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# What College Professors Could Learn From Comedians



By Whitney Braun

At the age of twenty-five I was hired to teach my first college course. Since I was a grad student myself at the time, and accustomed to sitting through long lectures delivered by monotone professors that yielded little information I actually retained, I was determined to be different. I resolved that when I stood up at the podium at the front of the lecture hall I would find a way to think outside the box and create a new style of teaching that would resonate with my students. I told myself I would find a way to break the cycle of reading from bulleted lists on a PowerPoint followed by a quiz on the minutia found in the footnotes of the textbook. Yes, I would find a way to make learning...as cliché as it sounds...fun! But how?

My moment of discovery came late one night when a friend and I were quoting lines from Saturday Night Live skits and lamenting the fact that it was so easy for us to remember word for word the dialogue spoken by every Will Ferrell character yet we could not remember the pertinent information from our professor's lectures that we so desperately needed to know for our future careers. I knew, sadly, that my ability to quote Frat Pack films was never going to land me a job. My friend said casually, "When stuff is funny...even if I am not that interested...I somehow remember it. It just sticks in my mind whether I want it to or not."

Right then, at 2:00 am, in my bean bag chair, is when it occurred to me that maybe the mechanism of comedy was the key. Perhaps I could step up my lecturing game by studying

comedy writing. But could I make the topic of bioethics, the class I was hired to teach, funny? Could I make end of life decisions, abortion, and stem cell research elicit laughter? Well, I was going to give it the old college try.

I immediately enrolled in comedy writing classes at the Upright Citizen's Brigade Theater in Los Angeles. It was a revelation. I learned the art of the punch line, the craft of political satire, the structure of the advertising parody, the timely topical tease and most importantly how to write for your audience. The main take-away from my time at the UCB was that the best way to make someone laugh is to make them comfortable enough to feel uncomfortable. You lull them into a state of comfort and then when their guard is down you start probing and looking to hit nerves. For example, it is standard practice to turn down the lights in a comedy club to make people less self-conscious, and when they are less self-conscious they are more likely react to the jokes.

We discussed the German concept of *schadenfreude*, which translates as "harm-joy," the psychological response to misfortune that leads to laughter. This is why some people always laugh at someone tripping and falling. This immediately took me back to what I had learned in freshman philosophy regarding how Socrates felt that honest philosophy makes you uncomfortable because it makes you judge yourself.

If I could make students feel comfortable enough in class that they would actually listen to what I had to say, then perhaps I could encourage them to get uncomfortable and question what they knew, question themselves and learn, truly learn.

Comedy writers craft jokes that stick in people's minds. There is a reason people can still quote Richard Pryor's standup routines forty years after they were delivered. Good jokes have social staying power because they lodge in the memory and the reason they lodge in the memory is because they force us to question the boundaries of our own ethics and social beliefs. And in that sense, shouldn't a student in a college course be forced to do the same? Shouldn't a student be lulled into a state of comfort and then challenged to critically analyze the beliefs they hold? As for the factual information a student must remember, couldn't it be delivered to them in a way that lodged in their psyche through the art of storytelling?

After my stint at the UCB I adopted three rules for myself in the classroom:

1. Turn down the lights...put the spotlight on yourself and not on the students until they are ready.
2. Make them laugh...lecture as though you are telling a funny story that makes them uncomfortable enough to chuckle.
3. Hit a nerve...when you have made them comfortable enough to get uncomfortable, then engage them with the information you want them to learn and make them question what they think.

Now please understand that I am not suggesting that this is the only way to educate. There are myriad ways to teach others and I have had wonderful professors throughout my education who employed entirely different tactics in the classroom. I am simply sharing what has worked for me. Teaching bioethics can be a remarkably depressing topic. Few people are banging on the door to discuss euthanasia and the ethics of infertility treatments with eager smiles but these are topics we must discuss and there are very specific and absolute bodies of information and facts associated with these subjects that students moving into the healthcare profession must learn and retain.

What if those of us who teach morally and ethically difficult subject matter took a page out of the books of the professionals who make people emotionally uncomfortable for a living and saw comedians as a different type of educator? Perhaps comedians, rather than being jesters, are fellow educators with a methodology we could learn from.

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