

Teacher as Stand-Up Comic

Stephen J. Sullivan*

Abstract: Classrooms and the stand-up stage share much in common. Both involve a presenter who is trying to keep an audience engaged, both involve a combination of scripted material and improvised interaction, and both involve risk on the part of the performer. Significantly different, however, is that the classroom teacher has a pedagogical goal, educating not merely entertaining his audience. As such, the teacher is not a stand-up comedian, but may make use of some of the techniques of the comedian for pedagogical purposes.¹

Keywords: Stand-Up comedy, pedagogy, self-deprecation

The performative dimension of teaching is well known; indeed teachers—perhaps especially at the university level—often joke about what they take to be the affinities between running a class and playing a lead part in a stage play. There is now a growing literature on the joke telling and other uses of humor that many teachers routinely employ in the classroom. In this paper, I would like to share some relevant experiences and reflections in my capacity as a university instructor or professor for more than two decades, especially in ethics, and to relate those experiences and reflections to this literature. (I use ‘teacher’ in the title to cover both kinds of position. Presumably, much of what I have to say is also pertinent to high-school teaching; indeed several of my introductory-ethics classes have included gifted students from local high schools. But, see Neuliep (1991), for potentially significant differences between high-school and university teaching.)

In my childhood and even during college, I was terrified of public speaking, except—oddly enough—as a student taking a class. Consequently, I struggled in graduate school to overcome this great fear. As a new teaching assistant and instructor in that setting, I discovered to my surprise that I actually enjoyed the attention of my students, especially when I was able to make them laugh or smile, and that my somewhat offbeat sense of humor was not as impaired as my family had led me to believe. Over the years of (mostly) full-time teaching philosophy at a variety of universities,

¹ I am very grateful for the insightful comments of Peg Cronin.

* Stephen Sullivan. Department of English and Philosophy. Edinboro University, USA.
SULLIVAN@edinboro.edu.

I have come to take for granted my regular use of humor in the classroom, but have rarely stopped to reflect on its pedagogical value or personal meaningfulness for me. This paper is my first attempt to do so methodically.

In this paper, I propose to address the following topics in separate sections:

- The pedagogical usefulness of humor in creating a comfortable learning environment and making important ideas more memorable.
- The value of humor as a means of sharing one's personality and to that extent one's identity with one's students.
- The special value of self-deprecating humor, especially in the light of inevitable comic failures.
- The use of pre-existing humor about philosophers.
- The use of humor in tests.
- Humor that amuses most faculty but should rarely if ever be used in class.

What I will not do here is to cover classroom cases in which I have students focus on humor or irony in an assigned reading. In the final section, I will offer some concluding reflections.

PEDAGOGICAL USEFULNESS

I am somewhat old-fashioned about the first day of class: despite the common recommendation to use it as an opportunity to hook students on the course, I mostly treat it in nuts and bolts fashion. That is, I work through the most important parts of the syllabus in order to give students a clear idea of what to expect from the course and of what I expect of them. I enjoy teaching and I hope my students will enjoy the way I do it, but I have no interest in giving them the impression that I am offering a “dog and pony show” designed to entertain them.

That said, I try to inject some humor into opening day in all of my classes, and I do so right at the start. Just before I call the roll to ascertain who is present and to learn names, I ask the students to let me know (during roll call) if they have some preferred nickname—“within reason.” Then I explain the point of the caveat: that I once had a student who wanted to be called ‘Big Daddy’ (pause), and I told him there was only one big daddy in the class and it wasn't him. This true story always gets a laugh, and I believe it not only lightens the mood (especially in classes

with nervous first-semester freshmen) but sends the message early on that we might just have some fun in the course.

Some other examples, such as the following one, involve student participation. Each term I give students in all my classes the option of earning extra credit by taking part in either or both of two contests. (The contests are linked to Halloween in fall term and April Fool's Day in spring term.) One is a costume contest in which the class itself determines by voting who has the best costume, using whatever idiosyncratic standards of value the students care to employ. The other is a (gender-neutral) bad-tie contest, similarly judged. The point is not just to relax the class after mid-term (by which time many students will be worrying about their grades on one or more tests) but to do so in a way that the class—and the instructor!--finds amusing.

Finally, humor can be pedagogically useful in making important material easier for students to remember. Whenever I teach the ethics of Immanuel Kant and cover his “rigorist” principle that an action is morally praiseworthy only if done from a sense of duty, I illustrate the principle by telling a story about my early post-undergraduate secretarial employment in midtown Manhattan at Metropolitan Life. I was walking south on Fifth Avenue late one Friday afternoon after a hard week's work, and when I was about halfway cross the six lanes of 42nd Street I realized that the light had turned against me. (Here I have the class imagine insane cabdrivers on 42nd Street revving their engines.) I was about to hotfoot it for the curb when I noticed that there was a little old man walking very slowly beside me who seemed oblivious to his peril; indeed, he seemed to be largely unaware of anything going on around him. At that point (I tell the class) I decided—for some reason or other—to escort the man the rest of the way, one painfully slow step after another. I even held my arms above my head so that the cabdrivers would definitely see us; and we did indeed make it safely to the curb. (In class I actually imitate the street-crossing action to make it more vivid.) Then, after noting that I evidently did my Kantian duty of beneficence by helping a person in dire need without grave risk of harm to myself, I ask the class to consider three alternative scenarios: (a) my motive was compassion or sympathy; (b) my motive was self-interest (e.g., to feel good about myself or have a story with which to impress future students); and (c) my motive was a sense of duty. We discuss the reactions Kant would have to these scenarios: my action, though right, deserved no moral praise whatsoever in (a) and (b), though it did in (c). And through shows of hands in response to questioning, I have the class give its own assessment of the action.

Where's the humor, you may wonder? Well, as I tell the class, I'm not quite done with the story. I continued walking south on Fifth Avenue, and before long I developed the disturbing sense that I was being followed. I hastened my pace, and so did my apparent pursuer. (This was 1979, I mention, when New York City was a considerably more dangerous place: was he a mugger? Pickpocket? Lunatic?) A rather large man tapped me firmly on the shoulder, and when I turned around in fear and trembling he said to me, "you did a very nice thing back there." Then he walked briskly away. "New Yorkers," I tell the class: "you never know." Sometimes students laugh, sometimes they just smile. But I'm fairly confident that they remember that story, and I am hopeful that they remember rigorism as well. And there are indeed studies linking pedagogical humor to improved retention and other cognitive benefits (Suzuki and Heath, 2013; Banas. J., Dunbar, N., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S.-J., 2011; Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, and Solomon, 2011).

PEDAGOGICAL SELF-EXPRESSION

I find that one of the joys of teaching is that it enables me not only to get to know many interesting people but to enable them to get to know me as person: something of both my character and my personality. When I talk of sharing my character I am referring not to moral didacticism (which is inappropriate for multiple reasons) but to habitual modeling--as best I can given my own limitations--of the values of respectfulness, thoughtfulness, and fairmindedness that seem to me central to a liberal arts education. But it is my personality that is more clearly relevant here, for it more clearly includes my sense of humor (especially when my jokes are spontaneous). What motivates my use of humor in the classroom is partly my desire to express who I am to others with whom I am or will be in sustained interaction. When I cannot consistently do this--when, that is, I have no personal rapport with a class--I find teaching much less fulfilling.

To be sure, not every student is interested in getting to know me as a person. And that's fine; indeed, I feel the same way about some students. (Putting aside such feelings is one of the challenges of teaching.) But I think many students are more open to learning from me and from their other teachers when they do get to know us personally. I am not alone in this; as one important study notes, "[t]eachers perceived as immediate by their students" use humor to "reduce distance" (Frymier, Wanzer, and Wojtaszyk, 2008, p. 273).

SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR

Some students—even in college--expect and want their teachers to stand far above them, to function on a pedestal. I am rarely if ever comfortable playing such a role; I am not a philosophical sage and seek no one's reverence. I suspect that one reason I indulge in self-deprecating humor is precisely to discourage such expectations. Another is that many students really do seem to appreciate seeing their teachers as mere mortals who are not all that different from them, or at least from what they could become. (According to a study by James W. Neuliep, this is the third most common reason given by high-school teachers for using humor in the classroom [Neuliep, 1991]). A third reason is that even—perhaps especially--in a profoundly demanding subject such as philosophy, a subject in which pomposity is a tempting hazard for professors and students alike, one is well-advised not to take oneself too seriously. Some education scholars worry that self-deprecating humor could undermine the credibility of the teacher (Alatalo and Poutianien, 2016, p. 75), but that has not been my experience. I suspect that if one already comes across as a knowledgeable, competent teacher, then—extraneous factors aside--one's use of self-deprecating humor is unlikely to raise credibility issues.²

One example of self-deprecating classroom humor that comes to mind is from a costume contest some years ago in which a female student of mine easily won first prize by dressing up as, well, me: whiskers, eyeglasses, button-down shirt, khaki trousers, sensible shoes. When I am encouraging my students to take part in the contest, I tell them of her costume and repeat what I said to her afterward: that she looked better as me than I do. (Also that a photo of the two of us side by side after the contest went viral.)

Making fun of my own underdeveloped drawing skills is another source of classroom humor. When I teach such upper-level subjects as moral epistemology and philosophy of science, I contrast foundationalist and coherentist theories of knowledge or justification. It's easy enough to draw a building in order to depict the structure of knowledge according to foundationalism. But invariably when I draw Otto Neurath's famous ship or boat (in which the planks, representing beliefs, are interdependent rather than hierarchical) in order to depict coherentism, it ends up

² Unfortunately, extraneous factors do sometimes appear. Peg Cronin points out that I speak in this paper from the perspective of a heterosexual, cisgender, white male who is more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt than a gay, transgender, black, or female teacher. I think she is right, but I will not venture into the relevant literature except to mention Banas, Dunbar, Lisu, & Rodriguez, 2011, pp. 125-126 on gender.

looking like a hat. We get a good laugh out of that, and I hope it helps them remember Neurath's ship better.

Making fun of my own sense of humor itself is another form of self-deprecation. Sometimes I tell my students that I went into teaching so as to have a captive audience on which to inflict my jokes. Indeed, I am at least as mindful of my unsuccessful comic efforts as of my apparent successes. (A student told me recently at the end of her final exam, "I really appreciated the course, and sometimes the humor." Ah, that 'sometimes'....) I still vividly recall my earliest effort at injecting humor into the classroom. I was a young graduate student at Cornell University teaching my very first course, a freshman writing seminar on Religion and Morality, and I was quite nervous at the outset. I wanted to explain to the students how to address me given that I did not yet have a Ph.D., and found myself saying with a straight face something like the following: "Don't call me Dr. Sullivan; you may call me Mr. Sullivan or Steve, just don't call me Mr. Steve." One student guffawed loudly, but the rest of the class didn't crack a smile; and the student who guffawed dropped the course before the next class. Clearly this was not a good way to start a course--or a career! But when students have gotten to know and like a teacher, they tend to be tolerant of his or her occasional comic failures, which may even strengthen their bond with the teacher. Indeed, in a recent study Sonja Bieg and Markus Dresel found that self-deprecating humor "showed positive effects on student perceptions of interestingness, vividness and care and on students' intrinsic motivation" (Bieg and Dresel, 2013). (See Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin, 2010 for additional, mostly supportive discussion of the pedagogical use of such humor.)

PRE-EXISTING HUMOR

I often enjoy the philosophy jokes, cartoons, and stories I have encountered online or received from friends, but I find that they seldom generate amusement when I tell share them in class. "How many philosophers does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Depends what you mean by 'lightbulb.'" Ha ha. "How many atheistic existentialists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Two: one to change the bulb, and the other to observe how the lightbulb symbolizes an incandescent beacon of subjectivity in a nether-world of cosmic nothingness." Whatever....I rarely tell such jokes any more and certainly not early in the term when most students are still getting to know me. Sometimes I'll pass around a cartoon and then make a copy for anyone expressing interest, but interest tends to be limited (as in the case of the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon I have shared about

the special wrongness of cheating on an ethics test). In courses in philosophy of religion I often share Mark Twain's classic maxim, "Heaven for climate, Hell for company", which induces some smiles. (For a thoughtful study of Twain's use of humor, see Berkove, 2010.) But there is one purportedly amusing story about the philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser that I persist in sharing whenever I teach Beginning Logic, despite getting mixed results at best. In case my audience today has not heard it, I will tell it again. (The fact that I always enjoy telling it is of course entirely irrelevant.)

Many years ago, the eminent ordinary-language philosopher J. L. Austin came to the Columbia University Philosophy Department to give a talk on logic and language. At one point, he noted that in English, two negatives make a positive and added that two positives don't make a negative. From the back of the room came the droning voice of Professor Morgenbesser: "Yeah yeah." (Obituaries, 5 August 2004).

Most students just don't get it. But a minority always do, and somehow that helps make it worthwhile to tell in class. Or so it seems to me.

HUMOR IN TESTS

Not all classroom efforts at humor need be done orally. Occasionally I insert humor into tests, herewith a few instances.

What is perhaps my favorite example is also from Beginning Logic (a course that I work hard to make more enjoyable than its subject matter suggests!) and concerns ambiguous claims and the distinction between syntactic and semantic ambiguity. (Syntactically ambiguous claims have more than meaning due to their structure or word order, semantically ambiguous ones do so due to their including a word with more than one referent.) I ask students to identify the two meanings of the ambiguous claim 'The professor needs to tell more amusing jokes' and to indicate whether the ambiguity is syntactic or semantic. Students who truly understand the relevant concepts usually find the answer promptly. The two meanings are, of course, that the professor's jokes aren't amusing and need to improve and that they are amusing and so he should tell more of them; the ambiguity is syntactic. Rare is the student, I suspect, who does not think of the instructor when he or she grapples with this question. Whether this is a good or bad thing—or neutral—is up to readers to decide.

In large ethics classes with multiple-choice tests, I sometimes include the following (“optional”) question at the end of the last such test; it doesn’t of course count for any credit.

If you have to answer one more philosophical question, you will do which of the following?

- (a) Run screaming from the room and the university, never to return.
- (b) Join a posse after class to hunt your professor down while muttering ‘Git a rope.’
- (c) Turn your back on the downtrodden and the oppressed and plan on a philosophical career.
- (d) Huh?

Here is one final test-related example. Before every final exam I write the following sentence on the board: “Please-please-*please* don’t contact me about your grade before grades are turned in next Tuesday unless you *really really* hate me.” Perhaps this lightens the mood a bit, at least momentarily, and it does seem to deter students (albeit imperfectly) from sending annoying emails while I’m grading piles of exams and calculating final grades. (For evidence that humor in testing can ease the pressure of test-taking, see McMorris, R.F., Urbach, S.L., and Connor, M.C., 1985.)

UNSUITABLE HUMOR

There are many kinds of humor that are inappropriate or unwise to use in the classroom, as pedagogical common sense and educational scholarship tell us (see, e.g., Wanzer, et al, 2006). Teasing one’s students is risky unless done affectionately to students with whom one is already on good terms. (Coming from a family of teasers, I confess I have learned this first-hand, and have felt obliged to apologize to students whose feelings I might have hurt.) But in this final section I want to focus on a kind of humor that many faculties very much appreciate but that is generally unsuitable for the classroom. I am speaking of undergraduate “bloopers” or “howlers,” which I

have long collected for myself and colleagues and which I borrow from others. Here are a few examples:

“I think polygamy is fine between two consenting adults.”

“Since my Catholic school days, I starve to be the best Catholic I can be.”

“Transgender people say that they are the gender they are because of the thing between their ears, not because of the gentiles between their legs.”

“David Hume discovered that there is some connection between cause and effect.”

Why is such humor generally inappropriate for the undergraduate classroom? Arguably it conveys an open contempt for students that is both deleterious to the learning environment (Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008) and ethically questionable in itself. In my experience, one of the things they most dislike is being talked down to or treated disrespectfully by faculty. (Indeed, in the “pet peeves” portion of the first or second class of the semester, in which I ask students to tell me what they don’t like to see instructors do, they sometimes make precisely this point.)

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I think this paper points to the following conclusions.

- (1) The pedagogical use of humor can be a valuable tool in the classroom.
- (2) It can also be personally rewarding for the teacher.
- (3) Some kinds of humor are more likely to succeed than others, though this may depend

on the teacher and the class.

(4) There are limits to the sorts of humor that should be used in classroom settings.

I would add a further claim, though I have said nothing so far to defend it explicitly:

(5) No teacher should feel obliged to play stand-up comic in the classroom.³

For (1), (2), and (3) depend so much on individual personality. If one is deeply uncomfortable with using humor in the classroom then one is ill advised to use it (a point also stressed in Bieg, Grassinger, & Dresel, 2017, p. 31). But some comic experiments may be helpful in assessing one's level of discomfort! If I had decided against a teaching career because of my fear of public speaking, then I would have missed out on a career that has overall proven more fulfilling than I ever imagined it could be. Likewise, a teacher who decides from the outset against using humor in the classroom just might be missing out on a valuable and fulfilling experience.

References

- Alatalo, S. & Poutianien, A. (June 2016). Use of humor in multicultural classroom [sic]. *Israeli Journal for Humor Research*, 5(1), 65-79.
- Banas, J., Dunbar, N.E., Lisu, S.-J., & Rodrigez, D. (2011). A review of humor in educational settings: four decades of research. *Communication Education*, 60, 115-144.
- Berkove, L. (2010). Twain's rhetorical bag of tricks. *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3 (22), 27-41.
- Bieg, S. & Dresel, M. (2013). Student perceptions of teacher humor forms and their relationship to instruction characteristics, learning indicators and student motivation and emotion. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Retrieved from <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/270158746>.
- Bieg, S., Grassinger, R., & Dresel, M. (2017). Humor as a magic bullet? Associations of

³ Special-education teachers may be an exception: see Skarbel & Shepherd, 2013.

different teacher humor types with student emotions. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 56, 24-33.

Frymier, A.B., Wanzer, M.B., & Wojtaszczyk, A.M. (2008). Assessing students' perceptions of inappropriate and appropriate teacher humor. *Communication Education*, 57(2), 266-288.

Hackathorn, J., Garczynski, A.M., Blankmeyer, K., Tennial, R.D., & Solomon, E.D. (2011). All kidding aside: humor increases learning at knowledge and comprehension levels. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(4), 116-123.

McMorris, R.F., Urbach, S.L., & Connor, M.C. (1985). Effects of incorporating humor in test items. *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 22, 147-155.

Neuliep, J.W. (1991). An examination of the content of high school teachers' humor in the classroom and the development of an inductively derived taxonomy of classroom humor. *Communication Education*, 40, 344-355.

Obituaries: Professor Sidney Morganbesser (5 August 2004). *The Independent*. <http://independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/professor-sidney-morganbesser-550224.html>.

Retrieved 2 February 2018.

Skarbel, D. & Shepherd, T.L. (2013). Knock, knock: Who's there? The funny teacher who? Exactly! *Israeli Journal for Humor Research*, 4, 57-77.

Suzuki, H. & Heath, L. (2014). Impacts of humor and relevance on the remembering of lecture details. *Humor*, 27(1), 87-101.

Wanzer, M.B., Frymier, A.B., & Irwin, J. (2010). An explanation of the relationship between instructor humor and student learning: instructional humor processing theory. *Communication Education*, 59(1), 1-18.

Wanzer, M.B., Frymier, A.B., Wojtaszczyk, A.M., & Smith, T. (2006). Appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor by teachers. *Communication Education*, 55(2), 178-196.