

Learning Through Laughter: The Integration of Comedy Into the Academic Curriculum

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Abstract

How can comedy be used as an effective tool and truly help innovate the learning experience? This paper outlines how aspects of comedy have been creatively integrated into primary and secondary academic curricula such as English Language Arts, social studies, drama, as well as in areas of mental health and wellness. The essay demonstrates, for example, how participating in stand-up performances helped sharpen students' critical thinking abilities and presentation skills. It also underscores comedy's pedagogical utility and versatility, its value in the classroom, and its promising potential as a stand-alone option in the domain of arts education.

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"Essentially, humor activates our sense of wonder, which is where learning begins." (Henderson, 2015)

Traditionally, when educators are asked to identify the various components that comprise the arts education curricula, comedy is seldom mentioned. Yet, teachers and students alike are both drawn to laughter. Humour is routinely used as an element of style incorporated across many spheres of the learning environment. While not all subjects are as conducive to creativity as the arts, the medium of comedy can cross over and play a meaningful role in the learning of most subjects. Using comedy as a platform in certain scenarios can also allow marginal voices to shine, and encourage greater active participation. Each generation of students brings new challenges and a need to adapt to current realities. Both humour and the medium of comedy are a welcome source of inspiration as we all attempt to adjust to the ever-changing landscape of education and life.

As a result of my 17 years of experience as a stand-up comedian, I have come to know and appreciate the importance of humour in personal development and social life. In addition, through my involvement in educational programs, I have become persuaded that humour can be a very effective way to create a sense of security and trust in a classroom that, in turn, can facilitate the processing of information and the acquisition of knowledge. For the past several years, I have held courses with students ranging in age from 11 to 17 and have integrated comedy into subjects such as English Language Arts (ELA), social studies, and drama. Drawing on my experiences during these classes for this paper, I will explain how the medium of comedy can enhance memory, facilitate processing of stressful information or social issues, sharpen skills in the classroom, and serve as a useful tool for improving student mental health and wellness.

Humour as a Memory Aid

Interestingly, more adults retained news stories at a higher level watching humorous episodes of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* when compared with traditional sources of information like newspapers and CNN (Henderson, 2015). With this in mind, I sought to explore whether this would apply to retention of information among children and adolescents. It has been found that the attention span of the average middle school student is 10 to 12 minutes and that there is little evidence to suggest that this result might be improved (Vawter, 2009). Research conducted across 22 elementary schools has revealed that the average elementary school student is distracted more than a quarter of the time. These findings were consistent from kindergarten and up (Barshay, 2017). While a 2010 study by Bunce and colleagues measuring the frequency and length of attention lapses, concluded that there were fewer lapses in attention during periods of active learning methods such as demonstrations and questions (Bunce et al., 2010, as cited in Briggs, 2014). Through their study of British medical students, Stuart and Rutherford concluded that it was, in fact, the teaching style, and not the format of the lesson, that showed the greatest variability. Rutherford underscored the importance of teachers being able to create a satisfying learning experience (Stuart & Rutherford, 1978, as cited in Bradbury, 2016). As legendary comedian Jerry Seinfeld noted, "There is no such thing as an attention span. There is only the quality of what you are viewing" (Steinberg, 2004).

One of the proven results of using humour is that it helps create memories. Historically, we have an easier time remembering experiences that made us laugh (Carlson, 2011). Based on this notion, I wanted to investigate whether humour might facilitate the creation of memories in the classroom. In traditional secondary level ELA curricula, students are taught to explore and identify a set of literary terms that can be found throughout different genres such as novels, short stories, and Shakespearian plays, to name a few. Students are invited to evaluate certain texts and provide an interpretation of which literary devices were used by the author and how they contributed to the effectiveness of the text. While the aforementioned genres have traditionally been used to help teach the terms, I wondered if the use of humorous materials and funny writing exercises might increase students' comprehension of, and capacity to, identify these literary terms and devices. As a fun introduction to idioms, I invited students in a Grade 5 English class to twist the endings of classic idioms by explaining to them that the key element of effective humour is surprise. I provided a list of half-idioms and proverbs, and allowed the students to generate some of their own. Examples included: "You can't judge a burger by its condiments."; "Actions speak louder than texts."; "Don't put all your eggs in your mouth."; "Elvis has left the chat."

When we laughed as a class at some of their creations, it helped crystallize their understanding and build a memory. When the students needed to recall the terms during a quiz, some students remembered laughing at their friend's version and this helped them recall the meaning of the term. Students also used humour to imaginatively create their own euphemisms and hyperboles: On failing the test: "There were a few numbers short of an answer." On a goldfish dying: "They went back to hang out with Nemo." On snoring: "You are really a dynamic sleeper!" On slow drivers: "They really appreciate the scenery." On being under-weight: "He's horizontally challenged." Some of the hyperboles created were: "I was so tired my belt fell off!"; "It was so expensive I had to sell my house!"; "I was so nervous I turned into

Garfield!"; "I had so much homework a truck couldn't carry it!" Students can also use humour to learn about similes, metaphors, and imagery by creating their own.

Comedy Combats COVID-19

Essay writing draws upon a skill set that is of paramount importance for all students. Regardless of the type of essay, the student must acquire the basic principles of effective essay writing. Some of these skills include research and structuring their thoughts in an efficient, coherent, and presentable manner. Humour can be used as a persuasive tool and some of the same traditional lessons of essay writing can be applied directly to constructing a humorous piece.

In what was the most unprecedented school year imaginable due to the challenges of COVID-19, I used humour with a Grade 6 drama class to cope with the feelings and stress brought on by the pandemic. I asked the class to create a comedic monologue about the unique year they were living through. They quickly learned that the same principles of essay writing could be used to construct a persuasive piece. As a unit of 17 students, we researched every aspect of the difficulties of the prior eight months in school by creating a word list that enabled the students to mix and match ideas from two separate topics such as school and COVID-19. For example, they mixed the words "detention" and "social distance" and created the premise that, "It was the only year where getting detention was a good thing so I could properly social distance if people were getting too close." Many questions were asked to elicit their own unique perspectives on what it was like wearing a mask and being isolated from some of their peers. Once enough information was collected, we organized and prioritized ideas and jointly decided on the optimal order in which these jokes should be presented. We continued jotting down humorous thoughts and revising the sequence of jokes into the most persuasive and entertaining form. The students were able to understand both the creative and writing processes through the lens of laughter and they worked collaboratively with the shared goal in mind of delivering a humorous monologue to parents and peers, one that imaginatively and insightfully conveyed their unique perspective on what was a trying year. The following are a few jokes from the monologue:

But we deserve to have a voice too! We're the students, a.k.a. the original guinea pigs, sending us to school not knowing what would happen. And the Quebec government knew it too, because they kept saying everything was being done "Par PrecauTION," but if you listened carefully, through their masks, I think they were actually saying "Par pre-CoCHON": the pigs will try it first! We're on to you! Speaking of "Pre-Cochon," we actually had to quarantine for the past 2 weeks, and it wasn't easy. Sure, online learning had its perks: the commute was great, travelling from my bed to the desk was phenomenal, switching metro lines in the bathroom. But trying to learn while your mom goes full Billie Eilish in the kitchen isn't conducive to anything good. Ocean Eyes Mom? You're giving me Glacial Ears!

I mean, look, we don't want to come off like we really hated every day, but it was tough. We lost out on a lot of things. Like many adults, we sacrificed a lot of stuff too. Ok, fine, the curfew didn't really affect us. We're 12 years old, it's pretty much been like 8 pm our whole lives. But we actually missed out on a lot of fun stuff: going to Cepsom, our 2 camping trips, even regular gym class. Nothing felt lamer than a round of social distance tag. It was so bad my shadow wasn't even following me.

But many adults got some compensation, like the Canada Recovery Benefit, the CRB. Well, enough is enough, let's cut to the cake. We want to get our own CRB, the Child Reward Benefit! We're not crazy here. Don't think we're buzzed from all the Lysol fumes. We deserve compensation! A little retribution here, SVP!

First off, we want 2 Halloweens a year to make up for last year's disaster. Not only did people not approach us but they literally just hurled candy at our faces from their porches. I got a Tootsie Roll lodged in my Avengers' mask. Now I can't see and then felt defeated by Taffy.

We just want to go back to where there are more people in the music room than in the nurse's office. We were just going to have an infirmary choir this year with Nurse Tremblay conducting us with a swab.

Even though, for safety reasons, we were unable to present our comedy set in front of a live audience, every member of the class had the opportunity to get valuable practice reading in front of their peers; they all learned which words needed special emphasis and what voice tone and range would be most effective for their individual parts. This kind of practice can be very meaningful as they prepare for oral presentations in high school. It was also explained that many business presentations and speeches usually start with a simple joke or have humour sprinkled in to help keep the listeners engaged.

Universal Language

When international students come to Canada for the first time and spend the year in a completely new learning environment, it can be both intimidating and stressful. In a Grade 9 English as a Second Language (ESL) class, I explained to students from Japan and China that a platform like stand-up comedy can be an effective way to help them share and express their unique perspective of being in a new environment. Using humour in this circumstance would help them create a sense of comfort and provide their peers with a better understanding of living in a new culture. The group of students made contributions by recounting some of their own personal experiences and challenges of being in a new country and school. They began to compile and organize their findings, and together they learned which information would go in the most optimal places: Will this idea be better as an opening or in the middle? As a set-up, or towards the end? The students then generated drafts of their work and, although the monologue was never formally presented, we agreed that this work was both important and an informative piece of writing that would evoke empathy and help build a greater connection between the international speaker and their listeners. The following are some notes taken about challenges and cultural differences:

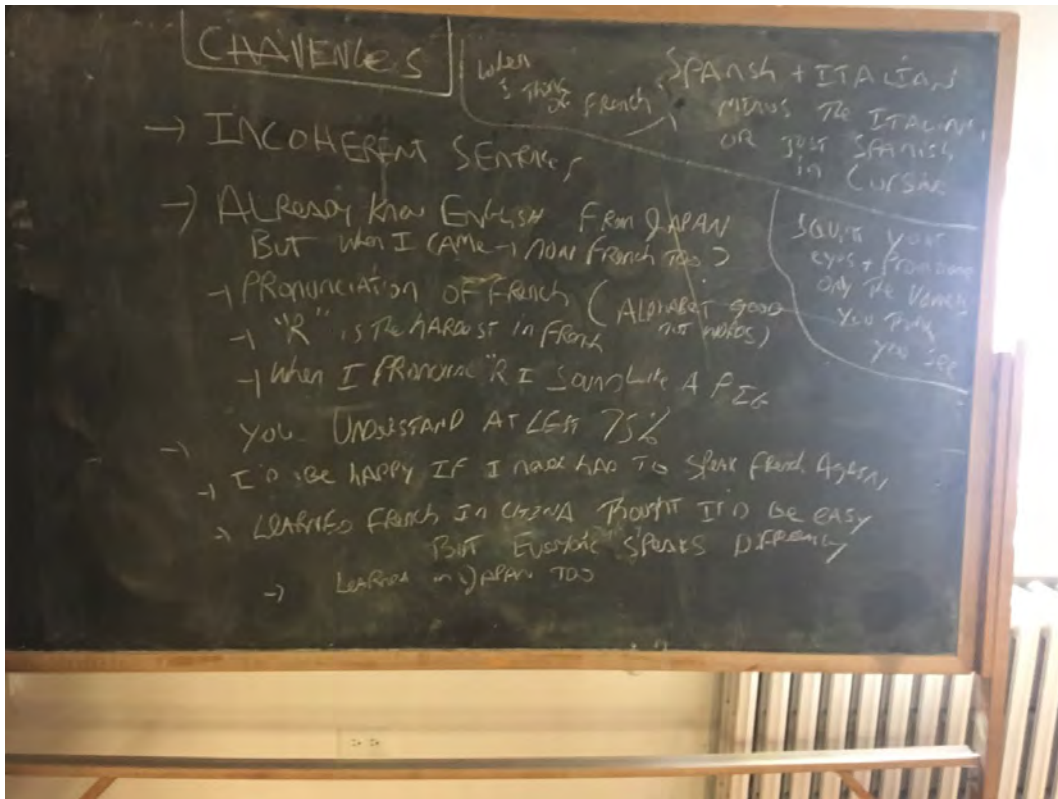


Fig. 1: Notes taken describing the challenges of international students both inside and outside of their new classroom environment.

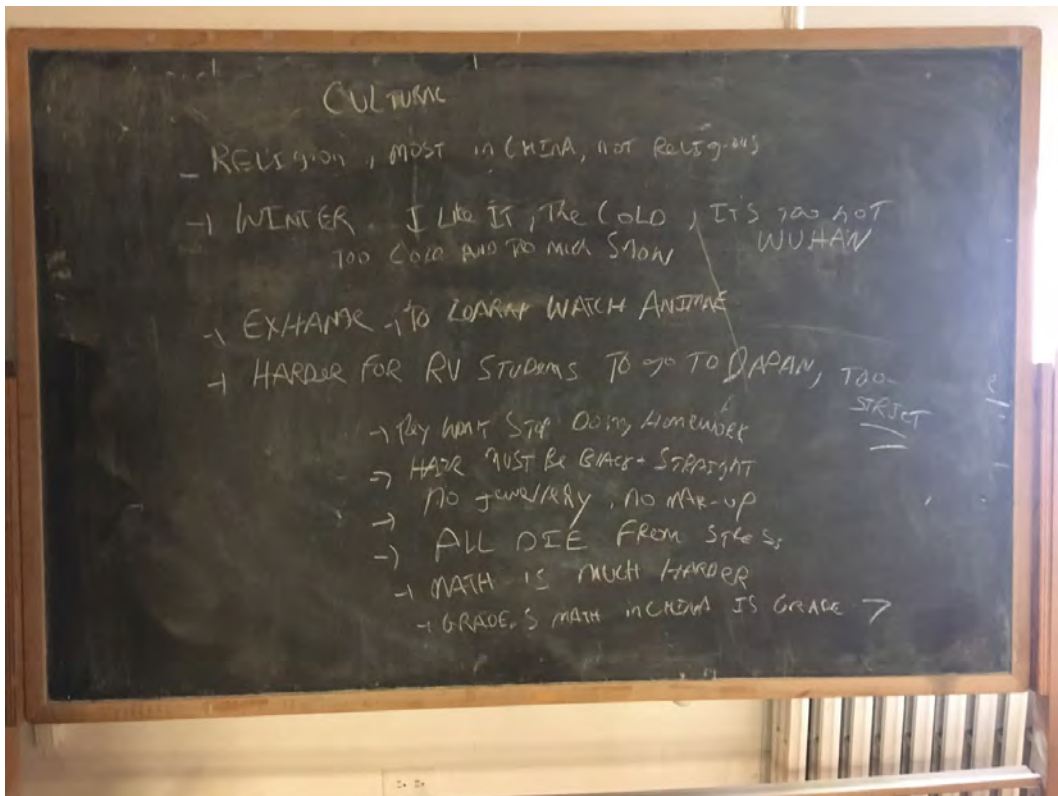


Fig. 2: Notes taken displaying some of the cultural differences shared by the international students.

They came away from this exercise learning that comedy is a language that can produce feelings of connection and compassion. The sharing of laughter helps to express an understanding and invites the listener to think more openly and critically about a specific subject. This sentiment can also be realized effectively in a social studies classroom.

(En)Lightening Social Studies

Stand-up comedy clips can be used not only to inform, but also to engage the viewer and to inspire group discussion regarding topics such as political and economic issues, environmental concerns, conflicts regarding immigration, gun control, and social sensitivity issues.

Thought-provoking comedians like Steven Colbert, John Oliver, and Trevor Noah, provide nightly monologues on contemporary issues and current events that can serve to introduce students to a subject with easy-to-digest facts and that can break the ice on what might be delicate social topics. Once the students have watched a monologue or a stand-up clip on a particular subject, momentum has been built not only to engage attention, but also to launch an exploration of the issue through both individual and group reflection. Through the provision of pertinent facts and the raising of a series of questions, students can begin investigating and shaping their own personal views on a specific issue. One fun activity revolving around comedy and learning, is to assign comedic premises based on a specific subject and ask a group of students to research and generate an original, less conventional viewpoint. A lot of premises in stand-up comedy routines are built on innovative thinking, allowing the individual to think critically and construct viewpoints that typically might be overlooked or insufficiently considered but that shed light from a different vantage point.

In a Grade 7 ethics class, students explored the environmental issue of climate change. Students gained interesting perspectives through the voices of different comedians. I then provided facts and statistics to help the students understand the importance of recognizing climate change and we discussed how community efforts can help to prioritize this issue and to appreciate the foreseeable consequences if efforts to mitigate aren't made. Students were then split up into groups of three or four and were given a premise to defend in a debate using the stats and facts provided. The following were some of the premises: "Climate change doesn't really exist."; "Global warming is a good thing."; "There are three bigger environmental issues than climate change."; "Humans aren't affecting the rise in temperatures."; "Corporations should not be held accountable for global emissions."

Over a series of three classes, students compiled information derived from research to help support these less than conventional viewpoints. In the development of their arguments, they had to cite a minimum of five facts as evidence in favour of their claims. The groups each presented their unorthodox stances, which both elicited laughter and conveyed to their audience unique and informed perspectives.

We then began a role-playing, improvisational exercise called, "World Court," in which an environmentally irresponsible individual or corporation was put on trial for allegedly having criminally harmed the planet. Members of the class rotated between the roles of judge, prosecutor, defense lawyer, and defendant, and a trial was then acted out. Using facts to build their case, the prosecution

and the defense attempted to persuade the judge to rule in their favour. Examples of charges brought included: polluting water and air, endangering wildlife, and the mishandling of contaminants and toxic waste. By taking on the more challenging role of the defence attorney, students had to get more creative with their case and, in turn, experienced a more light-hearted and humorous quality to the game without compromising the process of learning about the importance of working toward an environmentally responsible society.

An alternative approach that can be used in social studies may be built around thought-provoking texts written by comedians. For example, this joke from George Carlin may be fruitfully used to help students create meaningful conversations about the importance of critical thinking: “I do this real moron thing, and it's called thinking. And apparently, I'm not a very good American because I like to form my own opinions” (Carlin, 1992).

Another example from George Carlin, this one constituting an extended set of comments regarding the environment, demonstrates how the platform of stand-up comedy can be used to provide unconventional interpretations in a healthy and open-minded forum:

The planet has been through a lot worse than us. Been through earthquakes, volcanoes, plate tectonics, continental drift, solar flares, sunspots, magnetic storms, the magnetic reversal of the poles ... hundreds of thousands of years of bombardment by comets and asteroids and meteors, worldwide floods, tidal waves, worldwide fires, erosion, cosmic rays, recurring ice ages ... And we think some plastic bags and some aluminum cans are going to make a difference? The planet isn't going anywhere. WE are... The planet will be here for a long, long, LONG time after we're gone, and it will heal itself, it will cleanse itself, 'cause that's what it does. It's a self-correcting system. The air and the water will recover, the earth will be renewed. And if it's true that plastic is not degradable, well, the planet will simply incorporate plastic into a new paradigm: the earth plus plastic. The earth doesn't share our prejudice toward plastic. Plastic came out of the earth. The earth probably sees plastic as just another one of its children. Could be the only reason the earth allowed us to be spawned from it in the first place. It wanted plastic for itself. Didn't know how to make it. Needed us. Could be the answer to our age-old egocentric philosophical question, “Why are we here?” (Carlin, 2007)

This set of remarks by Carlin communicates to his readers the view that comedy is a legitimate and valuable medium through which personal or social issues and diverse, thought-provoking perspectives may be addressed and expressed, so long as this is done reasonably and responsibly. Considering these passages in class conveys the fact that humour has a constructive place in the classroom, in the learning process, and in the promotion of original thinking.

The Lessons and Impact of Stand-Up

I have outlined above various ways in which different forms of comedy can positively contribute both to the academic curriculum and to fostering and enriching the spirit of the learning environment. Stand-up comedy also can be used as its own long-term creative writing project to help students explore self and society, and to learn how to organize their thoughts and use humour to hone their presentation skills. I have now completed several semester-long projects in after-school programs and have reviewed and compared student writing samples taken from the beginning and end of the term. A trend I observed was

that the insights gained from these exercises led the students to produce stronger written pieces. As well, I observed students becoming more confident speakers and they were notably more comfortable in this role by the end of the course.

One of the first steps in this writing process is to help students consciously discover and reflect upon their own sense of humour and then to sharpen and extend it through a variety of individual and group exercises. It is essential for students to feel empowered early on, and these exercises go a long way toward demonstrating that they all have original thoughts and stories they can draw from as valuable resources and material.

In order to inspire students in this vein, I showed the class a variety of themed stand-up comedy sets (identity, family, story, culture, honesty, etc.). This represented an opportunity to begin to learn how comedians frame topics from unique and original perspectives and, specifically, how they bring into play a creative combination of analytical thinking and humour to build relatability and promote a shared, positive experience. I posed questions regarding each theme, and students were given time to reflect on these. Over the course of a few weeks, the students compiled multiple writing samples of material to draw from. To further develop their ideas, they were encouraged to keep a journal and to write down any interesting thoughts whenever inspiration struck. They also partook in various writing exercises such as stream of consciousness writing, producing stories with challenging word limits and having to use particular words in their sample. As they organized and developed all their favourite ideas, they slowly began to recognize their own voice and point of view. In the spirit of fostering collaborative work, group discussions formed surrounding the given themes and a “writer’s room” was created to help individuals looking for constructive feedback or a different spin on a subject.

As the creative process unfolded, students learned to organize their combined thoughts into a presentable body of work, which culminated in a final showcase in front of their peers. They each performed a short three-to-four-minute set, in which they shared their thoughts culled from all of the themes. Their presentations appeared to help strengthen their convictions, elicit empathy, and deeper understanding of others, and created greater comfort in the learning environment. They seemed to also emerge from the performance feeling more connected to their classmates and more confident in their own skin. In addition, they learned that even though the project ended with a performance, the material can always evolve further and be adapted in new ways with time.

Teachers also benefitted by connecting with and learning more about their students through their body of work, which could help establish a stronger rapport with their students and, in turn, facilitate the learning process. When students feel more comfortable and familiar with their teacher and peers, it follows that they will be more receptive to learning and more focused on the task at hand.

Adding Wellness

A significant emphasis has recently been placed on the notion of well-being in the learning environment. This theme has been prevalent at many education conferences, both here and abroad. These include the Positive Education Conference in June of 2019 at Ridley College in Ottawa; the Leadership Committee

for English Education in Quebec (LCEEQ) 2019 “Well-being – being well” conference in Quebec; the Canadian Educators Conference on Mental Health in Toronto, and the Optimus Education Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools 2021 conventions in London and Manchester.

A conscious effort to incorporate humour both as an element of teaching style and as a daily classroom resource, would improve the spirit and morale for everyone involved. More specifically, using comedy as the vehicle to help pinpoint certain mental health and wellness issues is a great way to help discover and treat these issues, as humour contributes to building a sense of comfort and connection with others.

I have had the good fortune of conducting both teacher and student wellness workshops and the same methods are used for both. Despite everyone’s differences and unique backgrounds, laughter is a universal language they all share. In joining a group of middle school students for a student wellness workshop, I used the medium of stand-up to encourage those who are normally shy and introverted. Using the theme of identity, students began by watching specific clips of comedians talking about what makes them anxious and fearful, their pet peeves and personality quirks, as well as self-esteem and self-image issues. The participants then took some notes on how some of these subjects pertained to their own lives. This enables them to discover that, just like the comedians, they too have unique traits and thoughts that can be framed in positive ways and presented in a manner that would strike a chord with others. Students then participated in a two-minute stream of consciousness writing exercise in which they had to keep their pencil on the paper the entire time. This helped them identify recurring thoughts, allowed them to tap into their creative spirit, and highlighted some issues that might be elaborated at an abstract level and that might be shared with others.

Using their two writing samples, a comedy trick was then taught about how to weave some of their non-linear ideas together in a way that helps create an element of surprise and conveys the comedy law of incongruity. Once the students organized some of their thoughts, they were invited as individuals or in tandem, to share some of their findings in front of an applauding and supportive group of their peers. Using comedy as the platform, students felt more encouraged to share something personal about themselves and, by the end, students were able to step out of their comfort zones and had partaken in a group bonding experience. This allowed them to come to know more about their peers and created a greater sense of comradery, enabling them to feel more comfortable in their own skin and in their learning environment.

Collaborative and Independent Potential

For many decades, drama has been a staple of the traditional arts education curriculum. Based on one of the drama competencies for secondary level curriculum, students are taught to appreciate various dramatic works by interconnecting the dramaturgy, its connection to the world and how that relationship intersects with the individual’s own personal connection (Learn Quebec, 2011). This has traditionally been done through the reading and analyzing of theatrical plays.

Every year, drama students spend a significant amount of class time preparing themselves for a live theater production by learning a variety of acting techniques, mastering and rehearsing lines, as well as

developing sets and costumes. Students also spend a significant amount of time on performance technique through a variety of improvisation games, which also help them think quickly on their feet and develop on-stage rapport. By the end of the program, the participants emerge with a greater understanding of the importance and role of theatre in everyday life as well as having developed a wider range of interpersonal skills, such as learning to collaborate with others and managing relationships.

Naturally, comedy and drama are elements that are often interwoven; yet, each has its own independent lessons and value. In a Grade 10 drama class, I showed students some of the specific elements of comedy that they can apply to their own acting performances, both scripted and non-scripted. Watching stand-up comedians, students learned how to establish their persona and attitude on stage through both nonverbal communication and tone of voice. Students were then shown examples of comedians with different emotional sensibilities and different techniques used to distinguish themselves and their voice. They also learned through stand-up comedy the effect that pausing and using silence can have on the command and delivery of their performance. They practiced these techniques by reading their lines and through basic improvisation scenes. In addition, they learned the importance of having a wide vocal range to enhance the comedic aspect and how all these elements combine to strengthen the connection with their audiences.

The drama students also learn how to improve the pronunciation of their scripted lines by reading a series of jokes. Through a collection of one-liners and short jokes, students are able to identify which words need to be stressed more and determine the tone of voice needed for a particular joke. Some of the students shared their take-aways via email:

It did change the way I saw comedy in a sense. I found out how much more relatable comedy can be when performing in front of an audience or to anyone in general. People use their own life experiences as a way to connect with another person's life and in turn, find a path into their mind. By doing this it's not just making them laugh when a joke is told, it is actually making them happy inside and out.

Well, in fact, we did learn that it would be best to distribute the roles in our scene according to our personalities to reflect the comedic aspect of truth.

The one element that he brought to light that I had not fully understood the importance of, was the rule that silence is golden. This rule showed me the importance of taking much-needed pauses between our dialogue.

While the lessons of comedy can certainly be integrated into the drama curriculum, comedy should also be considered as having its own independent, stand-alone value as its own course. As opposed to a drama class in which students learn to interpret both character and dialogue in the works of others, in comedy class they would have the opportunity to spend a semester creating their own monologues through their unique lenses and accumulated life experiences. The idea of spending one semester preparing and performing a play and then another semester crafting a personal act is where the true promise and potential lies. One possible misconception of a comedy class is that it would heavily revolve around joke writing and joke telling. I spent one semester in a comedy program for adults at Humber College in Toronto and, to my surprise, the vast majority of people enrolled were individuals 40 years of

age and older who were working professionals and wanted to learn how to improve their speech-writing and presentation skills. They sought to learn how to use humour effectively in their business presentations and in the development of their communication skills. It has been noted that humour is something that can be learned and cultivated (Gavin, 2015). As we age, it is important to exercise that “humour muscle,” which contributes to shaping us as more well-rounded individuals in regard to social communication.

A variety of options can be covered in a semester-long course. There is always the three-month exploration project of the self where the individual can properly reflect upon and shape their own self-discoveries through the lens of their own comedy monologue. As well, jokes can be analyzed and interpreted to help shape the understanding of contemporary and historical events. Students’ critical thinking abilities can be inspired from a full transcript of a thought-provoking comedy act. Personal and social issues can be introduced and discussed through reflection upon a comedian’s social commentary. And finally, various writing exercises help students sharpen their creativity and the practice of sharing their ideas and go a long way to enhancing their public speaking skills which, in turn, will help them in future personal and professional situations.

The time is ripe to integrate a regular comedy course into the arts education curriculum. The medium of stand-up comedy is more prevalent today than it has ever been through widely accessible streaming platforms like Netflix and Crave. This is an age when people with various backgrounds should be given the opportunity to be heard through a craft as self-expressive as comedy. It is also critical that students be encouraged to learn how to listen to and empathize with others and to recognize how humour might be used as a healthy way of digesting and communicating important messages. Students are more educated about the world outside of their classroom and, as we all take in more information at faster and faster rates, it is more important than ever to connect with others and to learn how to parse through everything that comes to our attention. As I have documented in this paper, humour can provide benefits both in the classroom and more broadly in terms of students’ mental health and wellness. Humour has the potential to help us absorb and process information in a way that no other medium can. People of all ages are drawn to laughter. Comedy elicits forms of appreciation and enjoyment that can be creatively utilized in educational settings for the benefit of healthy, growing minds craving to learn more about the world in which they live.

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Jeffrey M. Schouela is a professional comedian and educator who resides in Montreal, Quebec. His unique school-based comedy program has grown out of the conviction that the use of humour in the classroom setting can enhance student engagement, strengthen relationships with teachers and fellow students, and contribute to learning and personal development. The program Jeffrey has been developing over the last several years has aimed to integrate the medium of comedy into the academic curriculum at both the primary and secondary levels, and a growing number of schools have shown great interest in exploring this creative approach to the educational process.