



International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change. [www.ijicc.net](http://www.ijicc.net)  
Volume 2, Issue 3, May 2016

# Humour: A Platform for Blended Learning in Mental Health Promotion

Millear, Prudence .M. R., University of the Sunshine Coast,  
Maroochydore DC, Queensland, 4558, Australia

Email: [pmillear@usc.edu.au](mailto:pmillear@usc.edu.au)

Phone: +61 7 5430 1243

Blended learning has transformed the delivery of education and health programs in novel and interesting ways. For mental health, therapies have become more affordable, convenient, and flexible, and expanding the places and people who can be involved. Self-guided study around health promotion can be effective to reduce depression and symptom severity in health conditions. Humorous activities are important for persistence with blended learning. It is also an important outcome, as humour helps individuals to manage stress and strengthens their interpersonal relationships. The current review proposes a humorous approach to stress management through a combination of web page and companion book. Readers can reformulate their problems as different breeds of Dogs (from manageable to threatening) and consider ways of managing these problems, as 'How to train your Dog'. Having fun with the inevitable challenges of life is expected to shift their perspectives on problems and possible solutions, increasing their mental health.



Digital technology and the internet has profoundly changed human experience, enabling instant communication, access to the vast store of human knowledge, and real-time updates on news as it occurs. Technology is so ubiquitous that even small children *au fait* with complex devices. Education has embraced digital platforms to deliver more flexible learning solutions to students at all ages. Blended learning has enhanced student-centred teaching activities and the recent development of MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses) opens higher education to anyone with the interest and an internet connection (Littlejohn, Hood, Milligan & Mustain, 2016). Blended learning has also been widely adopted across the physical sciences and mathematics to the arts. This review focuses on psychology, which sits between the sciences and humanities, combining complex statistics, study of the brain, and the consequences of human behaviour (Pfund et al., 2016). Teaching in psychology has used digital platforms to motivate students apply important constructs to their own lives (e.g., Wesselmann, Kassner, & Graziano, 2016), and online services can facilitate psychological treatments to people who may not necessarily seek assistance for their concerns (Kazdin, 2015). As such, the online world fosters and enhances learning across the spectrum of sciences to bring knowledge and opportunities to many different people.

Despite these advantages, the main use for the internet appears to be for having fun, particularly for watching cat videos. Recent figures showed that there were 2 million cat videos posted to YouTube, each of which have had an average of 12,000 views (Marshall, 2014), although popular cats, such as the internet sensation Grumpy Cat, have considerably more followers. We have a preference for entertainment in the messages we receive, favouring comedy over drama to improve our moods (Zillmann, 1988). The pervasiveness of the cats on the internet means that individuals who like cats and dogs can select and consume amusing content about similar animals, bringing excitement and laughter, and relief from negative moods (Myrick, 2015). The current review considers how the internet can provide the platform for psychological education, using a blended learning framework and the humour inherent in the behaviours of cats and dog. It is proposed that techniques to improve stress management could incorporate online information (on a humorous website, [www.barkingdogindex.com](http://www.barkingdogindex.com), written by a Cat about Dogs) and a companion book, *The Barking Dog Index of Problems* (written by an academic in psychology, and her alter ego, the Cat). It is expected that the combination of enjoyable self-paced online activities with a more detailed book will provide individuals with a better understanding of problem solving, and practical solutions to apply coping strategies to manage the challenges that they face in life.

### **Blended learning in education**

The introduction of computers and online resources has changed the educational sector by increasing the options with which learning can be delivered to students. Rather than rely on traditional delivery methods of instruction (such as face-to-face lectures or classroom experiences), students receive some part of their learning through digital platforms. There can be many definitions of blended learning, although the essential criteria is that traditional in-class teaching is integrated with flexible methodologies that use mobile devices and online platforms to implement educational outcomes (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012). The combination of formal instruction with self-guided activities involved in blended learning allows for student-centred learning, with the benefits for students to increase their self-efficacy and academic outcomes. Students become active and independent, taking responsibility for their own outcomes and with their teachers acting as mentors to this process. Learning therefore becomes an active process for the student, rather than accidental or incidental to the teaching they receive. (Zimmerman, 2002). Asking psychology students to find songs that demonstrate personality constructs was effective in increasing their retention and understanding and improving exam results on the content (Wesselmann et al. 2016). The enjoyment of matching popular culture with abstract academic information highlights the strengths of blended learning for student outcomes.

In higher education, the innovation of online delivery has seen the development of



MOOCs, where course structures rely heavily on online interactions, rather than face-to-face teaching. MOOCs have the opportunity to provide higher education at no or little cost to a diverse and widespread student body, regardless of previous qualifications or geographical location, although completion rates can be problematic (Littlejohn et al., 2016). However, self-regulation of learning can improve student motivation and engagement. Amongst data professionals enrolled in a data science MOOC, the students with higher ranking for self-regulated learning were significantly more likely to have a clear motivation to complete their studies, to have greater self-efficacy, better strategies around completing study tasks and to value the task more highly. As such, motivation and organisation by students increased when courses were perceived to build on existing their skills (Littlejohn et al., 2016).

Regardless of delivery method, the most positive outcomes for students occur in supportive learning environments that use interesting material, and amongst motivated and confident students who have a deeper approach to their studies. These students have a greater retention of course material, and become life-long learners (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Within the context of blended learning in a degree program, students have specific outcomes and structured timelines to demonstrate their completion of the course material. MOOCs are at the less structured end of this spectrum, and require students to be strongly motivated and persistent, and to decide on their own schedule. In this way, MOOCs can reflect how individuals can learn in everyday situations, and they must be proactive to find and enact solutions to the challenges of their lives, although the challenge is to maintain interest over time. Humour can be an effective pedagogical tool to make material more interesting and memorable, overcome a student's anxieties about new situations, and reduce their concerns of making mistakes when they are learning something difficult, such as a second language (Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011). With an emphasis on 'having fun', rather than just 'being funny', including games can facilitate active learning by including elements of theories with the classroom activities as well as designing online activities to strengthen blended learning programs (Baid & Lambert, 2010). Humour may not be the 'magic bullet', as content must still be useful and designed to encourage student-centred learning, positive rather than derogatory, and appropriate to the task at hand.

### **Blended learning approaches in mental health**

As in schools and universities, psychologists and counsellors have relied in the past on meeting with clients and patients in person in a clinic, office, or hospital to deliver evidence-based therapies and interventions to improve mental health outcomes. Although the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates the 12-month prevalence rates averaged 18% for anxiety disorders and 9.5% for mood disorders (e.g., depression) (Kessler et al., 2005), only a third of the individuals who would benefit from such therapies take advantage of them. Technology offers to extend the reach of therapies to anyone with access to the internet, making therapies scalable for large numbers, more affordable, convenient, and flexible, and expanding the places and people who can be involved (Kazdin, 2015).

Rather than learning for specific content for educational outcomes, mental health strategies aim to increase psychological functioning and flexibility, to change the way in which individuals' process information about their environment (Kazdin, 2015). Effective internet-based interventions can be guided or unguided, delivered by people with varying qualifications, or in different formats. Online treatments were effective for university students to reduce consumption alcohol (White et al., 2010), whilst self-help interventions reduced symptoms for individuals with chronic pain and headaches, compared to the control groups (Beatty & Lambert, 2013). Guided interventions have reduced depression and social phobias in adults, although interestingly, the qualifications of the online coaches or completion of modules did not impact outcomes (Baumeister, Reichler, Munzinger, & Lin, 2014).

In addition to programs directed by clinicians, individuals often seek information on their



symptoms on the internet. Groups such as Beyond Blue ([www.beyondblue.com.au](http://www.beyondblue.com.au)) and Mood Gym (<https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome>) provide evidence-based information and support for self-help for people with depression and anxiety. Two studies of online interventions that were structured to mirror cognitive-behavioural strategies of conventional delivery but were fully automated were shown to reduce the symptoms of depression and anxiety in the longer term (Dear et al., 2015; Leykin, Munoz, Contreras, & Latham, 2014). These findings support Kazdin's (2015) belief that technology can disseminate knowledge of mental health to a broader segment of the community and show that unstructured, albeit well-designed interventions can be effective to raise mental health more widely.

### **Coping with everyday life**

Everyday life requires the individual to manage the diverse and often competing needs from their work and family roles, communities, and work environments. The stress and coping process is complex and multidimensional and takes into account the environment and the person who is involved (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The Stress and Coping Theory (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986) proposed that individuals appraise every event through what it means for them (primary appraisals) and then appraise what they can do to alter the situation, prevent harm, or improve their prospects (secondary appraisals). The person-environment transactions are the combination of primary and secondary appraisals, and the event becomes benign, challenging (with potential for mastery or benefits), or threatening (with potential for damages and losses). Coping is then the process by which the individual strives to reduce the demands they face and is dependent on the context in which the demands occur. It has two main functions, first to regulate emotions and second to alter the environment (Folkman et al., 1986).

There are many different ways of categorising how individuals deal with the stressors they face, e.g., problem-focused or emotion-focused, approach or avoidance. These dynamic processes can be explained through their adaptive purposes: to coordinate actions and contingencies (e.g., problems solving, information seeking), to coordinate reliance and social resources (e.g., support seeking, delegation), and to coordinate preferences and available options (e.g., accommodation, negotiation) (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Positive emotional outcomes occur when the individual feels that they have successfully managed to situation, whatever the type of coping strategy used. In contrast, where coping does not resolve the stressor, the ongoing distress increases the risks of psychological and physical ill-health.

Interestingly, the stress and coping framework has been extended recently to include recognition of surprising levels of positive affect that occur in the midst of the negative affect (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Positive and negative affect appear to be independent. Positive affect has an important role in the stress and coping process, allowing for respite from distress, by finding meaning in the situation, perceiving benefits, reminding oneself of benefits, and adapting goals to suit the changed circumstances (Folkman, 2008). For example, US college students who experienced more positive affect (e.g., gratitude) after the 9/11 attacks experienced less depression after the event, as the positive affect expressed their resiliency. Results also showed that cultivating positive affect lessened distress and physiological arousal (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Happy people also have better mental and physical health outcomes across their lives. In the Nun Study (examining aging and Alzheimer's disease in a Catholic teaching order), the nuns who used more positive and complex sentences in their handwritten autobiographies from the 1930s lived significantly longer than nuns who used fewer positive and more negative words (Danner, Snowden & Friesen, 2001). Similarly, positive self-perceptions of aging (e.g., 'as I get older, things get better') were predictive of longevity in Ohio Longitudinal Study of Aging and Retirement. Regardless of age, gender, or health, those older adults who were confident that old age would be more promising than difficult, lived on average 7.5 years longer (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002). It is remarkable that something as simple as being positive about being older can



‘add’ so many years and that older age need not be a period of disease or disability.

In contrast to changing or reducing dysfunctional cognitions (Kazdin, 2015), newer interventions are being designed around positive psychology, with the aim of building personal strengths and positive affect (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Reductions in depression and increases in happiness followed relatively simple strategies of being grateful or exercising, compared to a placebo condition (Seligman et al., 2005). A meta-analysis found that positive psychology interventions more widely (including gratitude, goal setting, being kind, and mindfulness) had a significant benefit for those individuals who were older, or depressed, or more motivated to improve (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Mood management through seeking positive experiences that make us feel better (Zillmann, 1988) and humour is an important and obvious way to generate positive affect. The rise of the internet cats shows that online audiences are preferentially seeking out humorous content to generate their own positive interventions. Humour is a highly adaptive way to deal with stressors, making social interactions much smoother and allows for the expression of distress without unpleasant effects on other. Interestingly, across the lifespan, humour as a mature coping strategy is strongly linked to longevity and happiness in old age (Vaillant, 2012). By seeing the world with humour, the individual can consider painful and difficult situations in a way that transforms their experience into a more bearable form, as well as just enjoying life’s events.

### **The Barking Dog Index of Problems**

The current review proposes that combining humour and blended learning will create an effective platform for mental health promotion. As noted previously, humour is a useful pedagogical strategy for learning difficult tasks (Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011), makes learning activities more engaging (Baid & Lambert, 2010; Wesselmann et al., 2016) and increases persistence at online study. These results indicate that students will continue with self-directed learning where the content is relevant and the experience is pleasurable. Kazdin (2015) raises the interesting point that it may not matter that individuals do not complete their online ‘therapies’, as the nature of online information is that it remains available should it be needed. Humorous, relevant, and informative material and resources therefore are more likely to be revisited and the content incorporated into the individual’s coping strategies.

The blended learning format that this review proposes has two components. First is the web site ([www.barkingdogindex.com](http://www.barkingdogindex.com)) written by a Cat, Professor Hilary Doodlebug, about Dogs and how to treat them. It is naturally ridiculous for a cat to be passing judgement on breeds of dogs, but the device transforms problems into stereotypical canine behaviour that can represent the size and scale of the problems we face. Dogs are presented on a scale of 0 to 10, with examples as follows: 0 (Sleeping Dogs, i.e., in holiday mode), 1 (Puppies, i.e., problems are just beginning), 2 (Kelpies, i.e., sensible problems), 3 (Corgi, i.e., problems manageable, but may bite), 4 (Poodle, i.e., small, silly problems), 5 (Dalmatian, i.e., larger, stupid problems), 6 (Fox terrier, i.e., problem starts small, gets bigger and noisier), 7 (Border collie, i.e., problem very busy and agitated), 8 (Blue healer, i.e., persistent and dogmatic problem), 9 (Pit bull, i.e., nasty problem), and 10 (Hounds of Hell, i.e., monumental stuff-up). Readers are offered strategies for ‘What to do with your Barking Dog’ (e.g., ‘Soothe the savage beast’), how to deal with FLEAS (i.e., cognitive errors), and can follow the Cat in her blog. The blog will be updated over time and is an ongoing exploration of good mental health, framed as how a cat would see the world.

The second part of the project is a soon-to-be-published book, *‘The Barking Dog Index: A guide to identifying your problems and getting them to sit nicely and behave’*. The book has two sections, firstly, an explanation of the Index (again written by Professor Doodlebug) and secondly, the research background to well-being and coping across the lifespan, written by the author of this review. Whilst The Cat’s part of the web page and the book are humorous, the framework in which coping strategies are developed is theoretically based and transforms evidence-based research (e.g.,





Folkman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2005). For example, a Cat would appraise stressors as 'ignore and go back to sleep', 'fluff out fur and swat the dog's nose', 'hiss and spit, then run away' rather than benign, challenging or threatening, respectively. It is expected that using humour in this way will provide individuals with a diverse range of strategies to reframe their problems in a way that suggests possible solutions, that may include changing or coming to terms with the problem.

## References

- Azizinezhad, M., & Hashemi, M. (2011). Humour: A pedagogical tool for language learners. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 30, 2093-2098. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.407
- Baid, H., & Lambert, N. (2010). Enjoyable learning: The role of humour, games, and fun activities in nursing and midwifery education. *Nurse Education Today*, 30, 548-552. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2009.11.007
- Baumeister, H., Reichler, L., Munzinger, M., & Lin, J. (2014). The impact of guidance on Internet-based mental health interventions: A systematic review. *Internet Interventions*, 1, 205-215. doi:10.1016/j.invent.2014.08.003
- Beatty, L., & Lambert, S. (2013). A systematic review of internet-based self-help therapeutic interventions to improve distress and disease-control among adults with chronic health conditions. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 33, 609-622. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2013.03.004
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. New York: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education.
- Danner, D. D., Snowdon, D. A., & Friesen, W. V. (2001). Positive emotions in early life and longevity: findings from the nun study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(5), 804-813. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.80.5.804
- Dear, B.F., Zou, J.B., Ali, S., Lorian, C.N., Johnston, L., Terides, M.D., Staples, L.G., ... Titov, N. (2015) Examining self-guided internet-delivered cognitive behavior therapy for older adults with symptoms of anxiety and depression: Two feasibility open trials. *Internet Interventions*, 2(1), 17-23. doi:10.1016/j.invent.2014.11.002
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2012). *Blended learning: A synthesis of research findings in Victorian education, 2006-2011*. East Melbourne: State of Victoria. Retrieved from [www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/)
- Folkman, S. (2008). The case for positive emotions in the stress process. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping: An International Journal*, 21(1), 3-14. doi:10.180/10615800701740457
- Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Dunkel-Schetter, C., DeLongis, A., & Gruen, R. J. (1986). Dynamics of a stressful encounter: cognitive appraisal, coping, and encounter outcomes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(5), 992-1003. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.50.5.992
- Folkman, S. & Moskowitz, J.T. (2004). Coping: Promise and pitfalls. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 745-774. doi:10.1146/annurev.psyc.55.090902.141456
- Fredrickson, B. L., Tugade, M. M., Waugh, C. E., & Larkin, G. R. (2003). What good are positive emotions in crisis? A prospective study of resilience and emotions following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 365-376. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.365
- Kazdin, A.E. (2015). Technology-based interventions and reducing the burdens of mental illness: Perspectives and comments on the special series. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 22, 359-366.
- Kessler, R. C., Chiu, W. T., Demler, O., & Walters, E. E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(6), 617-627. Retrieved from <http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=208671&gt>
- Leykin, Y., Muñoz, R.F., Contreras, O., & Latham, M.D. (2014). Results from a trial of an



- unsupported internet intervention for depressive symptoms. *Internet Interventions*, 1(4), 175-181. doi:10.1016/j.invent.2014.09.002
- Levy, B. R., Slade, M. D., Kunkel, S. R., & Kasl, S. V. (2002). Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(2), 261-270. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.83.2.261
- Littlejohn, A., Hood, N., Milligan, C., & Mustain, P. (2016). Learning in MOOCs: motivations and self-regulated learning in MOOCs. *Internet and Higher Education*, 29(1), 40-48. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2015.12.003
- Marshall, C. (2014, October 28). Cat videos on YouTube: 2 million uploads, 25 billion views [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.reelseo.com/2-million-cat-videos-youtube/>
- Myrick, J.G. (2015). Emotion regulation, procrastination, and watching cat videos online: Who watches Internet cats, why, and to what effect? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 52, 168-176. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.06.001
- Pfund, R.A., Norcross, J.C., Hailstorks, R., Aiken, L.S., Stamm, K.E. & Christidis, P (2016). A Dubious Distinction? The BA Versus the BS in Psychology. *Teaching of Psychology* 43(1), 32-37. doi:10.1177/0098628315620874R
- Seligman, M.E.P., Steen, T.A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410
- Sin, N. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 65(5), 467-487. doi:10.1002/jclp.20593
- Skinner, E. A., Edge, K., Altman, J., & Sherwood, H. (2003). Searching for the structure of coping: a review and critique of category systems for classifying ways of coping. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(2), 216-269. doi:10.10137/0033-2909.129.2.216
- Vaillant, G.E. (2012). *Triumphs of experience: The men of the Harvard Grant Study*. Harvard, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Wesselmann, .E.D., Kassner, M.P., & Graziano, W.G. (2016). Personality's Top 40: An assignment to motivate students to apply personality concepts to their favorite songs, *Teaching of Psychology* 43(2), 159-163. doi:10.1177/0098628316636296
- White, A., Kavanagh, D., Stallman, H., Klein, B., Kay-Lambkin, F., Proudfoot, J., ... Young, R. (2010). Online alcohol interventions: A systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 12(5), e62. doi:10.2196/jmir.1479
- Zillmann, D. (1988). Mood management through communication choices. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 31(3), 327-340.
- Zimmerman, B.J. (2002) Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory into Practice*, 41(2), 64-70. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4102\_2