The Straw Man Meets His Match: Six Arguments for Studying Humor in English Classes

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The Straw Man Meets His Match: Six Arguments for Studying Humor in English Classes

ALLEEN PACE NILSEN AND DON L. F. NILSEN

First, a note about our title: We are doing with it what Utah Governor Scott Matheson did a few years ago when Salt Lake City was suffering from two or three months of spring flooding. When sandbags had to be placed down State Street to convert half of it into a drainage canal, a broadcasting team came to do a story on the crew unloading and stacking the bags. Governor Matheson was working alongside volunteers and National Guardsmen when a reporter stuck out a microphone and asked, “Any comments, Governor?” Without missing a beat, Matheson responded, “Hell of a way to run a desert!”

His cryptic comment brought smiles to his supporters, while at the same time disarming his critics. What was there to say now that he had admitted fallibility? In a similar way, we are hoping that you will smile at our confession that some of our arguments may be based on straw men. But at the same time, we hope you will read further and become convinced that, in fact, all six of the claims we argue against are straw men. During the past twenty-five years as we’ve worked in various ways with the study of humor, we have found that whether or not these claims have an examined validity, they serve to keep both the study and the practice of humor outside the classroom door.

Straw Man: But Kids Already Get Enough Humor Outside of School.

The fact that everyday life is so full of humor makes it all the more important that we bring humor into our classrooms lest students conclude that school is even less relevant to ordinary life than they thought. Our job at school is not to repeat the same kind of humor that students get on the Comedy Channel, but to help students mature in their taste and appreciation. We need to educate students to catch onto a multitude of allusions and to have the patience required for reading and appreciating subtle kinds of humor. On the few occasions when we have taught a class specifically labeled “Humor,” some students have been disappointed because they expected us to perform a series of fifty-minute comedy routines. Even if we had been able to meet their expectations, we wouldn’t have been teaching them very much. Our goal is not to entertain students, but to help them understand why they laugh at David Letterman’s “Top Ten” lists and at the Budweiser frogs and lizards, and then help them develop appreciation for increasingly subtle forms of humor.

Jacque Hughes, who teaches at Central Oklahoma University in Edmond, has a good example of how drawing relationships between raucous humor and more subtle humor can help students move to new levels of appreciation. She was having a hard time getting her eighteen-year-old freshmen to understand the dark humor in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” then she happened to see National Lampoon’s Vacation starring Chevy Chase. It was wonderfully funny, and since most of her students had seen the movie, class members were able to compare the personalities and the incidents. When they realized that the sim-
ilarities were too extensive—and too funny—to be coincidental, they gained a new appreciation for O’Connor’s skill in doing only with words what movie producers do with both words and film at the cost of millions of dollars.

It takes skill and practice, along with a broad, cultural background of knowledge, to understand a full range of humor. In the *New York Magazine* (17 July 1995) readers sent in some thoughtful letters as a follow-up to an article on today’s depressing state of stand-up comedy. Allen Brookins-Brown answered his own question, “Why were the Bennys, the Aces, the Allens (Steve and Fred, both), Berles, Benchleys, Parkers, Woollcotts intuitively brilliant and where are their kind now?” with the observation that these earlier comedians “were the products of a literate society, widely read or with extensive cultural experience, which gave them backgrounds upon which to draw. Their cultural achievement was not arrested at the potty-training level. They knew how to think and were well edited, either by erudite editors or by perceptive audiences.” Brookins-Brown thinks the only contemporary performers who come close to this sophistication are National Public Radio’s Michael Feldman (“a Bennet Cerf–Groucho Marx reincarnate”), Will Durst, and Garrison Keillor. Another reader wrote that the place to look for delightful wit today is not in the comedy clubs but “in written form, in comic novels and essays.” Most of our students aren’t going to find this kind of humor unless we help prepare them.

*Straw Man: But Teaching Humor Will Take Away from the Time I Need to Teach Grammar, Composition, Literature, and Public Speaking.*

We first got into humor studies because we were looking for ways to make our grammar lessons more interesting. We found that it was much more fun to analyze deviant rather than regular sentences, and the learning was just as effective because students had to understand the expectations in order to recognize the deviations. There’s no better way to teach the dangers of dangling or squinting modifiers and words that are almost, but not quite, right than to read some of the sentences from Richard Lederer’s *Anguished English* (Dell, 1989) and *More Anguished English* (Delacorte, 1993). Let students use some of the mistakes that Lederer has collected as models for writing their own mistaken sentences. They will have fun, while developing a sense of the differences between formal, edited English, and the casual kinds of mistakes that all of us make.

Humor is an obvious emotion, and students are genuinely interested in figuring out what causes them to laugh.

And with writing and speaking, many students feel less inhibited when they are writing down something like an urban legend or trying to recreate on paper a comedian’s monologue that they just listened to. And when they participate in a joke-telling
festival or present the "joke of the day" on the morning announcements, they don't seem to realize that they are getting a lesson in public speaking.

We've also found that analyzing humor is a good way to entice students into other kinds of literary analysis. Humor is an obvious emotion, and students are genuinely interested in figuring out what causes them to laugh. While philosophers, psychologists, linguists, anthropologists, writers, actors, and comedians have all tried to figure out why people laugh, no one has come up with an airtight theory. However, listed here are ten of the features that often correlate with what people find funny. And although we are listing them separately, the features are intertwined so that a single laugh-producing incident is likely to incorporate several of these features:

1. **Surprise or shock**: The one steady requirement for humor is that people have to be surprised. Sometimes, the surprise is of the slipping-on-a-banana-peel type, while other times it relates to hearing talk about a forbidden subject such as a disaster, or hearing a joke teller "dis" authority. Not every surprise is funny, but everything that is funny has an element of surprise.

2. **Superiority**: Even kindergartners laugh at "Little Moron Jokes" because they know they are too smart to do the dumb things he does. In an article asking why there were so many "red-neck" jokes on the Internet, the editors of the *New York Times Magazine* (4 Sept. 1994) explained that, "cruelty and humor are old pals. Secretly, almost everyone relishes making fun of the less fortunate. So as the pool of acceptable targets shrinks, the humorous impulse seeks out people who ... are supposed to be bad—reactionary and racist—and thus deserving of all they get. And there's an added bonus: So few red necks have computers."

3. **Hostility**: Expressing hostility is closely allied with feelings of superiority because joke tellers may express hostility in hopes of making themselves feel superior to the joke targets. Children make jokes about their teachers, while adults make jokes about their bosses. Sigmund Freud, and a whole host of other philosophers and psychologists, have claimed that all humor expresses hostility. While not everyone agrees with the hostility theory, those who do agree say that even puns are expressions of hostility because the creators are being hostile to expectations and showing that they are clever enough to outwit the language.

4. **A trick or a twist**: Remember the old children's riddle about Pete and Repeat?

   Teller: Two brothers, Pete and Repeat, went out to play. Pete fell in the river. Who was left?

   Victim: Repeat.

   Teller: Two brothers, Pete and Repeat . . . As people grow older, they find more sophisticated ways to trick their listeners, but the fun still lies in tellers proving their superiority through stumpng listeners.

5. **Incongruity and irony**: The stories about the cat in the microwave, the rat tail in the fried chicken, the Doberman that is found choking on a man's finger, and the man who dumped a load of cement in the new car his wife was buying for him, are urban legends that exemplify the kinds of ironies that fill modern lives. This feature is tied closely to the superiority theory in that people enjoy urban legends, along with strange and bizarre news stories, because they think they are too smart to let such misfortunes befall them.

6. **Sudden insight**: We smile when a comic writer seems to know our secrets. This is what's at the root of self-deprecating humor and all those confessional monologues, where comedians talk about their personal worries. Such writers as Dave Barry, John Updike, Garrison Keillor, and Nora Ephron are funny because they are so often "right on" as they describe human relationships and emotions.

7. **Exaggeration**: Exaggeration is a useful technique to give people insights because once they have seen an exaggerated portrayal of characters with tendencies like their own, then they will get an image of how they might appear to an outsider. James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is a wonderful exaggeration of a day-dreamer. People who are in pain or trouble often tell exaggerated jokes to help themselves feel better about their real situations.

8. **Succinct word play**: The best creators of word play are the ones who hone every sentence down to the bare necessities. They succeed because they beat their audience
to the punch line. There's no surprise left when a comedian dawdles so that listeners have already figured out the joke.

9. Ambiguity: We enjoy the ambiguity of humor because of the way it forces our minds to make sudden turns and reversals. Joke tellers are notorious for dropping false clues which lead us down the garden path. The pleasure comes when our minds are forced to scramble between the false meanings and the surprise of the joke.

10. Situation: Jokes told in isolation are never as funny as those created on the spot to relate to real life or to the pseudo real-life provided by television sitcoms. We've all heard the half-apology for a lame joke, "You had to have been there." This isn't so much an apology as a statement of fact. The situation and the relationship among those sharing a joke is crucial to many jokes. The surprise and the pleasure comes from seeing someone's mind work fast enough to make a quip or a put-down that exactly fits a situation that couldn't have been foreseen.

Straw Man: But I'm Supposed to Be Preparing Kids to Earn a Living.

Over the last decade the chances of a young person growing up and being able to make a living while working directly with humor have increased tremendously, especially in our content area of writing. In the summer of 1995, fifty-nine television comedies went into production compared to forty-five during the 1994 season. That meant that 500 to 600 script writers were needed, and because there weren't that many with experience, the networks and shows were raiding each other's staffs. Writers are also needed for stand-up comedians and for sit-down hosts of late-night television, plus for all the advertising agencies that are increasingly relying on smiles to woo customers. And then there are the performers: 4,800 were listed in the 1995 Comedy USA directory as compared to an estimated 200 in the early 1970s. As teachers, we may shudder at the thought of having a future comedian in our class, but we can take hope from the story that the irrepressible comedian Jim Carey has told. As long as he didn't interrupt the class all week, his junior high teacher allowed him to do a ten-minute stand-up routine on Friday afternoons.

The tremendous growth in the comedy business may mean that a young person has a better chance of growing up to become a professional comedian or comedy writer than of growing up to become a professional athlete. Actually, in both fields the odds of becoming a professional are incredibly small, but just as people believe in the carryover of benefits from athletics into other aspects of life, there is also a carryover of humor skills to ordinary life. In fact, it would be hard to name a career where being able to use and appreciate humor would not contribute to success. Even people working in the grimmest of jobs—morticians, emergency room personnel, and rescue squads—use humor to get release from the stress they are suffering. And in less stressful jobs, the ability to use humor is advantageous because, as amply demonstrated by former President Ronald Reagan and many other successful leaders, it is a boon to effective communication. In 1997, the University of Chicago Master of
Business Administration program brought in Brett Scott, a director, writer, and actor affiliated with Chicago's Second City acting troupe, to help students improvise comic situations. Earlier in the year, business students at Vanderbilt had gone through a similar experience. In relation to this kind of training, C. Thomas Howard, director of the M.B.A. program at the University of Denver, explained in a *New York Times* story (23 Feb. 1997), "It's interesting that hard skills are considered better than soft, but when people go into management, it's the soft skills that . . . make the difference in career success.”

Humor also gives people practice in creative problem-solving. A key ingredient of humor is surprise, which means that humorists become accustomed to looking for hidden angles. Dr. William Fry, now emeritus from the Stanford Medical School, has done empirical studies of the effects of humor on the body. One of his findings is that after a hearty laugh the body retains extra adrenalin for fifteen minutes. This makes people more alert and able to think better, so if someone makes a good joke in a class or in a faculty meeting, don't think the time has been wasted.

**Straw Man: If I Bring Humor into My Class, I’ll Have Censorship Problems.**

Yes, you might. Because people joke about subjects that would make them uncomfortable if talked about in a straightforward manner, both folk humor and the humor prepared by professionals center around basic fears and worries connected to sex, religion, ethnic differences, disasters, and job security. Students need to learn that, even when there are laughs to counterbalance the fears, such subjects still make people uncomfortable—hence the connection between censorship and humor. And censorship is not the clear-cut issue that many of us would like to believe it is. Beneath the surface of any censorship case there are contradictions and paradoxes. We need to help students ponder the relationship of censorship to such terms as good taste, appropriateness, tolerance, kindness, respect, sensitivity, and the ubiquitous political correctness.

Because of its succinctness and because of the many real-life examples that are in the news, humor is a good tool for teaching about censorship. When a piece of our beloved literature is threatened, we English teachers have a hard time being objective. However, most of us can talk with detachment about how the California State Motor Vehicle division has a list of some 50,000 letter and number combinations that are forbidden on vanity license plates on the grounds that they may be offensive. And most of us can smile at how the Manhattan Transit Authority tried unsuccessfully to ban an advertisement on the side of their buses chiding them for not using environmentally friendly gas. It read, “Standing behind this bus could be more dangerous than standing in front of it.”

**Even people working in the grimmest of jobs—morticians, emergency room personnel, and rescue squads—use humor to get release from the stress they are suffering.**

Also, young people are more interested in the issue of censorship when it relates to their culture, as happened in 1995 when Paul K. Kim, a graduating senior in Bellevue, Washington, wrote a parody about his high school classmates in which he made fun of their preoccupations with football and sex. He posted it on the Internet under the title “Unofficial Newport High School Home Page” and included links to Internet sites offering sexually explicit material. When school officials learned about his actions, they withdrew support for a National Merit Scholarship and, without letting him know, faxed letters to the seven universities where he had applied for scholarships. As related in a half-page story in the *New York Times* (26 May 1995), the American Civil Liberties Union came to his support, and Columbia University accepted Kim in spite of having received the letter of nonsupport.

In 1998, a senior in Evans, Georgia, was suspended for wearing a Pepsi-Cola shirt to Green-
brier High School on the day that officials from nearby Coke headquarters were visiting as part of a contest. The boy's shirt spoiled the picture in which the students posed on the athletic field to form the word COKE. During the fall 1997 season, an NFL player was given an inappropriate-celebration-of-a-touchdown fine for lifting his jersey to show the crowd his Superman undershirt. Also in 1997, the Camel cigarette company was forced to retire the cartoon-style Joe Camel because of fears that he was unfairly tempting teenagers to smoke. On Halloween in Paulsboro, New Jersey, a police officer dressed as a clown managed to arrest twelve individuals, most of whom had been wanted for routine traffic offenses. He explained that instead of getting the usual "He isn't home" response, the clown costume allowed him to go into homes unsuspected. Critics said he gave clowns a bad name.

Straw Man: Humor Hurts People's Feelings.

Yes, humor sometimes hurts, but so does a hammer when people smash a thumb. And just as that doesn't make people throw away their hammers and vow to build their houses without using tools, people shouldn't decide to ban humor. Humor is a communication tool that can be used either for building or tearing apart. For every incidence of hurt feelings, there's a counterbalancing story of humor serving as a social lubricant that brings people together by providing comfort and joy.

The words we use when talking about humor show that we recognize its potential for causing discomfort; for example, we refer to the punch lines of jokes, to biting satires, to sharp-tongued wits, to the targets of jokes, and to things striking us as funny. From a literary as well as a psychological point, a moderate level of pain is there to serve as a contrast to the smile that follows. Henry D. Spaulding explained the concept when he wrote in the preface to his 1969 *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor* that his people "have a fondness for honey-coated barbs... a kiss with salt on the lips, but a kiss nevertheless."

Like tickling and teasing, when jokes go too far—as when hate speech is disguised as riddles—then the situation becomes painful instead of humorous. Achieving a balance so that the smiles are stronger than the frowns is a subtlety that we need to explore with students.

Many teachers are especially worried that if they allow humor in their classrooms, they risk offending minority students. Actually, humor is a wonderful tool for talking about cultural differences because when people are smiling they are more likely to be open to new ideas and to new ways of looking at problems. During the 1960s, Dick Gregory's jokes went a long way toward opening doors of communication between black and white people, as when he joked about the Birmingham bus driver who was so mad when two African Americans sat at the front of the bus that he drove around town backwards.

Humor is a communication tool that can be used either for building or tearing apart.

Many members of minority groups are skilled at using humor to turn old stereotypes on their heads, as when an Asian American explains that he started college as a computer science major because he had fallen for the stereotype of Asians being "high-tech coolies," but then when he recognized it was just a stereotype, he switched to social work. He did for one stereotype what a gay comedian did for another when he defined homophobia as the irrational fear that someone is going to break into your house and redecorate it without your permission.

We need to help students understand why it is more acceptable for people to tell deprecating jokes about themselves and about their own ethnic groups than to do the same thing for other groups. It is because sophisticated ethnic humor is more often about personal characteristics and behavior than about such obvious differences as skin color. People can tell jokes about a group that they belong to because, being insiders to the group, they have the right to criticize and the power to work for change. The same joke told by an outsider is more likely to contribute to stereotyping and the tightening of boundaries around the general perception of a group.
Straw Man: But I Can’t Teach about Humor When I Can’t Even Tell a Joke or Write a Funny Letter Home.

It’s all right if students prove to be better than their teacher at creating and performing humor and at writing and talking about it; after all, teachers have the advantage in every other activity except maybe hooking up their computers. Besides, no one creates humor out of whole cloth; instead, they remember things they have already heard or seen and then adapt them to new situations. And long before the 1960s when Bob Petrie went off to work with his fellow comedy writers on the popular Dick Van Dyke Show, people realized that laughing with and bouncing ideas off of friends was a surprisingly pleasant way to stimulate creative juices.

The classroom activities described below provide stimulating opportunities for helping students fall in love with the intricacies of the English language, while at the same time building a sense of cohesiveness and fun in your class.

Writing Parodies and Pattern Jokes

A good small group activity is for three or four students to work together to write parodies or new versions of old folk tales. If they need inspiration, provide them with copies of Jon Scieszka’s The Stinky Cheese Man And Other Fairly Stupid Tales (Viking, 1992) and The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs (Viking, 1989). On another day, students can rewrite maxims or parables, while on still a different day they can work with pattern jokes. For this activity, give each group a different pattern and ask them to come up with enough examples in ten to fifteen minutes of class time so they can do a group presentation for their classmates. With each of the following patterns, there will probably be someone in the group who will vaguely remember one or two examples, and from there the group can be creative in thinking up new jokes.

- Tom Swifties, as in “My name is Tom,” he said swiftly, and “Would you like another pancake?” she asked flippantly.
- License plate humor, as in IOSNE1 = Tennis, Anyone? XQUSME = Excuse me, and RM4U2 = Room for You Too.
- Light bulb humor, as in “How many New Yorkers does it take to screw in a light bulb?” “Three—One to do it and two to criticize.”
- Initialisms, as when Indianapolis football fans say that COLTS stands for Count On a Loss This Sunday and owners of Ford cars say the name stands for Fix Or Repair Daily.
- “Short of . . .” insults, as when someone or something is described as being “A few bricks short of a load,” or “A few sandwiches short of a picnic.”
- Good News/Bad News stories, as in, “Have you heard the good news/bad news about the year 2020? The bad news is that all the water that will be available for drinking will be treated sewage water; the good news is that there won’t be enough to go around.” A variation would be to write a group story sort of like Remy Charlip’s now classic children’s book Fortunately/Unfortunately (Four Winds/Macmillan, 1964 and 1980).

Collecting News Clippings

Students can be given points for bringing in humor-related clippings. Double their points if they accompany the clipping with an explanation. Clippings can be laminated and put on a bulletin board or in a reference notebook. More advanced classes might want to work with more restricted topics; for example when studying censorship, make a “Humor in Trouble Again” collection of stories about humor-related controversies. In connection with literature, look for...
examples of allusions, as with the *Time* magazine “Pinocchio Index.” Above a news quote which they judged to be less-than-honest, editors would print a photo of the speaker enhanced by a Pinocchio-like nose. Newspaper headlines recently brought into our classes include “My Boss, Big Brother” on a story about an Illinois law permitting employers to listen in on workers’ phones, “Texas caught in Catch-22” on a story about a prisoner on death row who refused to take his anti-psychotic medicine. The complication was that Texas laws prohibit executing anyone who is insane. “Great Expectations” drew attention to a story about the hoped-for jobs of those who successfully worked for President Clinton’s second-term election. Some students missed the connection between a “Clueless in Washington” headline and the movie title *Sleepless in Seattle*, while others didn’t realize that the 1997 movie title *Kiss the Girls* was planned to make them think of, “Georgie Porgie, Puddin’ and Pie / Kissed the girls and made them cry.” They missed the allusion because that particular nursery rhyme is so sexist that it has been excluded from the nursery school canon.

**Collecting Humorous Icons**

Today most people come in contact with more humorous than sacred icons. The desire to “make somebody happy” has gone far beyond bumper stickers, buttons, and tee shirts. A full-wall display of such icons, either the original objects, color photocopies, or crayon reproductions, can serve not only to amuse but to provide a source for analysis and classification. Collectibles include the set of thirty commemorative postage stamps issued in 1995 to honor the 100th anniversary of the comic strip. The project was so successful that in 1997 the post office sold not only stamps, but also ties and caps decorated with Warner Brothers’ Bugs Bunny characters. In 1995, the first year that Dr. Seuss’s widow, Audrey Geisel, licensed Seuss storybook characters and paraphernalia, including the famous hat priced at $13.95, Macy’s sold over 200,000 items. The 1996 *Journal of Nursing Jocularity* related the story of an emergency room nurse trying to diagnose the coughing of a precocious four-year-old. While the nurse was listening to the child’s lungs through her stethoscope, the girl kept up a nonstop conversation. When the nurse said, “Shhh, I have to see if Barney is in there,” the child gave her a withering look and said, “I have Jesus in my heart. Barney is on my underwear.” Thanks to modern marketing, it’s almost impossible to buy children’s underwear or bedding that isn’t decorated with humorous characters. And even serious-minded professors and CEO’s are wearing humorous ties featuring pictures of The Three Stooges, W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Dilbert (from the new anti-establishment cartoon strip), and even characters from Sesame Street.

Humorous icons aren’t just an American phenomenon. The country of Abkhazia, part of the former Soviet Union, celebrated its independence with a new postage stamp honoring Lennon and Marx. The fun is that the honorees are Groucho Marx and John Lennon.

**Researching and Writing about Humor**

Teachers tired of reading grim research papers about abortion, capital punishment, drug abuse, and the worldwide decline in the environment, might encourage students to study and write about humor. Topics that have worked well with our students include:

- Humor on the Internet
- Analysis of the humor techniques used by a favorite children’s author such as Dr. Seuss, Ronald Dahl, A. A. Milne, Lewis Carroll, or William Steig
- Relationships between popular jokes and the concerns of a culture
- Humor in politics
- Humor as used in television commercials
- Humor in the names of popular music groups and individuals
- Accidental humor as in bloopers and blunders
The humor of a special group such as a student's ethnic group or work group
- The biography of a performer or writer
- The stories behind a favorite television show or movie

In spite of our claim that most arguments against teaching humor are straw men, we would be less than honest if we didn’t admit that humor makes people nervous. Teachers bringing humor studies into their classes for the first time should start slowly and be well prepared. And to keep parents, fellow teachers, and administrators from coming up with one or more of the straw man arguments discussed here, teachers need to make an extra effort to communicate their goals. They can take heart from the fact that, when students are happy at school, their parents are also happy. It is the parents of children who are uninvolved and unhappy who jump on bandwagons to criticize schools and teachers.

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**EVE THOUGHT THERE'S AN INFINITE LINE OF US TYPING, I COULDN'T DO A SINGLE PLAY OF SHAKESPEARE UNTIL WE GOT THESE WORD PROCESSORS WITH CUT-AND-PASTE CAPACITY.**

**YES, AND THIS NEW GRAPHICS PROGRAM LETS ME DIAGRAM THE BARD'S SENTENCES!**