

Stand-Up Comedy and Teaching in a “Global Age”

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In the twenty first century, the phrase “Global Age” I suggest in this article refers not to geography alone, as it would once have done, but much more now to technology. Pre-eminent among the numerous implications of this shift for teachers, particularly in Higher Education, is that ‘knowledge transmission pedagogy’ is of increasingly less value to students, although many academics, across all disciplines, are still unwilling to acknowledge this major shift in the dialectic between teaching and learning. Drawing on my years of experience as an academic and as a professional stand-up comedian this article argues that, irrespective of comedy, academics can profitably use many techniques and strategies routinely employed by professional stand-up comedians to encourage their audiences to interact with them. It is in the uniqueness of specific audience interaction, the article suggests, that the best student learning and the most enjoyable academic teaching occurs.

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

Kenneth J. Eble

The word ‘global’ does not now 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. The most important implication of this revolution for academics is that in a culture where ‘knowledge’ can be instantaneously accessed, ‘knowledge transmission pedagogy’ serves little purpose, at least, not for the student. Kenneth J. Eble writes ‘Professors do not need to court media popularity, but they can learn from the performing arts’ (Eble, 1998: 13), and I argue here for the desirability of teachers learning specifically from stand-up comedians. Even, perhaps especially, in an age of Web CT, teaching, like stand-up comedy, is best experienced ‘live’. For exactly half the twenty years that I have been an academic, I have also worked throughout Great Britain, and also in France and Spain, as a stand-up comedian. Despite the chronological symmetry, I have opposed attitudes and indeed objectives as a teacher and as a comedian. As a comedian I want to make myself indispensable to an audience. I want the crowd to demand that I be installed as the MC so they can see me every week, but as a teacher my goal is to make myself redundant to the students before the end of every course. What struck me first about performing stand-up comedy was that although it was much harder than I had ever realized to be professionally funny, as an objective it was refreshingly clear: my job was to make people laugh. If they laughed I was doing a good job; if they didn’t laugh, I was not. Naturally, I compared that purity of purpose with what I realized was the indefinable, never articulated (at least

certainly not to me) imperatives of the seminar. The comedian's job is to make people laugh. However, in a seminar, what, exactly, is the teacher's job? In the last two years I have convened staff development workshops at twenty two UK Universities, and one in Slovenia, under the heading 'Teaching: An Improviser's Art'. My particular interest is in talking with new (not necessarily young) academics, who I believe are under pressures which are now unmanageable. No profession, certainly not stand-up comedy, despite its brutal image, makes such enormous demands on its initiates as does academe.

TEACHING AND STAND-UP COMEDY

My attitude to students and my teaching approach in the seminar room changed as soon as I began performing stand-up comedy. I now saw students not as people who had to be there, but as an *audience*, as people who could be working, or travelling, instead of attending university, and, more specifically, my seminars. 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 am aware that the moment a teacher uses words such as 'audience' and 'performance', battle lines are drawn. Some teachers agree, to more or less a degree, that there is a performance element, at the very least, to teaching, but others see only cringe-worthy images of desperate and misguided teachers dumbing down their subject by quoting Eminem lyrics to embarrassing and pointless effect. Professor Elaine Showalter, an eminent American literary critic and university teacher, observes 'many teachers feel anxiety about the very idea of performance, which strikes them as cheap, hammy and anti-intellectual' (Showalter, 2006: 15). It is likely that what most teachers mean, particularly younger 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. But this is a mistake - teachers are *not* actors; they *are* knowledgeable.

For many teachers the word 'performance' has intimations of 'pretence' within it. There are, no doubt, large numbers of teachers who would empathise with this observation by the English stand-up comedian and author 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, 2005: 135). There is, of course, another type of academic 'performance', more sophisticated and self-aware, neatly summarised by Jody Norton in a provocative discussion of 'guerrilla pedagogy': 'The initial point of guerrilla pedagogy is to split the traditionally univocal interpretive authority of the instructor in two. The authority of each pole of this dyad is further decentred by the open practice of illusion: Judy's and my interpretive positions do not represent the "truth" for either of us, but comprise a *critical method-acting*' (Norton, 1986:140, my emphasis). However, I want to suggest that 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 seminars always have this feature in common: they 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, teachers 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 the particular audience in front of them. In this, we teachers and comedians are together all alone. No British actor, for example, when he or she walks out on stage, is likely to begin the play by directly addressing the audience and welcoming their unscripted responses. Equally, nor are they likely to want to see the audience declaiming their own soliloquies. I assume here modern 'mainstream' British theatre, but there is, of course, a very healthy and influential European tradition of 'didactic' (or, our in culture, 'pedagogic') theatre which depends upon active audience engagement.

The best known and most influential of dramatists, directors and indeed theorists who advocated such a theatre is Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who was throughout his career committed to offering his audiences work that stimulated them mentally, rather than manipulating them emotionally. I argue this is what a teacher, as well as a stand-up comedian, should be attempting whenever they are in front of their respective audiences. Margaret Eddershaw argues in the concluding paragraph of her book *Performing Brecht* 'the popular tradition of Music Hall, variety theatre and pantomime, and their contemporary equivalents in "alternative comedy" have heightened an awareness of and developed skills in the handling of an audience through direct address' (173). The teacher, the stand-up comedian, and the actor in a Brecht play always need to be aware that they are in front of an audience. The task of all of them is to produce, or, perhaps more precisely, to co-create, *thought*, above all else, in their particular audiences. My particular interest, here, in stand-up comedy has nothing to do with laughter, or comedy, or humour – the focus is on interaction. Particularly, my focus is on stimulating students to engage critically with social concepts and structures. On this issue I am indebted to Brecht's most famous and provocative theory: *verfremdungseffekt* (alienation); thought must be pre-eminent. Connectedly, comedy can make the familiar seem strange, thus energising the audience and changing their perspective on what they had previously taken for granted; the teacher, too, can do this, thus stimulating the student.

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" (Showalter: 33).

Showalter's personal reservation about this connection centres on the emphasis placed on the charisma of the teacher: 'Teaching that is like stand-up comedy or postmodern performance art is seductive and exhilarating, but it can be very difficult to carry off. Not everyone can be a Paglia or a Kessler, nor do they need to be' (33). True, but nevertheless, many comedians are clearly motivated by a desire to teach their audiences; reciprocally;

then, teachers can sometimes use comedians' *techniques* to help their students to learn; they do not have to constantly perform as stand-up comedians themselves. Although I am a stand-up comedian, or perhaps because I am a stand-up comedian, I have no interest here in the actual subject of comedy itself. All teachers know that a sense of humour can be invaluable when they are in front of a class, but there are several other aspects of stand-up comedy which I wish to suggest are worth the attention of academics.

TECHNIQUES

Prior to performing stand-up comedy I had been content to *teach* students, but, I see now, I had no interest in helping them to *learn*. It was only after performing stand-up that I saw my job as a teacher was not to inform, or instruct, the students; the most valuable part of their learning was not in the passive receipt of the material I had been unthinkingly offering them, but in their engagement with it, and with me. 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 (Giroux, 1983:202-3).

Because teaching should always be more than the 'transmission of knowledge', students need to actively contribute their ideas, to make their own presentations: to discuss, dispute and disagree. 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. To these ends, I turned to stand-up comedy. However, I am always aware that my 'performance' is never more than a stimulus or a catalyst for student activity. Nothing matters more than them, and what they are doing!

It is called 'stand-up comedy', and although not all stand-up comedians do stand-up during their performances, most stand-up comedians do, in fact, stand-up. Since I started performing it I have never sat down while teaching a seminar. I not only 'stand up', I move continuously throughout the seminar, forcing the students to remain alert. More usefully though, when moving about it is harder to work from a lesson plan; this forces the teacher to be more spontaneous and flexible. When compères 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 compère'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.

Students do not 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. 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 texts or subjects will be taught, not people. Such teachers might as well broadcast their lectures on Web CT and stay at home! 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. Students in a seminar, like comedy audiences, need to be engaged with what is happening – they should not be passive consumers; they should be capable of shaping the dynamic of the seminar. Overall, I see my role in a seminar as that of the compere in a comedy club, the act whose job it is to engage directly with the audience. There is no reason why a seminar cannot be an 'event' for the students, something memorable and unrepeatable. I have no interest myself in a 'lesson plan' but, like a compere, stay flexible enough to let students lead the discussion.

Connectedly, I do not think seminars should be 'cosy' or 'friendly' – on the contrary, I try to incorporate the slightly adversarial atmosphere of the comedy club, itself based on an essential anonymity, into the seminar. I always start with questions: what did they think of *The Great Gatsby*? Why did they like it? Why not? What other texts is it reminiscent of? What aspects of it did they find unique? And so on. I want them to work from the start. I don't want them relaxed, or passive – I want them working, thinking. They need to know from the beginning that this is an interactive process. 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" does not have to always be enjoyable for the student. Learning, in any meaningful sense of the word, can be upsetting for the student; it can be chaotic and painful, not at all enjoyable and reassuring. Following this, I argue that the seminar itself need not, indeed should not, be painless either. Students in a seminar, like comedy audiences, need to be engaged - they should not be passive consumers, but they often need to be stimulated and provoked into shaping the dynamic of the seminar. To this end, I employ strategies, commonly used on the stand-up comedy circuit, which can equally be used to involve students. Many comedians clearly set out to teach their audiences; reciprocally, teachers can use comedians' techniques to teach their students.

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. Stand-up comedians such as Jeremy Hardy, Brendan Burns, Robert Newman and Mark Thomas habitually irritate, confuse, and even anger their audiences. Teachers can learn from what such comedians do on stage. Certainly, if I have to provoke or irritate my students to get them to think for themselves, I am happy to do it. When the 'political comic' Mark Thomas comes on stage he is likely to begin by

asking a series of questions, such as “who is the President of the World Bank?” “What is the name of the Secretary-General of the United Nations?” He has the discipline to let the (inevitable) silences build, so that the audience is forced to recognize its collective ignorance. Then, he begins. At times, depending on the circumstances, I do this in the seminar room. I know the likelihood of any of them having read, say, Baudrillard, or Foucault is remote but to work from this assumption seems a wasted opportunity. So I ask: who’s read *Symbolic Exchange and Death*? Who’s read *Discipline and Punish*? I let the silences build. Sometimes I want the students to feel poorly read. I want them to know how much they don’t know, and how much, by this stage at university, they should know. I know, from talking to audiences and comedians for the past eight years that many, many people have left a Mark Thomas performance thinking “I should know a lot more about politics”. Why not ask the same of a seminar? As a profession we are far too willing to believe that the learning experience should be ‘pleasurable’

STRATEGIES OF OMISSION

I learned from performing stand-up and watching talented comedians what I now think of as ‘omission strategies’. 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*. This, I later discovered, is a remarkably similar experience to one Jane Tompkins had regarding her teaching: ‘I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me’ (Tompkins, 1996:119). In my case, if my audience anticipated a punch line and laughed, I should have stopped there: they would have been flattered by their 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, both on stage and in a seminar, are not necessarily derelictions of duty – instead they can be the result of experience and discipline.

It is frightening for comedians when they walk on stage for the first time knowing they have not prepared their set meticulously in advance. But professional comedians do not learn their material and then always deliver it in that exact order, irrespective of the actual circumstances on the night. As the English stand-up comedian Dave Gorman points out ‘what you do isn’t *say those words in that order*; it’s play the audience’ (Double: 107). Professional stand-up comedians are constantly developing 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 teachers, 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. However, just as comedians can move material around in the set, or drop it completely,

replacing it with something more appropriate, depending on the response they are getting, so too teachers should be able to shift their material, or drop it, depending on the response of their students. Often, though, teachers lack flexibility or spontaneity in their teaching, 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 this is not surprising.

The entry level requirement now, in the United Kingdom and in America, for our profession is a Ph D. Carl Woodring writes 'Emphasis on research has promoted the overemphasis on the Ph.D degree as the only acceptable qualification for permanence as a college teacher; reductions in course loads go to PhDs as productive researchers (Woodring, 1990:103). 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. Nor are students particularly helped by those teachers who obviously begrudge teaching as time taken away from their research, and who introduce as much of this research as possible into undergraduate seminars. Wayne Booth observes 'my own worst teaching has often been about those subjects on which I consider myself most expert. The novel that I have taught most ineptly, the one that I now refuse to teach, is one I did my dissertation on, *Tristram Shandy*. I just know too much about it – and I try to stuff it all in at once' (Showalter: 46).

Some teachers are relentlessly, oppressively, spirit crushingly too well prepared for seminars. Some just read their script; hours and hours of diligent work must have gone into writing it; they avoid looking at students because they do not want to be asked a question they cannot 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. Teachers usually attribute this very common experience to the energy generated by the new. Larry Danson writes '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 the teacher to tell the students everything he or she knows about the topic, so the students are forced into active engagement. The students' understanding of the subject, the aspects of it that they found interesting,

incomprehensible...not those the teacher believes are important, now become the substance of the seminar. Additionally, when the teacher is unable to speak confidently about the particular topic, the students are likely to raise broader, wider, deeper issues; these are more interesting and more useful to them than the minutiae of a specific text, to which teachers will insist on dragging them back. I am in favour of using ignorance of a text as a deliberate teaching strategy. Knowledge is the point of teachers; as a profession we find it difficult to imagine that our ignorance could ever be beneficial to the student. But sometimes the less we know, particularly about a specific issue, 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. William McKeachie writes 'What is important is learning, not teaching. Teaching effectiveness depends not on what the teacher does, but rather on what the student does. Teaching involves listening as much as talking' (McKeachie, 1999:6).

However, academics hate waste – if they have spent hours preparing for a class then the students will certainly be the recipients of all that preparation. The teacher will talk; the students will listen. 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' establishes an emphatic separation from the more important activity which follows it. 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' (Double: 256). Many teachers would benefit from acquiring similar skills.

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, the textually specific preparation can be kept to a minimum. All academics, even the very newest, know much more than they give themselves credit for: if they could move away from the notion that the point of the class is to 'teach' the students everything they can about a subject, the preparation need take no more time than a brief reminder to themselves of why this topic is set for discussion. 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 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' (Jacobi, 2005:91). 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 texts; 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 writer and 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' (Allen, 2002:19).

As a staff developer, I am often informed by older teachers, dismissive of staff development "In my day, there was no staff development. We just went out there and did it". The arrogant assumption here is that they were 'naturally' good teachers (and, obviously, have become even better over the years). My own belief, usually tactfully unspoken, is that like all teachers, and like all stand-up comedians, they were almost certainly poor at the job when they started; however, they were poor teachers in front of classes of perhaps half a dozen students, all of whom were being paid to go to university, and all of whom, by virtue of even going to university at all, were assured of a decent career when they graduated. The question I always want to ask these teachers who are contemptuous of contemporary staff development initiatives is this: "how bad would you have had to be in your day before somebody complained?" Today, though, the university is *completely* different: mass expansion, 'seminars' of 40 – 50 fee paying students, a devalued degree, inevitable litigation from disappointed and disaffected students, increased pressure on academic staff to research and publish from university management...

All teachers in twenty first century HE need training; especially, I would argue, in the interactive skills so crucial to stand-up comedy. While much 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. Academics need to encourage students to develop qualities such as spontaneity and flexibility. In a culture that is constantly changing, we need to teach students how to think for themselves, clearly and quickly. In a "Global Age" students can easily access information with the aid of technology. It is easy, too easy, for them subsequently to confuse the *information* they have so effortlessly retrieved with *knowledge*, which as all teachers are aware is a far more arduously earned and actually problematic, less quantifiable construction than is mere information. Technology in a "Global Age" can give students limitless data, 24/7, but technology cannot teach the students such skills as evaluation, comparison, contrast, prioritisation and, perhaps most importantly, the technology at the heart of the "Global Age" cannot give them the capacity and the desire for critical interrogation of the information. Teachers can perform these vital functions for their students if they follow the lead of stand-up comedians and start acknowledging the live, unique audience in front of them, if they relish the interactive nature of the event, and if they stop teaching subjects and start teaching people.

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