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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/quadrivium/vol4/iss1/10
How to Get Hit on the Head and Laugh About It: Humor in the Formation of Self

by Eric Mason

Students come to a university for many reasons, but rarely would one say that one of those reasons is to tell (or listen to) jokes. But I think humor can be much more central to students’ educational experience than they, or we, realize. This paper explores what role humor might play in the academic identities of university students. It does not call on teachers to begin telling jokes as a way of engaging students with course material. Rather, it asks teachers to recognize how comedic activities and identities that seem to undercut traditional classroom decorum can be necessary to intellectual development.

Admittedly, laughter has rarely received kind words from teachers. The Greek philosopher Plato thought it was not just trivial but ethically objectionable. Laughter to him represented not only one’s lack of reasoned self-control, it also represented one’s willingness to find amusement in someone else’s shortcomings, to take pleasure in vice. In the Republic, Plato claims that social leaders “must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction” (633). Aristotle, Plato’s student, was a little more lenient, stating that laughter could help educate youth by identifying undesirable social actions. Basically, if you saw people laughing at something, you then knew what not to do. Perhaps this is what Paris Hilton was thinking when she claimed in 2008 that she sees herself as a role model for young girls everywhere (www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,342708,00.html).

Anxiety over humor in the classroom may be related to the fear of teachers that, by invoking humor, they are somehow pandering to students’ basest instincts, rewarding tastes cultivated by a diet of shallow and cheery mass media infotainment. As Neil Postman warned in his book of the same name, if we do not address serious issues, we are simply “amusing ourselves to death.” But humor is serious, and Plato’s teacher Socrates knew this full well. Socrates was convicted and executed for undermining the religious beliefs of the state and corrupting Athenian youth. These
charges were strengthened by a depiction of Socrates in the play, “The Clouds,” by Greek playwright Aristophanes. In this comedic play, parts of which are positively slapstick, the Socrates figure embodies all of the vulgarity and atheism the actual Socrates is later accused of.

To audiences of such performances, Plato cautions that “you [will] take intense pleasure in buffooneries that you would blush to practice yourself, and do not detest them as base” (643). In Plato’s mind, we should object to comedy on moral grounds, as it teaches us to relish vice and scorn virtue. According to these rules, the fact that the audience laughed at the character of Socrates on the stage in Aristophanes’ play would support the accusation that Socrates was a teacher of vice. In a world where being the object of laughter can easily be construed as evidence of impropriety, teachers are perhaps reasonably worried that their attempts at comedy may not go over well. There really is no good time to discover that one’s boss has no sense of humor.

Education is meant to prepare you for life. But of course there’s two things you’re never really prepared for: twins. This joke helps to show a central element of humor: the unexpected. Effective humor often leads us down one path, and right when we think we know what’s ahead, it does something else entirely. Academics call this “humor from incongruity” (Morreal). Arthur Schopenhauer, in The World as Will and Representation, for instance, believed that amusement was caused by a disconnect between our abstract concepts and our sensory experience. This incongruity is thus of the intellectual sort, and such an approach assumes that thinking is necessary to laughter. As a teacher of writing, and in particular persuasive writing, I’ve found it useful to teach students about the value of incongruity, of anticipating, and inventing, the unexpected.

Consider the work of Monty Python, the famous British comedy group known for its intellectual undercurrents. Monty Python was made up of John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, Graham Chapman, and Terry Gilliam. Even if you’ve never seen their television series “Monty Python’s Flying Circus,” you may be familiar with movies such as Life of Brian, The Meaning of Life, or The Holy Grail. You may have even seen Spamalot!, the Broadway musical based on Holy Grail and a Monty Python sketch about the virtues of canned meat. What you may not know is that most of the Pythons attended the universities of Cambridge and Oxford in the 1960s, a time when philosophical heavyweights like Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Ryle, G. E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein taught at these schools and established the curriculum that is still taught in philosophy classrooms around the world. The Monty Python members studied medicine, law, history, and political science, and John Cleese has since lectured at Cornell University on philosophy and religion. Such learned backgrounds in the field of comedy defied normal expectations, especially at a time when getting a college degree was still a bit of a luxury. The anticipation of the unexpected even made its way into the classic line from Monty Python: “And now for something completely different.”

As a teacher of persuasive writing, the Monty Python clip I most often use in class is entitled “The Argument Clinic.” I use it because, not only is it entertaining, it provides a compact model of how argument proceeds through the various stases of classical argument (fact, definition, value, and jurisdiction), as well as how speakers invent new arguments to counter the rhetorical moves of those they disagree with. You can watch it below (the first four minutes are the main portion I use in class, although I occasionally use the remainder, in which one finds the lessons
for how to get hit on the head mentioned in this article’s title, to discuss issues of convention and
decorum): https://youtu.be/kQFKtI6gn9Y

For students, this clip provides a host of entry points into understanding argument. The two men
cycle through all of the classical stases of argument, approaches that would almost definitely
have been part of John Cleese’s legal classes. For instance, the client’s question “Is this the right
room for an argument?” is clearly a stasis of jurisdiction, and his later claim that “an argument is
a collective series of statements to establish a definite proposition” is clearly a stasis of
definition. There are numerous stases of fact, such as the teacher’s statement “I just told you,”
and value is invoked when the distinction is made between “an argument” and a “good
argument.”

What I think is most interesting aspect of the sketch, and most humorous as well, is the way in
which the logic of contradiction eventually collapses. For much of the sketch, the argument
teacher deftly steers the client towards absolute statements that can be argued about in a “yes it
is”/“no it isn’t” manner. Eventually, when the teacher denies that the client has paid him for
another five minutes, the client corners him with logic, claiming “Aha! Got you. ... If you're
arguing, I must have paid.” The “must” is telling here. The underlying logical structure, what
academics call a syllogism, is intended to ensure that the client is correct and that the teacher
must concede. The syllogism looks something like this:

Major premise: The teacher only argues when he’s paid
Minor Premise: The teacher is now arguing.
Conclusion: The teacher has been paid.

Conclusions built upon a universal premise that was always and thus could not be argued against
were the ideal type of argument in the view of philosophers such as Socrates and Plato. But the
teacher’s response is both effective and unexpected, opening up a new possibility beyond the
simple yes/no of the previous discourse. He claims that he could be arguing in his “spare time.”
Unfortunately, the client then leaves, right when the teacher provides the greatest lesson: the
unexpected is just as effective in argument as it is in comedy. In most argument situations, the
person you are arguing with will have prepared a refutation of your expected argument, so it is
often only by inventing a new argument that your opponent has not anticipated that you will
prevail.

Besides not always being effective, relying on strict logic to corner one’s audience is related to
the broader point I want to make about humor. As John Morreal writes, the reliance on logic is
“largely responsible for the personal humorlessness of so many Western philosophers. They take
everything too seriously because they take themselves too seriously, and they take themselves
too seriously because they take their selves too seriously” (261). The possibility of identity
development is thus related to how we view the role of humor and logic in argument. Part of the
reason for being in school is to develop one’s selves, to learn to play the roles, not only of
student, but of scientist, artist, or whatever type of professional and person one hopes to be. As
David Bartholomae writes in his well-known article, “Inventing the University,” students in a
university do not develop a single way of thinking or writing, but “must learn to try on a variety
of voices and interpretive schemes—to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and as an experimental psychologist the next” (273).

The question remains: does humor contribute to the development of these voices? Of these selves? I believe it does. Robert Brooke has written that students often engage in what he calls “underlife”—those “behaviors which undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation” (141). It is how individuals, even when required to adopt a certain role, defy expectations by acting in unapproved but not entirely disruptive ways. This would include, for instance, how a student shows she is not just a student by making jokes that reveal she has a more complex personality beyond the expectations of the classroom. In many cases, “telling jokes’ behind the teacher's back” is actually students’ “way of applying the class concepts to their own late-adolescent interests” writes Brooke (145). Brooke claims that the identities developed by students through such underlife activities are “more powerful for real academic success than the traditional identity of the successful student” (141–42). If this is true, we should be less anxious about laughter in the classroom, and more tolerant of jokes (even those made at our own or our discipline’s expense) that engage in the word play necessary to both comedy and critical thinking. Acting up in the classroom is not necessarily unproductive, nor are tangential concerns always distracting from the work of intellectual development. As Brooke reminds us, once you understand education as identity formation, and recognize the role of underlife in this process, “activities which aren’t ‘on task’ become as important as activities that are, for besides the task itself, there is also always the formation of identity” (144).

Students come to the university to become something, and that something is not a student. Humor is one way in which students can explore other identities, engaging in underlife activities that defy expectations and expand the possibilities of discourse beyond the simple “yes”/“no” discourse of un-engaging classrooms. The ability to invent a good punch line or comeback is not unrelated to inventing a thesis or finding evidence for it. We need to prepare students for the unexpected, and enable them to exceed or evade expectations. I have to agree with the client’s claim in the Monty Python sketch that “Argument is an intellectual process.” But humor is an intellectual process as well, and I hope we encourage our students to engage in both.

Works Cited


