CAN SUSTAINABILITY BE FUNNY?

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Master students can choose to write comedy scripts on sustainability issues as part of a unique course at the Management Program of the Vienna University of Economics and Business. The course has already been implemented three times, received excellent feedback from the students and won the "Best of Austria Award" because of its innovative approach. Dr André Martinuzzi, creator and leader of this trailblazer course, shares insights on using the power of humour to help students better understand and deal with complex sustainability topics.

" I integrated humour in my lectures and presentations for many years, as I believe it intensifies learning effects and creates a pleasant atmosphere.

Environmental protection, social responsibility, and sustainable development are often perceived as killjoys, and young people typically feel pessimistic about their future.

When we started looking for new and innovative ways to motivate students to engage with serious sustainability issues, we found that humour might be a promising method. It has the potential to help increase students' self-motivation and awareness for current sustainability challenges, such as climate change or poverty.

Therefore, I watched late-night comedy shows for quite some time and was very impressed by John Oliver's 'Last Week Tonight' and Hasan Minhaj's 'Patriot Act'. Instead of making fun of daily life or commenting on day-to-day politics, they both explain scientifically challenging subjects in a hilarious way. Late-night shows have enormously extended their reach in the last ten years, and young audiences, especially, are more likely to receive their information from such shows than from traditional news media. **So the more I watched these shows, the more I asked myself if it was possible to give students the task of developing comedy scripts themselves instead of writing seminar papers.**

On this basis, with two assistants, Florian Findler and Angelo Spörk, we designed and continuously improved a course where students use humour by working in a group, creating scripts in the style of late-night comedy. To our knowledge, no one has tried this before.

Dr André Martinuzzi
Head of the Institute for Managing Sustainability Vienna University of Economics and Business

Within the scripts, humour is not used to make fun of serious issues. Instead, it is used to illustrate sustainability challenges in a scientifically sound and easily understandable way while raising awareness. **A good punchline is surprising and reveals a more profound truth. Therefore, developing good comedy takes expertise because humour is more than just fooling around.**

In order to do that, students have to understand the basics of humour and comedy scriptwriting, need the courage to be funny and have the freedom of creativity while dealing with serious and rather complex issues. Students have created scripts that cover various topics such as the Sharing Economy, E-mobility, fast fashion, greenwashing, food waste, supply chains, and smart homes.

In this way, students learn much more about the topic than if they were writing a classic seminar paper. They also increase their creativity, learn how to use humour in a targeted way and improve their communication skills. Many of them tell us that humour helps them communicate better about challenging topics in their peer groups and reach people who would otherwise not be interested in the subject.

Based on the experiences and evaluations of the three courses we already delivered, we learned a few interesting lessons:

- Humour is a craft and not a talent, which requires practising.
- By writing comedy scripts, students better understand a specific topic than by writing standard seminar papers.
- Humour can be integrated into courses that are not genuinely funny. Students reported that this approach helped them to boost their creativity and imagination.

Naturally, there are some challenges in integrating this approach into teaching. Teachers may see the use of humour as inappropriate for academic subjects and find it beyond their abilities to support students sufficiently through empowerment and steering. The question also arises if this approach can be used on topics like extinction, climate change, or human rights, which are very serious issues and where urgency could be diluted by humour.

Of course, this approach cannot be used in classes where the aim is to teach the basics as quickly as possible. But wherever creativity and communication are required, and a playful approach is acceptable, our teaching concept can be replicated. We are currently publishing our experiences in academic journals to motivate other teachers to adopt this new method.

One of the challenges in the implementation is finding the right balance between empowerment and steering of the students. It means giving certain permission to misbehave and the courage to attack grievances, exaggerate, and take things to extremes. Since humour often has an aggressive component and works with stereotypes, it can go beyond the boundaries of political correctness and may no longer be appropriate in the context of a university. Therefore, it requires skilful steering that, at the same time, does not hinder the creative process and the playful atmosphere.

Our experience has shown that humour can point out grievances while exaggerated characters can make people realise their own unsustainable behaviour or ask the question 'Do we really want to go there?'.

For the students, humour can also be a coping strategy to better deal with emotionally stressful issues such as biodiversity loss, human rights violations or climate change.

Students look forward to this course because it is entirely different from the usual courses at a business school. Once they start working on their project, a phase of doubt usually comes where they become unsure whether they can develop good punchlines themselves. For this reason, we have integrated a unit of improvisation theatre into this course. When they realise that humour is a craft that requires practice and can be learned, they really enjoy the process, and the results are impressive.

Students also associate the course with several positive experiences, like forming new friendships through teamwork. They work on a comedy script for an entire semester and perform it several times, and at the end, they have a shared sense of achievement at the final presentation. It was a memorable experience for all of us when Markus Hennig, lead author of ZDF Magazin Royal, one of Germany's leading comedy programmes, took two hours to watch the final performances of our students and gave constructive feedback.

As for longer-term effects, students describe increased creativity, saying that the course has made them more self-confident, open and relaxed.

Using humour makes it is easier for them to communicate in their private environment about the topic of sustainability or to make others reflect and overcome entrenched opinions and defensive strategies.

Humour can also be an exciting topic in business management because it creates a pleasant atmosphere, supports communication and increases creativity. Some comedians offer specific seminars for organisational development purposes. I think that some elements of our course are undoubtedly transferable, for example, working with exaggerations, associations and unexpected connections. ∎

For example, one student said, 'if you don't laugh about it, you should cry', while another student shared, "humour helps me not to feel powerless, to gain emotional distance and to be able to talk about things that I otherwise tend to repress".

For more information on this method: www.TEACHING-HUMOR.eu

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THE COURSE DESIGN CONSISTS OF THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS

Students work in groups of 5-6 on major sustainability challenges, such as land use, low-cost airlines, cruise ships, fast fashion, food waste, animal suffering, or bee mortality.

Together they carry out brief background research and co-develop a collection of materials on the recent problem, its causes and possible solutions.

Simultaneously, they take part in basic improvisation theatre training, gain insight into the building blocks of humour and learn how to develop sketches, jokes and punch lines.

Each student group develops the concept for a comedy script, containing an elaborated storyline and first humorous examples.

In several rounds of rehearsals and presentations, they receive feedback regarding scientific background, storytelling and humour.

Finally, the students give an 8-10 minute performance of their scripts in front of the classroom.