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You Must be Having a Laugh? Humour to Transgress

Sunny Dhillon
Bishop Grosseteste University, UK

Abstract *This article argues for the encouragement of incongruous humour in Education Studies (within higher education) learning environments. Examining three competing paradigms of humour, and reworking practices from second language learning, it is argued that incongruous humour may facilitate critical interrogation of concepts, policies and practices often taken as supposedly necessary, rather than necessarily contingent. Following the precepts of immanent critique, taken from the Frankfurt School of critical theory, merged with Nietzsche's advocacy of child-like play, it is argued that incongruous humour may transgress norms in generative, as opposed to compensatory, manner. Eschewing an attempt to create a toolbox of humorous techniques to employ in the Education Studies learning environment, this article presents a philosophical enquiry into the transgressive and critical role of incongruous humour amidst the contemporary neoliberal university apparatus.*

Keywords: Adorno; comedy; critical theory; Critchley; Freud; humour; immanent critique; Nietzsche.

Introduction

I argue that humour, and in particular, satire, is a mode of critical thinking that may help learners (be they students, staff or otherwise) fulfil Brookfield's (2017) reading of the potentiality of education; humour can help "to identify; and then to challenge and change, the process by which a grossly iniquitous society uses dominant ideology to convince people this is a normal state of affairs" (Brookfield, 2017, p.vii). As a lecturer in Education Studies at a Cathedrals Group university, most learners I interact with meet widening access criteria, and often have an emotionally fraught association with formal education. Following a social constructivist framework (Vygotsky, 1978), in my sessions, I also explicitly recognise that as a

Corresponding author: Sunny Dhillon
Bishop Grosseteste University, UK
Email: sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk

community of practice (Wenger, 2001), we are all involved in the reproduction of education under neoliberal governance (Harvey, 2005). I argue that humour, and in particular, satire, is able to stoke, and channel, justifiable righteous indignation with the status quo into creative and critical thinking.

In a typical language learning lesson plan, the warm-up activity is designed, in part, to elicit humour, and thereby lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1986). The intention of such a warm-up is to thus foster greater possibility of open dialogue. Adapting such practice in my Education Studies sessions, humour through dialogue as an intersubjective practice (Critchley, 2002a), may help participants to defamiliarise the familiar, and reveal contingency where there previously only appeared to be necessity (Adorno, 1973).

Amidst a wider context of increasing social inequality, rapid privatisation of public services, and ongoing uncertainty in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains the constant possibility to employ humour in the learning environment to discuss how we can possibly confront and alter material conditions that create and reproduce myriad challenges in our lives. Recognising the tenets of Embodied Cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999); namely, that learning is not merely related to the body, but that the very essence of learning comes from our physical embodiment (or “thrownness” into the world, as Heidegger (1967) would have it), humour exploits “the gap between being a body and having a body”; in effect the “physical and metaphysical aspects of being human” (Critchley, 2002a, p. 43). Therefore, as a bodily explosion, laughter from humour is a powerful process for changing one’s being in the world; in effect, it is a manner of opening oneself up to new possibilities.

Whilst the well-being agenda in higher education (and other formal levels of education) focusses nearly exclusively on the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject, and a concomitant need for the subject to look after and/or fix themselves to align with the status quo (Dhillon, 2018), I argue that humour via satire can help channel self-depleting energies in the service of wider societal change (Critchley, 2002a). That is, I take earnestly Biesta’s proclamation that “education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire” (Biesta, 2014, p.1).

Where the possibility of higher education as an atelic activity remains the preserve of a minority with the economic means and social capital to forego the job market, for most students and staff alike, the days of *Educating Rita* (1983) have long since passed. Instead, (UK) higher education has undergone increased bureaucratised procedures for knowledge production and exchange (e.g. REF, TEF, KEF) in the name of efficiency and accountability; in essence, pragmatic instrumentalism over critical theory (Horkheimer, 1992)—the what is clear, the whys are not. As practitioners, administrators and students, we are all—witting or unwitting – participants. Notwithstanding the lack of an Archimedean standpoint to diagnose and suggest infallibly progressive courses for action to steer the direction

You Must be Having a Laugh?

of higher education, there remains the possibility of immanent, reflective, critique (Antonio, 1981). This may be enacted by:

- recognising our embodiment in learning environments;
- exploring the power of humour and laughter as a generative—as opposed to merely compensatory—element of higher education learning;
- continually foregrounding—for ourselves as practitioners, as well as members of the communities of practice of which we are a part—the contingency of any given state of socio-political affairs, as opposed to their apparent necessity.

Limitations of humour as a potent mode of critical thinking will be discussed through highlighting the risk of a type of humour that merely domesticates and results in a pacified populace. Furthermore, though this article will highlight the importance of humour in higher education learning spaces, it is only a philosophical enquiry, and whilst it can argue for particular types of humour as desirable in fostering critical thinking, it will not provide a checklist of what a practitioner ought to enact. Indeed, to do so would fall back into an instrumental mode of knowledge exchange (Horkheimer, 1992). Rather, following the adage that “critique that does not start with the answers to its own problems may hold a better chance of realising useful answers” (McArthur, 2013, p. 144), it is hoped that readers will reflect on fostering opportunities to encourage satire and humour into their own learning environments in the service of critical thinking.

Theories of Humour

I distinguish between comedy as something that is intentionally consumed, and humour which is something that arises in any situation (including, of course, a comedy club). Laughter is the bodily response to a humorous stimulus. This article focuses on humour, and resultant laughter, that emerges in a formal higher education learning environment. There are three main theories of humour:

Superiority

Ascribed to Hobbes (Morreall, 2020), this theory deems that humour arises from the feeling of superiority in some capacity over a person or group. This can be enacted through physical attributes, wealth, health, geopolitics, and so on. Essentially, it is a laughing down on an other. This type of humour is often linked to bigotry, xenophobia, and known in comedy circles as “punching down.” I do not advocate superiority humour in higher education learning spaces.

Incongruity

Ascribed first to Aristotle (Morreall, 2020), this theory focuses on the humour that emerges through the incongruity between competing concepts. The paradoxical nature of existence is then brought to the fore, and the inability to truly grasp the essence of matters is rendered apparent, in humorous vein. This is the primary type of humour that I encourage in the learning environment; to highlight how ideas and practices are often contradictory.

Relief

Ascribed primarily to Freud (Morreall, 2020), this theory argues that humour plays a critical role in regulating one's egoic structure. Freud argues that humour permits the subject to continually recalibrate its sense of self in the face of the tragicomedy of existence, with its myriad changes and challenges. I argue that this type of humour does have a valuable, albeit limited, role in encouraging criticality in the learning environment.

In defending a joke, comedians and commentators will often cite the idea that humour is "subjective," and that what one person finds funny, someone else may find triggering. Personal narrative will invariably affect the way in which a well-intentioned humorous remark is received; the superiority/incongruity/relief lens through which phenomena are received takes place in the mind of the receiver (Husserl, 1989). That notwithstanding, humour in a class environment is also a shared, "intersubjective, discursive practice," which necessitates the "assent of others" (Critchley, 2002a, p. 80).

Regardless of the theory of humour one most identifies with, the participants in a community of practice are embodied learners (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), and their response to intentioned (or not) humorous stimuli will necessarily affect their emotional state for engaging with learning content. Whilst researchers such as Gibbs (1988) have made the case for the facilitation of relaxed, studious and encouraging learning environments to render "best results," I argue for the value of incongruous humour to foster a level of defamiliarisation between the learner, learning context and content, to prompt greater critical engagement by the former, of the latter two.

It is my gambit that amidst competing political agendas and ever conflicting evidence about what "works," there is a lack of honest, critical, self-reflection amongst educators, and the "educated," about what education actually is, who it is for, and what function it serves in society. To address this, recognition and encouragement of incongruous humour may facilitate greater critical interrogation of concepts, policies and practices taken as supposedly necessary, rather than necessarily contingent.

What is presented here is not a "how to" checklist approach, one that may be neatly packaged, repeated, and demonstrably used in terms of efficacy (Hamilton &

Hattie, 2021), but rather a philosophical perspective taken from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, which, following Ricœur's (1970) three masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, deems that concepts can never encapsulate reality as it is, but are always contestable (Adorno, 2008). In doing so, contingency is revealed amidst ostensible necessity, and through humour as critical interrogation, radical, alternative possibilities to those that exist may be perpetually developed; dynamism over stasis. By taking the apparently “unvarying” (Adorno, 2002, p. 312) apart to reveal complex interactions that require assent—often concomitant with conformity via fear—of either witting or unwitting subjects, I argue that parameters of educational enquiry are all too often unfavourably skewed against criticality from positivist first principles (Comte, 2015). That is, there is an assumed level of reason within normative educational discourse that takes place in Education Studies (Allen, 2017). There are all too holy cows that are assumed to be beyond critical interrogation by educators, and those being “educated” alike; for example, that education is a universal human right and social good (UN, 2021). Adorno's adage that “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass” (Adorno, 2005, p. 50) is apt.

Weak Cynicism

Humour as merely a defence mechanism serves to salve the wounds one feels in the face of injustice, without changing the conditions that engender it. See, for example, long-standing mainstream weak satirical shows such as *Mock The Week* or *Have I Got News For You*, which are predicated on an acceptance of existing social injustice, and focus on ridiculing the personalities of those in power, rather than actually critiquing the socio-political mores that frame them. Such humour serves to domesticate its audience members, rather than encourage transgression. As Critchley (2002b) warns, “most humour, in particular the comedy of recognition, and most humour is comedy of recognition, simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticize the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves” (Critchley, 2002b, p. 108). In contrast, for Critchley (2002a) the “real” comedian is one who

dares to see what his[her] listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he[she] sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all about what they want. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to change the situation. (Critchley, 2002a, p. 87)

In contrast to “changing the situation,” beyond merely “interpreting the world” (Marx, 2021), much contemporary humour, including that which takes place in higher education learning space, is marked by what Allen (2017) deems as

a reflexive impotence. We combine the weak cynicism of those who have “seen it all,” with the performative optimism and good cheer of those who can longer be disappointed. Nowhere is this more evident than in education. It introduces us to the world and its realities, not so that we might better reject it, but as preparation to endure. We aspire to making things a little better about the edges (Allen, 2017, p. 179).

It is this mere reform that Allen alludes to that is insidious. Though we may be unwitting, weakly cynical, participants, we are participants nonetheless, and reproduce existing social injustices through our “reflexive impotence.” This article itself, which will be noted on my professional record, is, without recourse to immanent critique (“infinitesimal freedom”, as Adorno (2005, p. 26) would have it), an Allenian act to “endure”: “Fail again, fail better” (Beckett, 1989, p. 101).

A stark example of weak cynicism in action is through our grumblings when undertaking enforced jollity through improvisational comedy training sessions, team away days and contrived morale building exercises. As Critchley (2002b) asks, “the question that one wants to pose to the idea of ‘structured fun’ is: who is structuring the fun and for what end?” (Critchley, 2002b, p. 109). Instead of posing a threat to the underlying managerial logic of such embedded training and acculturation, these—often openly weakly mocked—enforced endeavours provide “coping strategies instead of a radical questioning of the status quo” (Watson, 2017, p. 374). In these contrived situations, participants are encouraged to express themselves, and “act in a cool and even cynical manner. The very fact that this ‘resistance’ is encouraged [...] means that it is contained” (Watson, 2017, p. 374). Analogous to how formalised carnival is institutionalised and scheduled so that prevailing order may not actually be upturned, in the Education Studies context, similar phenomena occurs. For example, amidst the audit culture of the REF, publishing work openly critical of the REF will, invariably, be put forth by management as part of a REF submission! Regarding this set of affairs, I agree with McCarron and Savin-Baden (2008) that there is a distinct “lack of irony” (McCarron & Savin-Baden, 2008, p. 355) within higher education.

Capitalist Realism

We teach and learn under a contemporary logic of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009); i.e., “there is no alternative.” With growing social inequality, aligned with rampant neoliberalisation of all aspects of social governance (Harvey, 2005), as a community of practice we enquire within an audit driven culture of instrumental

You Must be Having a Laugh?

learning in the ostensible service of efficiency and accountability. The potentiality of Education Studies is that this instrumental culture is that which imbues critical discussion of its very practices; for example, Critical Pedagogy (Giroux, 1977). There is neither an Archimedean standpoint to be had for the facilitator, nor a Shangri-La in which as a community of learners we can extricate ourselves from our material conditions. We are all, witting or unwitting, participants. Instead of fantastical escape, or holier-than-thou proclamations, we may enter the “dirt” of discourse (Bloch, 1986, pp. 1043-44) and enact immanent critique (Antonio, 1981) of context and content.

Joining an Education Studies department in 2021, I was advised that the team followed a social constructivist model of education; that is, the learners’ experiences and knowledge mattered, in a more than perfunctory manner, and that the meaning of the content of learning was to be negotiated, debated, and interrogated. Focusing on theories of learning such as andragogy and heutagogy, learners are encouraged to be part of a community of practice (Wenger, 2001). That said, owing to the demographics of the students, and the socio-political context in which they have decided to become fee paying learners, there is a marked power dynamic based between themselves, and myself as facilitator. As much as I would like to earnestly have them become confident, risk-taking members of our community of practice, there is often clear resistance. Many students, especially those coming straight from further education, have become accustomed to a banking model of transactional education (Freire, 2018). The mature learners and returners to education are often far more willing to contribute, challenge and contest theoretical knowledge, mostly owing to their professional and personal experience.

As a full time, permanent, member of staff, and having studied when student fees were less than 20% of what they are now, students often see me as a privileged authority figure, who is paid to provide a service; namely, transfer skills and knowledge that will enable them to get the grades they feel they warrant, to be able to pursue their career ambitions. For someone, along with colleagues, who believes in the transgressive role higher education may play (hooks, 1994) in the lives of all those involved in its discourses, this is a sobering power dynamic to negotiate, one which is ripe for humour as a powerful manner of engaging in immanent critique.

Defamiliarisation

Incongruous humour can engender transgression in educational practices. That is, in understanding what matters to a society, and how mores are cultivated, perpetuated and negotiated, participants in a community of practice may pursue humour as a “form of critical social anthropology” (Critchley, 2010, p. 79) through defamiliarising the familiar. As second language learners will attest to, understanding what makes members of a community laugh is both the most difficult, but also one of the most rewarding, parts of the process. Idioms, for

example, are a goldmine of social mores. By understanding what makes members of a society laugh, the learner understands what matters to that society; what is sacred and profane.

When learning a second language, humour is often employed to familiarise the unfamiliar; to enable the learner to make connections and notice points of similarity between their first language and that which they are assimilating (Davies, 2003). My focus on incongruous humour in Education Studies is therefore at odds with the type employed in language learning practices. I stress defamiliarising the familiar. In the context of our discipline, where content relates to policies and practices of formal education, the role of humour is in reducing elevated texts to a level of critical interrogation, satire and mockery. Debasing the supposedly sacred is a way of considering alternative possibilities. This is not to encourage shoddy scholarship, rather, it is based on close reading, twisting, and exposing concepts to different vantage points (Adorno, 2008). By taking the supposedly “unvarying” (Adorno, 2002, p. 312) apart to reveal complex relationships, and through playing with concepts by configuring them into constellatory formations (Adorno, 2008), as opposed to strictly logical and linear processes, the Education Studies scholar will likely reveal contradictions, Kantian antinomies, and, crucially in the case of humour, incongruities.

At stand-up comedy training (which I have participated in: Laughing Horse, 2016), participants practice such playful sacrilege of concepts. For example, one training activity involves describing the minutiae of something to a Martian, thereby revealing complexity and contradiction; for example, why humans secrete tears when they cry or laugh, or, why it would (generally) be inappropriate to instigate a Mexican wave at a funeral. This is powerful practice. As Freud (2015) celebrated:

in humour, the joke is not the essential thing, it only has the value of a preliminary test; what is crucial is the intention that humour carries out, whether it engages with the speaker him[her]self or with others. It means: “Look, this is the world that looks so dangerous. It is child’s play, it is only right to make a joke about it”! (Freud, 2015, p. 566)

Transmuting danger (seriousness) into child’s play (triviality) is to instigate critical interrogation of givens; it is to replace ostensible necessity with evident contingency.

Metamorphoses

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presents a conception of three metamorphoses of the spirit, whereby he dictates how an individual is to transfigure from a burden carrying “camel spirit” who fosters an understanding of the morality of custom in which they reside, but does not wish to partake, to the freedom seeking

You Must be Having a Laugh?

“lion spirit,” who, liberating itself from the burdens of the camel, seeks to assert its moral agency, to the liberated “child spirit” who is able to create values anew (Nietzsche, 2003, pp. 54-55). Pre-empting Freud, Nietzsche argues that the child spirit may create in a playful manner without bearing the burdens of the camel spirit, nor the feelings of vengeance of the lion spirit. This is because the child spirit is unconcerned with creation that may be accommodated in normative discourse. In juxtaposition against such discourse, the child spirit may explore possibilities that transgress norms. This transgression, undertaken in a manner of play, is inextricably linked to humour; seriousness is usurped in favour of levity.

In the contemporary neoliberal university, student and staff camels abound, with the majority burdened by having to negotiate material challenges such as the increased cost of living, increased precarity in (potential) employment, and relentless assignment submission/marking deadlines and volume. Lion type students sometimes emerge, usually during the second year of our undergraduate course, when the contrast between critical pedagogy (Freire and co.) and the injunctions of the Department for Education comes into sharp relief. Child figures are conspicuous by their absence—there is too much money at stake for risk taking and “mere” play. Striking staff members often display the anger and righteous indignation of the lion, often with a romantic longing for a fantastical memory of what the University supposedly was, with its greater frequency of momentary suspensions from the logic of capitalist realism and instrumental knowledge (re)production; the author reminisces on how there used to be time for extra-curricular eastern philosophy reading groups. Now that time is invariably spent undertaking administration, or attending meetings about administrative procedures. Child spirit humour transgresses such administrative rites to anti-rites; it debases the supposedly sacred quasi corporate speak used so flippantly within higher education: “customer satisfaction,” “conversion rates,” “learning gain,” ad nauseam.

Nietzsche’s advocacy for child spirit play and rebellion is a logical extension of his earlier (and sustained in different guises throughout his oeuvre) championing of greater Dionysian dissonance at the expense of Apollonian consonance. Juxtaposing the primordial chaos of the Dionysian, with the rational Apollonian, Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory argues that the pre-Socratics were more profound than their successors. This sentiment is pithily captured in the later Nietzsche’s dismissal: “Plato is boring” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 77). In recognising the flux and contingency of existence, Nietzsche argues that the pre-Socratics expressed themselves artistically in “good faith.” Through a Platonic theory of forms, and supposed perfection, for Nietzsche Greek art developed into a veiling of primordial chaos in favour of domestication, seriousness and “progress”: proto-instrumentalism. Linearity (Chronos) triumphed over the ecstatic (Kairos).

Humorous transgression implicitly acknowledges the pre-eminence of pre-Socratic, Heraclitean, flux over Platonic forms or any telic Hegelian dialectic.

Humour is thus, paradoxically, rather serious praxis. As Critchley (2002a) observes, incongruities that humour reflects upon

speaks out of a massive congruence between joke structure and social structure, and speaks against those structures by showing that they have no necessity. The anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage. By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a critical function with respect to society. (Critchley, 2002a, p. 10)

In the context of the Education Studies class, humour juxtaposes the seriousness of the participants' (including the facilitators') lofty professional and personal ambitions (context of learning), as well as the materials under discussion (content of learning) with the "pettiness, chaos, fallibility and uncertainty of any human endeavour" (Watson, 2017, p. 377). Humour, and laughter, thereby emerges in the attempt to combine context, content, and chaos; the palimpsest reveals that incongruity and paradox abound. Humour is humbling, and, following Nietzsche's proclamation about the death of God, and the need for meaning in the face of the metaphysical challenge of nihilism (Nietzsche, 2001, pp. 119-120), "recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic acknowledgement" (Critchley, 2002a, p. 102). In our anxiety at being "thrown" (as Heidegger, 1967, would have it) into the world, humour helps participants to transgress, critically engage with context and content, and explore alternative, hitherto inconceivable, possibilities.

Daydream

Following Biesta's (2014, p. 1) adage about the pyrotechnic role of education, as opposed to the banking concept of filling a bucket, late satirist (and a Critchley "real" comedian type) Bill Hicks declares that "the comic is a flame—like Shiva the Destroyer, toppling idols no matter what they are. He[sh]e keeps cutting everything back to the moment" (Hicks, 2015, pp. ix-x). This burning, toppling, cutting, involves replacing the ostensibly necessary with the contingent; the enduring to the moment. As such, the metaphor of burning relates to the use of humour as a manner of, for the embodied, social constructivist, learner, to acknowledge feelings of righteous indignation (lion spirit), and transmute them into critical, playful (child spirit), engagement with the fuel of such feeling. Humour's function is therefore enabling, as opposed to merely compensatory.

Absurdist humour, in particular, takes incongruity to its logical extremes (see, for example, the Situationist International). As Vaneigem (1998) puts it,

You Must be Having a Laugh?

the laughter that destroys the seriousness of all authority and the gift that sweeps away the fundamental value of exchange both participate in an alchemy of the self whose crowning glory is love, the philosopher's stone in which existence comes back to life and genuinely creates itself. (Vaneigem, 1998, p. 253)

This child spirit like generativity, as opposed to camel like compensation, is what qualifies humour's critical function, especially in respect to Education Studies, where it is all too easy to become resigned to being at the mercy of competing political exigencies. In Situationist vein,

as the Italian street slogan has it, *una risata vi seppellira*, it will be a laugh that buries you, where the "you" refers to those in power. By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realise that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed. (Critchley, 2002b, p. 107)

A contemporary exemplar of satire as critical thinking is the comedy of Frankie Boyle. In the tradition of Hicks, Boyle repeatedly calls power into question. For example, in the provocatively entitled *Scotland's Jesus*, Boyle muses: "The Tories say they're cutting benefits to encourage people to get jobs, which, in the current climate, is like saying, 'we're cutting medicine to encourage you to become immortal'" (Boyle, 2013, p. 206). Linked to an Education Studies context, Boyle argues, briefly, earlier in the same text, that "an education system should be all about the love of learning. If you can successfully crush that, you've got yourself a compliant workforce" (Boyle, 2013, p. 202).

Building upon this notion of domestication, in *Hurt Like You've Never Been Loved* (2016), Boyle insightfully investigates the power of language in formal educational environments, and how "daydream" has become a euphemism for "thinking": "don't daydream, don't think" (Spencer, 2016). In satirical manner, Boyle exposes supposed necessity as contingent, malleable and open to critique. I am not recommending that higher education educators need to undertake stand-up comedy training, or even the glut of improvisation training sessions taking place across the sector (Seyfang, 2017). Rather, I argue that incongruous humour; for example, governmental policy interrogated through analogy as per Boyle, is critical thinking in action. Having explored different types of humour, and the role of incongruous humour in critical thinking, the next section will examine the current plight of the higher education Education Studies educator, and what they can do to incorporate humour into their learning environments.

Us and Them?

UK Education Studies departments are, like other faculties, subject to the audit culture that grows in proportion to the increased neoliberalisation of learning. Practitioners become (un)witting cogs within this machine, even if they gripe against it (like in this article), often labouring under the self-edifying narrative that they are on the “right” side of history. Nietzsche (2001) argues that

We must rest from ourselves occasionally by contemplating and looking down upon ourselves, and by laughing or weeping over ourselves from an artistic remoteness: we must discover the hero, and likewise the fool, that is hidden in our passion for knowledge; we must now and then be joyful in our folly, that we may continue to be joyful in our wisdom! (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 80)

In embracing our folly, we may subvert dominant mores. In a normative culture of managerialism, in which turns of phrase by educational theorists such as “improve teacher performance” (Hamilton & Hattie, 2021, p. 10) are simply accepted in uncritical fashion, there still remains the possibility to subvert, through incongruous humour, thus keeping alive the possibility of critical thinking.

In a key article examining the relationship between stand-up comedy and teaching in contemporary higher education, McCarron and Savin-Baden (2008), argue that in a transactional model of neoliberal education, educators ought to detach, challenge, and mimic the “slightly adversarial atmosphere of the comedy club” (McCarron & Savin-Baden, 2008, p. 361) to provoke critical thinking. Accepting that the neoliberal game is the only ticket in the higher education town, they deem that “people pay to come to the Comedy Store; they also now pay to come to the Higher Education store. Both spaces could be seen as challenging and possibly adversarial spaces, but being there, in either case, remains a choice” (McCarron & Savin-Baden, 2008, p. 362).

In incorporating and advocating stand-up comedy techniques in the higher education learning environment, McCarron and Savin-Baden’s approach is ostensibly commensurate with Nietzsche’s child spirit of play. However, in accepting the logic of the market, and arguing for an adversarial approach of detachment in engaging with learners, what may result is a focus on instrumental outcomes; this is not a social constructivist approach. Through a quasi-superiority-theory of humour in action, this approach may solidify the “us” educators and “them” consumers/punters dynamic within higher education. This pragmatic approach internalises the logic of capitalist realism, and seeks to reform pedagogical practice within it. The shadow of the burdened camel spirit, with a touch of the rebellious lion, looms large in the survivalist mode of practice for contemporary education. In my analysis, this strategy has value, but veers toward the superiority

You Must be Having a Laugh?

theory of humour, where the practitioner is the knower, and may mock the “punters.”

In seeking to cultivate “an atmosphere of intellectual detachment; one where the students can separate the idea or the intellectual position from the named individual who has proposed it” (McCarron & Savin-Baden, 2008, p. 362), whilst, in my view, helpfully discouraging ad hominem discussions, those researchers relegate the importance of embodied cognition, and the social constructivist model of learning that encourages learners to contribute as part of a community of practice. I argue for neither an adversarial approach between facilitators and students, nor a “mother goose” approach that spoon-feeds knowledge in a banking model of education. Whilst at opposite spectrums of a pedagogical approach of (dis)comfort, both adversarial and spoon-feeding approaches are concomitant with the dominant paradigm of education through instrumental, transactional, exchange. My approach encourages incongruous humour to call into question this very mode of exchange; it is immanent critique. Adapting Freud, I argue: “this is the state of formal higher education, this is our current socio-political situation, these are our supposed potential future possibilities; it is only right to make a joke about them!”

Ironically, amidst the performance management culture, where NSS scores, adherence to benchmarks (QAA), and pursuit of professional accreditations (Advance HE) are enmeshed within the higher education fabric, in spite of, or perhaps because of, my steadfast incorporation of humour, satire and mockery of content and context, I repeatedly “score” well in student and peer feedback. One final year Education Studies student, in their first course of study with me, noted “this is the first module that has affected me personally, changed my way of thinking, and will be something I refer to in my future as an educator” (Student feedback, 2018).

I find that students are often taken back at my attitude at the start of a module. They are accustomed to receiving instruction, are deadly serious and instrumental about their attainment in the service of future ambitions, and see the idea of learning as atelic process as anathema to their needs. Incorporating the incongruity theory of humour, I see it as my role as facilitator to model satire of content and context: “here we are on this spinning rock, examining this school policy, in order to achieve what end? Why? For whom? Shouldn’t we all just go have some cake?” Walking the tightrope of critical engagement, with apparent childish refusal to engage, my skills and experience are utilised in the service of encouraging humour, defamiliarising the familiar, and dissolving fear. As stand-up comic and educator John Roy (2013) reflects, “everyone likes when you turn the light on a dark room and show that there’s nothing there to fear”; replacing severity with levity, educators may be able to better aid learners, and themselves, to survive the marketisation of higher education, through fostering incongruous—rather than superiority—humour.

Modesty

In sum, humour, especially the incongruous type, is able to encourage critical thinking amongst participants in a community of practice in an Education Studies setting. It replaces supposed necessity with perpetual contingency, permitting practitioners to call into question mores, context and content. This paper has not prescribed a neatly commodifiable “how to” checklist approach (Gilbert, 2013; Keeling & Gilbert, 2009), but has argued how the education practitioner may play with existent cultural material to reveal inconsistencies, paradoxes, and flux as the ephemeral foundation of existence. In so doing, the practitioner may, humorously, encourage students to explore radical alternative possibilities. As bell hooks suggests, “we cannot have a meaningful revolution without humour” (hooks, 2015).

Following Allen (2017), I argue for Education Studies practitioners to, in the spirit of immanent critique, “give up on education,” “live more modestly” (pp. 164-65), and recognise that in attempting to live on the right side of history, or claim an Archimedean standpoint, we “only serve to buttress the status quo” (Dhillon, 2021, p. 251). Instead, enacting incongruous humour as a mode of critical practice is, as noted above, after Critchley, “a profoundly cognitive relation to oneself and the world” (Critchley, 2002a, p. 102), a relation that “recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic acknowledgement” (Critchley, 2002a, p. 102). Humour to transgress? You must be having a laugh.

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You Must be Having a Laugh?

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Author Details

Sunny Dhillon is a Lecturer in Education Studies at Bishop Grosseteste University.
E-mail: sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk



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