

“A HORSE WALKS INTO A BAR . . .”: THE RHETORIC OF HUMOR AS CONSUMMATE COMMUNICATION CONTRIVANCE

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“... and the bartender says . . .” This is how I begin the class, and I’m giggling because

I know the punch line, and I know that my students probably won’t get the joke, or understand the history, significance, and beauty of it.

“... why the long face?” I’m in a full-out laugh now. My students are laughing too—laughing at me. That’s okay. I throw back my head and bray like one of James Thurber’s malevolent female characters. When I tell them I’m a Thurber character, they don’t make the connection to Thurber’s “cat-bird seat” reference, so I’m laughing more. I’m in that cat-bird seat, and my very old joke sets up this semester’s plan: students reading, analyzing, and writing about humor; and the *piece de resistance*—writing and delivering their own 5-minute stand-up routines. Yes, this semester would be the communication trifecta: reading, ‘riting, and the ‘rithmatic (O.K., really “rhetoric”—but give me a break, I’m on a roll here!) of stand-up, a “near-perfect” blending of language, rhetorical strategies, semantics, audience analysis, pragmatics, history, and philosophy. Plus some really good jokes.

This essay discusses the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of an advanced composition course based on the rhetoric of humor, and through the use of students texts demonstrates how the emphasis on writing, revising, and preparing for the stand-up worked to un-do my “near-perfect” communication contrivance. In their obsessive quest for getting their stand-up routines right, my students did engage in the audience analysis, semantic, and rhetorical strategies I was hoping for, and a few student texts displayed a keen sense of communicatory glee, but too many students lacked the thorough discipline of writing about humor that transcends just getting the jokes right. Pedagogically, the semester’s writing emphasis suffered.

But the jokes were terrific.

All good jokes start with a narrative. So this is how the germ of the idea for this semester started. I was in the last stages (I hoped not throes) of putting my tenure file together, and my bleary-eyed-bordering-on-nervous-breakdown objective was to try to get as far away from thinking about the tenure process as possible. I’m a strong proponent of the concept of trying to find humor in just about all situations, so I figured that a semester of humor would be exactly the tonic I needed for what I was sure would be a dyspeptic wait for tenure news. Thus, the rhetoric of humor. I gave the course the oh-so-pedantic branding of “rhetoric” to remind myself (and students) about the seriousness of advanced composition. Here’s another old joke: a conference packed with psychologists who study humor is noted for being the most boring of all the boring conferences. I knew from experience that even when you start off loving a topic, studying it often kills its joy. Remember how excited we all were about our dissertation topics? I didn’t want to murder the mayhem of humor, so I treaded lightly with the theory of humor. Although I assigned the text *The Language of Humor* by Alison Ross, I also knew from experience that students would, at best, skim it. I did, therefore, what we all do—I explicated the text for them, bringing in the considerable (one must blow one’s horn) research I did on humor (and thereby almost killing the joy of it for me). I also used many of the text’s exercises.

In the spirit of all academic writing, let us begin with theory. Ross says that there are four cogent theories to explain why we find something funny: it relieves tension (witness the number of taboo and bathroom jokes that we all say we hate, but almost secretly love) (63); it involves the incongruity of the unexpected: Question to W.C. Fields: “Do you believe in clubs for young people?” Answer: “Only when kindness fails” (7); it contains an ambiguity of double meanings, thus breaking the nor-

mal expectations of language (27): Woody Allen: “I was thrown out of college for cheating in a metaphysics exam; I looked into the soul of the boy sitting next to me” (29); and it reinforces the superiority of one person laughing at another (53): African-American comedian Dick Gregory once said that the “definition of a Southern moderate is a cat who’ll lynch you from a low tree” (60).

Note on the use of old jokes and comedians: I had to explain who W.C. Fields and Dick Gregory were. Some knew Woody Allen, but didn’t know about his early career as a writer of jokes for others and then for his own stand-up. Indeed these explanations posed yet another sad point of my career. The things these kids don’t know boggles the mind. Am I channeling Sid Caesar?

Yet, to my glee, my students were following me. And laughing at the jokes. I invited them to tell their own jokes to illustrate the four theories. (I must pause here to mention that at the beginning of class, I discussed the ground rules for the class: there was no censorship of any kind [truly]. They could tell any joke, no matter how offensive, but I reminded the would-be joke tellers that they would, in the long tradition of joke-telling, live or die on the response from the audience. There was one hard and fast rule: no jokes about me. Another factoid: I began the class with 10 students; when I told them about the stand-up requirement, one student didn’t return for the second class, but another, learning *about* stand-up requirement, took her place. At Sacred Heart University, with a disproportional female-to-male population, this class had exactly five members of each gender.)

And so we began. Each class started and ended with jokes—all kinds of jokes; all kinds of good and bad jokes; all kinds of disgusting and silly jokes; all kinds of racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic jokes; all kinds of jokes that bashed all kinds of religions; all kinds of political jokes; and all kinds of sex and relationship jokes. In the middle of the joke-a-thon, I would slip in a little compositional theory. Even with all of the jokes, and the looming spectacle of the stand-up, my students wrote five essays; they also wrote and revised and practiced their stand-up routines throughout the semester.

But the one writing that students seemed to enjoy the most was a completely impromptu exercise prompted from the other text we read, Gene Weingarten’s and Gina Barreca’s *I’m with Stupid*. It all started with Chapter Five of *I’m with Stupid*. Gene and Gina are doing their usual fighting, but this time, they’re fighting about how men and women write differently. Gene and Gina decided to write a joint novel (Weingarten and Barreca 50). Sounds like a joke itself. Their plan was to write alternating paragraphs, and the rule was that each of their paragraph’s content must build from the previous paragraph (51). Hmmm. Maybe I’d jumble things up a bit and take advantage of my evenly balanced gendered playing field. The class would write a short story, alternating paragraphs—boy/girl/boy/girl—but they must write in the “voice” of their opposite gender, and each paragraph must build on the previous one. I chose the starting line-up. I had no idea

where this would wind up; in fact, I expected the kiddos to hate it, because it was, after all, MORE writing—an exercise that even wasn’t listed on the syllabus.

Sandy’s Pedagogical Theory #1: Never turn your back on a class.

Sandy’s Pedagogical Theory #2: When a class *can* surprise you, it *will* surprise you.

They loved the exercise. They not only loved writing in the voices of the opposite genders, but they turned their writing into parodies of each other’s voices, personalities, and phobias; they trucked in such huge sexual stereotypes that Freud would be proud, and maybe blush. They proved Gene and Gina were kind of right—men and women *can* write together—especially if they can bash each other over the head with their writing. This exercise also created enough material for me to analyze the sexual stereotypical semantics of rhetoric, should I be so inclined.

I thought we’d stop after one example, but they wanted to keep going. Think about this: when was the last time YOUR students wanted to write MORE?

Defense exhibit A: The short story is begun by Pam, then Brian, then Christine (who gave me permission to use their writing and to create aliases for them). Each student was trying to write how they thought the opposite gender would write.

Caution: Profanity ahead.

Here’s Pam writing like she thinks a boy would write:

“A night to remember ... or not ...”

“Dude I was fucking hammered last night.” Freeman said to me as we were walking down the halls of Sacred Heart ...

“Yeab, I know, you fucking made an ass out of yourself singing and dancing on the bar, then you puked all over that hot freshman chick with the nice ass.” Freeman smiled, so proud of himself... .

Here’s Brian writing like he thinks a girl would write, and continuing Pam’s story line:

“Listen,” Freeman said, “Even if you can’t remember her name, you should at least give her a warm smile and wave ‘hello’ politely.

“I guess you’re right bro,” I replied. I hadn’t considered that I might hurt the poor young girl’s feelings if I simply ignored her... .

Here’s Christine in boy-writing-mode:

But then I saw her hot friend walking behind her. She was all curves, long lean legs meant to wrap around my hips, a rack that make me drool, and an ass that was begging to be squeezed. And I got that warm tingly feeling just imagining all the ways I wanted to fuck her... .

I think you get the picture. Had I created a monster? Ten monsters?

Back to theory. In their scatological short stories, my students neatly summarized the four theories of humor: taboos, incongruities, double meanings, and laughing at others. They were brilliant. But could they also accomplish

the other little peculiarities of advanced composition, like style, audience analysis, and research? We English faculty can be such sticklers for the rules. Now, their essays. And then on to some more theory, which helped prepare them as they wrote and revised their stand-ups.

They wrote five essays. Plus the four impromptu short stories. Plus the stand-ups. If you look at numbers, just numbers, these kiddos wrote a lot. Really. Yes, a few managed to combine both the art of writing with the discipline of rhetoric. Yet, too many students lacked the thorough discipline of writing about humor that transcends just getting the jokes right.

And, I regret that I cracked down on the sometimes-less-than-terrific-writing with my usual zeal. Tenure-wait jitters, maybe. I did, however, give more Cs than I had given before in an advanced composition class.

Five essays. Each, except #3, included research; each required the usual complement of drafts, workshops, revisions, and conferences with me.

Essay #1—the interview/analysis of advancing a theory (one of the four) of humor. Tell a joke to two people of opposite genders and analyze their responses.

Pedagogical talking points: primary research, an abiding understanding of the theory to be advanced, and analysis of results.

The good news: Some had never conducted primary research, and this kind of primary research, telling a joke to a selected group of people, would be a little tricky. More good news. Students had to truly understand which of the four theories of humor they would be testing with their jokes.

The bad news: Their analysis was, at best, scant. Question: "Why is the joke funny?" Answer: "It's funny because it's funny." No follow up.

In Amber's essay, she chose theory #4—a joke is funny because it shows the joke teller's superiority over people. She writes: "I chose a simple joke... The joke is 'Yo momma is so fat, her blood type is Ragu.'... This joke may not be the funniest joke in the entire world, but I found it hilarious because... it's simple and stupid."

When she tries to analyze why her audience found the joke funny, she writes: "This joke... makes the listener feel inferior to the person reciting the joke... In this joke, it's even funnier because it's about someone's mother. I don't know why it's funny to make fun of someone's mother, but somehow it's become very typical." She doesn't delve into the psychology of the insulting-mother/wife/husband/etc.-joke, but concludes that the insult-joke is one kind of joke that works.

It's the first essay. Relax, I told myself.

At this point in the semester, students were also writing and revising their stand-up routines. A few students per class period would try-out their working scripts. Then they would revise. Writing and more writing. For a class of mostly average students, these kids were writing like mad.

Essay #2—analyzing, evaluating, researching a comic's style. Any comic. Nice range of choices, from Phyllis

Diller to Robin Williams to Dane Cook to Sarah Silverman to Daniel Tosh. We Googled and YouTubed comic routines, we drew up a list of categories/criteria to evaluate (for example: the use of self-deprecating humor, physical humor, political humor, sexist/racist humor, family humor, observational humor, the use/abuse of profanity, and the use of props). And we laughed.

Pedagogical talking points: research, analysis, evaluation.

Good news: They researched well.

Bad news: Their categories/criteria often blurred, and students reshaped the problems I found in Essay #1: "Why is this comic funny?" "Because he's funny."

Lindsay's essay about Phyllis Diller, however, stood out as a well-researched and analyzed piece of rhetoric. She begins: "Phyllis Diller is the original female standup comedian. She is the first woman to perform standup comedy and make it her living. She has a style that cannot be copied or replaced. She is truly her own woman. Phyllis Diller is successful because her comedy appealed to everyone, males and females, alike. Phyllis Diller is a comedy icon."

As Lindsay concludes her essay, she succinctly summarizes the appeal of Phyllis Diller: "Phyllis Diller can teach a great deal to young comics today. She is an icon because her comedy was incredibly smart and she changed with the times. She did not do the same joke for forty years. Diller understood that the world was changing and she was able to change her comedy while still keeping her comedic integrity and morals intact... Phyllis Diller never lets her audience down. She always delivers."

OK, thought I. Only the second essay.

Essay #3—writing their own funny story, a creative writing assignment. This assignment seemed to work. Although this essay coincided with the scatological short story writing, most students played it safe and wrote funny, family-based stories.

Pedagogical talking points: know your audience, write to your audience.

Good news: The writing was improving.

Bad news: No ground-breaking comic geniuses were emerging.

Be patient.

The semester progressed. Students continued to write, practice, and then re-write their stand-up routines, and occasionally I was able to toss in some theory. Here I turned to D. Diane Davis's *Breaking Up (at) Totality* and her exegesis of the theory of kairos, the gift of knowing just the right time to say just the right thing in order to produce just the right effect (Davis 29). Timing is the quality that makes or breaks the stand-up. Timing—that twinkle in the comic's eye—is when all the pieces of a joke join to crack-up the audience.

To the rhetorician, kairos joins that nifty Greek line-up with logos (logic), ethos (ethics), pathos (emotion), bathos (sentiment), and nomos (norms and customs)—terms we use to both explain and/or obfuscate our own writing. To

the budding comedian/rhetorician, *kairos* is the linchpin used to make fun of those other Greek terms. So, *kairos* involves both the comical and the rhetorical. For the comic, *kairos* is everything. For the audience, *kairos*—the timing of when we laugh—can have strange outcomes.

Davis says that the rhetoric of laughter is all about cracking up (22), being caught in that great cosmic sweep of outside forces which manifest themselves in bursts of uncontrollable and irresistible laughter. She references the classic “Mary Tyler Moore” episode where Mary laughs unexpectedly and hysterically during the funeral of Chuckles the Clown, who met his fate in a particularly bizarre manner: while dressed as a peanut during a parade, Chuckles becomes lunch for a hungry and confused elephant (22). At the funeral, Mary loses it. She breaks up laughing. She cannot control her laughter. She becomes the victim of *kairos*—she succumbs to *kairotic* laughter, which “arises from the overriding (non-rational) realm of play” (29). My students laughed at the 1975 episode.

When we are struck with *kairotic* laughter, Davis tells us, we are overwhelmed. Our sense of reason is lost in the laughter, and the more we try to stop laughing, the more we laugh. (See Mary Tyler Moore.) The laughter takes over, and becomes reason (*logos*) in and of itself. We, quite simply, break up. We cross those hard-kept borders (well, most of us keep them hard) of respectability and restrictions about what is proper and what is not. When we succumb to *kairotic* laughter we celebrate the non-rational joy of the seduction of laughter—the performance and irresistibility of laughter. And laughter will always win.

Unless you’re one of the (thankfully) very few people who are completely humorless. Or any number of university administrators. But I digress.

How to teach timing? Actually, it’s (forgive me) rhetorical. Timing is rhythm. Rhythm is choosing the right word for the right situation. So is rhetoric. I did *not* tell this to my students, of course. Why ruin a perfectly good pedagogical moment by reminding them that it was a perfectly good pedagogical moment?

The writing teacher in me rejoiced. My students were writing essays, writing their stand-up routines, and after practicing them, they revised. Practice. Just like revision. God’s way of telling us that we can have do-overs in life. My students wrote and revised and practiced their stand-ups up until the day before the stand-ups were to be performed. In this regard, they were acting just like the stand-up comedians we studied. In fact, in Jason Zinoman’s online *New York Times* article, “A Stand-Up Joke is Born,” he writes about up-and-coming comic, Myq Kaplan’s almost obsessive reworking of joke material. He writes that for the comic, “every word matters.” So true.

I must take another pause here.

Recall that I said that there would be no censorship (except for jokes about me). Well, in my zeal and temporary insanity, I forgot where I was. I was here. At a Catholic university. How about academic freedom, you say? OK. That’s fine. For me. What about the students? Would they worry about being offensive? Worry about being scolded? But there was no stopping this train I’d boarded.

Back to the essays.

Remember, timing is everything. I’m going to keep you hanging with regard to the students.

Essay #4—analyzing and evaluating a comic strip.

Pedagogical talking points: analysis, evaluation. They’d done this kind of rhetoric before with the comic’s style; now they had a chance to perfect their skills.

Good news: Better analysis; better writing. More in-depth research. Interesting range of comic strips, from “BC” to “Zits.” Again, we drew-up a list of categories to study: the number of panels in strips, the purpose of strips, the theory behind strips, audience analysis, and the longevity of strips.

Bad news: Research wasn’t at the upper-division level. I read them my version of the rhetorical riot act.

But again, one student’s love for “Ziggy” resulted in a well-crafted essay. Pam writes: “Ziggy’s unlucky, single-celled cartoon life reminds its audiences of all the ways the world can knock you down, but also of the importance of acting like Ziggy and never losing sight of all the world’s wonders. Ziggy’s soft, loveable form has been enchanting readers since the early 1970s, and this is because America loves this underdog character who never loses his good spirits despite all of his troubles and short fallings.”

In Pam’s analysis and evaluation of the appeal of Ziggy, she concludes that “Ziggy’s audience is the whole world. He is not a champion for human causes or a superhero, but he is a loveable loser. He is a small figure in a great big world. He never ages, however time changes around him. The artist includes bits of popular culture in the strip. Tom Wilson [the artist] said once in his website that ‘I see Ziggy evolving and changing with the times, and he always has,’ and this allows the audience to laugh at ourselves and our styles... . Ziggy reminds us that we mustn’t let humanity make us bitter when there are so many great wonders in life.”

Essay #5—the last one; the big showcase essay—the rhetoric and psychology of humor as demonstrated in the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of a comedy movie before 1960.

Pedagogical talking points: all of the above talking points, plus argumentation (arguing their positions about the film).

Good news: It was the last essay. Nice range, from *A Night at the Opera* to *Some Like It Hot*.

Bad news: Still too many so-so essays.

But Chris’s essay neatly summarizes what he’d learned throughout the semester. In writing about *Some Like It Hot*, Chris’s rhetorical strategies at work include asking rhetorical questions; describing and narrating important scenes from the movie to remind audiences of why he thinks it’s a classic, and apt analysis and evaluation of the movie’s place in the world of comedic films.

Chris writes: “Gangsters, men in drag and Marilyn Monroe, what more could you ask for in a movie? Not much, and that is why *Some Like It Hot*, is said by some, to be the greatest comedy ever made. The film combines mobster film violence with some of the best slapstick com-

edy to ever hit the big screen. Its dynamic comedy duo of Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon has set the stage for countless films in the decades that have followed, and this is one movie that has certainly endured the test of time."

Chris continues: "When it came out in 1959 *Some Like It Hot* was advertised as the movie 'Too hot for words' (Dirks), but what did this refer to? It could have been referencing a number of things, the jazz, the sex, the costumes, the characters, or maybe even all of these things. The ambiguity of this slogan can also be applied to the movie."

In his analysis and evaluation of the movie and its influence on today's movies, Chris quotes Roger Ebert: "The movie has been compared to Marx Brothers classics, especially in the slapstick chases as gangsters pursue the heroes through hotel corridors.' However, not like the 'slapstick' we find in modern comedies. Although this early slapstick has influenced movies of today, modern films have bastardized it. They push the limits on what is funny and what is flat-out wrong. With the advent of reality television our society finds more entertainment in shock value... Though some may find this style of humor funny it never would have been successful 50 years ago, and it is unfortunate that there is a demand for it today. We have strayed away from the entertainment value that these films were built upon. Some movies no longer make the viewer think, but almost seem to dumb them down."

And now, ladies and gentlemen, the stand-ups.

I scheduled them for 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. A safe time, I thought. Most faculty are long gone. More importantly, so are most administrators.

The venue—the little room we laughingly refer to as the "Faculty Lounge."

And at show time, the little room was packed to capacity. Students spilled into the halls.

The "master of ceremonies" (the friend of a kid in the class) performed his own little stand-up to get the audience in the mood, and since this fellow wasn't in my class, he was thereby free to flaunt my #1 rule—no jokes about me. So this fellow, for what seemed like forever to me, entertained the class with a few too many Sandy jokes.

Then it happened.

Each of my students took turns wowing the audience with the rhetoric of humor, communicating to them how humor was the consummate communication contrivance, and demonstrating the four theories of humor in performances that included sex, roommates, hometowns, drunken friends, illegal activity, more sex, and other assorted activities performed in PG to X rated language.

The audience was stunned. I was at the back of the room, and students nervously craned their necks in my direction to witness what they thought would be me shutting down the show at any second.

I didn't.

And as each student comic performed, the audience continued to be convulsed in kairotic laughter. Their laughter began as flat-out, out-of-control fits. Hands flew to their mouths to stop the escaping spasms of giggles.

Heads continued to jerk in my direction. I could imagine the audience thinking: "Where am I?" "Am I hearing what I'm hearing?" "There's a professor in the room!"

Then, when the audience realized that the show was to continue, when they saw that the campus police weren't going to raid the place, they relaxed. They stopped watching for my reaction. The audience quite simply gave into the force of kairotic laughter.

And my kiddos. They practiced what they had learned.

I was so proud. They performed their routines. My worries about them were unfounded. In fact, my students worried more about getting the jokes right than about getting a scolding about the risqué language.

My students tell me that they had fun, oh, and they learned a lot, too. Don't you love schmoozers?

Good news: I didn't get fired.

Bad news: I actually miss those kids. It's like your first time...

I'll end with a student's lines from one of the short stories: "Shit," I said aloud, "What the hell am I gonna do now?"

OK. I'm not quite finished. This course is really three courses.

One course, without the stand-up routines, is appropriate to advanced composition, a course in which students truly analyze the rhetoric of humor. I'd add to the essay topics discussed here, as well as TV sit-coms and political cartoons. I'd focus on the writing, as would befit a composition course.

Another course, with the stand-up routines, would be a special topics communication course, a course beyond the standard introduction to public speaking or even advanced public speaking. Students would still write, of course, but the pedagogical focus would be the ways in which the rhetoric of humor combines both written and oral communication. Students would analyze comics' styles in four mediums: texts (there's a slew of books out there by working comics), CDs, DVDs, YouTube; each analysis requires different, yet similar pedagogical strategies, and each demonstrates how the particular communication transcends its medium. I would also have students write jokes for others – a practice that even the most successful of comedians still employ. And, of course, the communications course's end-of-the-semester free-for-all: the stand-up routines.

Recently my university eliminated both freshman composition and public speaking and combined them into a first year seminar course that's taught by Arts & Sciences faculty, a kind of WAC on crack. (This is another story/paper, of course.)

A third course could be a hybrid of composition-public speaking. The first time I taught the first year seminar, I revisited, revised, and restructured the rhetoric of humor to work for a freshman audience. I tweaked the assignments. Instead of the Ross, Weingarten and Barreca texts, I used *Laughing Matters* by Marvin Diogenes, and in place of individual stand-up routines, I let them choose partners for three and four person sketch routines. To prepare stu-

dents for their sketch routines, we YouTubed lots of “Saturday Night Live” and I did a mini-lecture about the long history of sketch comedy. But this course still retains the essential elements of that advanced composition course.

My freshman performed their sketch routines in a large classroom on a Friday night last December. This time I invited all freshmen and first year seminar professors. This time the room was crowded, but not packed. This time one other faculty member showed up to support my kiddos.

Yet, it is the stand-up routine or its cousin, the sketch routine—that thing, that force unto itself—that blends the rhetorical power of language, semantics, pragmatics, history, philosophy, politics, interpersonal relationships, race/class/sex, and keen audience analysis—that is the consummate communication contrivance.

Comic Myq Kaplan, as Zinoman reminds us, worked and reworked his material. I had worked and reworked my course, and I rejoiced at my students’ success, but still, as Kaplan ruefully noted, “nothing was more fun than the first time.”

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