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To cite this article: Farima Fehrest, Jenny Panchal, Anja Pabel & Laurie Murphy (27 Aug 2024): Humour and children's learning: opportunities for tourism, *Tourism Recreation Research*, DOI: 10.1080/02508281.2024.2390715

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2024.2390715>



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Published online: 27 Aug 2024.



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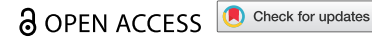


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RESEARCH NOTE



Humour and children's learning: opportunities for tourism

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ABSTRACT

Educating children as future agents appears crucial to achieving sustainability goals, and tourism settings are considered high-potential places for learning and education. This research note explores the importance of humour in children's learning by reviewing the educational literature and identifying a research gap in tourism. Findings highlight humour as a pedagogical tool, categorising different learning contexts and their features to determine how humour can be successfully utilised in various tourism environments for young tourists. The research note showcases instances of humour application within the tourism industry to engage and educate children. Having identified the gap, the authors propose fresh directions for future tourism research and potential strategies for industry practitioners.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 January 2024
Accepted 29 July 2024

KEYWORDS

Humour; education; educational tourism; children's learning; children's tourism experience

Introduction

Humour has been examined through various disciplinary lenses, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and beyond. As a phenomenon, humour is known to yield diverse benefits to individuals of different ages, including cognitive stimulation, interpersonal relationship regulation (Martin & Ford, 2018), and positive emotional outcomes (Isen, 2003). Research has revealed that humour can have both constructive and adverse effects on children. For example, humour can help children comprehend their daily experiences and navigate challenging situations (Berge, 2017). However, the use of humour can be perceived as inappropriate in certain contexts (Pabel & Pearce, 2019), making it a highly subjective phenomenon.

Notably, there is a dearth of research investigating humour for children in the tourism context, particularly with an orientation towards their learning experience. Travel and tourism represent an opportunity to learn for all age groups (Pearce & Foster, 2007). Many tourism sites offer educational programmes via *interpretation*, an educational tool aiming to develop a better sense of a place and understanding of local people, that enhances the tourist experience (Moscardo, 2022). However, children's learning has been overlooked in the tourism literature, despite its importance in educating children about sustainability (Seraphin et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, this research note highlights how providing humour can enrich children's tourism

experiences, making them more meaningful through enhanced learning. The study defines various learning contexts and presents evidence from the education discipline to identify the importance of humour for learning, and ways in which humour can enhance children's learning experiences. Finally, practical examples from the tourism industry are used to highlight the importance of humour, and future research opportunities are proposed.

Humour benefits for children's learning

Acknowledging different learning contexts and learning outcomes

Acknowledging diverse learning contexts and outcomes enables the creation of environments that promote active engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful learning experiences. Table 1 illustrates the differences across the three learning types.

Humour has been found to have positive impacts in formal and informal learning environments. In formal settings, it enhances cognitive experiences, emotional well-being, and social performance (Aria, 2002; Garner, 2006), while also boosting student retention, participation, and emotional engagement (Chaniotakis & Papazoglou, 2019). Furthermore, humour strengthens teacher-student relationships and improves classroom interaction, students' attention, and learning (Abraham et al., 2014;

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Table 1. Types of learning.

	Formal learning	Non-formal learning	Informal learning
Setting	School/university	Out of school but within organisational framework, e.g. sport clubs, tourism sites, etc.	Daily routines and places
Organisation of content	Preplanned	Usually preplanned	Spontaneous
Activity type	Structured	Less structured	Unstructured
Motivation	Usually extrinsic	Extrinsic/Intrinsic	Intrinsic
Cognitive state	Mindless routine/mindful active processing	Mindful active processing	Usually mindful active processing
Guide	Instructor-led	Instructor/guide-led	Learner-led
Outcome	Great or little understanding/high or low satisfaction	Great understanding/high satisfaction	Great understanding/high satisfaction

Adapted from Eshach (2007) and Pearce (2005).

Huss & Eastep, 2016). In informal contexts, children learn to use humour through interactions with adults, which enhances their resilience, flexibility, and sense of community (Stenius et al., 2022), and aids in language development and social interaction (Del Ré et al., 2020).

This research note focuses on the role of humour in non-formal learning contexts, particularly within tourism settings, where holidays offer a unique opportunity for both adults and children to escape work and school responsibilities. Consequently, children, in particular, may not actively seek educational experiences during their holiday breaks. Figure 1 summarises the uses of humour in different learning contexts and their learning outcomes while also highlighting further research opportunities.

Exploring humour in education

The integration of humour within educational settings yields multifaceted benefits that significantly enhance the learning experience. First, humour acts as a potent

catalyst for fostering emotional well-being among both educators and learners. By activating the dopamine-based reward system in the brain, humour cultivates a positive mood conducive to heightened receptivity to intellectual and emotional resources, thereby facilitating adaptability and problem-solving skills (Bartolo et al., 2006; McGhee, 2019; Neely et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2007). Moreover, humour plays a pivotal role in capturing and maintaining the attention of learners, particularly younger students, thereby promoting engagement with the presented content (Roberts, 2015; Xolmurodova, 2021). Lastly, humour fosters social cohesion and positive relationships within the classroom (Nesi, 2012) creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that encourages collaboration and participation (Berge, 2017). Through these interconnected benefits, humour emerges as a powerful pedagogical tool that not only enhances cognitive engagement but also nurtures emotional well-being and social development within educational contexts, making it a valuable asset in the realm of tourism experiences for children.

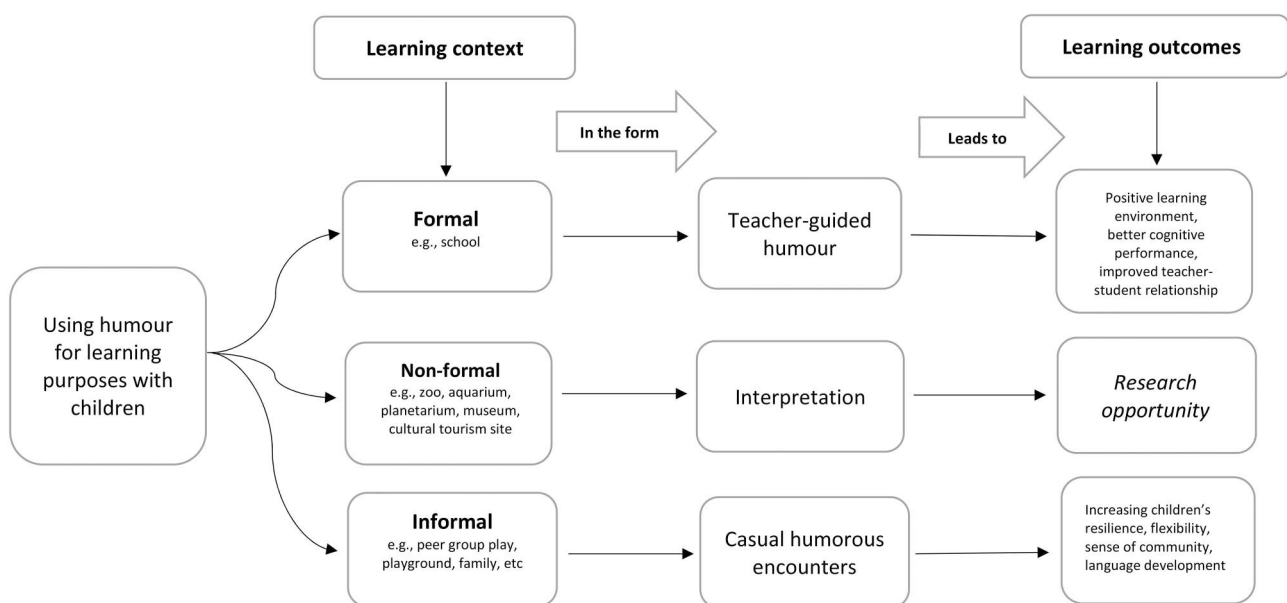


Figure 1. Various learning contexts and outcomes.

Children's learning in tourism: an opportunity to use humour

Travelling fosters personal growth, creativity, and learning opportunities (S raphin & Gowreesunkar, 2020). Children's holiday experiences have been found to contribute significantly to their learning (Poria et al., 2005). Lifelong learning through play and hands-on activities is achievable from early childhood (Cuffy et al., 2012). Since children are beginners in life, they primarily learn through experience (Zhong & Peng, 2021). This highlights the importance of active engagement, play, and familial interactions during trips, often resulting in memorable and fun holidays (Carr, 2011). Thus, tourism-related learning is closely linked with experiential activities and playful interactions for children.

Investigating children and their learning experiences while travelling with their families, Haverly et al. (2020) stated that children learn most effectively when they find the subject matter enjoyable or connect with the context, prompting them to explore the topic further because they feel passionate about it. Children often remember their field trips from schooldays because they found it much more fun to be away from the classroom (Haverly et al., 2020). Other studies acknowledge that the fun and engaging context of tourism provides a valuable opportunity for play and experiential learning (e.g. Breen & Jones, 2015). The play-humour link has been noted by McGhee (2019) who states that the benefits of positive emotions created by humour are similar to the benefits of play for children.

The term 'fun' holds significance in various tourism studies involving children (Johns & Gyim thy, 2003; Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001; Seraphin & Yallop, 2020). For families, holiday experiences revolve around spending time together and engaging in fun activities, fostering positive memories (Sch nz l & Yeoman, 2015; Shaw et al., 2008). Activities that engage children in interactions are considered fun for both adults and children in the context of family tourism (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). This indicates that children like the euphoria they experience while being actively engaged (Johns & Gyim thy, 2003). Considering all these aspects, fun is deemed essential in developing tourism products and services tailored for children. For instance, Poria (2006) identified ten dimensions of fun for children, with empowering fun being one of them. Empowering fun involves a sense of accomplishment through learning while having fun (Poria, 2006), illustrating the type of engagement children can experience in tourism settings. Tour operators can offer children this kind of fun by utilising humour to enrich their learning experiences.

Observational studies of children have found many examples of different humour types created by children while playing (e.g. De Rossi et al., 2015; Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012; Loizou & Kyriakou, 2016). Young children's humour is associated with their playful attitudes and behaviours and may include teasing, clowning, acting incongruously, performing word-play, riddles, and telling jokes (Bergen, 2019). In their study, Fehrest et al. (2024) introduced a framework to illustrate the potential of humour to enrich children's learning within tourism environments. Tour operators and planners can employ these humour types to design fun activities for children and to create the playful environments they need to learn in.

Recent studies emphasise the significance of fun learning environments in educating and empowering children to take sustainability actions in tourism (Seraphin, 2020; Seraphin et al., 2022). However, there appears to be a deficiency in examining how children are perceived as individuals and participants in shaping fair and sustainable futures (Canosa et al., 2022). For example, Boluk et al. (2023) reflected on the role of children in driving social change within their communities. Incorporating humour into child-friendly educational programmes can offer a pathway to empower them while enabling enjoyable participation in engaging activities. In this regard, humour can serve as a powerful tool, especially when it comes to imparting knowledge about sustainability to young people. Humour often involves wit and cleverness, requiring listeners to think critically to understand it (Martin & Ford, 2018). When sustainability concepts are presented in a humorous way, it may encourage young tourists to think critically about environmental issues, societal norms, and their own behaviours.

Harnessing humour for children: practical examples from the tourism industry

Aside from the academic discourse, practical and deliberate uses of humour for younger tourists by the tourism industry are also noteworthy. These practical examples demonstrate that tour operators and tourism practitioners recognise the value of using humour for educational purposes. Table 2 illustrates these industry examples in terms of context, humour form, purpose, and expected outcomes.

Turtle talk with crush

Turtle Talk with Crush is a real-time interactive talk with an animated turtle character named Crush both at

Table 2. Tourism industry cases of using humour and their features.

Industry case	Location	Context	Humour forms	Purpose	Expected outcome
Turtle Talk with Crush	Disneyland Park, California; Disney World Resort, Florida	Informal	An interactive talk with an animated turtle character named Crush that provides creative, witty responses to the audience's questions	Amusement	Providing fun, educating children
Katherine Outback Experience	Uralla, Northern Territory, Australia	Non-formal	Authentic demonstrations of horse training and working dog skills entwined with live music and humorous bush tales	Introduces the Northern Territory's rich culture and history	Entertaining, educational, and humorous
Comedy Tours	Mareeba Shire, Atherton Tablelands and Cairns (North QLD local region of Australia)	Non-formal	A range of fictional, comical characters accompany the tour to stage a humorous performance	Promoting local features, i.e. people, heritage sites, history, products, etc.	Well-informed, entertained, and well-fed visitors
LaZoom Tours	North Carolina, USA	Non-formal	Tour guides who stage a humorous performance while on tour	Promoting educational and entertaining tours focusing on the region's history and children-centric comedy	Edutaining kids with wildly funny experience

Source: Eshach (2007, pp. 171–190) and Pearce (2005).

Disneyland Park, California, and at Walt Disney World Resort, Florida. The audience sees this turtle in the underwater world, though thanks to technology, it is only a screen.

Crush excels at quick thinking and producing humour, offering creative and witty responses to audience questions, and ensuring that each show feels fresh and distinctive every time. The Tripadvisor reviews of this show suggest that it is a popular and highly recommended show for children and adults. Since kids can ask anything, they have the opportunity to be entertained and educated at the same time.

Katherine outback experience

The *Katherine Outback Experience* show in the Northern Territory (NT) was awarded the Best Tourist Attraction at the 2021 Qantas Australian Tourism Awards and won the Best Tourist Attraction at the Brolga NT Awards three times. The show is owned by Tom Curtain, who is a multiple Golden Guitar winner and horseman. He introduces the Northern Territory's rich culture and history through demonstrations of horse training and working dog skills with live music and humorous bush tales. The show is amusing, educational, and humorous for all ages, particularly children.

Comedy tours

Comedy Tours in North Queensland, Australia is a group of tour guides that operate tours for children. These tours are focused on the local history, agriculture and heritage sites, and use humorous actors and performers to inform children about local facts in an 'edutaining' way. Their website states that travellers will leave the tours 'well-informed, entertained, and well-fed'. The use of humour

helps this tour operator to achieve their purpose of educating and informing children on the local history and culture.

LaZoom Tours

North Carolina-based *LaZoom Tours* also conducts historical tours with guides that use their sense of humour to provide a fun experience for families as well as field trips for students. They specifically offer children's comedy tours with an educational purpose which they state are 'wildly funny' (Lazzomtours, 2023).

Considering these practical applications and the limited understanding of children's experiences with humour, the authors propose three research opportunities in the area of children's experiences with humorous interpretive programmes in tourism:

- exploring children's reactions to different forms of humour in tourism settings,
- examining how children learn in tourism settings and the impact of incorporating humour and fun into educational programmes, and
- designing interpretive programmes with humour and play specifically for children.

Tourism practitioners can benefit from designing diverse humorous programmes for children, particularly with an educational focus. Tour guides can educate themselves on using humour and its various types and techniques, including funny storytelling, jokes, tricks of language or wordplay (Pearce, 2009).

Conclusion

The present research note emphasises the potential role of humour in influencing children's learning and highlights a research gap based on providing evidence from the field of

education along with practical examples from the tourism industry. As education scholars suggest, employing humour can create a positive learning experience (McGhee, 2019), attract attention (McGhee, 2019), and build social bonds between the instructor and children as well as peers (Nesi, 2012). These three aspects have been explored by Pearce (2009) and Pabel and Pearce (2016) in tourism settings as well. The authors aim to conduct further research to explore other possible aspects of humour specific to children and their tourism experiences.

The authors reviewed the current literature on different learning contexts in education and tourism. As non-formal learning environments, tourism sites can benefit from the use of humour via interpretation to enhance children's learning about and attitudes on conservation issues and to change their pro-environmental behaviour while visiting a site. Creating appropriate environments through the use of humour and facilitating active participation in social roles ensures that children achieve real participation (Dahlberg et al., 1999) which can lead to a better learning experience. Practical examples from the industry demonstrate the potential of using humour for educational purposes. This can take place either at cultural or natural tourism sites.

Finally, this research note highlights additional opportunities for tourism scholars and industry practitioners regarding the use of humour. The potential benefits of employing humour for children in tourism settings coupled with the identified research gap in the previous tourism literature, provide a rationale for future research and initiatives in tourist settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Farima Fehrest is a PhD candidate in Tourism at James Cook University. Her research focuses on the role of humour in enhancing children's experiences in tourism settings. Passionate about working with young tourists, she aims to enrich their learning through engaging and playful activities within the tourism context. Her work seeks to bridge the gap between education and entertainment, making tourism a more enjoyable and educational experience for children.

Jenny Panchal is a Senior Lecturer at the College of Business, Law & Governance at James Cook University (JCU), Australia, teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Her

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Anja Pabel is a Senior Lecturer in the Learning Design and Innovation Directorate at CQUniversity. She is currently Manager & Academic Lead of the Leadership and Innovation Courses. Her research interests are tourist behaviour, marine tourism, humour research, and student experience in higher education. In 2015, Anja completed her PhD in tourism at James Cook University, Australia. In recent years, she has become active in publishing work on student experience using qualitative data from social media. She has received awards for her commitment to learning and teaching.

Laurie Murphy completed a Bachelor's Degree at the University of Waterloo in Recreation and Leisure Studies. She then spent two years at North Carolina State University completing and Master's Degree in Recreation and Leisure and as a research assistant on a major project for the North Carolina State Division of Travel and Tourism where more than 12,000 visitors to the state were surveyed. Laurie was offered a lecturing position at JCU in 1991 and she completed her PhD at JCU on Backpackers and their travel decisions in 1997. She has successfully supervised many international and domestic students. Her research interest are regional tourism, tourism marketing, and sustainable development of tourism.

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