

Why So Serious? Just Kidding: Humor as a Catalyst for Doctoral Learning and Well-Being

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Abstract

The doctoral journey is widely recognized as an intellectually demanding and emotionally taxing process, often marked by isolation, uncertainty, and sustained cognitive pressure. While online learning has expanded access to doctoral education, it has also intensified challenges related to disengagement, monotony, and psychological fatigue. This article argues that humor, when used intentionally, ethically, and inclusively, serves as a powerful pedagogical tool for supporting doctoral students' cognitive, emotional, and relational well-being. Drawing on the author's experiences teaching doctoral-level research and methodology courses, as well as a broad interdisciplinary literature, the article illustrates how humor can reduce stress, strengthen social connections, enhance memory, and promote cognitive flexibility. Classroom examples demonstrate how playful disruption, absurd scenarios, and creative exercises can foster metacognition, rhetorical agility, and the formation of scholarly identity. The article also examines the risks associated with boundary-crossing humor, emphasizing the need for cultural awareness, psychological safety, and respect for the vulnerabilities inherent in doctoral study. Recommendations are offered for faculty, programs, and students, including strategies for integrating humor into writing support, cohort-building, instructional design, and personal resilience practices. By framing humor not as a distraction but as a relational and cognitive asset, this article positions levity as a meaningful contributor to persistence, creativity, and scholarly development. Ultimately, intentional humor can help doctoral students navigate the nonlinear, emotionally complex path from student to scholar, offering a humanizing counterbalance to the rigor of advanced academic work.

Keywords: *Doctoral Journey, Humor in Education, Cognitive Flexibility, Student Engagement, Pedagogical Strategies*

Introduction/Background

Although my experience as a university professor falls short of the “long-time faculty” designation, I spent more than a decade teaching health and safety courses as an American Red Cross instructor for community groups, private businesses, public corporations, government agencies, and emergency personnel. Working with such a wide range of audiences over those years revealed a consistent pattern: the more engaged and entertained learners were, the more they retained.

In multi-day emergency medical response courses, I often assigned playful nicknames to participants: Gandalf the Purple, Hagrid, Gimli, Captain America, and others, to build rapport and lower the stakes of a high-pressure learning environment. In another course’s final scenario, I quietly instructed one “responder” to contradict the others, prompting disbelief, good-natured bickering, and a cascade of unexpectedly hilarious interactions as the group tried to reconcile conflicting instructions. What began as a simulated emergency quickly became a comedy of earnest confusion, with responders debating treatment priorities and even those who remembered the scenario correctly. The laughter carried straight into the debrief, where those moments of humorous disruption revealed communication habits, assumptions, and group dynamics far more vividly than a traditional critique could. These episodes of lighthearted chaos consistently demonstrated how humor can lower stress, strengthen cohesion, and make essential skills more memorable.

Having completed a doctorate myself, I know firsthand how intense the doctoral journey can be; the late nights, long hours of researching, writing, revising, and waiting for chair feedback. The online format, with its mix of asynchronous and synchronous learning, often felt isolated, with no fellow doctoral student beside me to collaborate with or even chat about everyday life. In that environment, humor became a necessary escape and a welcome relief. The professor I remember most wove sarcasm and wit into every live lecture, even delivering one session in a Mandalorian helmet to the delight of the class. My statistics professor likewise used laughter to make challenging material feel less daunting. Those moments of levity did more than entertain; they made the learning experience feel human, connected, and manageable.

In my doctoral courses, live lectures emphasize methodological rigor, yet humor often functions as the impetus that keeps students alert, connected, and cognitively open. During breakout rooms, I experimented with impromptu polling questions based on absurd hypothetical scenarios designed to catch students off guard and spark their curiosity. In one activity, students selected a hypothetical narrator for their dissertation: Morgan Freeman, Samuel L. Jackson, or William Shatner, and were then assigned to breakout rooms to generate arguments for and against their assigned narrator. The exercise prompted students to consider tone and delivery, audience

perception, and emotional resonance, ultimately revealing how voice shapes scholarly identity. The activity blended humor with critical thinking, disarmed defensiveness, promoted metacognition, encouraged rhetorical agility, and modeled my mentorship style. Other breakout activities used similar principles of playful disruption. In one session, students were given five required words and tasked with creating a research title, adding additional words only if necessary. In another, they were asked to combine the titles of three films into a single new title. To test the difficulty, I asked Microsoft's Copilot to generate three well-known films. Copilot listed: "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," "The Manhattan Project," and "The Lord of the Rings," wherein I produced the intentionally ridiculous title "The Good Lord Project of Manhattan and the Ugly Bad Ring." Students received their own set of films: "The Man Who Would Be King," "The Secret Life of Bees," and "There Will Be Blood." Their resulting creations were equally absurd. Yet the activity achieved its purpose: collaborative humor, shared creativity, and strengthened connection. These moments of structured play consistently demonstrated that levity can be a gateway to rigor, fostering engagement while deepening students' understanding of scholarly voice and rhetorical choice.

Literature Review

The demands of the doctoral journey are widely acknowledged across disciplines, yet they are fully understood only by those who have earned the title of "Dr." Whether in science, psychology, business, education, or other fields, pursuing a doctoral degree involves challenges that extend far beyond intellectual rigor (Stapleton, 2023a). Although online learning has expanded access and flexibility, the journey remains formidable and often intensely taxing. By the time individuals enter a doctoral program, many are already established in their professional fields (Stapleton, 2023b) and must balance coursework, research, employment, family responsibilities, and the emotional labor of sustained scholarly engagement. Collectively, these competing demands create a landscape marked by persistent obstacles, fluctuating motivation, and chronic stress.

The transition from student to scholar is a defining developmental task of doctoral experience. Levasseur (2019) emphasizes that this shift requires students to adopt new identities, new ways of thinking, and new expectations for independence and intellectual contribution. Yet the path toward scholarly identity formation is rarely linear. ScholarsEdge (2024) notes that doctoral students frequently grapple with isolation, uncertainty about career prospects, and the psychological strain of prolonged academic pressure. Even highly motivated students encounter periods of stagnation, self-doubt, and emotional fatigue, underscoring the complex emotional terrain that accompanies the intellectual demands of doctoral study.

Early enthusiasm is common among new doctoral students and aligns with adult learning theory, which suggests that learners with prior experience are motivated and ready to engage when they recognize the relevance of what they are learning (Cobb, 2025). George (2024) similarly observes that incoming doctoral students often begin their programs with excitement, curiosity, and a strong desire to contribute new knowledge to their fields. As novelty fades and the long-term realities of research take hold, however, students may experience a decline in energy and engagement. This shift underscores the need for strategies that support persistence, resilience, and well-being throughout the doctoral process. One such strategy is the intentional use of humor. Although humor may appear at odds with the seriousness of doctoral work, echoing the Joker's iconic challenge, "Why so serious?" (Nolan, 2008), a growing body of research demonstrates that it plays a meaningful role in reducing stress, enhancing learning, and supporting psychological health. Laughter has been shown to alleviate anxiety, reduce physiological stress responses, and improve cardiac health (Field, 2024), benefits that are particularly relevant for doctoral students whose prolonged exposure to stress can accumulate over time and affect both mental and physical well-being.

Theoretical perspectives on humor further illuminate its value in academic contexts. Relief theory suggests that humor functions as a release of psychological tension, allowing individuals to regain emotional equilibrium during stressful experiences (Carter, 2026). This helps explain why humor often emerges in high-pressure environments, including funerals, where laughter provides a socially acceptable outlet for complex emotions. Superiority theory, originally articulated by Plato and Aristotle, frames humor as a response to others' misfortunes; however, Carter (2026) cautions that this form of humor is counterproductive in leadership and educational settings, where relational trust is essential. In contrast, incongruity theory, one of the most widely accepted frameworks, posits that humor arises when expectations are subverted or when contrasting ideas collide (Davis, 2022). This cognitive shift mirrors the mental flexibility required for creative problem-solving, making incongruity-based humor particularly relevant for doctoral-level thinking.

Beyond its emotional benefits, humor may also confer physiological advantages. Evans (2025) highlights the exceptional longevity of several iconic comedians, suggesting a possible connection between humor, health, and extended lifespan. Similarly, Travsd (2024) documents twenty-three comedians who lived to at least ninety years old, including Bob Hope and George Burns, both of whom reached one hundred, further reinforcing the potential link between sustained humor, physiological resilience, and long-term health.

In addition to its physical and emotional benefits, humor is widely regarded as a desirable social trait (Brown & Holt, 2025) and operates across diverse cultural and literary landscapes (Banu & Gunasekaran, 2025), reinforcing its universality and adaptability. In educational settings, humor

has been consistently linked to positive learning outcomes. El-Sayed et al. (2024) identify humor as a valuable tool for managing stress and fostering supportive learning environments, while Lei et al. (2010) argue that it enhances instructor approachability, increases attentiveness, facilitates comprehension, and strengthens social relationships in the classroom. Sociocultural theory, rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky (Cherry, 2025), emphasizes that learning and development are shaped through social interaction with more knowledgeable others, suggesting that humor can serve as a relational bridge that supports cognitive growth. When used appropriately and in moderation, humor becomes a pedagogical asset that supports both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Cox (2026) further demonstrates that humor increases engagement in online learning environments, supports memory consolidation, and helps learners process complex ideas more effectively.

Garner (2006) conducted a study with ninety-four undergraduate volunteers who viewed three one-hour asynchronous statistics lectures, a subject intentionally selected for its reputation as a “dreaded” course. After watching the lecture, students completed a brief seven-point Likert-type survey evaluating the content, followed by a recall assessment. Participants were assigned either to a control group that viewed a standard lecture or to a humor group that viewed a version incorporating humorous stories and metaphors at various points. Students in the humor group not only rated the lecture more positively but also demonstrated higher recall of the material. Tricarico (2025) explains that laughter triggers the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure, learning, and motivation, thereby strengthening neural connections and facilitating easier recall. Without such engagement, instruction can quickly collapse into monotonous drudgery, exemplified in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off by the economics instructor’s flat repetition of “Bueller...Bueller...Bueller...” (Hughes, 1986). Mann and Robinson (2009) similarly found that 59% of university students reported being bored during lectures at least half the time, and 30% reported being bored most of the time, illustrating how quickly disengagement can take hold in traditional instructional settings. A bored student is, effectively, a disengaged student and is less likely to participate, complete assignments, or retain information (Jones, n.d.).

The cognitive benefits of humor extend even further. Korovkin (2024) notes that humor primes cognitive patterns associated with creativity and insight-based problem-solving. This aligns with Wood Brooks (2025), who argues that individuals who feel bored, serious, or mentally fatigued struggle to generate the cognitive energy required for innovative thinking. Humor disrupts this stagnation by activating more flexible and open cognitive states. R (2024) expands on this idea, suggesting that humor increases comfort with ambiguity, encourages risk-taking, and unlocks creative potential, qualities essential for navigating the uncertainties inherent in doctoral research. Sweller (2010) similarly emphasizes the importance of innovative instructional methods, reinforcing the value of humor as a catalyst for cognitive agility and creative engagement.

Humor also plays a meaningful role in shaping group dynamics and identity. Burhan-Horasanli (2026) found that humor can shift expert–novice roles and foster bonding within learning communities. This is particularly relevant for doctoral cohorts, where peer relationships often serve as critical sources of support, validation, and shared understanding. Collectively, the literature suggests that humor is far more than a momentary distraction or jovial event; it is a multidimensional tool with psychological, social, cognitive, and pedagogical benefits. For doctoral students navigating the intense demands of scholarly development, humor offers a pathway to resilience, creativity, and connection. Integrating humor into doctoral-level teaching may therefore not only ease the burdens of the journey but also strengthen the intellectual and emotional capacities required for sustained success.

Risks and Boundaries

Humor is widely recognized as a desirable social trait (Brown & Holt, 2025) and is expressed across diverse cultural and societal contexts (Banu & Gunasekaran, 2025). It can relieve tension, reduce stress, and contribute to overall well-being. Yet even as a well-timed “belly laugh” offers psychological and physiological benefits, humor also carries risks when used without care. Instructors and students alike can cross boundaries when humor targets individuals or groups, particularly when laughter occurs at someone’s expense (Carter, 2026). Such missteps can be offensive, damaging, and disruptive, alienating the very students who may already feel isolated or overwhelmed by the pressures of doctoral study (ScholarsEdge, 2024).

Boundary-crossing humor can also undermine the relational foundations of learning. A careless remark or uncalled-for slight can negate the benefits of sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through supportive social interaction (Cherry, 2025). It may also diminish students’ perceptions of instructor approachability and credibility (Lei et al., 2010), weakening the trust essential for rigorous academic engagement. These risks underscore that humor in doctoral-level teaching must be grounded in respect, cultural awareness, and a commitment to preserving the dignity of all participants.

When implemented thoughtfully, humor enhances learning; when misapplied, it can fracture community and impede scholarly development. Effective use of humor, therefore, requires intentional boundaries such as avoiding sarcasm that punches down, steering clear of stereotypes, and ensuring that levity never compromises psychological safety. In doctoral environments where vulnerability, identity formation, and intellectual risk-taking are central, humor must function as an inclusive bridge rather than a barrier.

Recommendations

Creating Conditions for Intentional, Inclusive Humor

Although humor varies widely from “great,” “dark,” and “witty” to “strange,” and is sometimes used at the expense of others (Carter, 2026), its intentional use can alleviate the stress and anxiety of doctoral learning when applied appropriately (Lei et al., 2010). While a “hold my beer and watch this” approach is clearly unsuitable in academic settings, faculty can treat humor not as a distraction but as a cognitive and relational tool. Chairs and mentors can model appropriate humor to reduce intimidation, signal psychological safety, and encourage creative potential (R, 2024). Programs can also explicitly name humor as part of a broader culture of care, integrating it into orientation materials, writing workshops, and cohort-building activities. Even small, playful exercises such as generating alliterative research titles like *Atoms Begin Creating Depth; Evolving Frequency of the Geological Harvest; or Illuminated Jade of the Kinetic Lunar; Measuring the Nebula Obsidian*, can help students explore voice, tone, and rhetorical agility.

Using Humor to Support Writing, Creativity, and Cognitive Flexibility

Humor can be especially effective in addressing writing paralysis and the cognitive fatigue that often accompanies long-term scholarly work. Workshops can incorporate playful strategies such as intentionally writing the “worst possible paragraph,” creating preposterous research titles, or using metaphors and absurd prompts to generate first drafts. These activities help students bypass perfectionism, reduce anxiety, and engage the creative processes associated with insight problem-solving (Korovkin, 2024). By framing humor as a legitimate pathway to scholarly rigor, faculty can help students see levity not as a distraction but as a catalyst for cognitive flexibility and innovative thinking.

Encouraging Students to Build Personal Humor Toolkits

Students can also be encouraged to create personal “humor toolkits” to support emotional regulation and perspective-taking during moments of overwhelm. These toolkits might include favorite comedians, memes, videos, autocorrect mishaps, or other sources of lighthearted relief. Programs can teach students how humor interrupts spirals of self-doubt and restores perspective, while chairs can help normalize the absurdities of academia, an approach that reduces isolation and validates the emotional realities of doctoral study (ScholarsEdge, 2024). Faculty can also model boundary-setting through humor, using playful reframing to push back on unrealistic expectations (“I’d love to have Chapter Three to you by Friday, but I’m planning on climbing into my mailbox to see if I can get somewhere”). Such humor maintains firm boundaries even as it softens the emotional weight of academic demands.

Using Satire and Playful Case Studies to Demystify Doctoral Work

Sometimes the most effective lessons come from what not to do. Faculty can use satirical examples or humorous case studies, such as “Bob did this, and it didn’t go so well. Don’t be Bob,” to illustrate pitfalls in research alignment, methodology selection, or the structure of a literature review. These examples make faculty more approachable and help students internalize complex concepts through memorable contrast (Burhan-Horasanli, 2026). Humor can also demystify doctoral-level jargon, reduce cognitive intimidation, and support reflective exercises in which students explore how humor shapes their resilience, scholarly voice, and sense of belonging. Chairs can reinforce that humor is not something students must suppress to be “serious scholars,” but rather a resource that can strengthen their scholarly identity.

Future Directions for Research and Practice

Future research may more precisely identify the specific learning outcomes associated with instructional humor, including its effects on cognitive engagement, retention, and long-term scholarly persistence. Additional studies could broaden the investigation to examine the benefits experienced by instructors who integrate humor into their teaching, such as increased instructional satisfaction, reduced burnout, and strengthened relationships with students. Understanding how humor shapes faculty well-being and pedagogical identity would deepen the field’s recognition of humor as a multidimensional asset rather than a peripheral teaching strategy. Such research would also help programs design evidence-based guidelines for the ethical, inclusive, and effective use of humor in doctoral education, ensuring that levity supports, rather than detracts from, the rigor and relational integrity of advanced scholarship.

Conclusion

Mann and Robinson’s (2009) findings on student boredom during lectures are hardly surprising, yet their study predates both the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented expansion of online learning across all educational levels. With predominantly asynchronous institutions such as Southern New Hampshire University and Western Governors University now enrolling hundreds of thousands of online learners, the more pressing question becomes: How much worse is student disengagement today? Even in synchronous online environments, where lectures or seminars are delivered live, it remains difficult to gauge interest or participation when students join from behind muted microphones and inactive cameras. The shift toward digital learning has amplified longstanding concerns about monotony, cognitive overload, and emotional fatigue, all conditions that can erode motivation and impede scholarly development.

Against this backdrop, humor emerges not as a frivolous addition but as a meaningful pedagogical resource. Literature consistently demonstrates that humor supports psychological well-being, reduces stress, enhances memory, and fosters cognitive flexibility (El-Sayed et al., 2024; Field, 2024; Korovkin, 2024; Tricarico, 2025). It strengthens social bonds, disrupts stagnation, and invites creative risk-taking, qualities essential for navigating the nonlinear, often isolating journey from student to scholar. Humor also aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through interaction with more knowledgeable others (Cherry, 2025); when used thoughtfully, humor becomes a relational bridge that supports both cognitive growth and emotional resilience. Simultaneously, humor requires intentional boundaries. As the Risks and Boundaries section underscores, humor that targets individuals or reinforces stereotypes can fracture trust, undermine psychological safety, and alienate the very students who most need support (Carter, 2026). The power of humor lies not in its capacity to entertain but in its ability to humanize rigor, soften the edges of academic pressure, and create conditions where vulnerability and intellectual risk-taking feel possible. When humor “punches down,” it becomes counterproductive; when it “punches through” tension, it becomes transformative.

The recommendations offered in this article illustrate how humor can be integrated ethically and effectively across faculty, program, and student levels. Faculty can use humor to demystify complex concepts, model healthy boundaries, and create playful entry points into difficult tasks such as writing, methodological decision-making, or navigating feedback. Programs can normalize humor as part of a culture of care by embedding it in orientation materials, writing workshops, and cohort-building activities. Students can cultivate personal humor toolkits to interrupt spirals of self-doubt, restore perspective, and maintain connection during moments of overwhelm. These practices do not diminish the seriousness of doctoral work; rather, they acknowledge that sustained scholarly engagement requires emotional as well as intellectual stamina.

Ultimately, humor offers a pathway to resilience, creativity, and connection in doctoral education. It provides steady influence in environments where cognitive load is heavy, emotional labor is constant, and isolation can be profound. Humor invites students to bring their full selves into academic spaces, not by lowering standards but by expanding the conditions under which rigorous thinking can flourish. As doctoral programs continue to evolve, particularly in online and hybrid formats, intentional, inclusive humor may become not merely beneficial but essential for sustaining engagement and supporting the next generation of scholars.

Future research can deepen this understanding by examining the specific learning outcomes associated with instructional humor and exploring the benefits experienced by instructors who integrate humor into their teaching. Investigating how humor shapes faculty well-being, instructional satisfaction, and relational dynamics would further illuminate humor’s role as a

multidimensional pedagogical asset. As the landscape of doctoral education continues to shift, humor offers a powerful reminder that even in the most demanding intellectual pursuits, levity has a place, and perhaps a necessary one.

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