Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One:

An Exploration of Jokes and Humour as Cognitive Tools

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THE BEGINNING

When Julie Andrews’ character from The Sound of Music first teaches the von Trapp kids to sing, she says, “Let’s start at the very beginning; it’s a very good place to start.” And who am I to argue with Fraulein Maria? But finding the beginning of a story isn’t always as easy as do-re-mi. Did the story of my interest in comedy in education start in late January when twenty-or-so Chilean educators descended on my classroom to watch my students and me start a collection of things that were funny for no reason? Was it the beginning of January when I started this course? Was it last September when I started this program or in 2010 when I first came across Imaginative Education?

I think the answer is that there are actually two beginnings to this story and neither of them has to do with education: one has to do with my life, and the other has to do with a death.

I’m writing this over spring break, and I just got back to Vancouver after spending a few days visiting my mom in Campbell River. She’s selling her house and was getting rid of a bunch of stuff, so she had a large tote full of my old school work for me to peruse (and then take home and then keep in my storage locker, untouched, for 60 years or so). One of the projects was from my Humanities class in 1999. We had to make our own magazine, and I made a comedy magazine, à la Mad Magazine, which I was obsessed with even though I had very few copies since I only ever got them as a treat when we travelled on the ferry. My magazine was called Who’s On First and included comics, a crossword puzzle, and letters to the editor. The most interesting part, though, was a survey I’d done where I polled my class about their favourite comedians. Here’s a photo of the results:
I guess I should say, this isn’t the life beginning I was talking about, not necessarily. What I mean to show through my Humanities 8 project is that comedy has always been something that’s interested me. When I think about it, every single person in my family is funny: my mom, my brothers, my dad, and even my step-sisters and my step-dad (though he was a bit of a black sheep, leaning more towards a punny humour than my mom’s quick, witty kind). My Uncle Dan, my mom’s brother, is also very funny, and his humour, like my brother Spencer’s, tends to come out in the stories he tells. Even my extended family is full of funny people: wedding and baby showers were never events I had to be dragged to. They weren’t just polite occasions of tea in dainty cups, but times for all the women and kids in my family to get together and share and listen and comfort and laugh—and laugh and laugh.

On August 1st, 2018 @crawfish_queen quote-tweeted this photo with the caption “Me going home depressed after making my friends laugh all night”:
At the time of me writing this, it has 91K retweets and 276K likes. Obviously, this tweet resonated with a lot of folks, me included. I’ve always been a kind of social performer, in my friend groups and certainly at school as well: in grade 5 I was voted funniest girl and in my grade 12 yearbook I was voted most likely to become a stand-up comedian. But, as much as I see humour as a fundamental part of who I am, I see the same in sadness.

When I was young and first started to buy my own tapes and CDs, my favourite music was always Motown. I’m not sure I thought about it much then, but having now the advantage of hindsight and adult articulation, I would say that I always identified with sadness, loss, and sorrow that was presented in an upbeat way.
Give “The Tears of a Clown” by Smokey Robinson & the Miracles a listen: in the category of “super sad songs I want to dance to,” this track is at the very top. So for all of the wisecracking I did in school and with my friends, there was a great deal of sadness and anxiety too. I have a counsellor who I see about every six weeks, and when she asks about my sadness she always says, “And where is your sadness today?” She never asks if it exists, but rather how big it is or how cumbersome. Because that’s exactly it: maybe some days sadness is like a little bit of water, enough to hold in two hands, or a mouthful you can swallow up and move on; sometimes it’s a warm tub and you can luxuriate a while, sink in, let it engulf you; but sometimes it’s a pool forming as the tide comes in and the water is rising, rising.

Here is the second beginning of this story: about three years ago—three years ago last week, actually—my step-dad died unexpectedly just two days after my wedding. He’d had for a few weeks what he thought was a bad cold, and eventually he felt so dreadful that he checked himself into emergency: that was on a Friday. I got married on Sunday, and he died on Tuesday.

Before Gord died if you had asked me what one should do when their sadness is as sure and steady as a rising tide, I would have said to just wait it out, that what waxes will also wane. But when Gord died my sadness was like a great lake: heavy and still and immovable. There was no waiting this one out, and I needed to do something.

My first birthday/Christmas without Gord was certainly the worst I’ve ever felt in my life. I was overwhelmed with sadness, and my anxiety was so great that I could hardly do much more than lie on the floor. I was desperate to feel even slightly better, and so I tried everything I could; my hippy neighbour made me a grief tincture, I downloaded some mindfulness apps, got a prescription for Ativan, took St. John’s wort and passionflower extract, started speaking with my therapist Patricia more regularly, and rode my bike on a trainer in our living room for 45 minutes a day. But surprisingly, one of the things that helped me the most, was a podcast
recommendation from my friend Liz. I remember I was lying on the couch, wondering if you can die from anxiety, and she texted to ask if I was listening to *My Favorite Murder*. I wasn’t, so I checked it out, and it was two hilarious women talking about horrible, horrible things: murder, greed, betrayal, abuse, fraud. The hosts, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, were on their 45th episode at the time, and I binged all of them in two weeks.

In the hundred or so episodes since then, they’ve gotten pretty huge and now go on live tours around the world. Karen always gives a brief description of how they are a comedy podcast about murder at the top of their live performances ever since a man in Melbourne got upset about the idea and made a fuss in the middle of their show. Here’s her description from the latest live episode in Toronto:

Karen: Um, guys, you know the, you’ve heard this time and again, but we have to say it for the strangers, for the new people, for the forced, the forced audience members who—some of you weirdos bring outsiders, why? You’re like, Hmmm who’s the most judgemental person in my life? I’m gonna have, I’m gonna invite them to the murder comedy show.

Georgia: My boss? Great, I’m gonna bring ‘er.

Karen: My mom that doesn’t like modern things? Perfect. We’ll make her do it. So, some people get worried or maybe offended at the idea of a true crime comedy podcast because they think that something like true crime, murder, the worst thing that can happen to anyone in the world, belongs nowhere near comedy and so, uh, just so you know, like, if you don’t listen to the podcast you don’t know us, and you can’t give us the benefit of the doubt, you don’t know that those two things run parallel. Um, we do our best to not intertwine them in any way because we don’t think murder is funny, and we don’t think loss is funny. But, life is shit and you have to laugh at things; it’s very important. (Hardstark & Kilgariff, 2019)

And that’s exactly right: they make parallel jokes. They’re not making fun of victims or families. They are not roasting anyone for not locking their door or trusting a neighbour they shouldn’t have. For example in episode 96, Karen tells the story of a woman’s son drowning under suspicious circumstances and her collecting $20,000 in life insurance from his military pension and using the money to open a beauty salon. The funny part comes, though, when we learn that
she named the salon “Fingers and Faces” (Hardstark & Kilgariff, 2017). For me their podcast was a reminder that life can be dreadful, but it can be joyful and silly too, and, most importantly, it can be all of these things at the same time.

So I did what any intensely grieving person would do: I joined twitter.

It was early 2017, and it seemed like the world was becoming increasingly politically hostile—or if not the world, at least my facebook feed. My (ex-)wife was an early adopter of all social media platforms and had been on twitter for years. Occasionally I would have a funny thought and ask her to tweet it out, to which she would always reply, “Why don’t you make your own account?”—so I did. Whereas facebook had become a place of divisive politics, I decided twitter would be a place of good vibes: I followed wholesome accounts for pictures of cats and heartwarming stories, like an elephant and a dog becoming unlikely friends. I also followed people who made me laugh either through their original content or their funny retweets, and, finally, I started making jokes of my own. Here are a few tweets from my early days of twitter:

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Allie H @alliesatwar · 16 Apr 2017
Why is telling the change room person you didn’t like any of the clothes you just tried on harder than breaking up with someone?

30 2 26
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Allie H @alliesatwar · 17 Apr 2017
If I were in charge of hell, I would--just as a fun introductory activity--make you listen to every voicemail you’ve ever left.

2 2 16
```
I remember being at work in the year after Gord died and walking around my classroom in a kind of panicked haze. I’m not a religious person, and I don’t think everything happens for a reason; there was no silver lining to this, and it didn’t feel worthwhile to spend my time looking for one. Instead I focused my time and attention on finding little things about the world or life or people that pleased me despite my grief, and it helped. Over the last two-and-a-half years since I started exploring twitter as a source of joy and as a platform for sharing my observations on life’s charming peculiarities, my involvement, fascination, and curiosity with comedy have increased notably as has my appreciation for comedy and my gratitude and my reverence.

This is all to say that comedy has always been a huge part of my life and is also significant to who I am as a person. It’s been influential in my upbringing and how I’ve presented myself to the world. Furthermore, though I don’t think I have time to do this idea justice, I want to suggest that growing up as a gay person also contributed to my humour in a significant way. Humour is a large part of queer culture, and I don’t think you need to look much further than *RuPaul’s Drag Race* to see that. I will say, humour may be more central to the drag world and the lives of gay men than it is to the East Van queers I currently spend my time with, but it was gay boys who I grew up with and who I socialized with until I moved to Vancouver in 2010; it was Jack and Will from *Will & Grace* who were my only primetime gay role models growing up.
Since humour and jokes are such a large part of my life, the idea that they could be a powerful cognitive tool is appealing to me. I think this topic has been relatively unexplored in education, and that’s why I’ve chosen to explore it here.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

Research shows that within the next 10 years, as many as three in five children could be born with a podcast.

So here is what I proposed to do, though maybe I should speak briefly about my school and classroom first. It seems convenient to say that I work with at risk youth, but the phrase “at risk” is generic and ubiquitous almost to the point of meaninglessness. At risk of what, exactly? I suppose I can say my students are “at risk” of falling behind and having their graduation jeopardized due to their behaviour, life circumstances, physical health, or mental health. They attend in the morning or the afternoon for three hours and they work at their own pace through two courses at a time that are organized into units. For the most part, students work individually except for on Thursdays when the Humanities classes get together for a weekly lecture/workshop called Human Hour (H Hour). My colleague, Mark Maretic, and I share a classroom and so all of our students are mixed in together; I help his kids, and he helps mine.
Our classroom is separated from the other humanities room by only a half wall and we visit each other frequently throughout the day. In some way or another, I know most of the students in the school regardless of whether or not they have ever been in my class.

It can sometimes be a challenge to get work from these kids, so we do our best to give them credit for what we can, and I want to give them credit for what they laugh at.

I have this idea that, basically, if you laugh you're smart. I suppose, yes, laughing at a video of a monkey smelling his own butt and then falling over doesn’t require a ton goin’ on up top, but I want to venture that most of the time we laugh because we get something.

I set out to explore the many ways in which jokes and humour can be powerful cognitive tools in their own right and not just a quirky sidekick or campy gay best friend to story and imagery. I wanted to set up a theoretical framework for the research, get an idea of the types of things the students were aware of and what they found funny, and get the students to create some funny content of their own all while tracking and chronicling my observations. Largely I wanted to know, did actively engaging with stuff that makes us laugh improve attendance and output? Did it make visible some of those difficult things to see and assess, like thinking? Could I prove my broad claim that if you laugh you’re smart?

**PURPOSE/RATIONALE**

Here is a small sample of the types of jokes I like to laugh at:

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@PeachCoffin · 10 Nov 2013

What do you mean I didn’t win I ate more wet t-shirts than anyone else

33 replies 5.9K retweets 13K likes
I am tempted to describe these jokes as “dumb jokes,” but I suppose that is a bit counterproductive to my goal here. But if I had called them dumb, by “dumb” I just would have meant that they are obviously silly and absurd; these jokes do not take themselves too seriously. Certainly these jokes are not highbrow political satire, but they are still “smart” in that there is still something to “get” in each one: that @PeachCoffin is conflating an eating contest with a wet t-shirt contest and is also subverting the “sexiness” of the contest with an image of someone eating wet shirts; that @WriteForWisdom’s autocorrect has been turned off and now he has absolutely no idea how to spell (and we get to sound out the punchline in a super satisfying way); and that there is a horse, named Henry, using chopsticks, on a lovely evening out with his gentle wife, and he’s upset about the casual tossing around of a colloquial phrase that’s likely offensive to his kind. Laughing at these jokes is our prize for being able to have enough of an
expectation of the world that it can be played with but not so rigid an expectation that we can’t have fun with it.

Consider this reply to the horse tweet:

Poor James. He’s like the kleptomaniac who didn’t get puns: he took things literally. (I’m sorry.)

The type of thinking the horse joke rewards us for is not the type of thinking where you know the definition of the words “chopsticks” and “hoof” and know that it would be logically impossible to use the former with the latter. The type of thinking we are rewarded for is a playfulness of thinking, a willingness to let go of the rigid ways of seeing the world, and an ability to think hypothetically.

For me, this is the epitome of creative and imaginative thinking: being able to think in terms of possibilities rather than realities. When I first proposed this inquiry to my district, it was under the title “Humour and the Use of Imaginative Education Tools to Increase
Engagement in ELA.” Though engagement has not dropped off as a point of interest for me, it has certainly not been my focus. What became the focus and what I would say now was the purpose of my inquiry was to show that what my students laugh at was a hitherto untapped resource for demonstrating the sophistication and quality of their thinking.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

What I hope I have done and am doing and will continue to do, is to present this work as an Imaginative Education approach action research. And I guess in order to say that, I might need to give a brief overview of what the heck IE is.

Here is a summary of IE in roughly 500 words.

And I know what you’re thinking: Imaginative Education. Does that mean I can just imagine I’m teaching? HAHAA that is so funny. I have literally never heard that before, not once.

Imaginative Education, as theorized by Kieran Egan, posits that at certain times in our development, we are more engaged by certain cognitive tools. Just like a hammer is a tool we use to, well, hammer, a metaphor is a cognitive tool we use to make sense of the world around us. To wield our cognitive tools with proficiency, power, and grace is what it means to be an educated person.
There are five “somewhat distinct” kinds of understanding: Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic, and with each of these kinds of understanding comes a new set of cognitive tools.

Before we have oral language, we experience the world somatically with the tools that the body affords us. Before we can speak and read, we can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

When we acquire oral language, we become engaged with the Mythic tools of understanding, named for the powerful role myth plays in our early cognition. We are drawn to vibrant, fantastical stories with clear tension between binary opposites such as good and evil, fair and unfair.

Our brains are then “reordered” when we learn to read, and we begin to seek limits for the fantastical realities that engaged us as primarily oral language users: we start to identify with heroes; we desire to collect and know some part of our quickly expanding reality; we become fascinated by the weird, the odd, the wonderful, and the extreme. Egan calls this Romantic understanding—not the va-va-voom kind of romantic, but the Wordsworthian Romantic, characterized by the vividness and light of the Mythic imagination with a burgeoning sense of rationality.

Philosophic understanding is characterised by the search for the capital-T Truths of ourselves and our world. With this kind of understanding, we start to form general schemes about the overarching “isms” that govern our societies, our relationships, and ourselves. Philosophic understanding requires the specific, pointed cultivation and support of a larger learning community; we are not genetically predisposed to Philosophic understanding, as with Somatic and Mythic, nor do we gain it through membership within a literate culture, as with Romantic.
As we move into Ironic understanding, the certain ground upon which we built our Philosophic schemes starts to shift. Ironic understanding is a place of paradox and plurality where, as Yeats put it, “the centre cannot hold.” Still, though Ironists may not be sure the physical world exists, they still bother to put on pants in the morning.

And that’s it. Easy peasy, right? But what does this mean for how I plan to execute my action research?

Egan (1997) says in *The Educated Mind* that the “terrible danger in writing about humour is to go drearily on and on about it” (p. 65), and, especially after my literature review, I wholeheartedly agree. E.B. White said, “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it” (Jennings, 2018, p. 33). Is there a way to study the humour frog that makes it interesting for people and doesn’t kill it in the process?

What I imagine an IE action research would look like is this: a smattering of cognitive tools wrapped up in narrative. There will be jokes, there will be metaphors; there will be images and binary oppositions. It will be playful and personalized, and there is a hope that you, dear reader, will be rooting for us and will connect with the joys, struggles, and curiosities of both my students and me. Meaning will be humanized as we attempt to grasp and grapple with the big ideas of the subject. And certainly, in unhealthy doses, there will be irony: a sense that this is what I know right now, but it is not all there is to know, and that this research might not be perfect, but that ultimately my students and I learned something and enjoyed ourselves and truly what else is there?
LITERATURE REVIEW

The readings I chose to engage with in preparation for my action research influenced both my theoretical approach and my approach to presenting my findings. In my literature review you’ll often see me taking what I want and leaving the rest. I am critical, certainly, but each of these readings influenced me in a particular way, and I hope that will be evident, either in philosophy or style, throughout my research.


   Egan suggests that “one kind of story not much mentioned in education is the joke,” but that the “terrible danger in writing about humour is to go drearily on and on about it” (p. 65). One of the first times I met Egan I asked him what he meant by people going drearily on and on about jokes, and he said that the writing on the subject is always so dry. I hadn’t read any academic writing on humour yet, and so I was unaware, but by the end of my literature review I was unfortunately very familiar with what he was referencing. The “go drearily on and on” sentence became a kind of guidepost for my writing about the subject: am I going drearily on and on? No? Good. Yes? Okay, add a screenshot of a twitter joke or something.
In this text, Egan also suggests humour takes a “complex, central role in Ironic understanding” (p. 65)—though jokes and humour as cognitive tools find their home in Mythic understanding, it is Ironic understanding where jokes and humour go to play. He says that “Ironic understanding seems to allow one to appreciate more jokes—even the cosmic ones” (p. 65), which points to not only an argument for learning about humour but also an argument for learning, period: imbedded in the idea that if you laugh you’re smart is also the idea that if you are smart you get to laugh. Egan suggests that jokes “can be a fertile means of building awareness of language and of developing increasingly sophisticated language use. Another value of jokes, of course, is that they are fun; they are a form of language whose use carries an immediate reward” (p. 211); laughing is the reward for understanding language and the conventions of language to the degree where you can also understand when language and its conventions are being played with in an amusing way.


This book is a more practical, user-friendly version of The Educated Mind. Egan suggests that literacy “enables us to reflect on, and become conscious of, language in a somewhat new way” and that “one consequence of literacy is that language becomes visible” (p. 22). He suggests, though, that we need techniques that help us become aware of language as an object, and that one of those techniques is the joke since it can help students develop “that ‘metacognitive awareness’ that seems to be important for their intellectual development” (p. 23).

Two things Egan mentions, which I think are very important and highlight the value of jokes, are that 1) “Jokes draw on various [other] cognitive tools” (p. 24) and that 2) “Humour is the great solvent and disruptor of excessive literalness in thinking” (p. 24). Metaphor is rampant in comedy and Egan points out that jokes are “commonly a kind of mini story” and “can also
enlarge our repertoire of expectations” (24). The idea of humour as a disruptor of literalness in thinking is perhaps my favourite, and I think it appeals to our sense of revolt/idealism as well. With the new curriculum’s focus on creative and critical thinking, working with a cognitive tool that helps students disrupt literalness and rigidity in thinking is a no-brainer.


Chapter seven of this book starts with an exploration of the pedagogical values of humour and suggests that “what we most often see in schools is superficial use of humor rather than consideration of its deeper pedagogical importance” (p. 49). This chapter mentions that humour is often seen as a distraction from learning, an idea that is also mentioned in Allen (2014, p. 388). Egan and Judson suggest it is usually because of the “side effects” of humour in the classroom (ie. support of good teacher-student relationships, creating a positive classroom environment, distracting from monotony) that we give it educational value, but they intend to show readers that “jokes can help students learn” (p. 49). Their main analysis of what is funny is explained through the incongruity lens and suggests that teachers should take a “humorous stance” (p. 50) and “look for what is incongruous” (p. 51) within any given topic.

The true value of jokes and humour lies not in the side effects but in what humour can show students about language and how it can encourage metaphorical thinking: “The use of jokes that requires us to ‘see’ language working often combines with the subject of the previous chapter [metaphor]; some educationally valuable jokes stimulate metaphoric understanding at the same time as they make language visible as an object that students can manipulate and play with, not simply a behaviour that has not been reflected upon” (p. 50). The mention of “educationally valuable jokes” is interesting and later they place particular value on jokes that
rely on wordplay (p. 51). I don’t disagree with these ideas, but I would like to challenge them a little or push against them at least: I would rather see us have a broader sense of educationally valuable jokes than a narrower one.


This review only covers parts of chapter 5 which is titled “Research Has Shown That...”. I was certainly affected by this chapter when I read it last semester, and it’s had an influence on how I’ve viewed research and the value of research, especially capital R (quantitative) Research. Egan says that we rely too heavily on what follows the commonly used phrase “research has shown that” and that “the chapter’s title is rarely justified in education” (p. 149). Egan tells the story of being asked to provide empirical data that his theories work, which he did (p. 150), but he couldn’t persuade himself “that all the research efforts over the six years actually showed anything reliably generalizable that wasn’t logically entailed by the arguments [he] had made in the beginning” (p. 150-151). He also suggests that merely having the scientific method is “only half the battle” (p. 156) and not enough to solve all the world’s problems since “the methods have to be appropriate to the phenomena they are used on” (p. 156). This was enough to convince me (though honestly it wouldn’t have taken much to push me over the science-is-lovely-but-girl-it-ain’t-everything hump) that it’s absurd to take a strict scientific approach to a deeply personal, subjective, and overall just *human* topic.


Berk starts the article by talking about some of the challenges of having humour in an academic paper, namely that it can affect publication (p. 61-62). But his stance is this: “If you use humor in teaching, training, and speaking to deliver serious content, why shouldn’t you use
it in your writing? Play with the minds of your readers by using colorful words and phrases, especially figures of speech, to create strong, memorable images” (p. 61). The rest of the article is a kind of how-to guide that I found a bit tiresome and at times downright cringey: “How do you decide what content to use in your humor? It’s like figuring out what to say to impress your first eHarmony® date between the appetizer and water buffalo entrée at Olive Garden® Italian Restaurant” (p. 64). Oof. He suggests one of the simplest ways to implement humour is to “create parodies of real warnings for products, food, and prescriptions” (p. 66), like, for example: “**WARNING:** If you have the attention span of goat cheese, this text will be interrupted regularly by warnings such as this one to check if you’re still awake. Are you? Heeeere we go” (66). I feel like I want to give him a piece of advice from Coco Chanel who said famously, “Before you leave the house, look in the mirror and take one thing off.” His jokes read like he’s wearing a scarf, three necklaces, dangly earrings, and a fedora: they lack elegance and are distracting, unnecessary, and positively gaudy.

I think, unfortunately, the answer to his title question “What could possibly go wrong?” is that your jokes could fall flat and your humour might actually decrease entertainment if it’s bad enough. What to take from this article was clear: humour where humour is due and never, ever reach.


I chose this article because I was interested in their links between humour and intelligence. After all, my idea is that if you laugh you’re smart, and I was wondering how this study connected humour and intelligence, and I wanted to challenge myself to read something that I wanted to disagree with outright: that humour is higher in males than in females. Because,
first, they use the word “males” instead of “men”; they are talking biology, not gender, which seems to suggest they found a biological reason that people with XY chromosomes are funnier than people with XX chromosomes.

What the study did to measure humour was give the participants comics and have them write captions. You know, like the contest at the back of The New Yorker magazine? In fact, exactly like it: they used comics from previous issues of The New Yorker for their tests. There were 400 participants, half men and half women, “58% white, 29% Hispanics, 5% Asian-American, 4% American Indian, 3% African American, and 2% other” (p. 189).

Here is an actual sentence from the article where they explain their mating success data: “Mating success correlated 0.35 (p<0.0001) with pro-promiscuity attitudes and -0.10 (ns) with family values; pro-promiscuity attitudes correlated -0.36 (p<0.001) with family values” (190). I think just reading that sentence affected my mating success and not for the better. And speaking of mating success, they mention men had more sexual partners and had greater pro-promiscuity attitudes without properly addressing (because how could you, in a five page paper) the many, many ways in which society praises and encourages men’s virility while shaming sexuality in women.

They keep describing men as “funnier,” when really, more accurately, they are only justified in saying after their research that men scored slightly higher on one type of verbal humour test according to the opinions of six people, four of which were men and two of which were women, all of unknown backgrounds; in other words, describing men as “funnier” based on their own, questionable research is begging the question. They also call their comic caption test merely a “reasonably valid” way of measuring intelligence (p. 189) and report that men “produced” a larger number of captions (191). The word “produced” is tricky since you could almost make the mistake of thinking it suggests that men thought of more captions when all the
experimenters can know is that men wrote down more captions; they don’t acknowledge or consider that the difference in number of captions may be a confidence thing rather than an intelligence thing. Perhaps a more reasonable or interesting conclusion is that if men are the machine gunners of comedy then women are the snipers.


I read this article the day after I read “Humor Ability Reveals Intelligence, Predicts Mating Success, and is Higher in Males,” and it gave me an idea of why I didn’t like Greengross and Miller’s work. “Don’t Forget” describes itself as a “sexnography” (p. 390) or an “ethnography of the sexual” (p. 390). It was interesting because I knew, thanks to this class, what an ethnography was: a tradition “grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation” (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 4, as cited in Allen, p. 390).

For me, Greengross and Miller took a humourless, stale, and I think just plain wrong approach to writing and studying humour. The article was aggressively scientific and dry, the title gave away too much, and the entire thing was lacking in any attempts to amuse their audience. They established humour as a predictor of mating success but made no attempts to seduce us as their readers.

“Don’t Forget” is actually enjoyable to read, and I found the personal touches charming. Allen gives obvious consideration to the readers and what their experience might be while engaging with the text and still clearly communicates her experiences and the results of her research.

This one was almost too boring to read. Just take a look at it!

It was written in 1972 so at least its typewriter font is legit and isn’t just an affectation or some ironic reference or callback to a simpler time, like the font of the bespectacled, bemoustached folks writing spontaneous poetry at farmers’ markets by donation. Font aside, the authors approach humour research by, to use Egan’s words, going drearily on and on about it: they reference research by a man named Patrick Laughlin and don’t even attempt a dad joke about his last name. But, nevertheless, they find that “[b]oth intelligence and creativity had a high correlation with sense of humor” (54) which supports my crudely articulated idea that if you laugh you’re smart. So, thanks, I guess, and I’m sorry I called you boring.
9. Huss, J., & Eastep, S. (2016). The Attitudes of University Faculty toward Humor as a Pedagogical Tool: Can We Take a Joke?

I’ll admit, I didn’t read all of this one. It didn’t turn me off in a kind of visceral way as others did, but it was just a little too focused on the side effects of humour and on humour’s contribution to positive classroom relationships rather than its cognitive significance. Huss and Eastep also repeat the phrase “the use of humor” throughout the paper, which tickles me for some reason: I imagine some young, square teacher sitting in his pleated khakis at his desk, reading this paper, and exclaiming, “Today I shall implement the joke!”

You know, as much as I slammed the “Humor Ability Reveals Intelligence, Predicts Mating Success, and is Higher in Males” article, I did appreciate that they describe humour as a “hard-to-fake” (Greengross & Miller, p. 188) signal of intelligence and creativity. The phrase “use of humor” brings us away from an idea of the “humorous stance” (p. 50) that Egan and Judson (2016) propose and suggests that humour is just another educational tool for anyone to implement, like a writing rubric or a cool app. If you are a humorous teacher who jokes with your students, you’ve likely come by it honestly, and it’s easy to see through a slapped-together attempt at joking from a traditionally not-funny person. It’s okay to instead be the kind teacher or the embarrassingly earnest or enthusiastic teacher; it’s okay to be uncool, as long as that’s who you are. I think just as important as making kids laugh is giving them examples of, and role models for, radical self acceptance.


This article outlines the three theories of humour my students and I used as a philosophic framework for our discussions of what makes us laugh. The three theories are superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory (p. 8). Superiority theory was “put forth
by [...] Thomas Hobbes in 1651” and it “relates humor to the ‘sudden glory’, self-satisfied superiority, or gloating a respondent feels towards others being disparaged or deprecated (Zillmann, 1983)” (p. 8). Relief theory “relates to surplus energy that overflows as humor, amusement, or laughter when ‘consciousness is transferred from great things to small’ (Herbert Spencer in Paulos, 1980)” (p. 8). Darwin and Freud also took stabs at relief theory: Darwin saw laughter as a draining of “unnecessarily generated energy” (p. 8) and Freud, of course, suggested that the mind formed “powerful barriers that suppress forbidden thoughts” and that laughter enables “a person to vent aggressive or sexual feelings and anxieties in a disguised manner” (p. 8). Finally, incongruity theory, which is by far the most popular, was introduced by James Beattie in 1776 and suggests that we laugh when “two or more odd, inappropriate, inconsistent, or unsuitable parts or circumstances are juxtaposed, with resulting surprise or unexpectedness” (p. 8). One-hundred-fifty-or-so years later, Max Eastman “referred to this interpretation of humor as derailment theory, pointing out that our normal flow of thought is sometimes derailed by an encounter with humor” (p. 8), which reminds me of Egan’s assertion that humour is a disrupter of literalness in thinking.


　*Planet Funny* is an excellent read, and if you are at all interested in the history of comedy or the ways in which comedy has changed our culture and our world, I highly recommend it. Jennings certainly achieves writing about comedy without going drearily on and on about it, but he doesn’t make the mistake of trying too hard like Berk; he comes off as just a genuinely funny and clever person talking about something he knows well and has thoroughly researched.

　Jennings also talks about the three theories of comedy mentioned in Teslow, and it was his descriptions of the theories that I borrowed from for my class handout (see appendix B).
Jennings’ list of things that are funny for no reason was also the jumping off point for my class starting a list of our own. In the book he discusses evolution, irony, politics, differences in humour between men and women, taboo topic jokes, twitter formats, if one can get better at telling jokes and being funny, poetry, and all sorts of things. The tone and the style matched the content in an inspiring way: he is formal enough to show that this is a topic worth studying and he carries this off with an authoritative tone. At the same time, though, his prose is rich with metaphors, images, and, of course, jokes. This whole book is as if to say, “Here is the power of humorous writing done well.” I suspect this book will become a kind of textbook for my school based Comedy Club in semesters to come.


In my first semester of this masters program, we had an assignment where we all chose a paper from a list of about ten, learned the paper and what it proposed back to front, and then presented the paper to our classmates while in the character of the person who’d written it. My partner, Joshua, and I chose “Common Misconceptions of Critical Thinking” by Bailin, Case, Coombs, and Daniels (1999), and so we presented—as Bailin, Case, Coombs, and Daniels—the idea that, to put it simply, critical thinking is a quality of thinking not a type of thinking. Anyway, I first came across “Opportunity to Teach” when a pair of my classmates presented it as Berliner. His idea is basically this: each teacher should be able to, every year and for some period of time, go off curriculum’s script to teach their class about a topic of the teacher’s choosing.

Berliner tells two stories of learning from people who were deeply passionate about a certain subject: one story about a “wizened old man” in Reno, Nevada who knew an absolute ton
about hats and a story about an old friend who’d taken up target shooting in his retirement. About three quarters of the way through my data-collection section of my action research, I was watching stand-up comedy with my students and laughing and reflecting on our amusement, and I thought to myself, “Hey, am I basically doing what that Berliner guy suggested?” And I think the answer is yes.

If I truly think about it, what I was trying to do with this action research project is to see if I could prove that this thing I like to talk about actually has educational value. If a parent or my principal or the district asked why we were making memes in class, I could thump this document on their desk and say fill yer boots. I would say that comedy, as a disrupter of literalness in thinking, encourages and improves both creative and critical thinking. And, specifically, I would say writing our own jokes and making our own memes strengthens our ability to use metaphors and analogies or just overall see connections between unlike things.

RESEARCH ETHICS
To ensure my research was ethically sound, I attended an ethics lecture from Dr. Dina Shafey from the Office of Research Ethics at SFU. I followed the necessary protocol obtaining permission from the district before I started my project. My proposal to the district included an initial sketch, a copy of the permission letter I would send to parents/guardians, a survey I planned to do with students, and a timeline of how I planned to execute and record my research. I explained that

Students will have the option to withdraw at any point during the project. After gathering data, results will be presented and, if any student is mentioned, a pseudonym will be used to protect their privacy. Personal information will not be shared. At the end of the study, results will be made available to the school, the district, the students, and to parents upon request. (SFU Inquiry Proposal. 2019.)

I also obtained permission from parents/guardians to use their child’s work samples, surveys, reflections, videos, and photographs to present to members of my graduate cohort and my instructors to demonstrate my own learning.

Most importantly for me, I emphasised that this inquiry process is not intended to assess, place, or evaluate the students in any way, but will serve to strengthen my teaching practice. Regardless of their decision, the integrity of the relationship I have with the students would not be affected, and they could withdraw their consent at any time. I made this clear to my students in the beginning as well, and let them know that, as always, if anything was disclosed to me that suggested harm to themselves or others, I would need to take the appropriate steps to report this to the administrator and the counsellor.

Ethically speaking, nothing noteworthy happened during my action research. There was never a dilemma for me as an educator when deciding to include something or not; what I have outlined here is my true recollection of events.
On Tuesday nights I play dodgeball on a team called Dodge Grand Caravan. We play in the Double Rainbow Dodgeball League, a queer league here in Vancouver. There are over 200 players on 18 teams, and the entire league is volunteer run. To save money, and because it’s probably just the easiest and best way to do it, we all referee ourselves, and honesty is valued above all else: if you get hit you go out; if you think you got hit, you go out.

There is a role, though, called the ambassador who is a player from one of the teams not playing who keeps score, clarifies rules, and starts every match with the “3, 2, 1, DODGEBALL!” cry. The reason I bring this up now is that everytime I ambassador and a stray dodgeball comes by my feet I have the same thought: do I, as a neutral third party, move my feet or let the ball hit me? Is objectivity getting out of the way or becoming part of the backdrop?

In this dodgeball situation, I think the answer is either A or B as long as you are consistent, but it’s an easy enough question to answer about a bunch of adults throwing foam balls at each other in an elementary school gym. The question of objectivity was slightly more complicated when it came to—and I’ll be honest about this—having an idea and wanting to be right about it. I truly don’t care if the Dodgey Partons beat Get Outta Dodge, but I certainly did care if I proved what I had hoped to prove, and if my students had a good time while proving it.

Perhaps you’ll notice my verb tense in the last paragraph: the question of objectivity was slightly more complicated, and I certainly did care if I proved what I had hoped to prove, but objectivity became less important as I found it wasn’t necessary. I didn’t need to be a neutral
party between two sides because there were no two sides: no one was against the other. Dodgeball was an imperfect metaphor because we were all on the same team, and I realized this when I stopped to think about the significance of what I’d named my research group.

I wanted to conduct my research in a small group, and so I did, and I called it Comedy Club. Consciously I wanted to call it Comedy Club because that’s typically where you would see stand-up, and it was a kind of amusing play-on-words. I also go to a gym called Tight Club, a community based gym that’s super welcoming and has an open and accepting vibe, and I was influenced by wanting to recreate that feeling. But I think subconsciously, my creation of a club had to do with my desire to meet with my students as equals. A club is a group of people who share a common interest, and the interest of our club was to share stuff that makes us laugh and to see if we could then prove that what we laugh at means we’re smart.

Of course, I was the one deciding where the club would go a lot of the time, but that didn’t necessarily mean there was an imbalance of power: traffic cones tell us where to go, but I’m not worried they might some day band together for world domination. I had also handpicked the students I thought would be good for the club, and they all seemed to understand without it being said that yes, we were talking about comedy, but we were also in school, and I was also their teacher, so there was an implied limit on what we might explore. Though the kids occasionally swore in club or showed me jokes that, you know, maybe I wouldn’t have written on the whiteboard but were other than that just funny, no one was ever disrespectful or did anything I would consider inappropriate. I don’t believe the students were holding back for my benefit or that had the situation been different they would have suddenly been into an entirely different kind of humour; for the most part, the kids leaned towards a kind of goofy, charming, clever but stupid, victimless kind of humour.
I was very open about being in a master’s program, and it was no secret that I wanted to show that if you laugh you’re smart. I would occasionally say things like, “Okay, I feel like we haven’t produced any stuff, so next week let’s make some memes for my project.” The objective of the group was no mystery because it didn’t need to be; in fact, my research became their research, and we were bound by a common goal.

Perhaps my disregard for objectivity, my skepticism of what follows “Research has shown that...”, and my overall flippance towards a strict, quantitative process might make me come off as anti-science, but I really don’t mean to sound like that. There is so much talk in education about learning what is “useful,” and it seems as though in these talks that science reigns supreme. But truly, when I think about what has been “useful” in my life, I’ve gotten way more mileage out of Ebb by Edna St. Vincent Millay (“I know what my heart is like / Since your love died: / It is like a hollow ledge / Holding a little pool / Left there by the tide, / A little tepid pool, / Drying inward from the edge”) than I have from the fact that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. I guess how I mean to come off, rather than anti-science, is just pro-curiosity.

As far as I can tell, I conduct research all the time. Just last week when I was in Campbell River I saw my therapist Patricia, and when she asked if there was anything I wanted to start with I said yes, I wanted to start with my habit of always buying two identicals pairs of shoes at the same time. Am I that afraid of loss since my dad died that I need a permanent back up pair of my Old Skool Vans? And so we made a theory and tested it against evidence, adjusted the theory and then tested it some more. We were essentially researching the question, “Why did Allie behave X way?”

I’ve never really had a strict sense of what “research” is, and I don’t feel like I owe anything to any community of intellectuals. What I set out to do is find, for myself, an answer to
an educational question, and I did as much as was necessary to feel secure in my conclusion and to have a rationalization for my conclusion and some evidence to support it.

**RESULTS and DAILY REFLECTIONS**

As I mentioned, I work in a team teaching environment with Mark Maretic. So every (roughly) Wednesday, Mark would watch over our classroom while I did Comedy Club with the kids. During each session I took as many notes as I could, and afterwards I would type them all up along with my general feelings and observations. Below are my notes. They are mostly preserved in the form they took originally, so there will be some random ALL CAPS words and just loads and loads of incomplete sentences and comma splices :)

**Jan 24th**

I just did for the morning students the lesson that I’ll be doing for the Chileans in the afternoon. It went really well! The morning is typically busier and more engaged, but I’m hoping what we might lack in numbers the Chileans will make up for.

I started with a story, one that didn’t really happened to me but I adapted from something I’d read in *Planet Funny*. It seemed better to tell it as if it was me, and I tried to add vivid images and make it engaging. I mentioned that things can be important without being serious. Then I played with the worse/better binary and suggested that, ironically, things are getting funnier because the world is getting worse. (Oh yeah, this lesson is part of H Hour and part of a month of lessons we did on happiness.) We then watched two clips: one from Trevor Noah, and another that was an animated portion of this podcast I listen to. The kids laughed at both, and I was happy.

Overall, they seemed to be really engaged and into it, which always feels so good. I said that jokes are rebels and that they are creators and destroyers, since creating a joke is about disrupting (destroying) expectations. I gave them some examples of anti-comedy jokes to demonstrate this (one about an apple, one about a hippo, ask me later), and these were a hit.

Anyway, then the big part of the lesson was where I showed them Ken Jennings’ big ol’ list of things that are funny for no reason. I had it photocopied from the book and gave one to each of the students. I read about a page of the list, and then I had them go through and highlight all of
the things they agreed were funny for no reason. Then, I had a piece of chart paper up on the wall and students added things that were funny for no reason so that we’d have an ongoing list. That’s it! It was fun and funny and they seemed to enjoy it, so I am super thrilled and feel a lot better about this afternoon.

AFTERNOON

Chileans went well, though not as well as this morning, honestly. There was like 15 of them and while I was talking there would be a few of them quietly translating as I spoke. I mean, it was good, but obviously it wasn’t our usual, and I think some of the humour was lost in translation.

It still felt good, though, and once they got to the part where they had to highlight stuff they agreed was funny for no reason, they were good to go. A few of them offered things that were funny for no reason for our collection, and things kind of settled once all eyes weren’t on me. Maybe before it was just too obvious that we had these people there and we were kind of doing it for them. But all the kids were super lovely, and I was happy with how I represented my idea of an IE lesson, even if the situation was a bit forced.

Afterwards all of the Chileans met with me and Mark in the staffroom to ask us a bunch of questions about the school and our kids and, mostly, the lesson. They asked about how I approached planning it, and the really amazing part is that I had answers! Like good answers. Where obviously I had thought about what I wanted to do and understood what tools I was working with and why. For me, what I had planned was an IE lesson—not necessarily a romantic understanding lesson or a philosophic or ironic (or even mythic) one, but an IE lesson. I borrowed from whatever kind of understanding I wanted, and that’s generally how I approach IE in my classroom: it’s the tools that guide me, not the understandings.

Feb 5th

The kids have been asking me when Comedy Club will start and what we will be doing. Which is great, but also a bit scary, since I’m not entirely sure yet. But at the moment, what I think I am going to do is look at a few theories of comedy and we will go through some stuff that makes us laugh and see if it fits or defies the theories. Egan uses the incongruity theory, which is popular, but we will also look at the superiority theory (not an excellent one, in my opinion) and the relief theory. It was interesting to see Herbert Spencer’s name pop up in my Ken Jennings reading! I thought to myself, Hey Cool! I know that old racist, sexiest, elitist dude! He’s the guy who bequeathed our progressivist inheritance!

Feb 6th

I was going to have the first edition of morning Comedy Club today, but half of the students aren’t here. I feel like this is going to be the main challenge. I hand selected a few students for the research, but I’m beginning to think I might just need to invite all of the kids in the school
and see who shows up. Maybe the afternoon will be better, and maybe I will still just administer the student surveys to the few students who are actually here. Also, I still only have one permission form back! Yikes.

Did lesson one with Elias and Ezra! They said I am Top Ten White People!

Notes: we mostly just talked about the Superiority Theory. I thought we would have less to talk about, but we actually talked a ton! When I very first brought it up, Ezra said he finds it funny when a slower car tires to race him. I beat some old guy in a Lexus, he says, and I laugh.

Elias says anything his younger sibling does is funny for this reasons. Any of the dumb stuff they say or when they fall down.

I brought up Late Night political comedy and we agreed, and this lead to them bring up “libtards” and “snowflakes”—this is about feeling superior.

Then we talked about “getting into it on the internet”—can you believe this idiot said this, but then talked about getting “roasted” for grammar. That if you make a good point but there it one error, it’s invalid. I suggested it’s the low hanging fruit. And Ezra said if you are the first one to point out the error you get “hella likes” and that might be part of it.

They also told me about “clout demons”...18-21 yr old women from LA who will do anything for internet popularity, which often includes putting others down.

I asked them about COUNTEREXAMPLES and Elias showed me a facebook page called Subtly Depressed People, and we talked about self-deprecating humour a bit.

BUT I suggested that are depressed people on the internet also being superior because being seen as happy is seen as simple? They wholeheartedly agreed! They seemed a bit mindblown, which was cool, and I kind of hadn’t thought about it much either. Happy people are simple, shamed for happiness—“like, if your parents are together and bought you a car, you’re gonna get roasted” -Ezra.

“Happy people have basic tastes”—is there a correlation between happiness and comedy? They brought up Robin Williams and a comic named Joey Diaz. Ezra said depressed people go on the internet more and happy people experience real life, so they know fewer memes (an interesting theory!).

As another anomaly, I introduced them to Mitch Hedberg and we read a bunch of his one liners...How is his comedy about being superior?
I used to do drugs. I still do, but I used to, too.  
My fake plants died because I did not pretend to water them.  
You know, I’m sick of following my dreams, man. I’m just going to ask where they’re going and hook up with ‘em later.  
I’m against picketing, but I don’t know how to show it.  
I haven’t slept for ten days, because that would be too long.  
I wanted to buy a candle holder, but the store didn’t have one. So I got a cake.  
Is a hippopotamus really a hippopotamus or just a really cool opotamus?  
Rice is great if you’re really hungry and want to eat two thousand of something.  
The depressing thing about tennis is that no matter how good I get, I’ll never be as good as a wall.

Afternoon was interesting. Much more difficult. I had Lou, Fil, and Oscar, and Lou was in a sour mood. She disagreed with everything everyone said but couldn’t provide counterexamples. At one point she said “Fair is foul and foul is fair” for pretty much no reason. Fil was very loud and gave examples that were off topic. Oscar talked about what we should have talked about.

Generally they talked about things that were off topic.

Superiority=Trump misspelling words. Cofefe, Global waming.

Lou wanted to say that Superiority was self-deprecating humour. I asked how (I had the example from this morning, but she didn’t get there). It’s hard to talk about anything, even jokes, when you are not open to it. How do I make the environment for it? That’s going to be a challenge in our school. Do I just decide on Comedy Club when we are all manic? I could tell beforehand she was withdrawn.

They talked about jokes afterwards, which I think is always a good sign. Carrying the conversation on afterwards, without me there.

Play on words are not about superiority. I introduced the idea of a “victimless joke” and they said maybe dad jokes.

They thought all of TWITTER was a toxic place of a lot of roasting, but here we moved away from actually talking about humour.

CLAPBACK—a clever or funny answer to someone who has criticized or insulted you: She delivered the ultimate clapback on Instagram. Her new record is a clapback to everyone who underestimated her. We talked about the art of the clapback.

PARODY was a good example of superiority comedy, they thought.
Dad jokes, SHREK IS LOVE, and Shaggy meme may be victimless humour.

We moved onto Relief theory and it was hard to think of examples at first, but eventually they thought of prank shows. And Oscar suggested it’s like when we laugh at people falling or getting hurt but only if we know they are okay.

It’s funny when we worry about something and it turns out not to have been a big deal.

I remembered a scene in The Office when Michael pulls a “prank” on Pam in the pilot episode by pretend-firing her for stealing post-it notes, but she’s obviously deeply upset and cries and it’s not funny at all.

Feb 13th

Just had two snow days. Was excited to see my work friends and excited for an excuse to wear overalls to work. It was a chill day, and I was getting ready for Valentine’s day.

Lou was in a better mood today which helped. I addressed us getting off topic at the beginning and tried to make eye contact with Oscar as I did that, so he knew that I had read his feedback and taken it into consideration.

I told them that today we would round out the theories worksheet and that I wanted to try a measurement of humour I had read about.

So Incongruity. We found that most of what they laugh at fits this—they enthusiastically showed me memes for about 40 minutes. Do you know cursed images? What about the Shaggy meme? Hello Hungry, I’m Dad. Here’s a cat on a microphone. Here’s a video of a guy reading tweets with his voice autotuned. Here’s a video of Freddie Mercury on a rollercoaster. Here’s animals sitting like people. Here’s a bunch of dentures made into a jello.

I showed them this twitter joke

![Pinned Tweet]

and they described it as a “shitpost” (which I still might not fully get). My coworker came by and asked me if a raccoon was just a raccoon or if it meant something else. She assumed it must have been slang for something, but the joke was actually just that it was silly: there was no piece of information that this joke required, just an openness. She was wondering what she had missed, but she hadn’t missed anything—it was just absurd.
Oscar seems the most interested in the task at hand. At a certain point he asked if we should try to come up with counterexamples. His first thought was people falling down. I ask if it might still be incongruity because we expect people to stand up but then they are on the ground. But he says that often we laugh even when we know they are going to fall down, and I agreed, remembering an 8 minute long video I’d watched on my snow day that a woman took out of her apartment building window here in Vancouver of a particularly harrowing intersection where people were falling down and also sliding all over with their cars. Eventually the police put up caution tape and cones and people were still driving through, which certainly lit up the superiority section of my laughing brain.

For the last part of the class, I had them repeat a test I had read about in the Greengross and Miller reading. They had determined that certain people were “funnier” by measuring their ability to come up with captions for New Yorker cartoons. So I explained the activity to the kids, showed them examples from past New Yorkers and explained how the process worked: one week it’s blank, then they choose the top three captions, then the winner of the top three is decided the next week. I chose these three comics, and here are our captions:
1. a) I’ve been catfished 48 times. I’m glad someone is real.
   b) Joe, you’re giving me really flat responses lately.

2. a) Who are you?
   b) Son, you need to show these kids who’s boss!
   c) Fight the children, son.
   d) Why can’t you play? Because public parks are part of the socialist agenda, son.
   e) My dad didn’t love me either.

3. a) You’re fine, just bloated.
   b) You need to treat people a little better: you’re a little toxic.
   c) Big.
   d) Who let a pufferfish into my office?

Feb 14th

Read the section of Jennings book about joke formats as a possible way of getting better at jokes. I asked them to think of joke formats—not exactly memes, but memes in a way. And does playing with this help us?

Interestingly, a lot of the formats are metaphor! Thinking of something that two or more things have in common—like the hand shaking meme.
Feb 20th/21st

Usually I do Comedy Club on Wednesday, but Ezra hasn’t been here (mental health related I suspect), so there isn’t much of a club if it’s just me and Elias. Chatted casually when he was here on Tuesday but were going to do the official club the next day, but then he wasn’t here. Ezra and I are close and I had hoped this would entice him to school the next day, but that was not the case.

Also, in the afternoon, Lou has been away all week and Fil wasn’t really feeling it, so we postponed it. I began to worry that Comedy Club was over and that it would be hard to get the kids there anymore. Oscar was still very gung-ho though and is always responsive to Comedy Club. I’m wondering if maybe I have made it too optional in a way.

We do H Hour and it’s always the same thing and we do it at the same time every week and the kids know to expect it. I should be more strict about it taking place at a certain time and that time should coincide with when the students are actually with me.

Feb 21st

Ezra still away in the morning. We’ve missed two lessons now, will maybe need to focus on afternoon kids.

AFTERNOON

Melissa asked if she could participate and if she needed to sign a form and I said yes, it’s very simple, you just need to get your parents to sign it, it’s a chill form that just says I can talk about you in my discussions and they just have to sign it and give their credit card info, very chill very chill. (Oscar had a callback to this joke later, but what was it??)

Fil, Oscar, and two new students (Melissa and Lindsey). I took the kids into the multipurpose area this time, I think because generally we are a bit loud and disruptive. Melissa sat at the table with us. But Lindsey sat close at another table, though facing us, and I got Fil and Oscar to explain to the other two what we had done so far. They explained each of the theories of comedy and gave examples for each. It was cool! Then I introduced the activity for today with the second hand out (see appendix B).

I was apologetic in handing it out, because I was aware in some ways that it was an old meme. But they liked it and laughed at the examples I used and seemed to enjoy the progression of the meme—standard use, educational use, variation on use, metause.

About this time, Lindsey made intense eye contact with us all, said she had had five cups of coffee and could see space and time and that she had to go. Totally cool, Lindsey left.
I wondered if using this meme or any meme formats in general could help us get better at any kind of thinking or any particular literary devices. I was leading them here for sure. Oscar said it makes us good at comparison. Yes! And so I pushed them a little more...and what do we study that is working with comparison? Eventually Fil said, “I was gonna say simile” which was great! I pointed out how a lot of them were essentially saying “picky eaters are just like kids—all they want are chicken stips” or “my knees are just like rice krispies: they both go snap crackle pop.”

So then we tried to make our own.

It was tough at first, and I got really nervous that I had asked them to do something too hard and they would give up. But then Fil suggested we make them of each other.

Fil—Ruby Gloom—spooky Canadians with red hair

Canadians—mid westerners—saying oops when they bump into a table

Math class — putting on a movie after 10pm — falling asleep after 5 minutes

Oscar — going to an abandoned warehouse — saying hello??

Nobody’s favourite colour—white people picking up the phone—yellow?

Crocs—Heeleys—forbidden shoes

Then we had an interlude where we riffed on Crocs a bit because Fil was wearing a Crocs shirt. They were established in 2002 and Mel said she was as old as cros, Oscar said he was older. “Kids these days, I’m older than crocs!”

Crocs—this analogy—full of holes

Then I asked for a bunch of memes, and they told me them—I learned a lot! Also decided that for next week, well, we’ve been focusing on this very specific internet format humour and maybe we should look at some traditional stand-up form comedy.

Roasts (history of on CBC radio I heard this summer)
Stand-up
Then weird stand-up, experimental stuff?

Feb 28th

Ezra is still away. It’s really just two students in the afternoon who are holding things down, Fil and Oscar. Once in a while I get other students stopping by, Melissa, mostly, but without them
there isn’t much of a club. Ezra and I are close, but it’s interesting that this was still not enough to get him here. I wonder if it had been every day? Even just briefly? How would I make it more of a commitment?

Also, Lou has been away, but I think it might have been because of conflict with some of the students in the class because she has been avoiding my room. Yesterday I went over the meme handout with her and we laughed, but there wasn’t a lot of conversation created.

I tried to get Comedy Club going yesterday, but Fil wasn’t feeling it that day so I said I would try the next day. Even though we had H-Hour today, Fil, Oscar, and Melissa still wanted to participate in the club.

Early Joey Bishop (1960): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VR2j8nDwNbs

They talked about set up vs joke time. There was a bomb joke about a dog peeing on trees that we didn’t quite get and just wasn’t that funny—dogs peeing on trees is old news in 2019. There was an actually good joke about the guy plunging down the stairs though: it was unexpected and good and felt almost like a modern joke.

Early Richard Pryor: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmZm2HBMtTQ

More energetic, more relatable. (The idea of relatable came up quite a bit.) They found him to be just funny enough and a little absurd, just racial enough as well. Acknowledged his race and the differences and in a funny way.

Standard Lady Act (Nikki Glaser): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oufGY-I7j0k

I was surprised by how much the girls liked this stand-up. I thought it would come off as typical girl comedy about dating, but they found it relatable as well. I guess I’m not straight, and I’m not dating dudes, and I guess maybe that’s why it didn’t say anything interesting to me.

Oscar said it felt like she was making the same joke over and over but in a different way and that it felt stale to him.

Fil thought it got better over time. She said that we warmed to her, and Oscar said that we don’t always have to warm to people but sometimes we do. He suggested that Pryor was someone we liked right away.

They mentioned energetic vs monotone comedians. We don’t need to get used to the high energy people but it takes longer to engage with monotone people.

Maria on Standard Lady Act: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDnLedkBjWg
More Maria Bamford: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3k861fymMw&t=3s

They commended her execution. It was a commentary on comedy. They thought the voices certainly added to it, and they liked it better than Nikki.

They thought Bamford seemed naturally good, and I asked if she seems like she practices or not. They said it doesn’t seem like she practices but she probably does. They liked that she experimented and Fil said it appealed to her “teenage monkey brain” because it’s a bit stupid.

Mitch Hedberg—one liners

Didn’t watch them all. I had pre-vetted some appropriate ones and skipped the ones that were too much about drugs or drinking, even though these kids are woke.

Also appealed to the “teenage monkey brain,” said Fil.

They said you almost hate yourself for laughing at it. It’s so stupid but you are enthralled and want to know what is next. It’s unpredictable so you have to stick around. We talked about the joke about limes floating. It’s absurd but we didn’t see it coming, and it’s so amusing and charming.

John Mulaney, The One Thing You Can’t Replace:
https://open.spotify.com/track/6g4g8xqoSn5mqMAPG2sKhZ?si=pOyw7rBRdWSQsAcWHbnsxw

Fil showed us this. She doesn’t really listen to stand-up but had heard this and shared it. It’s basically just a good, interesting story. I’ve heard other stand-up of his and it is very story based. It’s about a party at a teacher’s house. He used excellent metaphors—one about the civil war and made a funny reference to Steve Urkel, which I’m sure the kids didn’t get. He used vivid mental imagery, described the party as a “sea of drunken toddlers.” It was certainly just excellent storytelling. Masterful and engaging in a very IE, cognitive tools way. Well done, John!

We ended by watching a few youtube funny people, an area of comedy that I really know very little about. They mentioned Bill Wurtz, Gus Johnson, and Matt Post who I think made vines. They also mentioned Jimmy Carr and Billy Connolly and wondered if we might explore some sketch comedy. There is so much to do! Which is cool. Basically I think Comedy Club will extend outside of my research. That I will not really be “done” when I do my writing in a few weeks. I think I will form this into a unit and give it as an option, but it does kind of depend on if the kids have a rich comedic life. Asking Oscar what’s the funniest breakfast cereal feels somehow less silly than asking that to just anyone. Maybe because he doesn’t find the question absurd—that obviously there ARE funnier cereals. I think there might be a difference between liking to laugh and liking comedy, and that might be interesting to explore.
March 4th

Dear Diary, today Anna and Oscar came by my desk. Oscar is going to get credit for art and we had to work out what could be artistic about Comedy Club, and we decided the memes could be the thing. She wanted him to do an analysis of his composition, and I told her it might not be pretty and in fact likely wouldn't be. I showed them two bad photoshops I’d made recently as examples.

Then I told him next we would work on some photoshopping, then we could rank some non-funny things (what’s the funniest fruit? “Banana seems obvious”—what’s the funniest shoe? Crocs? “Oscar: I think Heelys have the edge.” Funniest cereal? Froot loops. Maybe chocolate rice krispies. Or Reese's PB puffs for the song, which Oscar sang and it was like a hip hop song, v funny exchange, he's a good kid).

March 5th

Today we made memes with a meme generator! And then ranked non-funny stuff. It felt great today. Oscar came to me and asked if we were doing Comedy Club, and I didn’t really have anything planned because usually we do it on Wednesday, but in the spirit of the learning centre I said sure, why not? I signed out three laptops and I was going to show them how to use this online photo editor that I use, but we found a site that generates memes. I made a few from the other week when we brainstormed, and they made some new ones using already existing formats (see appendix C). They were better at this than I was, I think, but I was pretty stuck on the epic handshake one and also wanted to keep it clean. We made memes and laughed and showed each other as we created.

Then Oscar asked if we were also going to rank non-funny things, and I said yes and that we should make a survey to do the next day with the morning and afternoon classes during H Hour. The categories we thought of so far are fruits, shoes, olympic sports, dog breeds, facial hair, and cereal.

March 7th

We did the Funniess of Everyday Things survey with the kids during H Hour! It was super fun. Even the staff got into it, and I have results from the secretary and the principal as well.

Not all of the kids—or adults, even—had an idea what all of the things were, so I said that obviously they could look them up. I suspect, but I don’t have data for this, that if someone didn’t know what the thing was they were likely to rank it not very funny. Because it seemed like a lot of the time the funniness had to do with some association and not necessarily to do with an inherent funniness. But I don’t have the data on that either. I think that would have required follow up interviews with all of the students which I do not have the time to do.
And honestly, I don’t really have the desire, either. Because what was good and important for me is that the kids were happy to engage in this task. They discussed it with their friends and took the time to look up stuff they didn’t know. They were engaged for a solid fifteen minutes debating the humourous merits of a can opener and a colander. The joy of a bicycle ride is not the route you take or even the bike you use: it’s the wind and it’s your body. It’s thinking about absolutely nothing else for even just a little bit of time.

**March 12th**

Ezra was here and he asked if we could do Comedy Club. I had to tell him that it was basically over but that we could continue on Wednesday, and we could pick up where we left off, which was on lesson two. It’s cute, actually, or charming at least, that he thought about it and asked about it. That despite everything that was going on he did remember.

I told him and Elias that if they wanted, we could do the Comedy Club after spring break and in the meantime he could do the funniness ranking of everyday things. Originally Elias had done the survey incorrectly, and so he instructed Ezra not to make the same mistake he had.

Ezra, who is a car guy, commended me on including the PT Cruiser as one of my funniest cars. I think there is certainly a place in the future for Comedy Club to be an ongoing thing, and I can see it getting better and better as I collect the right materials. I think once something is on your radar, you collect more, and as you are out and about you think, “Oh! This would be perfect for Comedy Club!” I hope it will become like that.

**March 14th**

Took Fil and Oscar into the staffroom to do our final recorded interview. It was so charming and made me feel great about this whole thing! I think Comedy Club was a resounding success, 10/10 would do again.

Even though I had questions to ask them and it was an “interview,” it kind of just had the feeling of most of our club times: casual, exploratory, open. I guess I always wonder how they feel about it, but if they were honest in the interview—and I have no reason to believe they weren’t or shouldn’t have been—they feel good about it and enjoyed Comedy Club.

I actually feel kind of excited now for the writing part, which I certainly wasn’t feeling at the beginning of all of this. But I feel like now I have stuff to say, so it’s really not that scary anymore.
The One Who Got Away

When I thought of who to include in the final interview, there was really only one option: just Fil and Oscar. Though throughout the process I’d had Elias and Ezra involved, and Lou and Melissa, and sometimes even the larger group, it was really Fil and Oscar who held the club down and who had the best idea of the big picture.

As I mentioned, this research had originally been more concerned with engagement than it ended up being in the end. Because the question of engagement in the learning centre setting was answered early on: studying what we laugh at is engaging to students who are already at school, but studying what we laugh at was not enough to get students to school.

Ezra had a strong start in Comedy Club. He and Elias and I had a great time at our first meeting and didn’t even get through all of our theories of comedy. Ezra was my student maybe two years ago, but he’s stayed in my classroom because it’s where he’s comfortable (and because it’s where Elias is, and these two come as a pair). Ezra’s attendance dropped off at the beginning of February, and he didn’t return until the week before spring break. When he did return he called a meeting and asked that both his teachers and me and the principal be there. This is not common practice, but it was obviously important to him, and we were happy to oblige. He came in that day with his mom and told us all the story of what had been going on with his family; he wanted us to know that this is his place, and he’d been away for legitimate reasons.
If you got the idea in my opening story that listening to *My Favorite Murder* and joining twitter cured me of my grief, then perhaps I didn’t tell it so well. What I meant to communicate is that I was drowning in sadness, that I was out in the middle of it and hadn’t seen the shore for months. Laughing at silly things on the internet and encouraging myself to make jokes about the little, everyday things I found amusing was just enough to get my head above water, and it was then that I could do the real work of reaching out to people, of still loving people and being close to people even in the face of inevitable loss. Hannah Gadsby (2018) says in her amazing comedy special, *Nanette*, that “Laughter is not our medicine; stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine” (*Netflix*, 1:06:50).

So it didn’t bother me that Comedy Club hadn’t worked out in the morning session with Elias and Ezra: it turns out that in education, as with comedy, timing is everything.

**The Interview**

The interview with Fil and Oscar was great, and when I think back to the process and listen back to the interview, I’m happy about how our final discussion works as a final assessment as well.

I imagined the interview would be quite short, five to 10 minutes, but it ended up being over half an hour. For that reason, I am not going to type it all up. But I will pick out some highlights and below are some transcribed parts for your convenience.

The length of the interview is actually one of the big take-aways from this whole experience: they talked about their learning for 35 minutes! And I think they actually could have gone much longer. I wrapped up the interview when I did just because we were getting into a much larger topic (is there a difference between creativity and intelligence), and I feel like we could get into that more as we continue on with the club.

I used the following six questions as a guide for our discussion:
1. Read over your surveys from the beginning of this. Any significant changes?
2. What did you enjoy about Comedy Club?
3. What would you have liked to have been different about Comedy Club?
4. Would you like to continue on with CC after my research is over? Where would you like to go from here?
5. How did Comedy Club compare to the booklet work that you usually do here?
6. I had this idea that if you laugh you’re smart. Do you think I’ve been able to show this? Can you see any links between humour and intelligence?

Neither Fil nor Oscar thought there was any significant changes to their comedy consumption habits since Comedy Club. Fil thought that maybe she followed more meme accounts or made more memes but that could just have been a chance increase not related to our time together.

For the second question, I acknowledged that maybe I worded it in a leading way and that I was open to them not having enjoyed anything about the club. But Fil said she enjoyed making memes and writing jokes about each other and said that it helped us to bond more. Oscar said he enjoyed it all because he just likes comedy: “Comedic things are fun,” he said simply. At the tail end of this section of our discussion, I acknowledged their extensive knowledge of memes, and Fil explained that it’s because they’ve grown up on the internet. It felt like a positive way to recognize generational difference: I pointed out that they were ahead of me in some ways, and they had a kind of victimless explanation. Though our relationships to comedy were different from each other, they weren’t strange or bad or better or worse.

The question of what they would have liked to be different about Comedy Club was answered instead as a question of what we had missed: Fil said we could have explored sketch comedy and Oscar said sketch comedy and also more stand-up. It was interesting, though, that they only focused on content and not format: based on these answers, they had no objections to the format or the feeling of Comedy Club. They didn’t say it could be more often or less or
include more people. With question four, though, they did suggest they would like Comedy Club to involve the larger school audience by having something like a GLC memes page or a bulletin board for the jokes we write.

At the learning centre, students usually work on their own at their own pace through a number of units that make up each course. Each of these units is usually, but not always, in the form of a booklet. When asked how Comedy Club compared to the booklet work, Fil said, “With Comedy Club, it’s like, we can all discuss it, and it all makes sense because it’s mostly teenagers talking, and I’m a teenager, so I get it,” and that “Comedy Club is really, really fun and I think it’s going to help me in a way.” Oscar’s view was slightly different in that he thought there was a time and a place for booklet work. He said, “I can blast through booklets, but they are the worst way to learn,” and that he wouldn’t want to do anything other than booklet work for subjects like math. Fil told us about a British TV show called Horrible Histories that included a section called Stupid Deaths that seemed like an IE approach to history: it was funny, there was a catchy jingle, and it focused on an extreme in historical deaths: the stupidest ones.

Finally, I asked them the big one: did we show that if you laugh you’re smart? Fil was only half convinced in the beginning, but she became more convinced as she talked: “I think we’ve proved it a little bit. Like, um, the more well thought out jokes, like, we all have to think about it, and then we laugh because we get it.[...] We get it, and I think it proves, like, how much of an understanding we have on a certain subject.” Oscar said, “Yeah I think there’s definitely a correlation between intelligence and how often you laugh,” and that “the more jokes you understand the smarter you are. And the smarter you are the more jokes you’ll understand.”

When it came to creating our own jokes, Oscar said, “I would argue that it does make you smarter because it kind of strengthens your ability to find, you know, like patterns and correlations between things. Like probably the most common jokes you make in everyday life
are comparing two things, at least for me anyway, and I’ve gotten to the point where I can do it pretty quickly.” He also said that writing jokes makes you better at writing; you are more creative and find more patterns in the world.

Overall, the interview was fun, and it had the feeling of our previous times together. I think they felt like I was genuinely curious, because I was, and that they genuinely had worthwhile things to say on the topic, because they did. They were authorities on comedy now. Throughout my explorations of jokes and humour as cognitive tools, they also clearly formed their own ideas on the subject and had their own justifications for their ideas and beliefs. Within the interview there was agreement and there was disagreement and there was laughter, and I would be proud to have anyone listen to this interview as an example of my learning and of their learning, too.

**Jokes of the Day and Larger Group Activities**

I should also mention my assessments of the comedy related activities I did with students that were outside of Comedy Club, namely the Comedy Club Joke of the Day and the two lessons I did during H Hour.

Over the my last two years here at the learning centre I’ve featured a daily check-in question on the board as a way to engage the larger group of the class. Since our students are mostly working on their own at their own pace, they don’t always get to know kids who aren’t already their friends. During my action research time, I changed the check-in question to a joke of the day (see appendix A).

Mark and I had some debate over the format of the joke. I leaned towards the one-liner or if I did feature a joke with a punchline, I would always offer the punchline. Mark thought that the punchline should be withheld so that students would need to actively engage to get the
“answer.” Perhaps similar to my choice to have a comedy club, I didn’t want to be the Keeper of Funny in this situation: I had no desire to force an engagement. As it turns out, engagement didn’t need to be forced anyway. Students would tell me if they liked the joke or if they didn’t get it or if it was stupid and made their eyes roll back so far into their head that they went blind for a few minutes. Also, when I returned from spring break I kind of saw my action research as “over,” and several students commented on how I hadn’t updated the joke. So I changed the joke to a new one, and we laughed, and now I still update it. It seems as though the Joke of the Day is here to stay, and I’m happy for it.

In the daily journal section of this project I previously reflected on the comedy lesson I planned for the visiting Chilean educators. I will say that it was one of my favourite H Hour lessons this year and framing the lessons around a number of cognitive tools (binary opposites, heroic qualities, story, jokes, etc) was effective for engagement.

The other comedy related activity we did with the larger school group was the survey the Comedy Club made that was about ranking the funniness of everyday things (see appendix D). I collected all of the surveys from the morning and the afternoon classes, and I had big plans to compile it all and make a big, beautiful chart for my action research. But honestly, what for? Coming to conclusions such as “The morning students found the Loch Ness Monster to be funnier than a Merman, though the opposite was true of the afternoon” or “Teachers found the PT Cruiser to be 5% funnier than students did” seems inconsequential. For me, the significant finding is that students were able to do this activity at all. It wasn’t as if I handed out the survey and they all stared at me, with faces as blank as donuts, wondering what humour could possibly be found in a spatula or a rolling pin. Every single student could place all of the everyday objects on their own funny/not funny spectrum. There were discussions and debate—who knew students had such strong feelings about Raisin Bran?—and both the morning and afternoon
students approached the task as a reasonable and worthwhile exercise. It was also interesting and cool for the Comedy Club kids to see what we’d created finding its place in the larger learning community.

CONCLUSION

On the last day of school before spring break, there was a hip hop performance at our school. Every year one of our teachers, Rino Marrone, applies for a grant to have a couple of hip hop artists come to our school one day a week for eight weeks to work through the fundamentals of hip hop with a group of our students. They learn about the five elements of hip hop (graffiti, MCing, DJing, breaking, and beat boxing), and they do a performance for us at the end. My two main participants for this research, Fil and Oscar, both performed, and they were both absolutely amazing.

Fil did a spoken word poem called “Hi” that was about becoming proudly a weirdo despite years of torment and acknowledged that it’s the haters who are wrong, not her; Oscar did an original song called “Little Green Man” about his anxiety. Though I was super impressed—like SUPER. They were both so, so good—and proud of these students I’d gotten to know well over the last few weeks, I didn’t think much about it beyond the context of the hip hop
performance until I was on the ferry on the way over to the island to see my family. What occurred to me then was that all of the students I’d involved in Comedy Club had, like me, first hand experience with anxiety or deep sadness. I decided I’d talk to my kids after spring break and see if this was a fair assessment of them and if they’d be okay with me exploring this conclusion in my write up. (For the ethical record, I individually asked all of the students involved, and they all gave me their consent. In fact, when I asked each of them if it might be fair for me to suggest they had some experience with anxiety or deep sadness, they each gave a kind of mirthy laugh as if to say, “HAHA yeah dude, I’m totally sad, you are not wrong.”)

When I spoke with Oscar and asked for his permission to talk about his song, he also said that he thinks my connection between people who seek out comedy and people who are generally a bit depressed is a fair one; just look at Robin Williams, he said. He also suggested something I hadn’t thought about before: what if people who are sad like us like to be funny because we don’t want other people to feel the way we do? It was an excellent idea and one that Superiority theorists might not be too pleased to hear. I’ve spent these last weeks attempting to show that if you laugh you’re smart, and perhaps, at least according to Oscar, if you laugh you are also kind.

At the beginning of this semester, I spent just about the entire hour of a therapy session with Patricia talking about my incredible lack of motivation when it came to this project. I separated from my wife in September, and I’m very much still dealing with what that means for how my life is going to be. I remember feeling, like, who am I doing this for? Not that I lived every day for my wife, but certainly I did feel some obligation to be a smart and impressive partner and to do things that would contribute to our value as a couple. Achieving the feat of carrying out a large scale research endeavour wasn’t something I needed to do for myself; I
already have a solid sense of myself as a teacher, and I already believe that I do right by the kids. Who was left to impress? My mom?

Patricia suggested that maybe I was facing the same kind of struggle that my students face every day, all of these “who am I doing this for and why” questions. I found, though, that what inspired us in Comedy Club wasn’t clear learning outcomes or a rationale. When I think about it, we did have a goal (to explore the idea that if you laugh you’re smart), but we didn’t have a single learning expectation. It’s possible we would have talked about memes for six weeks and actually been dumber for it. What made it work was that we were curious and that our enjoyment of the thing wasn’t riding on any particular outcome. I wanted to be right about the connection between humour and intelligence, but I wasn’t going to become serious and humourless if my research was unable to theorize that connection.

When I was first becoming a teacher I was profoundly influenced by an essay I read called “Ghosts and the Curriculum” by William Doll (2002). In the paper, Doll suggests a reimagining of curriculum based around the etymology of the word. *Curriculum* “means either ‘a course for running’ or ‘a chariot for racing’ such a course[,]” but we should see curriculum by “its infinitive form, *currere*, [which] means ‘to run’” (p. 29). I think the magic of Comedy Club is that it was curriculum as a verb; we had some direction, some ideas to guide us, and some stops we all wanted to make, but ultimately it was a beautiful day and the air was fresh and our desire to make each other laugh was enough to get us anywhere we wanted to go.

I’m not sure if I’ve succeeded in convincing you, dear reader, that if you laugh you’re smart, but I did succeed in justifying this belief to myself and to my students. Conducting this research also meant that for one hour a week for six weeks straight my students and I created a little pocket of joy in this world, and I think that’s the smartest thing any of us could ever do.
SHOUTOUTS

Special thanks to my mom and Gordo, to my brothers for being the closest thing there is to me, to my friends for their compassion and support and their kindness in buttloads, to the Hittrich-Kovacs for my family Sundays, to Marko my HOV buddy for life, to Hoover for being so handsome, to all my pals from class and especially my critical friends, and to my kids who are the best and crack me up every single day.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIXES

A: Comedy Club Jokes of the Day (feat. our class mascot, a hairbrush someone left on a desk three years ago and has been in a bag clipped to the whiteboard ever since)

Comedy Club Joke of the Day
Did you hear about the corduroy pillows? They're making head lines!

Comedy Club Joke of the Day
I went into a place to eat, it said, "Breakfast anytime." So I ordered French toast during the Renaissance.

Comedy Club Joke of the Day
Remains to be seen if glass coffins become popular.
Comedy Club Joke of the day

What’s the best thing about Switzerland?

I don’t know, but the flag is a big plus.

Comedy Club Joke of the day

Why did the turtle cross the road?

Because the chicken was on vacation.

Comedy Club Joke of the day

What did the 0 say to the 8?

Nice belt!
Comedy Club Joke
of the day
What do you call cheese that doesn’t belong to you?
An imposta!

Salad

Comedy Club Joke
of the day
What do you call a fake noodle?
An impasta!

Comedy Club Joke
of the day
Three tomatoes are walking down the street...papa tomato, mama tomato, and baby tomato. Baby tomato starts lagging behind and Papa tomato gets really angry, goes back and squeezes him and says..... “Catch up!!”
Comedy Club Joke of the day

I have an inferiority complex, but it's not a very good one.

Comedy Club Joke of the day

I have the heart of a lion and a lifetime ban from the Toronto zoo.

Comedy Club Joke of the day

I'm against picketing, but I don't know how to show it.
STOP ME IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE

Comedy Club Joke of the day

Why aren’t Koalas actual bears?

They don’t meet the Koala-fications

Comedy Club Joke of the day

The difference between a hippo and a Zippo is that one is heavy and the other is a little lighter.

Comedy Club Joke of the day

I asked my North Korean friend how it was there—he said he couldn’t complain.
Comedy Club Joke of the day
You can never lose a homing pigeon—
if your homing pigeon doesn’t
come back, what you’ve lost is a pigeon.

Comedy Club Joke of the day
What do you call a bee
that can’t make up its mind?
A maybe.

Comedy Club Joke of the day
I bought the world’s worst
thorsaurus yesterday.
Not only is it terrible, it’s also terrible.
Comedy Club Joke of the day
What's orange and sounds like a parrot?
A carrot.

Comedy Club Joke of the day
So what if I don't know what Armageddon means? It's not the end of the world.

Comedy Club Joke of the day
I haven't slept for 10 days because that would be too long.
B: Comedy Club Handouts

**Comedy Club, Handout 1**

Hello! Welcome to Comedy Club! We are going to get so smart by laughing at stuff (maybe).

I have this idea that if you laugh you’re smart. And I guess this idea comes from the belief that if we laugh at a joke it’s because we *got* something. Of course, maybe there’s not a ton of intelligent thought that goes into laughing at a video of a chimp smelling his own butt and then falling over, but I still think it’s worth exploring.

To start, we’ll look at a few theories of comedy: the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. (I’ve been getting most of my information from Ken Jennings’s book *Planet Funny.*)

And I know, I know: there is nothing less funny that explaining a joke. E. B. White is mostly famous for having written the beloved children’s book *Charlotte’s Web,* but he’s also known in the comedy world for saying that “analyzing humour is like dissecting a frog: few people are interested, and the frog dies of it.”

But ask any biology teacher: frog-dissecters aren’t trying to save the frog. They are trying to see how frogs work.

**The Superiority Theory:** the ancient Greeks, back to Plato and Aristotle, originated what was the dominant humour theory for most of Western civilization: the superiority theory. We make jokes to put others down. As Thomas Hobbs put it, “The passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmities of other.”

It’s true that many jokes have a target (or “butt,” which is a funnier word), but comedy must have been pretty limited in ancient Greece for no one to come up with a counterexample.

So let’s do that now—can you think of some jokes that aren’t about being superior?

**The Relief Theory:** this theory is usually credited to English political theorist Herbert Spencer, best known as the guy who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” When he studied “The Physiology of Laughter,” he decided that it was an outlet for built-up psychic energy: sometimes we vent energy via aggression or flight, but sometimes we laugh. Freud felt the same way and saw humour in the same way he saw dreams: they were both ways to release the pent-up strain of reality, particularly repressed hostility and—Freud being Freud—sexuality.

So what do we think? Yay? Nay?

**The Incongruity Theory:** more popular today amongst scholars is the incongruity theory (which is, incidentally, the theory most cited by Kieran Egan, the guy I study)—the notion that we laugh when something violates the order of things or when two mismatched concepts are juxtaposed. Immanuel Kant said that “laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.” Our mental patterns must quickly shift to adjust to some unexpected collision of concept with reality. Some theorists focus on the “incongruity resolution,” as Kant does, but others point out that incongruity itself can be funny; humour is sometimes the sheer oddity of something, not the neat resolution of it.

Can we think of anything that makes us laugh that doesn’t fit neatly into any of these theories?
Now we know a lot about comedy theories (superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory), and we can figure out roughly where what we laugh at fits into these categories (or doesn’t!).

So cool, we laugh—how can I use that to give you credit in your courses? If laughing does show that you are smart, how does it show that?

Okay, that’s goal #1. The other thing I’m interested in exploring whether or not we can get better at being funny.

In Ken Jennings’ book, where we got our theory definitions, he suggests that joke formats might be a way for us to practice being funny; we can watch people using these formats and using them well, and then we can attempt to use them on our own.

I don’t want to conflate joke formats and memes, but they are pretty darn close. (I mean, are they the same thing? Let’s discuss!) Below I have some examples of the “epic handshake” meme.

Here are some for you to understand how the meme works (which I’m sure you know but here I am):
Here are some ways it would be used for education:

Here are some variations on the meme:
And here are some what-I-will-call “meta-memes”:

And here is the twitter format version that uses an emoji instead of this image:

---

**Aaron Wiseman** @awofficial · Feb 18
malia obama me

drinking wine & hating trump

---

Tim Smith Retweeted

**dom nero** @dominicknero · 24h
Sonic the Hedgehog Bernie Sanders
always running

---

**Alexander Supertramp** @aye_alexpowell · Feb 19
Anti-vaxxer's Bad Girls by Kids MIA
Live Fast, Die Young
All right, let's see if we can make some handshake memes together.

Then we'll see if you can make some on your own.

And thennn, I'll get you to reflect on how using this meme/joke format could show that you are smart and should get you credit in a course. For example, are there any literary devices you might get better at using after playing with these formats? Is there a certain type of thinking these formats promote?
C: Student made memes

Fil

I ACTUALLY NEED TO SAVE MY MONEY

BUY MORE HAIRCLIPS OFF AMAZON

I HAVE $15 IN MY SAVINGS ACCOUNT

WHAT ABOUT THOSE CUTE TOPS?

RETAIL THERAPY ISN'T AN ACTUAL FORM OF THERAPY

MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE

DEAD!

ANTI-VAX KIDS

NICE GUY

"NO IM NOT INTERESTED"

IS THIS A PERSONAL ATTACK?
STOP ME IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE

ME AFTER WRITING A VENGE
MESSAGE TO MY FRIENDS

DELETING EVERYTHING
AND SAYING “WHAT
OH YEAH IM GUCCI FAM”

ACTUALLY TALKING
ABOUT MY FEELINGS

ACTUALLY SAVING YOUR
MONEY FOR A BIG PURCHASE

“2 FOR 1 ON
HAIRCLIPS AND
ACCESSORIES!”

ME
Okay we need new ideas for characters in our video games.

- More scantily clad women in tiny armor
- Another dystopian or apocalyptic story
- Maybe make our existing characters better with backstory
STOP ME IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE

Oscar

BEING SMART

PEOPLE WHO LAUGH AT MEMES

SCIENTISTS
STOP ME IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE

NOT GETTING THE JOKE

NOT GETTING THE JOKE BUT LAUGHING ANYWAY

GETTING THE JOKE AND LAUGHING

GETTING THE JOKE AND SAYING “THAT’S FUNNY” BUT NOT LAUGHING

USING FACTS TO WIN AN ARGUMENT

NAMECALLING

GROWN ADULTS ON THE INTERNET
STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE

FOX NEWS
VIDEO GAMES

IS THIS TURNING YOUR CHILDREN INTO MURDERERS?

$1,000,000 CASH
COOL TOY

CHILDREN
STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE

Allie

FULL OF HOLES

THIS ANALOGY

CROCS

STRANGERS ON THE INTERNET

NEEDING TO TALK ABOUT STUFF I'M GOING THROUGH

FRIENDS AND FAMILY WHO KNOW AND LOVE ME
STOP ME IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE

SERVICE DOGS

ME

DOGS I’M ALLOWED TO PET

ACTUALLY DOING MY SOCIALS

MAKING MEMES FOR CREDIT

FIL
D: Funniest of Everyday Things Survey

**Funniness of Everyday Things Survey**

Rank the following everyday things *from funniest to least funny*. Higher number being the funniest (one category has more answers than the others), and 1 being the least funny.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHOES (5)</th>
<th>DOG BREED (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crocs</td>
<td>Pug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heelys</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clogs</td>
<td>Corgi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibram five finger shoes</td>
<td>Shiba Inu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiking sandals</td>
<td>Bloodhound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BREAKFAST CEREALS (5)</th>
<th>MYTHICAL CREATURES (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raisin Bran</td>
<td>Loch Ness Monster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coco Puffs</td>
<td>Abominable Snowman/Yeti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn Pops</td>
<td>Leprechaun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Froot Loops</td>
<td>Mermaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grape-Nuts</td>
<td>Merman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bigfoot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OLYMPIC SPORT (5)</th>
<th>CARS (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race Walking</td>
<td>Prius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping Pong</td>
<td>Smart Car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curling</td>
<td>VW Beetle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diving</td>
<td>Mini van</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMX</td>
<td>PT Cruiser</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACIAL HAIR (5)</th>
<th>KITCHEN UTENSILS (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chin strap</td>
<td>Ladle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul patch</td>
<td>Spatula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handlebar moustache</td>
<td>Can opener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutton chops</td>
<td>Colander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goatee</td>
<td>Rolling pin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you think there is an obviously hilarious item missing from one of my lists, please let me know here:

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
E: Initial Student Survey

**Student Survey: Humour and the Use of IE Tools to Increase Engagement in English Language Arts**

1. In general, do you enjoy coming to school? Why or why not?

2. What kinds of class activities do you enjoy most in school?

3. What does humour mean to you?

4. Do you consider yourself a funny person? Why or why not?

5. Do you feel jokes different from humour? In what way are they/aren't they?
6. What are some of the ways, if any, you actively engage in jokes and humour? (ex. Watching standup on YouTube, following meme accounts, etc)

7. How often do you seek out humour?
   a. Once in a while
   b. Once a week
   c. A few times a week
   d. Every day
   e. Many times a day/all the time
   f. I don’t seek out humour

8. I seek out humour, or things that make me laugh, on the following platforms (circle all the possible answers—you may have multiple answers):
   a. Twitter
   b. Instagram
   c. Facebook
   d. Tumblr
   e. Snapchat
   f. YouTube
   g. Other:

9. Who/what makes you laugh the most? Rank the options from 1-5, 1 being the most and 5 being the least:
   a. My friends
   b. My family
   c. Myself
   d. Specific comedians or internet content creators
   e. Unknown/random content creators (meme accounts, a funny retweet from someone you don’t know, etc)