humor relieves tensions, releases anger, helps cope with painful feelings, and contributes towards better health. Research works undertaken between 2001 and 2007 underscore that humor benefits the immunological and the cardiovascular systems (SOUSA, 2016). Such benefits are frequently exploited in hospital wards by the "nurses of joy"¹:

Since humor helps one cope with the constraints of life and since nurses are the health professionals who have to face tensions, sufferings, loss and fear, it is understandable that they are particularly concerned in the study of humor to deepen their knowledge and its use within the context of health in general and of nursing in particular. (JOSÉ, 2008, p. 24, translated by the authors)

Further, psychologist Emma Otta (1994, p. 34 apud SILVA; CAMPOS, 2014, p. 3, translated by the authors) states that "laughter becomes a relevant mechanism to boost cognitive and emotional development". It also corroborates with learning, underscores Souza (2016). Why are nurses the most concerned in studying humor when there are so many indications that it helps maintain health and cognitive development? Which studies are being undertaken on this subject in the field of pedagogy?

¹ The NGO Doutores do Riso, established in 2013, is specialized in hospitalized children diagnosed with cancer.

It is common to hear teachers complain that they feel unmotivated in teaching since students do not have any interest in the subject matters, their immature behavior provokes jokes that deviate the lesson's focus towards other matters, and such behavior impairs learning and impacts assessments negatively. Further, teachers' lack of stimulation for preparing lessons, especially due to exhaustive workload, causes a monotonous approach in dealing with the subject matter. It almost boils down to a monologue within the "discourse-blackboard-chalk" context. Frequently, teachers fail to arouse and develop in the students the perception of "what" is being taught and "how" it is being taught is relevant for their lives.

A pertinent question turns up: Why should humor not be developed in the classroom? Several educators have researched and developed teaching alternatives that include humor (already extant in the classroom and frequently causes dispersion) as a strategy to hold students' attention and maintain them concentrated on the subject. It is a fact that laughter causes well-being and activities developed in a pleasant mood yield more results. However, current research will also show the limits in which humor may be administered as a secondary participant, without deviating from the focus of the subject being developed in the classroom. It should also be underscored that present thematic balance does not merely define humor as an act of loud laughter in the wake of a situation presented as comic by the teacher. It includes small acts, strategies and practices within the classroom which will create a more pleasant and enjoyable milieu without losing the lesson's primary aim.

Since the analysis of humor as a teaching strategy may not be easily met in handbooks on education and since information on the theme may only be found in (very recent) theses, dissertation and scientific papers, a review of the literature is relevant, or rather, we will forward a theoretical account of extant material to guide educators and researchers who would like to make an in-depth investigation on the theme.

2 First contextualizations

2.1 Pedagogy throughout the years

É It is not easy to give an overview of the history of Pedagogy throughout the years and investigate its evolution. Francisco Larroyo (1974) suggests a division by more specific and limited periods, distinct from the wider and general periods usually established in history. The author established ten periods, with special reference to the classical age, Christ-centered age, the

Renaissance, pedagogical realism, the pedagogy of the 19th century and others. The period which chronologically starts the history of pedagogy goes back to prehistory. The period, called “the traditional age”, is characterized by the transmission of past customs and traditions into the present. Maria Lúcia de Arruda Aranha (2006) also refers to education in the prehistorical age as traditional education, although she widens its features to the close relationships between the members of the group. The teaching and learning process is defined by doing things together. However, Larroyo and Aranha fail to mention how such relationships occurred in practice and one cannot state that humor was inserted as a pedagogical strategy.

The idea of pedagogy and teaching started to be structured in Antiquity by the philosophers Democritus, Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. “Teaching became a subject matter and the teacher-student notion was established” (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 9, translated by the authors). The notion of *paideia* (with its initial meaning of *education of children*) meant an integral phenomenon concentrating on the education of the body and the soul, constituted by *gymnastics* (physical exercises) and *music* (spiritual formation, such as aesthetic, moral and religious education). Aranha (2006) makes it evident that Aristotle’s pedagogical proposal was foregrounded on the culture of virtue through discipline, mastered by repetition of the model to be followed and by the pattern to be reached. Although the repetition of the model and discipline do not a priori dispense the use of humor in the teaching-learning relationships, in Plato’s dialogues, the character Socrates uses humoristic features to make the disciples reflect and think.

During the Middle Ages, a pedagogical guideline was constructed around the figure of Christ. According to Larroyo (1974), this fact changed the trajectory of education in the western world.

The Middle Ages, with its perfectly divided societies, attributed warfare to noblemen, education to the clergy and labor to the common people. The rigid structure of pedagogy established a neat dichotomy between the student and the teacher and, at the same time, delimited clearly the contents of the disciplines taught. It was a highly localized teaching, essentially directed to the clergy and selected people. (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 9, translated by the authors)

Aranha (2006) considers the medieval period as too long to describe it within a single characteristic “without incurring in a sort of simplification” (p. 154, translated by the authors). The author states that the Middle Ages were a thousand-year period with several types of progress and regressions, influenced by Arabs, Byzantines and barbarian invasions. All these events required the production of knowledge for survival and the correct forms to develop teaching. Although the use of humor in pedagogical practices is not even mentioned – society was in fact based on strict hierarchy featuring harsh discipline – one may find comical and humoristic works, written or staged

in popular plays and in the celebration of Carnival. The inversion of roles – servants playing the roles of noblemen and royalty – was a strategy to criticize the aristocracy (BAKHTIN, 1999).

The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation developed a pedagogy whose protagonists were the Jesuits and their ecclesiastic pedagogy.

Ignatius of Loyola established what will later be the basis of Traditional Pedagogy whose principles were strictness and discipline and the impossibility of questioning teachers' authority. During the period of a divided Christianity, authority could not be discarded in so far as the Church, true to the Pope, demanded power. (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 10, translated by the authors)

A pedagogy for humanist renewal was on the increase during the Renaissance. Comenius whose central point was the teaching of everything to all gave a great contribution to pedagogy.

Comenius establishes the fundamentals of teaching by elaborating an integral educational system through a logical basis. The theoretical and practical set to make learning easy was also an important contribution of the Father of Didactics. (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 9-10, translated by the authors)

Since the 17th century, the American continent, subjected to European invasion and colonialism, started to integrate the General History of Pedagogy due to the Jesuits' attempt to catechize the natives for the "expansion of the faith", while imposing European culture and thought on the peoples. There was a trend to approach the natives' knowledge by the teacher as illustrated by Jesuit practice in Brazil, or rather, the transmission of the Christian faith was given in the native languages and not in Latin as has been the custom. Pombal's Reform ended the experience (ARANHA, 2006).

The Industrial Revolution brought with it the capitalization of theory and educational practices (LARROYO, 1974). During this period, Europe started to establish public schools for the education of the masses which required greater instruction and minimum general knowledge to boost their labor in the ever-increasing number of factories. The mere memorization of information was the most important especially for workers who had to execute automatized services (ARANHA, 2006). Therefore, transmitted knowledge became a truth that should never be questioned. "In a society where knowledge of learning mechanisms and cognitive development had not been taken into account, the teacher-student relationship was a metaphor for the master-employee relationship with total authority for the former" (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 10, translated by the authors).

The Enlightenment gave birth to a great number of philosophers and thinkers, such as Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Dewey and others, who sought to construct and develop forms of education. On the development of education in Brazil, Bruno Lima (2017) says:

The history of education in Brazil is characterized by a constant search for didactic methods to renew knowledge which increased since the foundation of the Brazilian Republic. The 1930-1960 period was crucial for Education since

the Ministry of Education and Public Health was established during this period. Reform occurred within the educational sector but did not substantially modify the primary course. There was a restructuring of the secondary school and conditions for the admittance to this level through the introduction of admission exams. The tests required knowledge not transmitted in primary schools and this fact contributed towards guarding the selection developed by secondary schools and reinforce the uselessness of the primary school. (LIMA, 2017, p. 28, translated by the authors)

The need to furnish the State with professionals who would be able to manage the administrative machine and to supply the country's emergent commercial and industrial sectors brought about discussions that culminated in educational proposals characterized by technicism. In-depth discussions on the learning and teaching process were a constant in the constitution of social, historical and economic relationships during the modern and contemporary periods. New methodologies were established, especially during the 20th century. The New School movement placed the student within the center of the learning process and blurred the previous hierarchical design of teacher-student as a metaphor for master-employee. Paulo Freire's (1974; 1992) contribution attributed the educational perspective to the student and to the context in which the educational process occurred. Consequently, contents related to students in their immediate milieu and the questioning of truth exposed in handbooks by teachers and students were underscored. Consequently, the teacher-student-contents dialogue was established and tense relationships had the opportunity of being broken. It is actually one of the conditions for the circulation of the humoristic text.

Finally, we must underscore that, among several pedagogical theories and methodologies, the comic aspect and its related items, such as laughter, playfulness and humor, were given due emphasis and dealt with as important factors in pedagogical relationships. Their advantages will be seen in the following items.

2.2 Laughter

According to the *Dicionário Michaelis* (RISO, 2015, on-line, translated by the authors), laughter is characterized as “1. Act or effect of laughing; laughter; 2. Demonstration of happiness, pleasure, characterized by the contraction of the muscles of the mouth and face”. The *Enciclopédia Barsa Universal* (RISO, 2010, p. 5.258, translated by the authors) defines laughter as “the manifestation of an emotional state when tension is solved unexpectedly”. However, these short definitions do not comprehend the complexity involved in muscle movements that characterize

laughter. The backstage of laughter goes beyond human anatomy and is therefore the object of several studies by philosophers, historians, psychologists, sociologists and physicians from ancient times to contemporaneity Minois (2003). The same author states: “A week does not pass without the publication of a book, article, radio program, a colloquium or a conference on laughter in this or in other periods, through this or that medium” (MINOIS, 2003, p. 15, translated by the authors). In spite of several studies, discussions on the comic are never exhausted. Studies, theories and philosophies on laughter seem to be without an end and always require more and more, as Minois (2013, p. 15, translated by the authors) declares: “We praise its merits, its therapeutic virtues, its corrosive force in the wake of integralisms and fanatisms. However, we scarcely can delimit it”.

According to Verena Alberti (1999), the oldest theory on laughter may be found in a passage of Plato’s *Philebus* where the character Socrates, discussing with Protarchus and Philebus, says that it is the state of our soul that stimulates comedies, very similar to a mixture of pain and pleasure. Aristotle discusses the issue and evidences the superiority of the person who laughs with regard to the matter which is the object of laughter. However, systematic theories on laughter and the laughable were elaborated by Cicero and Quintillian. Leemen, Pinkster and Rabbie (1989 apud ALBERTI, 1999) say that the occurrence of the comic in Cicero’s discourses is meant to entertain the reader during the highly-dense paragraphs. They also state that, in Book VI, the Roman orator Quintillian deals with the passions present in discourses, especially in perorations, to hold the interest of the public and move the passions. The fact that Quintillian

associates the passions to peroration makes him underscore that, in the last section of any discourse, the orator should ‘put all his strength in the fight’ and ‘try to convince the listener’ through the seduction of the feelings. The laughter issue is thus inserted in the discussion on the passions and the laughable is one of the last resources he has to convince and seduce the listener. (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 63, translated by the authors)

Laughter in ancient times is thus a strategy of power within the political game.

Many centuries after, in his discussions on the passions, Hobbes underlines the three occasions in which laughter occurs: when we laugh at our own acts; when we laugh because of the weaknesses of others; when we laugh at funny expressions or acts, corroborating Quintillian’s statement that “laughter lies in us, in the other and in neutral elements” (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 129, translated by the authors). Alberti (1999) states that it is a non-refutable conclusion that “the object of laughter should be the novel and the unexpected since a comic thing wears out when it becomes old and common” (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 128, translated by the authors). However, one should also take into account that certain events, statements or scenes remain laughable for a long period even if they are repeated over and over again. This boils down to the fact that humor should not

necessarily be novel. The most important factor is the approximation of unusual semantic fields, as Freud demonstrated.

Although dealing negatively with the theme, Bergson (1983) is relevant when he published in 1899 three papers in the *Revue de Paris*, later edited in his book *Le rire* (1900)². He defines “the comic mainly as a negative manifestation which laughter should correct” (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 209, translated by the authors). In his opinion, “the comic and laughter are, respectively, a negative deviant and a functional sanction which establishes order in life and society” (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 209, translated by the authors).

Freud has also given his contribution to the theme. Jokes are the manifestation of the subconscious since the latter ignores prohibitions and is moved by desire. Jokes allow the subconscious to steam off and manifest itself. According to Freud (2017), jokes, stimulating the comic and humor, bring together what lies in different and unexpected fields. This may explain the explosion of laughter.

Propp (1992) and Bakhtin (1999)³ have made very important theoretical contributions to humor, the comic and laughter. The former deepens Bergson’s concepts and amplifies them to include mockery which highlights a target-person’s defects within Russian literature. Propp emphasizes the theory of the comic of forms, situations, professions through fictional protagonists and establishes the frontier of what is comic. In his study of culture in the Middle Ages, the latter author introduces the concept of desacralization of reputable respectable protagonists (such as kings) within a cultural event where everything is represented upside down: this is the case of Carnival. The humoristic fact lies in common people wearing royal clothes and stage funny behavior, making a caustic criticism on the customs and attitudes of the historical period. Since royalty is dethroned, dethronement and desacralization produce humor and laughter.

Further, many authors, such as Hegel, Flögel, Schopenhauer, Kant, Jean Paul, Nietzsche and Baudelaire, have dealt with the laughable in a philosophical manner. The current article, however, is not focused on each theoretical contribution. Its purpose is to give a theoretical outline that makes humor and its meanings the study theme which somewhat subsidizes suggests humor as a pedagogical strategy.

² We used this Brazilian edition: Bergson (1983).

³ An in-depth analysis on the contributions by Freud, Propp and Bakhtin may be found in VASCONCELOS (2019; 2021).

3 Humor in teaching?

Would it be prudent to employ laughter in teaching? In spite of the fact that many teachers take for granted that humor in the classroom indicates indiscipline and rowdiness, research in the field, albeit recent, is promising. In his book *L'humour en éducation: approche psychologique* (1979), Anver Ziv is one of the first authors who deals with humor as a pedagogical strategy. Ziv (apud ENGRÁCIO, 2008) insists that humor may be an aid in the learning process and proves this hypothesis by an experiment which employs students randomized in two groups. Whilst one group attended classes featured by traditional didactics, the other group was exposed to a different methodology. In the latter case, the teacher told jokes and showed cartoons to transmit the lesson contents. Students were then evaluated. The experimental group showed a greater improvement than the former one or control group (BENEDICTO, 2013). Although the author is convinced of the collaborative role of humor in learning, Ziv underscores that the experiences in this field were very brief, with no specific results “when compared to the 1.000 h period during which the student has to cope with throughout the year in the classroom” (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 71, translated by the authors).

Benedicto (2013) provides the positive aspects of humor in school tasks and foregrounds his arguments on Powell and Andresen (*Humor and teaching in higher education*, 1985) who also defend the benefits of humor in learning. He even adds that university students may acquire abilities to use humor in the classroom, disregarding whether one is funny or not (POWELL; ANDRESEN, 1985 apud BENEDICTO, 2013). Benedicto argues:

Lomax and Moosavi (2002) employed humor retrieved from various sources (internet, journals, magazines and others) in lessons of statistics. Resources were always used to introduce the lectures. In this case, students had to explain which concept was related to the humoristic situation. The authors, therefore, showed that students' anxiety could be decreased; they could be motivated and committed; they also had a deeper knowledge of the contents. (BENEDICTO, 2013, p. 29-30, translated by the authors)

Another researcher with outstanding works on the theme is Handerson Engrácio (2008) and his dissertation *Humor na educação*. Engrácio mentioned several advantages for the development of more dynamic lessons given in a relaxed milieu, namely, creativity and easiness when innovating, shunning the standard attitudes. The author's opinion has been based on Morrison (2008) to boost his argument:

Humor increases the capacity of divergent thought and the ability to solve complex issues. Since humor links areas which previously were not linked to

the brain,⁴ it elaborates new associations involving already existing concepts. (MORRISON, 2008, p. 3 apud ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 81, translated by the authors)

Engrácio (2008) illustrates Morrison's argument with the following story: *Two fleas met outside the cinema. One of them said to the other: Shall we go on foot or by dog?* The comic stance or humor lies in the fact that the fleas are dealt with as humans and the adaptation used (the dog substitutes the car or the bus to return home) produces laughter.

With regard to the nexus between the brain areas and pleasure caused by laughter, Alberti (1999) writes:

In the category of unoffensive jokes, Freud includes the reflection jokes (Gedankenwitze) – dealing with thought and reasoning – and the puns. In the two types of jokes, pleasure is the result of a release of psychic tension due to the intellectual effort economy. One may distinguish the opposition between laughter and grave thought. Freud remarks that in reflection jokes pleasure is caused by the possibility of thinking without the demands of intellectual education to which we are committed at the moment in which reason and critical judgement declare the absence of meaning in our childhood games. On the other hand, puns or word jokes give us pleasure since they dispense the necessary effort for the serious use of words. Word jokes provoke the link between two different sets of ideas whose usual apprehension would require much more effort. The pleasure resulting for this short circuit is big according to the strangeness of and the distance between the two sets of ideas. The above causes a greater economy in the thought trajectory. (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 17, translated by the authors)

Besides Freud's thought economy, one of the greatest advantages of humor in the classroom is the construction of trust in the student-teacher relationship, underscored by Freire's (1974; 1992) educational suggestions and vividly explained by Engrácio: "Greater closeness has the advantage of fortifying teamwork and stimulates the aims. The natural gap between teacher and student is surmounted when fear is replaced by constructive and relaxed communication" (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 63, translated by the authors). In fact, humor is one of the methods to achieve it. Engracio (2015) adds that, through the establishment of affective links between students and teachers, students' collaboration and participation in activities proposed by teachers are facilitated. It is needless to say that if we ponder on the teachers we have had during our school period, it is easy to perceive that we remember dearly those whose lessons were agreeable and instigated our curiosity. This is precisely the result of Farhana Abu Bakar's research. Discouraging in his thesis on the motives that trigger him to research on humor in teaching, Abu Bakar states:

I remember attending lectures with many teachers. However, I enjoyed only a few of these classes. Upon reflection, I realized that the classes I truly enjoyed

⁴ The statement echoes Freud's proposition given in section 2 and in the following quote by Alberti (1999).

were led by teachers who incorporated humor in their teaching. (ABU BAKAR, 2018, p. 3)

The educational system that severely punishes students' mistakes or that which makes lessons dull and distant from students' real life are actually the cause of great stress and inhibitors of the imagination, creativity and full emotional development (ENGRÁCIO, 2008).

The authoritarian teacher, a deposit of all knowledge and truth, was built throughout many years through a punitive educational system, molded on economic and cultural relationships since ancient times, reinforced during the Middle Ages and, willy-nilly, is still present today. Engrácio (2008) also perceives humor as a way of developing activities in the classroom. Through jokes on themselves, on their mistakes and activities, teachers make the students have a better perception of the teacher, as someone who commits mistakes and is not the perfect person they imagine. In fact, this fact relaxes the tension in the classroom.

Based on Lundberg and Thurston (2002 apud ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 68, translated by the authors), Engrácio remarks that when teachers admit their own mistakes and laugh at themselves, "students perceive that making mistakes is not a sort of doomsday". Further, it reveals that teachers do not have an egocentric and perfectionist view of their own activities. Humor approaches students and teachers and is a manner that solves awkward situations or tension in the classroom, such as situations of irritation and anger. "Humanizing and creating empathy is a good educational kick-off" (Engrácio, 2008, p. 69, translated by the authors).

However, empathy results in the classroom are linked to teachers' qualities in employing humor for didactic ends. Teaching strategies, humoristic or not, should be multifaceted and should not reduce teachers as mere transmitters of knowledge. "Continuous effort and preparation may be seen as the rehearsal of an actor who seeks a better performance on the 'stage', the classroom. Teaching is actually a type of art" (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 71, translated by the authors).

It is highly important to take into account the type of humor selected. Not all jokes have an aggregating factor of knowledge for students:

Berk [2002] suggests that several types of humor should be shunned from the classroom since they are somewhat hostile and fail to boost empathy. Consequently, humoristic types such as making fun of people, sarcasm, vulgarity and humiliation are unnecessary and counterproductive. A study by Webb (2001) revealed that more than 7 out of 10 students and teachers perceive that one may not use humor to depreciate, humble or make fun of students. The main issue is that most humoristic situation involves one of these features. TV propaganda, jokes in films and in serials, such as the Stand-Up Comedy, and political cartoons, demonstrate this fact. It seems that humor is still that derived from the good old theory of superiority by Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes. (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 66, translated by the authors)

Several cases met in magazines and newspapers and denounced by students to headmasters reveal a critical humor in schools and universities. An example was reported by students of the Pontifical Catholic University of the state of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), when a professor claimed that “laws are similar to females: they are made to be violated” (SUPOSTA..., 2015, on-line, translated by the authors). Another case occurred in Ufac where a professor’s macho jokes obliged the female students of the journalist course to put up banners saying: “Professor, your macho jokes do not make you funny but one more asshole with a diploma” (ACADÊMICAS..., 2016, on-line, translated by the authors). Denouncement of racism occurred in the Faculty of Agronomy of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul: a professor reading Legumes of Food Grains, said in his first lesson that “the niggers of the favelas had white teeth because the water they drank was treated with fluor” (PROFESSOR..., 2009, on-line, translated by the authors) and that “soybeans are similar to niggers: once sprouted, it’s difficult to kill them” (PROFESSOR..., 2009, on-line, translated by the authors). Such attitudes were analyzed by the faculty’s commission and declared that the professor’s “intention was to create a relaxing milieu on the first lecture day” (PROFESSOR..., 2009, on-line, translated by the authors). Later on, the professor was condemned by the Federal Regional Court of the 4th Region (PROFESSOR...,2009, on-line). This is a mere sample of newspapers reports, but actually the cases are more numerous. One may realize that:

The teachers’ humoristic freedom is not extensive as the comedian’s since there are humor types incompatible to the classroom. Besides, the teacher should not distribute the same amount of humor since his function is not to be funny but to use humor as a help in the transmission of knowledge. (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 73, translated by the authors)

Farhana Abu Bakar developed another research perspective that involves teachers’ and students’ the point of view on laughter in the classroom. She writes that few listen to students’ opinions and, as a rule, articles deal with teachers who analyze humor employed by themselves and their results. Abu Bakar (2018) writes that only 19 out of 45 papers focused on students’ perspectives and only three gave the perspective of both. The researcher designed another investigatory track: she interviewed 15 students and 5 teachers cited by the students on their employment of humor in the classroom. No student reported any negative humoristic fact and this event increased focus, motivation and ability when they remembered the contents of the subject matter. When they were questioned on what they remembered of the lessons in which the teacher intercalated contents with funny comments, each student described at least one joke and its relationship to the subject matter. Further, the stimulus provoked by the comic story would also be

an alternative to maintain students' attention distracted by cell phones, notebooks and other electronic devices (ABU BAKAR, 2018).

In her research *Riso, humor e resistência na escola pública de ensino fundamental*, Marcela Fontes (2014) studies the forms of resistance of critical intentions developed by students to reinforce their place in the classroom, shun teachers' domination and fight against losing their identity and customs. From such a perspective, Fontes analyzes how humor employed by students may be a sort of resistance constructing several types of behavior different from academic aims. Consequently, students' humor becomes a motive against teachers and it expresses the manner they perceive them.

Frequently, laughter in school occurs between periods of serious thought and in an extraofficial manner, or rather, within a parallel communication network undertaken by the students. The main communication network, undertaken by the teacher through the serious and official discourse, rarely admits the insolence of laughter. (FONTES, 2014, p. 31, translated by the authors)

The author investigated 9-Year students and her results were similar to those by Abu Bakar (2018). Only two students said that they did not believe they learned more because of teachers' jokes. It was only a distraction, which had good assets. "Only seriousness; seriousness turns to be something bad" (FONTES, 2014, p. 102, translated by the authors) said one of them.

Research on the theme becomes more specific, focusing on the applicability of humor in the classroom in different disciplines.

Bruno Oliveira Lima (2017), for example, analyzes humor in lessons on Biology. His research methodology consisted of a questionnaire among high school children in Campina Grande, Brazil, who participated in massive Biology lessons for the Brazilian High School National Exam (ENEM) in 2016. He justifies his methodology by the presupposition that "knowledge on individuals is only possible through human description and defined by the protagonists" (LIMA, 2017, p. 55, translated by the authors). Surveying the research's results, he states:

When the data were tabulated, we perceived that 88% of the participants reported that the Biology lessons featured by humor helped a lot in students' approval in the entrance exam; only slightly, was the opinion of 12%; no participant said that they did not help. Students who replied "helped only slightly" had participated at least three times during the year. (LIMA, 2017, p. 62, translated by the authors)

Benedicto (2013) focuses on his research on humor in Chemistry lessons. He discusses the use of cartoons with a scientific theme (already extant since the 18th century, with a biased stance) and the manner chemists in the 20th century started to make their own cartoons on the subject matter. "The authors underscored the use of this material to improve teaching, with special attention to the cartoon used and the images it may transmit" (BENEDICTO, 2013, p. 36, translated

by the authors). The author underscores the importance of riddles and anecdotes, with special reference to puns to produce a comic effect. He exemplifies: “What were ten carbon molecules doing on a ladder? Scaling down” (BENEDICTO, 2013, p. 36, translated by the authors), “Metyl and methane used parachutes. Who jumped first? Metyl, since he is radical” (BENEDICTO, 2013, p. 36, translated by the authors), and other which became very popular due to the Internet (BENEDICTO, 2013). Erik Benedicto underlines the demand of more practical lessons in Chemistry by students for a more “palpable” analysis of its contents. This reveals lack of interest and weariness produced by traditional lessons (BENEDICTO, 2013).⁵

Several materials are available in the field of humor as a possible pedagogical strategy for lesson in Portuguese Language. In her paper called *Piada em sala de aula é coisa séria: o potencial dos textos chistosos para o ensino de Língua Portuguesa*, Rosani Muniz Marlow (2017) forwards ideas for the teaching of Portuguese in primary schools through the problematization of reading-writing and literacy practices used by teachers for decades. She analyzed the 1997 Brazilian Curriculum Guidelines (PCN) and underscored the need for social pedagogical practices that “would trigger in students the efficacious use of language: active comprehension – not de-codification and silence – and the use of speech and writing as expression and communication through texts – and not the evaluation of the product’s correction” (MARLOW, 2017, p. 56, translated by the authors). Dealing with high truancy rates by children and adolescents, the author insists the need for approaching students’ knowledge and that to be taught:

Learning occurs when the student participates actively in the process of knowledge building by applying his operatory skills of thought to studied contents. In other words, learning is a mental activity, it’s thinking, reflecting and acting. Learning is favored when ‘mechanical’ tasks, featuring repetition and memorization, are replaced by other tasks that stimulate and demand mental operations of the students. (MARLOW, 2017, p. 58, translated by the authors)

Commitment to a pedagogy that values students’ utterance and experience, also finetuned to Freire’s contributions, is also defended by bell hooks (2017)⁶ in her *Teaching to transgress: education as a practice of freedom*⁷ where she writes on her experience as teacher and teacher’s role in teaching transgression of racial, sexual and class frontiers. hooks (2017) states:

All students, not merely those hailing from marginalized groups, seem to be more disposed in participating actively in classroom discussion when they

5 “It is a highly common custom among Chemistry teachers to employ jokes for effective learning, such as that by a teacher who asked the student: “– What is H₂SO₄?”. The student hesitated and after some silence, he said tentatively: “– Sir, it’s on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t remember.” Jokingly, the teacher replies: “– Spit it immediately. It is sulfuric acid!”. (VASCONCELOS, 2019, p. 179, translated by the authors).

⁶ Small letters!

⁷ Also in small letter on the book cover.

perceive that it has a direct relationship with them (white students only speak in the classroom when they feel linked to the theme by experience; this behavior is not abhorrent). When students are skilled on a certain theme, they may tend to speak with confidence when related directly to their experience. (HOOKS, 2017, p. 118, translated by the authors)

According to Rosani Marlow (2017), the employment of humor by the discourse genre joke in lessons on the Portuguese language would help students' knowledge in literacy practice. In fact, there has been an increase in the circulation of humoristic texts after the popularization of social networks and virtual environments. Increase in the production of information from the Internet caused the creation of new discourse genres which may be worked in the classroom and may permit a thorough investigation on other themes characterized by orality, intertextuality and social issues.

Sírio Possenti (2001) also remarks on the relevant collaboration of the joke for social studies and, especially, for language studies. In *O humor e a língua*, Possenti (2001) gives several examples of jokes and double-meaning expressions, intentionally or not, which may be used beyond their humoristic contents and taken within the linguistic perspective. In another text, *Os limites do humor*, Possenti states:

Besides representing or exposing facts and social behavior, jokes take language to its very limits in the domain of grammar and lexicon.

I would say that, from the perspective of language, the most important phenomena are not related to the exploitation of the lexicon, especially with regard to etiquette issues and connotations. Jokes exploit other language factors that involve more the limits of grammar (lexicon, morphology, syntax and semantics) and even the so-called practical rules than issues of *finesse*. It would not be preposterous to say that jokes play games (in the sense of *entertainment*, but, particularly, the mobilization of rules...) with the apparent regularities of grammar. Further, besides taking language to its very limits, jokes require a precise selection of *non-linguistic*, contextual or intertextual elements. (POSSENTI, 2003, p. 104, author's italics, translated by the authors)

Hélio de Sant'Anna dos Santos (2010) suggests the use of humor in Portuguese language classes through literature. In his paper *A contribuição do trabalho com o humor para o ensino de língua portuguesa*, the author discusses the possibilities of developing reading skills through the book *Comédias da vida privada – edição especial para escolas*, by Luis Fernando Verissimo. The book features a series of humoristic chronicles for the study of the interpretation of texts and for deeper discussions on the textual resources in writing. In fact, the humoristic text contains linguistic (phonetic, morphological or syntactic) games⁸, metaphors, comparisons and special punctuation

⁸ One may forward a humoristic, albeit biased, joke based on the phonetic articulation involving a volley player born in Piracicaba, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, characterized by a multiple retroflexive vibrating sound. When the volley coach tells the player: “– Lady, *once more*”, she replies “– In Piracicaba”, misinterpreting the English expression for the Portuguese “Where do you live?” (in Portuguese: “onde cê mora?”).

marks. The above means that the humoristic text is an immersion in the texture of the text, as Pereira remarks,

When we ‘appropriate’ a text (take it and possess entirely), we have to investigate it completely, in its deepest structure, in the syntax that made it, in the morphology it molded it, in the semantics which gave it meaning and in the words chosen for such an aim. The adjective does not merely define or qualify. One should understand why it is there, its worth, its contribution for the final result of the text. The exclamation mark is not there for admiration nor for surprises, but to contribute towards the syntax, rhyme, general meaning. (PEREIRA, 1999, p. 220, author’s italics, apud SANTOS, 2010, p. 233, translated by the authors)

Approaching this type of text in the classroom makes reading an entertainment and a pleasant undertaking so that students without the habit of reading may become familiar with books. They may perceive that reading may give pleasure and the door for further literary interests. Santos (2010) suggests several forms of approach to the chronicles of Verissimo’s book in Portuguese language lessons. This may be a starting point for teachers.

Following the suggestion to motivate Portuguese language teachers to introduce humor in their lessons, Clediane Santos (2013) developed a didactic unit for teachers in Year 8. Starting from several humoristic stories, she suggests activities that may be developed with students, including text interpretation, the development of reading abilities and text production inspired from them. For example, writing a short story that shows a humoristic situation experienced by the students. It is highly relevant to take into account the target-public of the suggested project, or rather, “the reading level of the student should be analyzed since each text requires a set of factors so that it may be properly interpreted” (SANTOS, 2010, p. 234, translated by the authors).

Maria Aparecida Resende Ottoni (2007) concentrates her investigations in humoristic genres in the teaching of Portuguese and states that at present there are more research works on the teaching of reading and writing activities underlining humor than some time ago:

Several researchers develop their work by focusing on specific humoristic genres; others focus on the use of humor in general. Trachtenberg (1980), Vadillo (1998) and Berti (2002), for example, concentrate on jokes; Smith (2000), focuses on cartoons; Pereira (2003) on puns; Pavei (2005), on charges; Araújo (2001), on cartoons and charges; Silva (2005), on charges and puns. Garner (2005), Kher, Molstad and Donahue (1999) and Powers (2005) argue for humor in general when teaching. (OTTONI, 2007, p. 167, translated by the authors)

However, the author adds that most research work has theoretical and methodological gaps when dealing with humor in the classroom. Several researches are mere suggestions on how teachers may use humor in the classroom. Several suggestions have never been tested in the classroom (OTTONI, 2007).

Otoni (2007) also deals with points of view contrary to the employment of humor or the comic in education. The author quotes van Tassel (2013 apud OTTONI, 2007) who discusses that, although humor eases the hierarchical relations between teachers and students, this is not desirable. According to van Tassel (2013 apud OTTONI, 2007), it may mean the students' refusal to study what is proposed by the teacher and transforms the classroom in a debate on authority. Another argument deal with the teachers' concern on what parents, headmaster and other teachers would think when all the class is laughing. "There is a valorization of what is called 'occupied time' in which students 'seem' to be learning" (OTTONI, 2007, p. 168, translated by the authors). Based on Bauer (1996 apud OTTONI, 2007), Otoni writes that teachers do not know how to deal with the humor genre and fear that it would bring them discomfiture. Another factor raised by authors cited by Otoni (2007) mentions the subjectivity in humor: what some people think is funny, others do not. This would affect negatively the use of humor in the classroom. "Humor may act as a social lubricant or as a social 'delayer' within the educational scenario. It may educate or 'disfigure'" (LOOMANS; KOLBERG, 1993, p. 14 apud OTTONI, 2007, p. 169, translated by the authors).

In spite of the above, Otoni (2007) says that these arguments were insufficient to change her motivation with regard to "triggering reading and critical analysis of humoristic texts in the classroom" (OTTONI, 2007, p. 169, translated by the authors). She therefore develops her research in which, at the end, the positive and negative points in the application her suggestion are analyzed. Among the negative factors, she mentions indiscipline and excess of parallel talk when dealing with the theme during activities. However, the author underscores that these issues complement demotivation as the great difficulty that teachers have to cope with (OTTONI, 2007). The cause of indiscipline, however, would be motivated by external factors, such as the lack of limits imposed by the students' parents, community and school.

In fact, there are bigger issues which are not related merely to the development of the Final Proposal, but to the educational situation as whole, in Brazil, and to social issues. I think that more than teachers' and researchers' efforts are needed for their solution. (OTTONI, 2007, p. 252, translated by the authors)

One should underscore that results produced by the use of several teaching and learning strategies do not merely depend in the interest of teachers in applying them or not. It is highly important to take into account the milieu in which lessons are given, their structural conditions, the size of the group, ergonomic conditions, students' social conditions, "motivations, expectations, convictions, knowledge, relationships, context and relationship with teachers" (ENGRÁCIO, 2008, p. 64, translated by the authors). When methodologies involving humor are analyzed, one tries, besides maintaining students' attention and the best results in learning, to deviate adverse situation

in education, maintain students' optimism and inspiration. One should take into account that learning is not a one-way track with the teacher as the sole protagonist. Students are important agents within the process and should be part and parcel in better results.

4 Final considerations

Bibliographic research undertaken shows the diverse studies currently being produced on the employment of humor and its benefits in learning and in the sociability it confers, besides possible problematic issues within the school space. Further, humor may be not merely a comic deviation or an artifice to have students' attention, but also as an effective theme in the study of discourse genres in Portuguese language. One may also see that the possibilities of humor as a pedagogical strategy are not limited to specific disciplines, but may be developed in more learning situations and methodologies.

In spite of all, a previous analysis of jokes, puns and humoristic texts is necessary to verify whether they really collaborate in the lesson dynamics. Offensive and inconvenient puns, with sexual, sexist, gender and racial contents which may be misinterpreted by students should be definitely banned from the classroom. One should analyze how humor helps in learning and up to which point humor may be only a cause of dispersion within the classroom.

It may be expected that we have been able to guide researchers who are interested in the subject and who want to delve deeper into the vast bibliography available, only partially mentioned. Despite being aware of the numerous limitations faced by teachers in the classroom, it is expected that the partial results of current research may at least inspire educators to investigate other ways of working teaching contents in their classes, not limited to established traditional grave schemes.

Further study perspectives or proposals in the use of humor in pedagogical practices may include memes in language classes, as in researches by Souza (2019) and by Souza, Nóbrega and Lima Júnior (2019).

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