

September 5-11, 2006

"Laughter is the best medicine. At least that's what my grandfather used to tell us, before several of us died of tuberculosis." I'm not sure what made me think of that old joke, but I guess it occurred to me after class that humor for me is often derived from a conflict in meaning – the first part of the statement is an idiom, but when explored literally, this has surprising results that create humor.

I was immediately attracted to this class because I have a strong suspicion that finding humor has a close relationship with loosening one's grip of the conscious mind, which means allowing oneself to explore the world beyond structure, rigidity, and rules. In terms of my interest in adult education, I'm concerned that adults avoid play and believe that learning with humor in the pursuit of creativity constitutes only a "soft skill" at best. In my own participation as a member of an improvisational theater troupe, I have spent countless hours with my partners discussing what it means to be "funny", and we have frequently reached a point of frustration by trying to "create" humor. One discovery that we have made is that it can be effective in a performance scene to specifically avoid such an attempt to create humor and focus on enjoying ourselves first, which seems to alert that audience that they are allowed to laugh when the humor does appear.

I'm excited about this class because I believe that humor does have real value, and this has already been shown in the first class as we used humor to establish our environment in which it is permissible to enjoy the process of learning in spite of the learning also taking effort.

What I found most interesting about this week's readings was the suggestion of how humor and creativity are related. My initial interpretation is that humor is a type of support structure for creativity – that humor naturally depends upon the same divergent thinking that is associated with allowing creativity to happen. In the experiments mentioned by Ziv, perceiving something humorous makes it legitimate to subsequently use divergent thinking. Expanded to an evolutionary framework, is humor ultimately a survival tool? Could it be that humor does not exist to simply provide pleasure but is a catalyst that prepares the mind for the kind of divergent thinking that helps one to adapt and thrive?

September 12-18, 2006

"We laugh that we may not cry." At the mention of the forming of the American Comedy Archives project at Emerson College, the idea returns to me about the commercial success of comedy as entertainment. It is very unlikely that I will ever make a one-million-dollar salary in a year of teaching, and yet the very best of the comedy entertainers can make several times this. Why? - because so many people are willing to pay to experience this form of humor "product". This suggests to me that people find substantial value in observing humor and not only want to infuse it in their daily lives but also are willing to give up something valuable (money and time) in order to experience humor presented by professionals. I once heard that a

basic rule of performance is that an audience likes to look upward toward a stage where a singer or actor is performing, because the audience is really looking to experience a feeling of inspiration or awe in these situations (the audience wants to “be” the performer). Conversely, the audience likes to look downward toward a stage where comedy is being performed, because the audience needs to feel superior to the performers (the audience gets pleasure and relief from the fact that they are NOT the performer). Why is it not only fun, but also *important*, that a person attends comedy performance strictly as an observer?

In reading about this week's death of Ann Richards, the former governor of Texas, I learned the details of the speech presented by former President Clinton at the funeral. Clinton referred to Richards as having been “hilarious”. He had attended a lunch with Richards, Billy Crystal, and Robin Williams and was quoted as saying, “I thought to myself, I bet this is the only time in their entire lives that Billy Crystal and Robin Williams are the second and third funniest people at the table.” How can it be that Richards' sense of humor was discussed on par with her accomplishments to help the people of her state as governor? Shouldn't it be that she is most remembered for important programs that she instituted, supporting education, public safety, workforce development, etc.? Could it be that Richards' sense of comedic ability was equally important to any other quality in her success?

As always, my thoughts on humor reflect back to my participation in an improv. theater troupe. I connect it with reading Ziv's article, particularly the idea of fusing incompatible frames of reference. In my formal training, I learned the mechanics of an improv. scene. In my continued learning, I have rediscovered the importance of play, and I recall how many times now we have referred to “how children behave” as examples of the openness needed for “good” improv. scenes. Improv. actors are the “humor constructors” which must instantaneously create a novel situation by fusing fantasy with reality. If an improv. scene does not reflect the way that people actually talk or act, it can be confusing, and the audience loses the enjoyment of the situation because they cannot relate well. On the other hand, if the improv. scene never tries to expand reality into the fantasy or absurd realm, it may be funny because it is familiar, but the audience is less satisfied because there is less chance to use their own imagination, which is critical to improv. in which no physical props or stage sets are generally available.

September 19-25, 2006

This week, I start with some comments on Koestler's “The Art of Creation”, from which I read the chapter entitled “The Logic of Laughter”. Now, we're getting somewhere. Although at times I find the writing to be esoteric, I greatly appreciate the idea of creativity spanning across a continuum of ideas from humor to discovery to art. This creates a very powerful image for me, in that it is so each in an academic environment to categorize learning according to the convenience of a degree program or major. We study Economics, Physics, Art, History, Civil Engineering, etc., as completely distinct disciplines. Perhaps the future of creativity lies in

encouraging individuals to generalize a little more instead of remaining inside of one specialization. The current culture of specialization surely relates to the nature of employment competition. Even so, is there a company which welcomes an employee who is equally capable in biology and sculpture, but an expert in neither? Theater and mathematics? What other unlikely combinations might actually be useful in developing original ideas, and how can it be made effective to develop tracks of academic study which allow spanning across these traditional categories?

One mode of my mind in discussing humor so far has been in questioning. When we say that humor is related to creativity and make strong connections between them, I find it desirable to explore this further without assuming too much. I ultimately agree concerning the proposed strong connection between humor and creativity, but I only express doubt because I find it so much more interesting to search for a counterexample - a case where humor can exist without creativity.

This brings me to a comment about an interesting idea that came to mind when reading the Koestler article. When speaking of matrices and codes, the article suggests that a key construct of humor is the codes that form the "rules" in a situation and the matrix which forms the pattern relevant in a specific situation. This reminds me strongly of my training in improv. theater. One key concept is that there are several rules that are meant to ensure a good scene. These rules include the requirement that no questions are asked which force an actor to explain the situation, a actor must respect the persistence of imaginary objects, and other similar ideas. One of the most critical suggestions of improv. theater is that the actors need to "find the game" in the scene. That is, they must essentially play at make-believe until each person acknowledges the same reality of the scene. Each scene is the pursuit of a "game" - the code/rules are defined as mentioned above, but the matrix is the collection of all lines spoken by an actor during the scene up until the current moment. The code suggests how to get to the next spoken line, but what that lines turns out to be is extremely flexible. Other ideas of humor fit in nicely, including being comfortable with ambiguity, use of divergent thinking, playing with language and meaning, surprise, resolving disparate concepts, and exaggeration, among many others.

Otherwise, I'm starting to appreciate even more the style of class and see new things about the importance of humor. I'm curious about humor as a coping mechanism. Also, I'm fascinated by the fact that humor has a seemingly broad application, much like the most visible creative breakthroughs often find use in several disciplines. I've also become more open to some of the humor that I have around me, such as how the media portrays events and people in a way that shows bias. It can be right either way to call the glass half-empty or half-full, but I can see humor in the discussion of which is the case.

September 26-October 3, 2006

I have noticed some changes in my perception of humor this week, although I'm finding that the questions are continuing to grow much quicker than the answers. From our class discussions and viewing of videos of humorous situations and speakers, I'm starting to examine every humorous situation and see it with a more creative, and critical, eye. The main question raised in my mind right now is the source of "sense of humor" in a person. It seems clear that the social environment impacts humor creation and appreciation, but I still wonder about some of the individual nature of humor. It seems that for a given individual, there are periods when that individual's feelings, thoughts, perceptions, state of mind, and environment increase or decrease the chance that humor will be allowed to show itself. Even so, does "sense of humor" imply an ability of the individual to willingly enter into the right conditions despite the social environment? Is sense of humor the result of the persistent memory of an individual's past experiences? Or does identifying "sense of humor" at all serve as a way of explaining away differences of humor appreciation between different people, which might help to relieve the social tension that occurs when those people don't find the same humor in a given instance?

In viewing some of the video programs from last week's class, I also considered the way that communication occurs can give meaning to a statement or action and influence the perception of humor. Such communication, particularly verbal communication, includes other components of body language, eye contact, voice projection and volume, voice inflection, and physical movement. Further, a given humorous situation changes when presented in different ways. For example, this has relevance to performance in improv. theater, which I am always seeking to explore further. When my partners and I are examining a new way to perform, our initial ideas are presented in one or more of several possible styles. Ideas are written and then read by others, ideas are spoken and discussed, ideas are shown in the form of mini-scenes, ideas are rehearsed several times with small variations each time. Each such expression is a communication between partners in the group and reveals different elements of potential humor. For example, writing out an idea may help to explain the logistics and intention of the humor, while discussing an idea may help to demonstrate a character voice that is needed to make the scene "work" more effectively.

Concerning Koestler's use of imagery to explain the bisociation of two distinct planes of a concept, I am encouraged to think of further visual representations of humor creation. Koestler uses the intersection of planes to describe where the humor occurs, as if we are active on multiple planes and then reach an intersection. I believe that this visualization still begs the question though, as the idea of the plane seems too rigid. It's difficult for me to accept that different domains and concepts have such a clean-cut distinction of when they cross each other and create a bisociation, and when they do not. I prefer to think of an analogy of creativity as a solar system of spinning and ever-moving planets. In the system, every single body exerts some force of gravity upon every other body. There is a more observable influence between bodies that are larger or closer, but the motion of the entire system remains in balance but changes constantly. I consider that moments of bisociation in creativity have the same pattern – these

moments occur when two different concepts pass into each other's range of influence, and an observable connection is made that exists temporarily but immediately shows how the concepts influence each other. Each concept causes a tidal wave on the other's surface which disturbs our knowledge of that concept, the moment of humor or creativity is created, and as it passes, the concepts pull back into their original forms.

I need some work on this analogy, I know. What fascinates me is that patterns seem to emerge at many different scales on the physical world, and this may provide some reference to how humor can appear at different scales as well. One such pattern is the shape of a coastline, where if I stand on a beach and look down at the point where water and land meet, I see a very jagged pattern of tiny peninsulas and bays; if I observe the east coast of the U.S. from space, the same jagged pattern appears. I find humor in broad (generalized) areas, such as the idea of people dressing up their pets in human clothes. I also find humor in specific (specialized) moments, such as a specific instance during my childhood when my pet dog ran away clumsily after being surprised by a squeaking toy. Rather than traveling on planes to reach the bisociation, maybe I travel through the planetary system, sometimes in the far reaches of space, sometimes close to the surface.

October 4 - October 10, 2006

I clearly feel less anxiety around the nature of humor compared to how I've felt in previous weeks. I think this is because of the introduction of more grounded research and understanding of how humor and creativity are related. One aspect about which I was skeptical was that humor means that creativity is present automatically, but I think I was actually uncomfortable with defining humor and creativity so broadly that they always seemed to be present in the same form under any given circumstance. I certainly appreciate though the existence of creativity as a precursor to humor, perhaps a support system that becomes activated in the brain to allow humor to emerge. One idea suggested by Koestler and other researchers is that humor is a specific case of creativity. If little-c creativity depends on both the creator and evaluator being in agreement that creativity exists, humor is a special case of this, in which a humor creator and audience are mutually depended upon each other for the humor to be acknowledged. There is something very exciting about this to me. I conceive that humor is not really about the creation of humor and audience response as cause-effect events, but instead, humor is one (but not the only) form of transaction of creativity from one person to another. In other words, what if humor is one way in which the activation of creativity occurs within one person, and another person activates the same creativity at the same moment of time, representing a vestigial form of non-verbal communication? Before the existence of spoken language, perhaps humor was the mechanism for passing creativity between people, a way that one person could actively create a cognitive "partnership" with a member of the tribe, enhancing a group bond?

This past week in class, we discussed the process of telling a joke and how the humor is created up to the point of the punchline and laughter. I've been considering this with respect to my participation in my improv. theater troupe. In one respect, all dialogue is the "real-time" creation of a joke in which the set-up is developed organically with language and action and the punchline evolves from that and comes as a surprise to both the audience and actors. In general, when discussing a concept with my partners and reflecting on why a particular exchange was funny or not, we tend to find quick agreement around the concept itself, the setting of expectation, and the meaning of the punchline itself. What is much more difficult is identifying the correct timing of the punchline - the point where the expectation is broken where it most "fits" with the previous statements. This must be what all improv. actors try to understand, since the "joke" is created by multiple people, the *intention* varies between actors, and therefore the point at which the next line fits properly is always in question and being reinterpreted. I believe that the best improv. troupes have achieved a type of cohesion in which all of the actors very smoothly adapt each other's *intention* and therefore in their exchanges start to tell the same "joke" each time. This is the illusion of improv. theater - that the funny situation comes from the initial audience suggestion which seems completely arbitrary and therefore the humor is "magical". In reality, no matter what the initial suggestion, the humor comes from the actors' ability to take turns on stage telling the same joke because they have all agreed upon the punch line well ahead of time within a scene and therefore stop **thinking so much** about creating "funny" dialogue.

I'm greatly looking forward to the first "buddy" presentation in class this week, as the topic is the relationship between humor and gender. In all of the preparatory articles, there are many fascinating suggestions about the role of producing humor within groups of mixed-status members, including women and men, as well as ideas about how the target of the humor serves the purpose of men and women differently in terms of establishing status and bonding to the end that the operation of the group is improved. I'm still extremely curious though to what extent these factors relate to the social dynamics of men and women in a given culture. One research result suggest that women show greater intensity of brain activity because they experience greater reward of humor due to lower initial expectations. If so, WHY or HOW do these lower expectations *benefit* women in other areas?

October 11 - October 17, 2006

This past week's class left me intrigued but wanting much more. First of all, the Humor class followed the Creative Thinking class, where I already felt that so many more questions had been left open. In the Humor class, our first speaker discussed her ongoing CCT work as it relates to humor in the workplace. She discussed some of her interest in bringing FUN into the workplace such that it could help to promote a more productive environment, allow people to take alternative views on what it means to enjoy work, and help workplaces develop more appreciation for humor, sense of humor, and granting permission for humor to occur. Along with feeling agreement with all of the proposals that our guest was making concerning the

need for greater use of humor in the workplace, I also admired her energy and started to consider how that kind of energy is an indication of the source of the “intrinsic motivation” that has been mentioned in our readings as a great influence in the kind of follow-through which can be important to the creative process.

One issue to which my mind returns often is the one which seems to be unaddressed or even avoided by today's guest as well as the panelists from the Creative thinking class. It seems that examples are easier to find when discussing people that are open to creative energy, such as the example of the company president that dressed in costume to surprise the meeting participants. My perception though is that there are a great many more number of people who are not only unaware but also resistant to developing the skills that may enhance their creativity or let it be shown. What about the people to make faces, roll their eyes, or silently resent the introduction of fun, humor, or creativity into their work, passing it off as a “waste of time”, “childish”, etc.? I believe that a basic willingness to participate in activities, exercises, or discussions that are suspected to be pointless is a critical factor in allowing creativity and humor in particular to happen. This continues to beg the question. If someone appears to be generally not receptive to humor in the first place, is there necessarily some barrier preventing it that must be removed? Or is this the result of a “legitimate” innate personality that serves the person beyond what humor could do? Certainly many other factors must be considered though, including economic, health, and other social elements of a person's environment. I feel the need to ask these questions because I feel that it is somehow unfair to deny the gift of humor to those who reject it, under the assumption that everyone deserves and needs some amount of humor at least some of the time, and there are people who simply do not have the tools to use humor nor had the opportunity to develop them. At my most cynical, I would say that while it is admirable to seek out the community in which we are most welcome and secure, we can become too comfortable by isolating ourselves in groups of people where that is always true. I am distinguishing between what it takes for personal transformation versus society transformation to occur, and I conclude that society transformation, especially in any creative manner, takes a form of communication and even ability to market ideas that goes beyond developing individual creativity.

Also in class this week, we discussed the relationship between humor and gender, which seems to be both a mysterious and controversial issue. It seems that anecdotally, there are patterns in how women and men differently perceive, appreciate, and use humor. It would be useful to continue our class discussion by making some further distinctions. We can discuss how the genders perceive humor – that is, if they have different ways of determining and appreciating what is humorous or not. We can discuss when the genders use humor – that is, what it takes for someone of a particular gender to decide that humor is appropriate at a given time. We can discuss how the genders use humor – that is, if a person of a certain gender is more likely to draw upon certain kinds of abilities or intelligences when creating humor (linguistic, visual, etc.). We can discuss how the genders use gender humor – that is, what are

the intentions and consequences of using humor that specifically refers to one of the genders specifically?

I feel that we only scraped the tip of the humor iceberg in class, so I'll limit myself to adding a few observations from my real-life situation. In my participation in improv. theater, I have observed several improv. troupes – groups of people who perform together. In these troupes, there is a typical breakdown of 1/3rd women and 2/3rd men. Statistically, women are less likely to engage in this kind of performance, and I suspect this is similar in many related theater styles including stand-up comedy and pre-written sketch comedy. As far as specific people, the women that I have known or observed seem to have no less training, ability, or natural talent as compared to the men. In improv. theater, a source of humor is often satire or self-deprecation, and this can require some element of looking silly, getting hurt physically or emotionally in some minor way, or otherwise showing an outrageous side. I feel that it is less likely to receive laughter feedback from an audience when these things happen to women compared to men. Only based on intuition right now, but my guess at the reason for this is that it is "ok" when men experience these situations, relating to previous ideas discussed in class that humor can occur when incongruities are resolved within a safe way. On the other hand, women in these situations are more easily perceived as being more permanently affected or embarrassed, meaning that that the incongruity is not temporary. Once again, I need to explore this further.

October 18 - October 24, 2006

With much that happens over the span of our classes, I often leave the class applying what we have just discussed to my own life before considering the wider meaning. After this past Tuesday's presentation concerning humor and health, I have been considering the role of humor in the whole of my own well-being. One question that came to mind was if there are any wellness practitioners who intentionally include humor as part of their other work, whether it be teaching yoga, Pilates, or other mind-body fitness pursuits, providing massage therapy, or other similar ideas. I don't mean simply that the practitioner welcomes and supports humor within their daily work, but that the practitioner actively plans for and utilizes humor in specific, predetermined, integrated ways within the bounds of the rest of the practice. I'm not sure what this might mean...maybe active (non-reflexive) laughing, or by purposely telling of humorous stories during periods of rest between periods of more vigorous activity? The research presented during the class presentation by Jen, Anna, and Megan did not seem to address whether or not this could even be seen as possible.

The above questions got me thinking about the unpredictable nature of humor. Those who create humor for a specific purpose are constantly taking risks, particularly including comedians, actors, professional speakers, and other such people. They judge, plan, and play with how to create humor and strive to do so, and yet years of experience and wisdom simply do not guarantee that the humor *connection* will actually be created, as this depends upon the audience.

One suggestion that has been made in readings from the Creative Thinking class is that creativity *can* depend upon domain knowledge and even long-term expertise (Baer, 1998; Weisberg, 1999). In the pre-planned creation of humor by entertainers, it seems that they must be employing a creative skill in actually developing what they are hoping will be very funny, and that this particular skill may be different that the creativity that occurs during the actual telling a joke or story and the bisociation experienced by the audience in understanding and responding to it. What is the domain knowledge in the case of the actual creation of the joke? Perhaps the comedian's domain knowledge consists of understanding of the nuances of vocabulary, public speaking expertise, experience observing other comedians, ability to use body language...what else? Some of these seem particularly interesting because we have generally discussed "domain knowledge" in terms of cognitive structures - facts and understandings of the mind alone. What about the body? A comedian certainly does not consciously control each particular gesture, facial expression, or use of posture, and also a comedian surely gets a feeling of emotional response from the body language of the audience, and yet must not all of these factors must contribute to the success of the humor? I still wonder over this possibility, but perhaps this is one juncture where the humor/health connection is made. If humor leading to laughter induces a chemical change that affects the flow of oxygen to the body and relieves stress, the entire body, as a system, must be involved with humor? All of this is extremely puzzling and intriguing. If laughter as a result of humor is certainly healthy, why does it so often take a professional comedian to plan and present the humor in order for one to laugh - why do people need to seek out sources of laughter? If a person's body and mind are already in a healthy state, what good is done by laughter? If a person is not in a healthy state, and laughter from humor is reflexive, why doesn't laughter occur more easily? Why can it be so difficult to laugh in stressful situations? Why must the source of humor be external? It seems like laughter is fairly easily suppressed, even if humor is appreciated, in a situation where a person is depressed, angry, or under trauma. Would not that be the perfect time for a laughter reaction to occur if it really serves the purpose of improving health?

October 25 - October 31, 2006

This past week, our attention to humor was particular important to me and meaningful in my "regular" life. Unfortunately, my grandmother passed away at the age of 84 after a long and wonderful life, and as I spent the last several days with my family in the Midwest, my participation in the Humor class was certainly influential in the way that I made it through the week. Something that I noticed in particular was the way that all of my family was using humor as much as possible when speaking about my grandmother. There were references to her hobbies, interests, typical phrases that she would use, and stories of times that she enjoyed herself. It almost was as if we felt obligated to remind each other that one way to acknowledge her properly was to recognize the ways that she had fun and propagate these stories throughout the family. From having spent recent weeks in the CCT Humor class, I have taken

on a sense of genuine importance about the presence of humor, far beyond what I knew in my pre-CCT mind. I've always enjoyed humor greatly and suspected that it was truly important logically, but more than ever now, I truly *feel* the importance of humor, meaning that there is a palpable dissonance in my thoughts during a instance where humor is not present but I know it should be. This provided some of the boost that I needed to allow my own humor through while reflecting on my grandmother.

I made another discovery as well about something that had not been explicit to me. Because I really felt the importance of humor during this past week, I noticed that I also had the *courage* to use it (as appropriate) during these last few days. Maybe this sounds ordinary, but now I see a direct connection between *courage* and *importance*. If something is *important* to me, I have the courage to use it, recognize it, speak about it, and stand behind it. The quality "important" is almost like an inhibitor to fear and hesitation - it is my alert system that fear and hesitation must be put aside because the "important" thing must be completed, noticed, shared with others, despite any consequences. In this way, my family's use of humor through this week was an indication of their courage - addressing the more difficult challenge of putting light on my grandmother's life, as opposed to our tendency to maintain a more somber mood from the *fear* of showing disrespect. At the last class, Marnie and I gave a presentation on some possible relationships between humor and evolution, and I might also tie this in by using a term from our article. This past week, use of humor was our own form of "microevolution" - the tools that we use to survive and adapt to change on a very small scale, a daily basis. The humor that we shared was communal, it extended the bonds between family members, and it provided a signal to each other that wonderful things could still be forthcoming to all of us.

In this past week's class, we tried to use some techniques for writing jokes. I struggled with this exercise to some extent, although I found the techniques themselves to be helpful. I wondered about this, as I have recently done quite a bit of writing in creating jokes and humorous scripts as part of my improv. theater experiences. The class exercise further magnified the kinds of conditions in which I best do this. I believe these conditions actually reflect how I best do all of my CCT work as well. First, my most productive writing sessions occur alone and particularly when I can write over multiple sessions. I almost never sit and write anything and complete it within that session. I start writing, I go away for a while, I come back to writing later, etc. Also, I've found that I really don't become stimulated by group discussion in which any form of *problem-solving* occurs, so it's strangely ineffective for me to get the opinions of others on my ideas. Instead, I feel like I highly rely on my intuitions as I catch the scent of a solution and try to run off on the trail, leaving the others in the group behind. On the other hand, I very highly depend upon and enjoy group discussion settings for *problem-finding*.

November 1 - November 7, 2006

I sincerely feel that my participation in this class has truly helped me through the past few weeks, in which my grandmother and father both passed away within days of each other. I echo more strongly my comments previously that humor is truly important and necessary at a time like this, and I have given more thought to how my own humor appreciation has been influenced by the both of them. I think that a certain subtlety of humor that I tend to use is closely related to my father's sense of humor. I remember that he always appreciated the humor of the ways that our society and culture sometimes had a way of inflating the importance of different ideas. For example, when he would listen to political speeches or television talk shows with an "expert" addressing some topic, my father would find much of this very funny although the tone of these presentations was fairly serious. Instead of merely focusing on the issue, I think my father had a keen awareness of the subtle ways in which people in authority tried to promote their own high status, sometimes even to the point of sounding ridiculous - continually mentioning their credentials, playing on reactionary emotions of the audience, etc.

As I think about this more, I realize that my father's point of view was not necessarily cynical but highly skeptical about the whole idea of "marketing" in the sense of messages intended to convince people that products or services would solve their problems. Through this, I greatly appreciate my dad's sense of value - his unyielding knowledge about what was really important, what it meant to have real problems, and what it meant to be fortunate. This possibly relates to my own humor, as I also tend to be very discerning about what in the world I would actually call "important", and because I conclude that so little meets this standard, I am able to find many sources of great humor and laughter in the things that are not as so important. It seems like this could be another important component of humor that needs further exploration - not only my knowledge, creative tendencies, and personality help to define my humor, but also my tendency to either find or recognize humor. Is humor-finding related to problem-finding? Perhaps the two are related, as I would suggest that sometimes finding humor can be a challenge and seems to require a mental search process where I even use different strategies to perform the search...

November 8 - November 14, 2006

Since I have been away from class for a week now, I have gained a little separation from the discussion nature of class and have been able to observe some very practical aspects of humor. I certainly have spent much time reflecting on the death of my father, but humor has served as stress release, as we have mentioned in class several times. At times, it has been impossible for me to appreciate and respond to humor as I might normally, and more interestingly at other times, it has been impossible for me to *avoid* appreciating humor, laughing, and showing sincere joy. I noticed something about these moments. At the point of humor or laughter, I feel that I completely forgot about the stress and sadness that might have existed moments ago. It's much more than just pushing those feelings aside temporarily to get out the laugh -- it's as if those stressful sad feelings never existed at all. I really feel that the

distinction between the two seems subtle but is very significant because my emotional sensations are different between one from the other. In these recent cases, it's almost as if not only the passage of time but also humor creation and appreciation are instruments in the process of *forgetting* grief. In combination, both of these are providing my brain with instructions: "Ok, you don't need these thoughts to be in your working memory ALL THE TIME. We're going to place them in long-term memory in case you need them later, but that means that you have permission to allow other thoughts to enter your mind without conflict or interruption again."

November 15 - November 21, 2006

In this past week's class, we went through the interested exercise of trying to use Allyn Bradford's dialogue technique to discuss an open-ended question that I posed about the meaning of sense of humor and how this slightly broader concept might apply to the specific discussions of humor that have been presented in class. This discussion perhaps did not leave me with solid conclusions but did encourage me to further consider the kinds of external conditions that can facilitate or inhibit humor to be used and appreciated. Even though the "sense of humor" label might be related to a person's tendency to use humor, laugh out loud, or make jokes to others over a fairly long period of time, I return to my own beliefs that everyone enjoys humor on a very personal level (perhaps by definition?). Even with people that I know in life that have been labeled (sometimes unfairly) as "humorless" or "serious", these people certainly have also showed enjoyment of humor in very specific situations and when a number of conditions are met, such as a physical environment and presence of the other people around which the person is most comfortable. One important factor for me personally seems to be my own ability to "be myself", meaning behave completely naturally and spontaneously. Ironically, I probably behave the most this way when I am completely alone and certainly make behavioral adjustments in the presence of others, such that it enhances the communication between us or gives a certain kind of information. When I am experiencing humor, I believe that I am the closest to "being myself", in the sense that my behavior at the moment is very much about me spending that moment only concerned with my own immediate emotions and allowing myself to react to them.

I have started to form numerous additional questions about the relationships between myself, this course, humor as a broader topic, and use of humor in educational environments. Through my samples of improv. exercises, I'm now questioning even more how to use this in developing a source of creativity education for adults. Improv. theater depends upon spontaneity, play, ambiguity, humor, dialogue, action, and communication in other ways. How can others receive the benefit that I have received in an appropriate way? What is needed to transform the basics of improv. theater into something that is accepted as important and necessary in education? I still feel that there is something of beauty waiting beyond my immediate understanding. A vast majority of my improv. colleagues perform in this style specifically because they wish to be more flexible as actors and therefore create a greater

chance that they can act as a long-term career choice. In my case, I have no real desire to make a living with acting or improv. theater, but I find it incredibly rewarding personally, with or without an audience! Also, it represents what I most respect and aspire to achieve in terms of creativity - the ability to develop truly original thought -- sometimes useless, sometimes funny, sometimes sublime, sometimes offensive, sometimes profound. I have a series of connections to make still. If I want to help people improve their communities and lives, how can I help inspire the kinds of original thinking that allow this to happen, and how can I use adult education as foundation of the development of this kind of thinking, and how can I use the core concepts from improv. theater to organize and structure the learning environment necessary for this climate of adult education?

November 22 - November 28, 2006

It was very exciting this week to have heard more about the comedy archives project at Emerson. It seems that this might be one representation of a growing acceptance of the importance of humor in the culture with an underlying acceptance of the kind of creative thinking that is needed. A few patterns emerged among the people being interviewed for the archive video. First, several people commented about the way that humor can rise out of pain and tragedy. Sometimes this seemed to be personal suffering that affected the individual comedian starting with childhood, and sometimes this seemed to refer to the broad kind of worldly problems such as poverty and war in which humor was used to counteract them. One person even alluded to the possibility that if there was no tragedy in the world, it would be a sad day for some comedians who would then have nothing left to address within their normal kind of humor.

As most issues in class, I often find myself relating new ideas to myself first in terms of my life in general, then in my interest in improv. theater, and then from a more global perspective. There were some particular comments from the interviewees that I found particularly relevant to all three:

- Be honest - humor derives from truth in it's purest form; the audience recognizes insincerity.
- Humor is best when natural - uncensored, unplanned, better analyzed afterward than beforehand.
- Humor is about communicating in a new way.
- Humor comes from saying something that everyone thought was unique to them but is actually universal.
- ** There is no way to learn how to be funny. **
- Humor, like much else, requires numerous failures along the way to reaching greatness.
- Humor is best when it allows for the audience to be respected and honored.
- Humor is not only about words and delivery, there is a rhythm to it, almost musical.

- Those who tend to offer humor often have good language skills, are acutely aware of vast areas of popular culture, and are incessant readers.

Through our class, I've become very excited about the potential for further study into humor and creativity. I've decided at this point that despite all of our academic discussion, I still have so many questions about the real core of humor. I feel that I understand laughter a little better, as well as the cognition of humor recognition and appreciation. What drives me forward now is to more deeply explore the real joy of humor. Beyond all of observable factors, what is that "thing" that really happens when the joy of humor is found? It occurred to me that when I feel a (small or large) creative impulse which turns into something wonderful and interesting, the feeling is very much the same for me when I experience a moment of humor of the highest order. As an improv. actor, these moments seem to occur both for me and for the audience, but it seems like these moments for me are quite independent from those of the audience. It's as if the audience and I actually find a completely different form of satisfaction from an improv. performance. When I am being creative in some other area, the *feeling* is the same as when I find this satisfaction in improv.

One of the archive interviews exposed a comment (** above) that both bothers me and excites me. The notion that humor cannot be learned is one of the most fascinating ideas that I've heard in recent weeks. In one way, I agree that it might be a bad idea to teach directly to an end goal of producing humor, as this may take the form of a "rule" that ultimately restricts the creativity needed for humor to thrive. From another perspective, it seems both possible and important to create a learning environment to encourage humor. How can humor benefit teachers themselves, either to encourage creativity or promote a comfortable environment? Before humor is used as a tool in a learning environment, doesn't it need to be explained to students? What room is there for a teacher to actually allow the class to collaborate in their agreement on the ground rules for using humor in the classroom as well as allow all participants to identify their own humor styles? If it's true that only some people are "naturally funny", does it mean others should not push themselves to try to be funny? Or perhaps this just means that individuals should be encouraged to seek to find their own humor boundaries and judge their humor relative to themselves rather than an external audience?

November 29 - December 5, 2006

I'm highly encouraged this week about a few additional discoveries in my course of humor study. Because I am taking the humor course at the same time as the Creative Thinking course, I have been seeking relationships between the two so that I am not just thinking about individual classes but instead recognizing that all of this study fits into a unified whole, as complex as it may be.

In Mary's presentation this past week about the influence of humor on human biological health, she mentioned an analogy. She was discussing how the various immunoglobins and other molecules interacted with each other to form a way for the immune

system to fight invasions, and she described these as if they were bees or ants. All of the individual members simply act according to their nature automatically, without pausing to “decide” anything on their own. An individual molecules bonds to another that is complementary to itself, an individual bee carries a pollen from one place to another or moves a substance from one place to another in a hive. Each individual element does not have “awareness” of the big picture but is driven by its nature. From a broader view though, each one is part of an elegant system, one that as a whole even seems to show “intelligence”, such as it is. In our Creative Thinking class reading for this week, organizational creativity was discussed, so perhaps this is an analogy for that as well. Perhaps the individual members of a organization each act according to their own nature in a similar way, so the organization’s creativity reflects that work but cannot be perceived so well without standing outside of the organization and really observing the system while temporarily ignoring the elemental actions. Of course, aren’t organizations really fundamentally an association between individuals?

Along these same lines, another connection between humor and creativity comes to mind. in considering children’s humor, I’ve been using a particular exercise as a teacher in my own classes which serves as an integrative lesson and consists of the use of a number of answers given by children to probing questions. I use these with my adult GED students as part of teaching reading comprehension and verbal interpretation (as well as computer typing skills) and ask them to explain why each answer is “funny”, if at all. A sample of these questions and answers appears on the last page.

What is so puzzling then? When answering these questions, the children were not prompted in any way to be funny or express humor - they believed that they were answering serious questions posed by adults and were simply being honest about their own beliefs. Were the children being creative? I’m not sure, other than they were expressing themselves in their natural way - there was no apparent intention of creativity or humor, although both seem to have been expressed, if only by the adults taking the survey or reading these results. What if these actually were questions posed on a test in a grade school? I’m sure that in many cases, the teacher grading such a test in our current culture might find the answers “silly” rather than enjoyable. Through this mystery, I connect humor and creativity as expressions that perhaps do not have to be “created” at all but instead exist in everyday life for us to find when we wish. If it is possible to suppress our western view of creativity and humor in which a new product must be developed in order to recognize the accomplishment, perhaps we can find that both creativity and humor are already constantly present, available, and complete free to all of us? As I step back and look at the forest rather than the trees, I have an image forming of the creative and critical thinking as a system, and I am greatly excited that this system may not be merely a series of gears in which humor and creative thinking are individual components that turn each other, for example, but rather a river filled with interacting organisms - constantly changing but always there, holding necessary elements for life, unimposing when considered in small amounts but powerful as a whole.

When children ages 6-9 were asked questions about love, they gave the following answers:

1. Why does love happen between people?

"I think you're supposed to get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn't supposed to be so painful."

2. What is it like falling in love?

"Like an avalanche where you have to run for your life."

3. How important is beauty?

"Beauty is skin deep. But how rich you are can last a long time."

4. Why do people who love each other hold hands?

"They want to make sure their rings don't fall off because they paid good money for them."

5. Do you think you will find love?

"Love will find you, even if you are trying to hide from it. I been trying to hide from it ever since I was five, but the girls keep finding me."

6. What qualities do you need to be in love?

"One of you should know how to write a check. Because, even if you have tons of love, there are still going to be a lot of bills."

7. How can you make someone love you?

"Don't do things like have smelly shoes. You might get attention, but attention ain't the same thing as love."

8. How Can You Tell if Two People are Married?

"You might have to guess based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids."

Within these statements there are creative elements such as metaphors (avalanche, "shot with an arrow") and elaboration (holding hands to keep rings from falling off). Do the children *care* about that? Would the responses really be much funnier and still genuine if the children were told to be funny?