The eLearning Coach Podcast
ELC 049: How to Find Funny When Speaking, Writing and Installing Mufflers
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Connie Malamed:	Welcome to The eLearning Coach podcast, online at theelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed, bringing you ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.
Connie Malamed:	Hello learning people. Welcome to episode 49. Do you struggle with the challenge of designing courses that are not inherently fascinating? I know I have to face that reality too often. That's what has me so interested in the benefits of using humor in learning. In this episode I speak with Mark Shatz, PhD who is a professor at the University of Ohio, Zanesville. He's an educational psychologist and co-author of the book Comedy Writing Secrets. Mark teaches an awesome sounding class called Humor Writing and has done research on humor and learning online. I thought this would be the perfect person to interview for this topic. You can find a transcript and relevant resources at theelearningcoach.com/podcast/49. And if you have an experience you'd like to share about humor and learning, please add it to the comment section.
Connie Malamed:	Hi Mark. Welcome to The eLearning Coach podcast.
Mark Shatz:	Thank you. Glad to be here.
Connie Malamed:	Oh, I thought you were going to start out with a joke. Okay.
Mark Shatz:	That's the joke. That's as good as it gets.
Connie Malamed:	I am so interested in humor and I want to find out what got you interested in humor and its effects on learning and education.
Mark Shatz:	It's kind of the longest story but teaching is my passion and I love teaching challenges so I teach everything ranging from death and dying to stress management, to statistics. At Ohio University the first college level university humor writing class was taught by Mel Helitzer and it became nationally recognized mostly because of the final exam, which was pretty cool. You had to do five minutes of stand-up and it was graded based upon the audience participation. So modest applause got you a C. Enthusiastic applause got you a B. Standing ovation you got an A. If they threw food, you failed but if the food was edible the grade was bumped up to a D. That class had a waiting list of a couple of years. It got national media attention.

Mark Shatz:	Anyway Mel, the creator of the class, ended up teaching it on our campus which is the Zanesville campus of OU. I was teaching it at OU and I just was intrigued by the idea of learning how to write funny. I took the class, got an A, thank you, and then proceeded to be hooked by this whole idea of trying to teach people to be funny so I MC-ed the class. Eventually when Mel retired I took over teaching the class. I started doing educational research on using humor and online courses to see if it could make courses more interesting. And then Mel invited me to write the second edition of his best-selling book Comedy Writing Secrets. So for the past 10 years that's really been the focus of my career, is writing, teaching people how to be funny.
Connie Malamed:	That is so good. What a career. So how you define humor?
Mark Shatz:	I define humor unlike most act-omissions what's ever funny. English props get really hung up by labels and stuff, and whether you're doing comedy or humor, the core element of funny is a joke, so as far as with the humor writing book that's one of the main things we teach, is how to write a joke, but for me if it's funny it's funny.
Connie Malamed:	Now that's a definition that even I can remember.
Mark Shatz:	In a classroom, and since you're talking about and focusing on eLearning, my main pitch when I train teachers or designers is that the goal isn't to be funny in a classroom or a virtual classroom. The goal is to find funny. And those are really two different things. Also, in the classroom your goal is not to entertain. It's to educate.
Mark Shatz:	So back to that stand-up routine and I've done stand-up. When I'm on stage, the audience's expectations are high. They expect me to be funny and my success is measured by the number of laughs that I get. But when I'm in the classroom and when you're designing eLearning environment, the expectations are incredibly low and to be honest they kind of expect many classes to suck. That's advantageous for teachers or designers because it means the bar is low, it also means lame works. You don't have to be particularly funny to be successful in an online environment. In fact, if you're too funny, that's what they're going to remember. They're going to miss the lesson and they're going to remember the joke.
Connie Malamed:	Yeah, that's been my problem, just being too funny.
Mark Shatz:	It's a curse, isn't it?
Connie Malamed:	Yes, it is. A little while ago you mentioned that you have to find the humor. Can you elaborate on that?
Mark Shatz:	Sure. One of the examples you wrote to me was about sometimes designers have to create courses that are with topics that are not particularly inherently

entertaining like you got to do something about mufflers, and that was the example you gave me. If that was me, the first thing I would do is I would get online, I would be looking for any quotes, jokes about mufflers, I'd look up the history of mufflers, I'd go back to the Midas commercial and look at the history of that, look across cultural stuff, and then I would actually go to a muffler shop and talk to people who work in the field and have them tell me interesting stories like what's the most bizarre thing that you found in a muffler, what's the most bizarre case. And when I talk about finding that's finding funny.

You don't have to necessarily create it yourself. It's a great skill to have and we can talk about it at some point. But for most teachers, most designers, it's finding stuff that's funny.

Mark Shatz:	Remember, in a classroom, again, whether it's virtual or live, the bar is so low. Interesting is the same thing as funny. That's something that instructors need to know. Their goal isn't to be funny, but the goal is to find funny and your students or the learners will appreciate the effort at doing that.
Connie Malamed:	Yes, I agree. The interesting thing is we're already out there talking to users, to learners, to subject matter experts, so all we have to do is dig a little deeper, listen to their stories, and try to find humor. Like you won't believe what this person found in a muffler when they were changing it.
Mark Shatz:	Exactly. Again, what happens often with the designers or educators, they're worried about whether something is funny enough, which is something you need to be worried about if you're performing. But in a classroom setting really the bar is it interesting. So if somebody found, back to your example, they found something bizarre in a muffler, it may not necessarily be outrageously funny but it's interesting, it allows the reader, the learner a mental break, it also tells them that you're trying to make the stuff interesting and that sends a huge message to the learner.
Connie Malamed:	Right, right. From a cognitive psychology perspective, what makes people laugh and what is happening to them internally?
Mark Shatz:	There are all kinds of theories about why people laugh. The research on laughter indicates that most laughter happens as a result of two human beings interacting. If you play back our conversation, both you and I have laughed at different points, not necessarily at something funny but it's just laughter is a natural part of communicating. So that's where most laughter comes from.
Mark Shatz:	Now when laughter comes from humor or comedy, most of the time it's the result of being surprised. The basic structure of humor or comedy is a joke and the structure of the joke is such that you have a set up, you take somebody in one direction and then there's a punch line and you take somebody in the unexpected direction and it's the surprise of where the story ends up that causes people to laugh.

Connie Malamed:	It's the surprise. So does that mean I'm crazy when I laugh when I'm alone?
Mark Shatz:	No. Most laughter occurs out of social interactions and being alone and especially if you talk to yourself, social interaction. Now I'm not going to get into the crazy assessment, give me a little more time with our talk and then I'll give you an evaluation, but no. But most people think laughter comes from something funny. No, it's just part of human communication.
Connie Malamed:	That's really interesting. What always amazes me is how young babies are when they laugh.
Mark Shatz:	It is amazing, and part of what babies laugh about, think about one of their favorites games, peekaboo, it's the element of surprise for them. So for them that causes them to laugh. They lack the cognitive skill called object permanence so every time you do it, they find it to be funny. Now eventually they develop their cognitive skill and then they look at you like you're a raging idiot for playing the game.
Connie Malamed:	Yes, I notice when I play peekaboo with my adult children, they look at me like I'm an idiot.
Mark Shatz:	Yeah, college bound kids really, they will give you that mom, look, that mom's a little nut.
Connie Malamed:	Can you talk about how humor and laughter can potentially benefit learning?
Mark Shatz:	There are a multitude of ways. I like to say humor in the classroom is an educational lubricant. What I mean by that is it sets up the conditions for learning to take place. My whole philosophy of education online, live, learning should be fun. To me that's the key goal, and in fact, whenever I do workshops training designers or teachers, that's the first activity I do, is ask people to list who their favorite teacher was, K through college, and then list characteristics of what made them a great teacher. When you put people together eventually the list will have things like being organized and fair and student oriented, but almost always the list is going to have the teacher made learning fun.
Mark Shatz:	I make a distinction. There's a difference between being funny and making something fun, and that's what designers' challenge is, is to take a virtual learning experience and make it fun, make it enjoyable for them. So it's this back to the term education lubricant, in a live situation it breaks down anxiety, it builds interpersonal communication. When we did the first study of humor in an online course, my colleague Frank Loschiavo and I, we took this online psychology course, myself and one of my students, we took the materials he had and then we punched it up with humor. So we wrote jokes, we included stuff. We had two groups of students, one students taking a traditional online PSYC introductory course and the other students taking the humor enhanced one.

Mark Shatz:	What our findings indicated was first there was no difference in academic performance, and that's something we didn't expect, because humor in and of itself is not going to make you smarter. But what we did find is the class that had humor embedded, students were more often to go online, they were more often to post comments, they evaluated the class more positively. So even though it was an online class, the humor did its job by getting the students to participate, be more involved, to be more engaged by the experience.
Connie Malamed:	That's interesting. A few months ago I wrote an article about humor and learning and came upon some research that did say that humor could improve retention and for the workplace I think that that means people would be more likely to apply it to a real world situation.
Mark Shatz:	My position on it is I don't see necessarily the [inaudible 00:12:20] that humor in and of itself is going to boost learning. But what humor will do will get people to be more engaged, more likely to study the material that they read, and especially if the humor is content oriented, it may make it a little more memorable for them. So what you're doing with humor is more setting the conditions for learning to take place. Back to what you said with the courses poorly designed and it's boring, I'm sorry, you're not going to get much learning. But if it's well designed and it includes humor, you probably are going to see some differences.
Connie Malamed:	That makes so much sense that humor will engage people and set the stage for learning.
Mark Shatz:	I like that line. It basically sets the stage for learning to take place.
Connie Malamed:	And yet I also read about how important placement of humor can be and how it can also be a distraction. So what are some of the pitfalls of using humor in learning?
Mark Shatz:	You posed two questions about the placement and then I'll talk about the pitfalls. As far as placement, it probably depends on what you're teaching. If I'm teaching a stat course, students' attention is going to be 7 to 10 minutes if I'm doing it live. And then I need to use humor to grab their attention. But if I'm teaching an abnormal psychology class, which is inherently interesting, I really don't need humor along the way.

I also teach death and dying. That's actually my main area. It goes back to your point about the time. There's a time and place to drop jokes, especially if you're talking about grief. You don't want to minimize what you're talking about. But at the same time with part of the reason I teach death and dying is the emotional component of it is you have to learn when to use humor. It's not appropriate all the time. |

Mark Shatz:	So placement is key and a large part of it has to do with what you're talking about. And when it's me, whether I'm writing an article or I'm presenting, I look at the pacing, I look at the topic, and then I decide, okay, when do people need a mental break. That's really the key. Then as far as pitfalls, especially when you're doing it online and you're doing eLearning experience, you're missing an important component of humor and that is feedback.
Connie Malamed:	So true.
Mark Shatz:	When you're live you can read the responses. You get immediate feedback from the group that you're with. You can tell whether you should go down this path or change it. But when you're doing something online, you're basically doing print humor. And when you're doing print humor, it's a lot more risky in the sense that you can offend individuals. That's why in an academic setting the number one target has to be the teacher, that's usually the safest target, making jokes about belief systems or politics or anything like that, that's just, that becomes high risk.
	You do word play. You can do funny stories. But I typically encourage instructors to think about what they're targeting when they use humor. I explain it as to map the humor. The material has to fit the audience, it has to fit the performer, and it has to fit the purpose. In a classroom basically what that means is humor has to match up with what the teacher's personality is, has to match up with the content of the course, and it has to match up with the students.
Connie Malamed:	Those are good guidelines.
Mark Shatz:	In an eLearning environment, it's a lot more risky. When I do online courses I'm obsessive about getting feedback from people because that's really the only way to know whether something's working or not.
Connie Malamed:	User and learner feedback is essential for so many reasons. I'd also like to point out that in eLearning and in videos it's not necessarily about jokes. We can use humor themes and stories and scenarios that have some humor or a humorous aspect to them to get people engaged and interested. For example something I'm doing for a client right now, I'm using an overly dramatic soap opera theme to lighten up dry content in a series of short animations. A situation it's humorously overdramatized. Then there's a little bit of information presented, and then back to the drama again.
Mark Shatz:	So you're taking stuff that you deem to be humorous and you're packaging it in a certain way. What you're doing is exactly what educators have to do when they design courses, and that is be aware of how it's going to be perceived on the other end. I think what you're describing is great because you're clearly identifying for the learner this is meant to be humorous, lighthearted. Again, the fact that you're thinking about how it's going to be received I think is the key. There's an old line in humor, if there's no corpse, there's no joke. What that

means is that with most humor you're attacking something, and that's why educationally you got to be really careful what you're attacking. You just have to be careful who or what you're going after. If somebody feels you have you slighted them, the teacher has slighted the student on some level, then the odds of that person being able to or being willing to take your lead as an educator diminishes greatly. It's self-defeating.

Mark Shatz: The hardest thing for me to do in the classroom and it's the biggest problem I have is I can be funny and I can do shtick, I got jokes, and I have to remember that when I'm in the classroom I'm not there to entertain. Plus if I start to entertain, I'm going to, excuse my language, piss off somebody.

Connie Malamed: I get what you're saying. When an instructor is involved in the classroom or in synchronous online training, the best jokes are going to be the self-deprecating ones.

Mark Shatz: The safest jokes. In general another suggestion is because I teach psychology it's easy to have real life examples. One of the things I would remind designers and teachers is that you need to make sure the story isn't too funny because if it's too funny, they're going to remember the story and they're going to miss the concept. For example, there is a memory concept called the repression where painful experiences people typically forget. I had a horrific first date that occurred a couple hours after having my five front teeth pulled. I had all my baby teeth when I was 15.

Connie Malamed: Oh my god.

Mark Shatz: Yeah. So it's a great story and I would tell the story when I was covering repression but students would miss the test item. How could you miss it? And what was happening was that they remembered the story and they totally forgot what the context was. I tell the story but after I've covered the principles.

Connie Malamed: Yes, I've read some research that said to separate the humor from the actual educational content.

Mark Shatz: Yeah. Or the other thing that you can do, if you truly want to be funnier in the classroom or if you want to make your online course funnier, then you have to change back to the structure of the joke. You have to change the setup. The problem with that is let's say you're covering mufflers. That's not a great setup for a joke.

Mark Shatz: For example, as a college student I rode Greyhound buses. I have some great epic Greyhound bus stories. Now if I just throw out a Greyhound bus story when I was a college student, that's going to be perceived as fluff. Doesn't matter what the context is, it will automatically be labeled as fluff. But when I teach statistics I do active learning. I do very little lecturing, and I mostly do minds on educating. In my stat class I'll divide the class into bus drivers and management,

give them salary data, and then have them go through this debate about whether the bus driver should have an increase in pay. It teaches them how to lie with statistics, it teaches them measures the central tendency, but then we're talking about bus drivers. Mark can throw in his Greyhound bus story and it doesn't seem as fluff. It fits the context.

Mark Shatz: If an instructor truly wants to be funnier, then they need to actually improve their instruction and use active learning, applied examples, because once you start doing the applied examples, now you have opened up your avenues for doing stories, jokes, and doing stronger humor without the students viewing it as this is a waste of time.

Connie Malamed: That's a good point for anyone who's doing instructor led training either online or in person. I'd like to talk more about writing humor. Are there some strategies or techniques for finding the humor in everyday situations?

Mark Shatz: There are the techniques. I'm going to break your question into two parts. Part of what you're saying is the brainstorming part. The other part was the writing part. So I'm going to do the writing part first. When you're doing especially something online it's print humor and unfortunately bright people write like they have a college education and that's not necessarily the most effective way to write. When I joined this Mel Helitzer to write the second edition of the Comedy Writing book and he came out of the journalism model. He ran an ad agency in New York City. He won the Clio award a bunch of times. And I would write stuff and he would send it back to me and go, "Stop writing like you went to college."

Connie Malamed: Interesting.

Mark Shatz: So, one of the suggestions I would make to anybody who does eLearning for a living is to spend some time learning how to write comedy or humor. It's much more of a journalistic style, it's much more concise, it's to the point on whether it's my book or a different book, not necessarily to write jokes but to learn how to write in such a way that it connects immediately with other individuals. It's much more effective to write I think a virtual learning lecture in that format than to write like you're act-omission.

Mark Shatz: So what I would suggest to all designers, pick up something on writing humor, writing comedy, and again just look at the basic structure format, sentences are briefer, paragraphs are two or three sentences at the most. It's just a different style.

Mark Shatz: And then back to the brainstorming stuff, the major mistake beginners make when it comes to humor is they censor themselves. What that means is you have to have ideas. The biggest flaw when it comes to people writing humor is they don't explore all the options. As an educational psychologist I use those cognitive psychology principles that you talked about, brainstorming

techniques. The simplest one is just dissociation. If you're doing anything on mufflers, just take out a piece of paper, write everything that you can associate with mufflers. You can do this as far as people, places, things. And then where the funny comes in, think about and identify every person, idea, thought that you don't associate with muffler because the funny is in the unexpected.

Connie Malamed: That's a great technique. I read it in your book but when you said it, it kind of made it come alive.

Mark Shatz: Well, thank you. And it really does work. I just did, I don't know if you know who Erma Bombeck was.

Connie Malamed: Yes, she was a riot.

Mark Shatz: Yes, she was a riot, and she left the University of Dayton [inaudible 00:24:18]. Her family left [inaudible 00:24:19] for every two years there's a major writing conference and I just presented there and my opening activity was we're going to write something about Starbucks. First, you have people list everything they associate with Starbucks and [inaudible 00:24:36] list as likely, and then you have them list stuff that you don't expect at Starbucks. Somebody wrote something about, "I don't expect to see Amish at Starbucks," and then it took off from that. And that's where the funny exists, is in the things that you don't expect.

Connie Malamed: Right, right. One time I was in line at Starbucks and there was a policeman in front of me, and I said, "Hey, what's going on? I thought you guys always go to Dunkin' Donuts," and he said, "Nah, we've moved up in the world."

Mark Shatz: Did you really say that?

Connie Malamed: Sure. I can't help myself.

Mark Shatz: Can I steal that joke? That's ...

Connie Malamed: You can, but I do expect a kick back.

Mark Shatz: The royalty check will be coming. They sell one doughnut at Starbucks by the way.

Connie Malamed: Which one is it?

Mark Shatz: They sell the old fashioned doughnut. They also have the mini cake pop. There's a funny image of a police officer leaving Starbucks eating a cake pop. I don't know why.

Connie Malamed: A pink one.

Mark Shatz:	The pink cake pop, that's very good.
Connie Malamed:	I will stop asking you questions eventually but just a few more about writing. In your book you have quite a few exercises for writing humor. Can you talk about a few more of them?
Mark Shatz:	You and I just did one with the Starbucks example. I think the most important part, at least what we can do in a podcast, the most important part of humor is the brainstorming part. If you can't think funny, you're not going to write funny. Writers always want to worry about crafting the joke and editing the joke. And those are teachable skills. But if you don't have something funny to begin with, you're not going any place.
Mark Shatz:	I think just like you came up with and I started it, or you started it with the Starbucks thing and then the doughnut and then the cake pops and then the pink cake pops, now we have created something that's potentially funny. That's brainstorming without any censorship and that really is for a lot of teachers and a lot of designers, they worry about whether it's funny and they worry about it too soon. When I do online components for my courses, I just write and then I'll go back and trim it and edit it, but the most important piece of advice I can give designers is just brainstorm. Don't censor. Brainstorm.
Mark Shatz:	Now it is true in humor writing about 90%, at least 90% of what you write will just be thrown away. That is the nature of humor. That's why like stand-up comedy is so hard. You have to take probably two to four years to build a decent stand-up routine. It takes that long to do. But again, designers have to two choices. They can find funny, they can quote people, they can do the Erma Bombeck quotes, they can do things like that, or they can start to write funny. But the thing is they don't have to necessarily start from scratch. They have a topic and they just need to punch up their design so that the students connect to it on some level.
Connie Malamed:	That makes sense. What about watching stand-up comedians? Do you think that's helpful for writing?
Mark Shatz:	If you can watch it and look at the structure and not listen to the joke. So when I teach the Humor Writing class and we analyze comics, when you do this it's going to take the fun out of the stand-up.
Connie Malamed:	Perfect, let's take the fun out of it. What is a typical structure?
Mark Shatz:	Well, the old school structure was the straight up joke, a setup punchline like the Bob Hope kind of thing. More recently, you know you're a red neck if, and then you have a punchline. Comics today if you ask them or you watch any of these TV specials about stand-up, they will tell you they don't do jokes. They do stories. If you really analyze it, they're still basically jokes embedded in the story, but stand-ups today don't want to do traditional joke structure. They

	want to do stories. They want to relive events. They want you to look at it from different people's perspective, so each stand-up has a slightly different style and it's really personal preference on what people like.
Mark Shatz:	From an educational perspective, there are so many TED Talks that you can look at on educational topics. I look at some speakers that have the combination being educational plus humorous, those kind of be the most effective ones. But if you're going to write, you need to write in your own voice, so studying the greats has value, but eventually you have to figure out what your own voice is. That takes a little bit of practice.
Mark Shatz:	In reference to your audience to people who design these courses, effective writing is effective thinking and it has to be in your own voice. I have reviewed tons of online learning courses and the best ones are which in the first paragraph you can just tell this person designed and wrote the course themselves. That's what you're shooting for. If your voice can come through in an eLearning environment, then you're going to increase the odds that your learners are actually going to learn. If it reads like it's been cut and pasted from some technical textbook you're going to lose them. You need your own voice especially in an eLearning environment because so many of them are so dull or the topics are not necessarily inherently interesting. You need to have your own voice.
Connie Malamed:	Except for HIPAA law, that's the best.
Mark Shatz:	Oh, I can't read that stuff before bed because I'll never sleep. I mean it's just so fascinating.
Connie Malamed:	Yes. So Mark, I really want to thank you for your time and for your advice. Do you have any last words of wisdom?
Mark Shatz:	Back to my original point, learning should be fun, but teaching also needs to be fun. My recommendation to designers, take a risk. Have fun with it. The worst case that's going to happen is your joke or your story is going to suck. Big deal. You get feedback. You rewrite it. But have fun. And if you have fun designing the eLearning course about mufflers, then it's going to come through.
Connie Malamed:	Excellent advice and I'm so glad we got a chance to focus on mufflers.
Mark Shatz:	Again, I don't know if I'm going to be able to sleep. I'm probably going to have to binge eat after this because HIPAA, mufflers it's just, I'm so wired.
Connie Malamed:	Thanks again Mark. It's really been fun.
Mark Shatz:	Thanks.

Connie Malamed: I really enjoyed that conversation with Mark and I hope you did too. I think that you can sum it all up by saying that using his Comedy Writing exercises—and there are more of them in the book—you can find funny on any topic, even mufflers. Humor reminds everyone that learning can be fun, so go forth and make jokes.

Connie Malamed: You can find a transcript and relevant resources on humor at theelearningcoach.com/podcast/49. Talk to you next time. Take care.