

JUST ADD TECHNIQUES?

“Are you having a laugh?” Stand-up comedy and teaching in higher education in a ‘global age’.

The word ‘global’ does not immediately summon up, as it once did, geographical images; actually, our Western images are completely opposed to the natural, primeval specificity of ‘geography’. Technology, especially email and the internet, dominate *our* understanding of the word ‘global’. We know that anybody, anywhere, with internet access, can receive information from Google, or Wikipedia on any subject in the world. Additionally, while much inventive and exciting work is being developed by teachers in HE (Web CT, pod casts, wikis, etc) there is a considerable danger that students will become increasingly passive consumers of ‘an education’, rather than active and engaged learners – excluded, rather than included.

I have been an academic for twenty years; for ten of these years I have also worked as a stand-up comedian - this paper will establish several links between the two activities, and will suggest that teachers have much to learn from comedians about interacting with the people in front of them so that the experience is unique and unrepeatable.

‘Teachers need to keep a sense of play in teaching...teaching is an improviser’s art’

Kenneth J. Eble

It is not uncommon to hear academics referring to teaching as a ‘performance’ – what is uncommon is to encounter any further analysis of what *kind* of performance it is. I think what most teachers mean, certainly younger, or newer, ones, when they refer to themselves as ‘performers’ is that they perceive themselves as actors, pretending to be

more knowledgeable than they actually believe themselves to be. There are, no doubt, large numbers of academics who would empathise with this observation by the English stand-up comedian Alexi Sayle: 'one of the comedian's tricks is to pretend to be much more erudite than you are. Lenny Bruce used to do that all the time' (Double 135). If academics are indeed 'performers' then the one branch of performance they are actually connected to most closely is stand-up comedy: *only the teacher and the stand-up comedian rely on the continuous interaction between themselves and the people in front of them.* Comedy clubs and seminar rooms always have this in common: they both fill up from the back. The difference between all other performers (dancers, actors, musicians...) and then teachers and comedians is that we require the people in front of us to also 'perform'. For the seminar to work, to be considered a success, we need the students to contribute, to actually impose themselves and their views so that they help shape the dynamic and the direction of the seminar; just as good stand-up comedians will always interact with and respond to the particular audience in front of them. In this, we teachers and comedians are together all alone. No actor or dancer wants to see the audience declaiming their own soliloquies or performing their own pirouettes. Teachers are *not* actors; they *are* knowledgeable; one lesson they could take from stand-up comedians is to be less cautious.

Elaine Showalter cites Camille Paglia on the relationship between stand-up comedy and university teaching:

In her memoir of her Birmingham professor Milton Kessler, Paglia describes him as a master teacher: "With the improvisation of great Jewish comedians like Lenny Bruce, Kessler would weave in and out of the class his own passing thoughts, reminiscences, disasters." Paglia and Kessler are not the

only teachers to mention stand-up comedy as a model. “The basic equipment for a classroom teacher is the same as for a stand-up comedian”, writes Lionel Basney (Calvin College); “a striking voice, a direct gaze, and the inner freedom to say more or less anything that comes to mind” (33).

But what everybody neglects to observe here is the principal characteristic of stand-up comedians: their insistence on interacting with the people in front of them.

When comperes in comedy clubs ask questions of the audience they are performing three tasks simultaneously: they are demonstrating their improvisational skills, they are providing the other comedians with information on the audience demographic, and, perhaps most importantly, the compere’s questions assume a proleptic role – they dramatise for the audience that stand-up comedy is, above all else, interactive; the audience is an integral part of the performance. One of the principal reasons comedy clubs are so popular (and it is worth noting that students are the single biggest audience for live comedy in Great Britain) is that the interaction with the audience that is fundamental to live comedy means the audience know the night is unique; unlike a film, or play, or recital, it can never be done in the same way again, even if all the performers were on the same bill on another night. I believe students value something similar in a seminar.

Although I am a stand-up comedian, or perhaps because I am a stand-up comedian, I have no interest here today in the subject of comedy itself. I cannot better the advice to teachers given by Kenneth Eble: ‘Use humour if you can, but only if you can do it well’. (60) When we talk of “keeping students engaged” in higher education, we insist on seeing this engagement as always enthralling and enjoyable for the student. But engagement and even enjoyment are not always accompanied by smiles.

It is a common mistake to assume that all stand-up comedians are only interested in getting a laugh, all the time. Many of the most highly respected acts on the contemporary British live comedy circuit are renowned for provoking audiences, for irritating them, for insulting them, for, basically, forcing them to think. The stand-up comedian and academic Oliver Double writes 'Some of the best comedians don't just use their tricks of sharing and rapport to get laughs and keep the lurking hostility at bay, they also use them to challenge some of the audience's most basic assumptions' (Double, 2005: 138). Similarly, if I have to provoke or irritate my students to get them to think for themselves, I am happy to do it.

Performing stand-up comedy has influenced my teaching in three principal ways: Preparation, Performance and Curriculum Design. I want to talk principally about Preparation and Curriculum Design, mainly because the performance aspects are better suited to a workshop. I have run staff development workshops linking stand-up with teaching at many UK universities and I'm happy to talk about performance later with anybody who is interested.

In *Theory and Resistance in Education*, Henry Giroux writes:

The active nature of students' participation in the learning process must be stressed. This means that transmission modes of pedagogy must be replaced by classroom social relations in which students are able to challenge, engage, and question the form and substance of the learning process. Hence, classroom relations must be structured to give students the opportunity to both produce as well as criticize classroom meanings...a critical pedagogy must provide the conditions that give students the opportunity to speak with their own voices (202-3).

Prior to performing stand-up I had been content to *teach* students, but no interest in helping them to *learn*. It was only after performing stand-up comedy that I saw my job as a teacher was not to inform, or instruct, the students; the most valuable part of their learning wasn't in the passive receipt of the material I had been unthinkingly offering them, but in their engagement with it, and with me. My role was not to inform them, but to respond to them. For me to respond, though, they needed to act. To get them to do this, I needed to develop strategies that would ensure they 'performed' in the seminar themselves. Therefore, I became committed to encouraging continuous student response, and to frustrating or blocking any of their attempts to sit in a seminar as passive consumers who were receiving an education. I learned from performing stand-up and watching talented comedians what I now think of as 'strategies of omission'. When I started I left nothing for the audience to fill in for themselves, because even though I believed I was focused on them, in reality I was not thinking about them at all; what I really cared about was how they responded to *me*. If they anticipated a punch line and laughed, I should have stopped there: the audience would have been flattered by their own ability to anticipate it, while I would actually have received a big laugh without saying anything. But I would ruin it by thinking (actually, not thinking) that I had to say the punch line, and I would get back, at best, a muted, anti-climactic laugh. If someone heckled me and got a big laugh I was not confident enough to acknowledge the wit gracefully and give him the laugh, perhaps even asking for a round of applause; instead I always had to have the last word; again, my reward was usually, and quite rightly, unenthusiastic. Eventually I learned that not saying something, not doing something, on stage are not necessarily derelictions of duty – instead they can be the result of experience and discipline. The

most significant impact of this on my teaching was that I realized I prepared far too much for seminars, in common with many other academics.

I now saw that students valued interaction more than information. They don't want to see all their teachers always sitting at a desk, always working from a lesson plan; when they do see this, students come to the unflattering conclusion that last year and the year before, the same issues were discussed in the same order, irrespective of who was in the class, or what anybody had to say. There is no space here for the students to believe that the teacher is there to teach *them*, uniquely; instead the students understandably believe that only subjects will be taught in this class, not people.

Because I do virtually no preparation, I never have a 'lesson plan' but I do have a very broad, yet perfectly sufficient, agenda. While encouraging the students' comments, I always stay alert for an opportunity to introduce the handful of issues that determined the text's presence on the course, but then these issues are seen to emerge organically – not perceived to have been imposed by me upon the students. For example, if the set text was *The Great Gatsby* I would do no more preparation for the class than remind myself why I wanted the students to read it, then write down three or four reminders: 'American Romanticism', 'The Jazz Age', 'Fitzgerald's/narrator's rhetoric'... Each of these issues opens out into a much bigger issue, or set of issues. The advantage of working with the students in this way is to lessen preparation for the teacher and, more importantly, it allows the seminars to function as opportunities to address issues that transcend the specificity of an individual text or subject.

Professional comedians do not learn their material, their 'sets', and then always deliver it in that exact order, irrespective of the actual circumstances on the

night. As Dave Gorman points out ‘what you do isn’t *say those words in that order*; it’s work with them (the audience)’ (Double 107). Professional stand-ups constantly develop performance qualities such as spontaneity of thought and flexibility of response; these aspects of their job are no less important to them than the writing of new material. Many academics, however, are far more concerned with constantly adding to their material (their knowledge) than they are in thinking about the manner in which this material is going to be offered to their students. But just as comedians can move material around in the set, or drop it completely, depending on the response they are getting, or spontaneously improvise on something somebody has said, so too teachers should be able to shift their material, or drop it, depending on the response of their students. They should also be able to improvise, but too often their knowledge resembles a ‘set’ only insofar as it is ‘set’ in stone. Often academics lack flexibility or spontaneity, and this is only to be expected. While academics like to see themselves as bolder, livelier; as the swashbuckling, unconventional members of the professional classes, this is largely unfounded. Academics can be as cautious as solicitors and as niggardly as accountants, and, again, this is not surprising.

The entry level requirement now, in the United Kingdom and in America, for our profession is a Ph d. As a direct result of the profession’s obsession with research, caution is the cardinal virtue in academe. This caution, of course, is entirely appropriate for academic research: footnotes, sources, references; phrases like ‘it is possible to suggest’, and ‘it is not unreasonable to assume’ are inevitable and necessary. But this professional caution is not necessarily an advantage in the seminar; in fact, it is quite the opposite, particularly with respect to ‘preparation’. Many academics only manage to combine research with teaching, two completely opposed practices, by making sure that before they go ‘out there’, they are thoroughly

well prepared; often, in fact, far too well prepared to be of any service to their students. Some teachers are relentlessly, oppressively, spirit crushingly too well prepared for seminars. Academics hate waste, especially of their own efforts – if they have spent hours preparing for a class, then the students will certainly be the recipients of all that preparation. Such teachers do not seem to apprehend the illogicality here: their students are listening to the results of a highly labour intensive, professional practice called ‘seminar preparation’, but they are listening to this ‘preparation’ *during* the actual seminar, even though the very word ‘preparation’ should establish an emphatic separation from the more important activity which follows it. Some academics just read their script; hours and hours of diligent, and pointless, even counter-productive, work must have gone into writing it. They avoid looking at students because they do not want to be asked a question they are afraid they won’t be able to answer, and the seminar is rigid and unaccommodating for the students. This is the extreme result of the teacher following too rigidly schematic a lesson plan, written as though the whole point of the seminar is what the teacher says, not the students. Academics take for granted that the more they know about a subject, the better they can ‘teach’ it. However, many teachers also talk of how one of their most memorable seminars was on a subject they felt under-prepared to discuss. Larry Danson says ‘When I think of the best classes I’ve taught, I always think of classes I taught a long time ago, when I was dealing with material that was fresh to me. And I shared a sense of excitement in being, quite literally, one step ahead of the students (Showalter 45).

But ‘it is possible to suggest’ that, really, such classes go well because of the teacher’s lack of specific knowledge and subsequent inability to impose themselves on the discussion. The seminar cannot be a space for teachers to tell the students

everything they know about the subject, so the students are forced into active engagement. The students' understanding of the subject, the aspects of it that they found interesting, incomprehensible, irrelevant, ...not those the teacher believes are important, now become the substance of the seminar. I am in favour of strategically using ignorance as a deliberate teaching strategy. Knowledge is the point of teachers; as a profession we find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine that our ignorance could ever be beneficial to the student. But sometimes the less we know, the more the students might learn. It can be very productive for students if their teachers are disciplined enough to do no preparation at all for a class. You haven't read the book you are about to 'teach'? So what? You're an academic; you've read thousands of books! It just so happens you haven't read the one set for today. Oliver Double writes that a very large number of professional comedians 'realize that, with experience, preparation becomes unnecessary, even counterproductive...the fact that comedians can reduce the amount of preparation they do and still perform as effectively (or possibly even better) when they are faced with an audience, is a testament to the skills they have acquired' (256).

It is not necessarily the case that teachers prepare far too much for seminars for the sake of their students; it is just as likely that this excessive preparation is done to protect themselves *from* their students. Obviously, extensive preparation has an understandable appeal for academics: it seems the 'right' thing to do, thus appealing to the dutiful; and it also seems to offer protection from being exposed as a fraud, so also appealing to the cautious. This neat economy of purpose is hard to resist. But it is worth resisting. When a comedian who regularly performs 20-40-60 minute sets does a 10 minute spot, the extra material is 'there' in every aspect of the performance, except the actual utterance. Academics, too, have years of reading and writing behind

them when they go into seminars, and, if this is self-acknowledged, specific preparation can be kept to a minimum. All academics, even the very newest, know much more than they give themselves credit for. Academics do not need any more *knowledge* to be good teachers; what many teachers need to do is re-appraise the value to their students of knowledge-based teaching, and then cultivate such performative qualities in themselves as flexibility and spontaneity. Of course, such cultivation is not easy, especially for academics. Steven Jacobi, an academic who performed stand-up comedy on the ‘open mic’ circuit in London for several months, eventually realized the enormous importance of flexibility and spontaneity to the stand-up comedian and writes: ‘‘Living in the moment’ was, of course, precisely what I was brought up, educated, trained and conditioned *not* to do. Anything but. Generally speaking, I avoided the moment and often took great pains to do so’ (91). Academics are often needlessly nervous about abandoning their script to engage directly with their students, choosing, as the safer option, knowledge transmission. However, teachers are not in the seminar room to teach subjects; their job is to teach students. Larry Danson observes of teaching ‘Being in the now, present, at this moment, thinking out loud, rather than being bound to overwhelming notes, is absolutely essential’ (Showalter 17). Similarly, the English stand-up comedian Tony Allen writes ‘There’s no getting away from it. The secret of comedy is good timing. Unfortunately, it’s not a technique that can be learned in front of the bathroom mirror; it’s an intuitive state of grace that has to be discovered, an elusive abstract lubricant that exists in the eternal now and can only be found by taking risks and playing around with a live audience’ (19).

Until recently, during my twelve week nineteenth-century American Literature course, my colleague and I taught a four week option each; she offered 'American Romance' and I offered 'Slave Narratives'. Then, in another of my classes, 'The History, Theory and Performance of Stand-Up Comedy', I discussed the comic 'rule of three' with students, suggesting that the reason it is always three people who go into a bar: an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman, for example, is that three is the most economical number for this type of joke. One person's behaviour could be idiosyncratic, but two set up a pattern that the third then disrupts for comic effect. It occurred to me that this 'rule of three' could be applicable to the curriculum itself. I had recently read Joycelyn K. Moody's essay 'Personal Places: Slavery and Mission in Graduate Seminars' and I was very well aware that her demand that teachers of African American Literature be 'proficient' meant that I was precisely the type of teacher she disapproved of, strongly:

What exactly does *proficiency* for the African American literature classroom entail? Not "blackness," not an African phenotype. But also not simply a background in generic American Literature, if such an entity exists. The instructor who would pick up, say, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and presume to select a few items for inclusion in a syllabus, on the basis that they are, after all, literature, insults both the traditions from which the selections emerge and colleagues long trained in holistic historical and theoretical contextualizations of those traditions (Hall 29).

This was clearly a scolding but after my realization that the comedy 'rule of three' could be applied to the curriculum itself, I was so far from thinking that I should

learn more about all slave narratives, as well as their ‘holistic historical and theoretical contextualizations’ so that I could teach them ‘proficiently’, that I began to wonder if I even needed as many as four of them. Within any genre two texts is sufficient to set the pattern; the students would almost certainly learn more by comparing two slave narratives with another kind of writing than they would by adding two more. Accordingly, I then set just two. For week three I set William Burroughs’ *Junky*, and instead of asking the students to read a fourth text I asked them to spend their normal weekly reading time thinking through the extracts and their implications and comparing and contrasting the nineteenth-century slave narratives with a twentieth-century addiction narrative. It was strikingly clear to me that virtually all the students in this group had learned more and thought more and talked more about the two slave narratives that they had read, because they had been asked to compare them with *Junky*, than previous cohorts had done having read four of them. Actually, this was another of the many lessons I have been given by stand-up comedy: repetition is rarely effective either on stage or in the seminar ; it just eats up your time and prevents you from doing better material.

REFERENCES

- Double, O. (2005) *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*, London: Methuen.
- Gibbs, G and Jenkins, A (eds). (1992), *Teaching Larger Classes in Higher Education : how to maintain quality with reduced resources*. London: Kogan Page.

McMahon, A. (2006), October 6). Sleuth who rose up family tree. *The Times Higher*, 29.

Savin-Baden, M. (2000) *Problem-based Learning in Higher Education: Untold Stories* (Buckingham, Open University Press/SRHE).

Wilkie, K. (2004) *Becoming facilitative: Shifts in lecturers' approaches to facilitating problem-based learning*, in M. Savin-Baden & K. Wilkie (eds) *Challenging research in problem-based learning*, (Maidenhead: SRHE and Open University Press).