

## Humor in the teaching of writing: A microethnographic approach

CHRISTIAN F. HEMPELMANN\*  
Texas A&M University-Commerce

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### ABSTRACT

**EN** This paper presents the content of a critical thinking and writing course, along with similar courses derived from it, designed around the topic of humor and culminating in a microethnographic investigation of humor in students' lives. The aims of the paper are threefold: to offer a general rationale for using humor in the writing classroom; to illustrate different types of potentials and dangers of such an approach; and to suggest extensions of the findings to the second-language writing classroom. The paper offers texts, writing prompts, and activities for instructors teaching classes that focus on the writing process in a first or second language.

**Key words:** HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM, COLLEGE COMPOSITION, MICROETHNOGRAPHY, FIELDWORK, CRITICAL THINKING

**ES** El presente artículo expone el contenido de un curso de pensamiento crítico y escritura, así como de otros cursos similares basados en él, con un diseño centrado en el humor que finalmente culminó en una investigación microetnográfica del humor en la vida de los estudiantes. Tres son los objetivos en este trabajo: ofrecer una justificación general del uso del humor en el aula de escritura; presentar diferentes tipos de potencialidades o debilidades de tal enfoque, y sugerir posibles extensiones de los hallazgos al aula de escritura en segunda lengua. El artículo ofrece textos, temas de escritura y actividades para profesores que impartan clases centradas en el proceso de escritura en lengua materna o extranjera.

**Palabras clave:** HUMOR EN EL AULA, ESCRITURA ACADÉMICA, MICROETNOGRAFÍA, TRABAJO DE CAMPO, PENSAMIENTO CRÍTICO

**IT** Questo articolo presenta i contenuti di un corso su pensiero critico e scrittura, e di corsi analoghi che ne sono derivati. I corsi sono stati progettati attorno al tema del comico e si sono conclusi con una ricerca micro-etnografica sull'umorismo nella vita degli studenti. Gli obiettivi dell'articolo sono molteplici: offrire un'argomentazione generale per l'uso del comico nelle classi di scrittura, illustrare potenzialità e pericoli di tale approccio, suggerire l'applicazione dei risultati alle classi di scrittura in lingua seconda. L'articolo offre testi, tracce e attività per gli insegnanti di corsi incentrati sul processo di scrittura in lingua madre o in una seconda lingua.

**Parole chiave:** COMICO NELLA CLASSE, SCRITTURA, MICROETNOGRAFIA, RICERCA SUL CAMPO, PENSIERO CRITICO

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\* Contact: [c.hempelmann@tamuc.edu](mailto:c.hempelmann@tamuc.edu)

## 1. Introduction

Finding a new voice in writing is analogous to learning a new language, or at least a new register in that language (Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 1997). Academic writing requires the development of an academic writerly voice, which can be challenging even for first-language writers. It can be especially difficult in cases where students have not had models of such a voice in the past, such as at rural universities with many diverse students who often are the first members of their family to attend university (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). This paper proposes that humor can be a tool to help students develop such a voice. It describes four college-level critical thinking and writing courses taught by the author, in which humor is the explicit research focus. The paper also theoretically extends the scope to second-language writing classes.

The focus in this paper is therefore neither on humor as part of the style or practice of the educator, nor on the use of humor in learning materials (e.g., funny examples or readings). Rather in the courses described, humor was an explicit topic of the class, both as a research and writing topic and as a means to discuss general issues in the humanities as they surface in universal human behavior (cf. Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, pp. 166-182). The purpose of the paper is thus to provide an overview of such a course, including a course outline and suggestions for course materials, and to make the course adaptable by other instructors of first language (L1) or second language (L2) reading and writing. The materials presented here have been previously discussed in Hempelmann and Beermann (2013), but they were presented in German and only as background to an analysis of themes in students' field notes for computational humor generation. This article instead makes the course material the focus, promoting teaching humor as a path to learning and providing scholars and instructors with novel evidence of the relation between the study of humor and language practice.

The organization of the paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews literature on humor as a motivator and a pragmatic tool in language learning and practice. It also introduces humor as a motivational double-edged sword: Humor may enhance learning for some, but it is also a potential distraction or annoyance to others. Section 3 describes the three portions of the original composition course designed around humor-based microethnography. It presents the course texts used and provides all writing prompts and other assignments. It also briefly discusses themes that were found in the field notes of student who took the course. Section 4 presents two later adaptations of the course materials and their integration with newer readings, one for an honors composition class and one in core curriculum course in the humanities illustrating a different, non-writing-based thematic arrangement of the materials. Finally, Section 5 presents conclusions and highlights the central experiences of the courses.

## 2. A review of the study of humor in teaching and learning

### 2.1. *Humor in the composition classroom*

Humor is frequently understood to be a motivator in the classroom in general, and in writing courses in particular. Since Berlyne's (1960) work more than 50 years ago, scholars agree that in composition classes, students need to write about something that they care about in order to provide intrinsic motivation. Humor can play this role (Harnett, 2007). Humor is strongly associated with emotions, particularly mirth (Martin, 2007), which can be motivational. And while humor can also be associated with emotions such as aggression (Martin, 2007), aggressive humor, if properly contextualized, can also motivate students. When students have a sense of injustice about the uses of aggressive humor, they can be motivated to explore this strong emotion by writing about it, as illustrated in the section about ethnic humor and sexist humor outlined below.

Apart from motivation, humor has also been found to be a window on rhetorical logic, because of the pseudologic necessary to playfully resolve the key element of incongruity in humor (Attardo, Hempelmann, & Di Maio, 2003; Attardo & Raskin, 1991; Hempelmann, 2004; Hempelmann & Attardo, 2011). Exploring the pseudologic that connects the two opposed meanings of a humorous text provides an example of sophistry that can help students understand logical fallacies in general. A clear example is seen in the logic of punning, which is based on the fallacy that the relation between the linguistic signifier and the signified is natural, or motivated, so that if two concepts surface in an identical word in a given language, the concepts are somehow meaningfully related. This, of course, is the exception in natural language, where the arbitrariness of the sign holds in the vast majority of cases.

It should be noted, however, that much research on the effects of humor in the classroom and, in particular, much of the "research [on humor as a motivator in the classroom] has been equivocal" (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006, p. 178), and remains so to this day (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Martin,

2007). While research suggests that certain types of humor may be a motivator in specific contexts and when used by a specific instructor, humor needs to be used carefully and selectively (e.g., Chabeli, 2008; Darling & Civikly, 1986/1987; Gruntz-Stoll & Rißland, 2002; Wanzer, 2002; Wanzer et al., 2006; Zillman & Bryant, 1983; Ziv, 1988). Instructors should be particularly careful about using humor in lecturing, which might put the instructor, the jokes, the instructor's personality, or all three in between the student and what is to be learned or practiced. In assessment materials, humor also risks being a distractor (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016).

## **2.2. Humor in the second language classroom**

In second language research, several studies provide evidence of the benefits of including humor in the L2 curriculum, such as positive effects on motivation, a more natural interaction with learners, and assessment of pragmatic proficiency (e.g., Bell, 2009; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Deneire, 1995; Fung, 2010; Schmitz, 2002; Tocalli-Beller, 2005). The close observation of humor mechanisms can also benefit the language learner in developing and strengthening language competence at both a communicative and a pragmatic level. As Bell and Pomerantz (2016) write, "humor does have something very important to teach us about how language is used and to contribute to how it is taught and learned in classrooms" (p. 197). Using humor in the second-language classroom is also a good means of assessing learner's mastery of intercultural pragmatics, as the ability to understand and produce humor and language play often requires the highest mastery of the pragmatics of language (see Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

Additionally, the observations in Section 2.1 about humor in the writing classroom are also relevant for the second language classroom, as "L2 users encounter many of the same social, cognitive, and linguistic challenges using humor as L1 users" (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 42). Despite the differences between L1 and L2 writing—including differences in revision strategies, linguistic competence (Widdowson, 1983), and discourse conventions (Connor, 1996; Kaplan, 1983;), all of which should undoubtedly be addressed in the classroom—the overall similarity of the writing process in L1 and L2 (Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1983) makes for a logical basis for the meaningful transfer of the insights gained in each context. L1 and L2 writers, for instance, rely on a similar set of skills, procedures, and critical thinking abilities to develop and express their ideas in writing (Silva, 1993). Additionally, proficiency and development of L1 and L2 writing are correlated (Schoonen et al., 2003). Finally, with the increasing student diversity in classrooms, scholars are currently advocating for a shift towards thinking beyond L1/L2 binaries and enacting pedagogies based on translanguaging and multiliteracies (Canagarajah, 2013), which draw on students' repertoires across languages, in the teaching practices for composition courses as well as language courses. Thus, research in both L1 and L2 writing pedagogy is relevant for understanding multilingual writers and learners.

## **3. Original freshman composition course at GSU**

In the fall of 2005, I developed a freshman composition course at Georgia Southern University (GSU) in Statesboro, Georgia, based around the topic of humor, which I taught in three parallel sections. The general purpose of composition courses at GSU was to coach students in developing an academic voice in written English, as well as to introduce research methods. Full-time faculty were not required to use a prescribed textbook or syllabus, but were invited to build courses around their expertise and interests. Because of my research in linguistics and in humor, I was aware of research on humor as a motivating factor in the classroom (see Section 2.1.), and I was curious to evaluate its effects in my own course. Additionally, my department, the Department of Writing and Linguistics, encouraged a microethnographic approach (cf. Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2011) for composition classes. In a microethnographic approach, students research the subtle social structure of a community as it manifests itself in the interactions of the members of the community. Thus, my course combined these two strands, humor and microethnography, asking students to assume the viewpoint of an anthropologist who encounters a human society for the first time and documents its actions—here, primarily the interactions that involve humor—without preconceived notions. Bell (2009) suggests that making students collect instances of humor, for instance through field notes, is a beneficial focus-on-form activity in L2 classrooms as well. "Using humor in the language classroom (. . .) could be useful for raising learner awareness of the different types and functions of humor" (Bell, 2009, p. 254; see also Medgyes, 2002).

My 15-week course had three general units: a) introduction and classic readings; b) studying humor and aggression; and c) the final project on humor fieldwork (initiated during the second stage through field

notes), in which students then used humor as a window on structures of social interaction (e.g., Norrick, 2003; Sacks, 1974). Each unit lasted roughly five weeks. I now discuss each of the three units in turn.

### **3.1. Unit One: Reading and writing about humor in general**

At the beginning of the semester, students wrote a free-writing piece on what humor means to them and what they laugh about in their daily life. They were asked to reflect in particular on what they laughed about in the media, and also what was *not* funny to them, even when they identified humorous intention, in general or in a given context. These free-writings served as important tools in helping the instructor to identify sample materials for lessons later in the semester.

Next, students read a series of basic and classic readings (Armus & Decker, 1988; Douglas, 1984; Keith-Spiegel, 1984; Koestler, 1964; Oring, 2003a; Raskin, 1985b; Walker, 1984) and responded to them in in-class discussions and various writing assignments, including summaries, counterarguments, compare-and-contrast essays, and an abstract. The readings were contextualized with lectures, particularly when heavy on theory (e.g., Raskin, 1985b) or dated and weak in their main points, but very illustrative and influential beyond humor research, such as chapters from Freud (1905/1990), including, for instance, *Technique of Jokes* (pp. 16-20, 60-66), *Purpose of Jokes* (pp. 90-116), and *The Motives of Jokes* (pp. 140-158).

Another early exercise and homework unit was structured around a learning-by-doing approach based on Greg Dean's standup writing workshop (Dean, 2000). This approach, drawing on Raskin (1985a), coaches readers through developing material for jokes and the actual joke-writing process. After an introductory lecture, I created several jokes on the spot in class—which were not perceived as particularly funny, but were recognizable as jokes—by following the steps of Dean's "Joke Map" (2000). These steps are: a) select a setup; b) pick a target assumption and choose a connector; c) list reinterpretations for the connector; d) choose a reinterpretation and compose a second story; e) write a punch line that expresses the second store. Students then authored two jokes in group work, sharing the one they thought funnier with the class. Finally, students created two more jokes as homework. This exercise was overall a very successful method to assess whether the students had become aware of the principles underlying humor as presented in Raskin (1985b), a more easily digestible summary of Raskin (1985a), and Dean (2000). Here are some of the funnier examples of the students' jokes:

- What did the cow in the pasture do?  
Drop food on her mumu.
- My Netflix stopped working again: unpaid.  
My neighbors are so irresponsible.
- Our relationship is like Romeo and Juliet:  
We broke up after 3 hours.
- I got dumped Friday night.  
One minute I'm napping, the next minute the dumpster gets emptied into the dump truck.
- What do you call four honors students playing scrabble at 2 a.m.?  
Virgins.
- I took out the trash extra early today.  
I would have waited, but my kids started looking for Fluffy.

To summarize, the first third of the semester proceeded through the following steps:

- 1) Free-writing about humor;
- 2) Discussions and writings in response to classic readings;
- 3) Joke-writing workshop.

### **3.2. Unit Two: Reading and writing about aggressive humor in particular**

The second segment of the course was based on the thematic complex of humor and aggression, already introduced in the context of Freud's ruminations (1905/1990). The focus of this segment was the so-called "ethnic joke." On the basis of several readings (Boskin & Dorinson, 1984; Davies, 2002; Oring, 2003), the students had to make an argument about whether ethnic humor is always aggressive. The largest thematic focus was the discussion of Jewish-American Princess (JAP) jokes (Chayat, 1987; Davies, 1990,

2002b; Dundes, 1997; Spencer, 1989; Zappa, 1979; Zappa & Zappa, 1982). Although these had to be contextualized for students in parts of the United States with very low Jewish populations, like rural Georgia, they also acquainted students with part of the American experience they had not been extensively exposed to.

The introductory media item presented to students was Frank Zappa's song *Valley Girl*, in the form of a music video that was intended to pique their interest also in terms of early 1980s aesthetics. As homework, students read articles from a range of perspectives: from those who find any humor with targets offensive, such as Freud (1905/1990), to those who see the joke-tellers intentionality as an important factor to consider (Davies, 1990, 2002; Oring, 2003). Students were encouraged to watch (after being warned about explicit content) Zappa's *Jewish Princess*. They were then asked to write a 5- to 6-page paper in response to the question of whether JAP jokes are racist, sexist, both, or neither, while addressing the general question of whether there is a kernel of truth in humorous stereotypes. Although students were encouraged to consider the relevance of intentionality on the part of the joke teller as separate from the joke itself, many students sided with the position that assumes any targeted humor as aggressive. Regardless, the debate generated much discussion and writing.

The next third of the semester therefore proceeded through the following steps:

- 1) Focus on humor and aggression;
  - a. Jokes targeting groups of others;
  - b. Jokes targeting women;
- 2) Freud vs. Davies and Oring;
- 3) Starting the microethnographic field diary on everyday humor (discussed in the following section).

### **3.3. Unit Three: Researching and writing about the humor of a community**

In the third, final, and longest segment of the semester, a task that had been going on for most of the semester came to fruition. Starting in week four of the semester, students had been keeping a field diary with anthropological notes. For this purpose, the methods for such a microethnographic project were discussed with the help of instructions and examples from a handbook dedicated to this method (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2011). In this microethnographic project, the main purpose was to make the familiar unfamiliar by close-up observation of what is normally taken for granted, so as to gain insights into one's own environment from a renewed perspective. Everyday actions of people using humor were documented in detail without preconceived hypotheses. In this phenomenological-inductive process, individual observations became the basis of generalized qualitative results.

Students collected observations in field diaries over the course of weeks, beginning with five observations per week at the beginning of the project and gradually increasing to 10 per week by the end of the semester. This timeline made it possible to collect laughter events over a longer period of time and not just take an impressionistic snap shot. The field notes were intended to document everyday events that were accompanied by laughter in the life of the students. As a first step, the circumstances of the laughter event were to be recorded in a notebook. Participants in the events were to be given a pseudonym. Any dialogue that may have occurred before or after the laughter was to be quoted in as much detail as possible. Most importantly, the participants in the situation, the circumstances, and the locality were to be sketched. Students had to pay attention to detail in the dialogue noting any joke targets (Raskin, 1985b). Field notes were to be submitted by email by the end of each week, with a short reflection on each note. The prompt for the field note task can be found in Appendix A1. Typical field diary entries are shown in Section 3.4. Emphasis was placed on the fact that it was not necessary for humor to have had occurred, only that there was laughter, which is of course not necessarily the result of a humor event. This basic and important causal dissociation of humor and laughter (cf. Zweyer, Velker, & Ruch, 2004) was developed with the students through examining the example of events in which laughter was used to structure conversation rather than being triggered by humor, as well as examples of fake vs. sincere laughter. As another reading intended to facilitate the students' documenting of humorous events, Sack's (1974) classic paper on the telling of a dirty joke was assigned.

While students were collecting these laughter events, the course introduced more theory on humor. An episode of the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "The Outrageous Okona" (Armus & Decker, 1988) was used to show how humor is an important part of being human. As part of its humanization

journey, the android Lieutenant Commander Data approaches the human behavior called humor both practically and theoretically. Students were directed to summarize humor theories in a helpful email to the android, cc'ed to the instructor.<sup>2</sup>

Students also completed a character study (see Appendix A2 for prompt) of a character in the cartoon series *Family Guy* (McFarlane, 1999), which was mentioned by the majority of students as their favorite funny television show at the time. Students selected one of the main characters of the show (Peter, Stewie, Meg, Lois, or Brian) and focused on events in which the character laughed. They then analyzed what could be gleaned about that character's humor from patterns in those instances. This character study was an exercise in ethnographic study, using a framed media context to ease students into self-observation and self-reflection. A subsequent character study was then based on one of the people in the students' field notes. It was also intended to be, and successfully became, part of the final cumulative paper of the course. In general, they were successful in maintaining the "othering" distance (Said, 1978) they had developed for the *Family Guy* character. An additional advantage was that this show was being aired on a local cable channel at the time of the course. Even so, it is not appropriate to assume that all students have access to media products that are not by themselves free or only accessible through paid Internet access, in particular in rural areas of the United States. To ensure that all students were exposed to the material regardless of home circumstances, two randomly selected episodes of the show were also watched during class time.

Students also wrote 6- to 8-page location studies (see Appendix A3), in which they were asked to take a closer look at one of the locations in which the group they study commonly congregates, like the gym, the cafeteria, or the church. If no such location had emerged by the time this task was assigned, students were allowed to write an additional character study. Either of these was to become a source for their microethnographic study on the topic of the humor culture of a community (they are part of or they regularly observe).

Finally, in Week 10 of the course, based on the character and location studies, students embarked on the final paper for the course. Instructions for the final paper specified that students were to focus on one of the social groups that they had been observing, emphasizing the humor of social groups, its recurring themes, and its functions. This step was also discussed in 15-minute one-on-one conferences that replaced class sessions during that week. These conferences were followed up on by another set of conferences in Week 12. These were intended to provide students with feedback on the basis of their drafts with respect to the structuring of their argument and its illustration. The specific prompt at this stage of their writing focused on the development of their text by phrasing their emotional response to the laughter of the group in relation to specific examples from their field notes. The final instructions for this group study were to first introduce the group, with the help of individual characters from the character studies. It was also helpful to refer back to discussions of aggressive vs. affiliative humor (out-group and in-group marking).

For many students, these final papers, with a length requirement of 12-15 pages, were the longest they had ever written. The lengthy data collection period, paired with continued theoretical reading and discussion, allowed students to develop a writing topic that was substantial and motivated by patterns from their specific context. It also allowed for reflection on their own social circumstances, driven by humor. Looking at the familiar from a newly acquired distance and relating it to contextualized research proved to be a fruitful approach to providing these writers with a writing context that lowered motivational and genre boundaries.

In summary, the final third of the semester thus proceeded through the following steps:

- 1) Continuing the field diary on everyday humor;
- 2) A focus on microethnographic research on the humor of a social group that the students had access to or were even members of;
- 3) In parallel, studying the humor of fictional characters;
- 4) Character study and location study;
- 5) Final paper on the humor of a community;

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this media material was no longer a recalled item for students in 2005, much less in 2014, so newer examples should be identified (e.g., IBM's Watson: [www.ibm.com/watson](http://www.ibm.com/watson)) by instructors wishing to adopt this activity.

### 3.4. Themes as result of the field study

As part of the evaluation of the course, a colleague and I conducted an analysis of the themes that occurred in the field notes that students generated throughout the semester. The results are the focus of Hempelmann and Beermann (2013). Because those findings were published in German, I present here a very short overview of the results.

In our analysis, randomly selected field notes by 28 students, 16 males and 12 females, between the ages of 18 and 22 ( $M = 18.64$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) were used to understand themes in everyday humor of undergraduate students. The random selection of field notes comprised 1,000 situations that involved laughter (average of 35.71 per participant,  $SD = 12.00$ ). They were coded in accordance with the key assumptions in Raskin (1985a), who postulates one or several semantic script oppositions with script overlap as the central component of humorous texts. At first, one coder added themes of the script oppositions to a growing inventory as the coding progressed. Later, these themes were consolidated into 21 groups as seemed meaningful. These groups are reported below. A second rater annotated 10 randomly selected field notes. The interrater reliability, as calculated with the algorithm used in Ekman, Friesen, and Hager (2002), was satisfactorily high at .81.

The results in the themes held few surprises. Our informal hypothesis—exemplified in the title of a chapter from Gernhardt (1988), “Dick, Stumble, Fart” [*Schwanz, Sturz, Furz*—was that most instances would involve sexual humor, *schadenfreude*, and bathroom humor. And indeed, the most frequent themes were: university life, sexuality, drugs and alcohol, sports, physical pain, romantic relationships, and food. Highly significant gender differences could be identified for the following themes: sports, alcohol and drugs, religion, police encounters, and hunting, which were more frequently reported by men. Only “family life” was reported significantly more frequently by women. Below are three examples of field notes used in this study of themes. The first line reports demographic details and the annotated theme, the remainder is the original field note itself, ending with the short reflection.

1) Student #9 (female, Caucasian, 18 years), field note #4, annotated theme: sexuality

*Kim, Aubrey, Ann-Marie, and I in Kim's room. Crystal bangs on door before she comes in.  
Kim – What were you doing? Humping the door?  
Crystal – Yeah, most wood I've gotten all week.*

*Wooden door.*

*I am starting to notice that my friends and family seem to have very sexual and sarcastic humor.*

(2) Student #17 (female, Caucasian, 18 years), field note #30, annotated theme: alcohol

*30. November 8*

*(Susie and Laura are sitting and gossiping)*

*Susie: Did you hear what happened to Brad this weekend?*

*Laura: What happened?*

*Susie: Brad got really drunk and could not get up the stairs. 3 people had to carry him.*

*Laura: (pulls back her hair) Look what else happened...*

*Susie: Hahaha! A hickey!*

*Laura: Yep, he gave one to me, Emily, and Sarah.*

*Susie: Damn. He had a good night.*

*Laura: haha*

*Susie was trying to gossip about Brad's crazy weekend. But, in reality, Laura knew more of what was going on than Susie did. Little did she know, Laura and several others had received hickeys from the drunken Brad.*

(3) Student #14 (female, African-American, 18 years), field note #19, annotated theme: sports

*11/7 5:05pm Dorm room*

*Ellen and I are talking about softball.*

*Ellen: The coach said I had the best swing on the team, it's just that I had no eye-hand coordination. He told me, "Ellen, if you could just hit the damn ball, you'd be great."*

*This is funny because it's almost sad that she was such a good player, she had all of the fundamentals down, but she couldn't make contact with the ball.*

These field notes also illustrate how students were able to focus on humor (Examples 1 and 3) and social relations as manifested in humor (Example 2 and 3), thus meeting one of the intended pedagogical outcomes of the course.

#### **4. Further implementations at TAMUC**

Two further iterations of the basic course design were implemented in 2014 and 2016 at Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC), the first closely aligned with the original design, the second more loosely. This section briefly introduces those courses, in order to illustrate the portability and expandability of the original course.

##### **4.1. Honors composition course**

In the fall of 2014, I taught another composition course at Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC), in Northeast Texas. While the type of school and general student population at TAMUC is very similar to that of the initial group of courses, the new course was for honors students. Honors students are assumed to have higher intrinsic motivation (Wimberley & Stasio, 2012), and the number of students per course is often restricted, to 15 in this case.

The general semester plan remained identical to that of the earlier course, centering on the microethnographic final project. I added a recent introduction to humor research, *Ha! The Science of When we Laugh and Why* (Weems, 2014), as an affordable textbook to replace most of the texts listed under Section 5.3. (except for Oring, 2003 and Raskin, 1985b). In retrospect, I do not recommend Weems (2014) for this kind of class, because it focuses on recent research results rather than fundamentals in humor research. It is also based heavily in psychology and neuroscience, Weems' fields of research, to the neglect of other perspectives, and it uses too much personal anecdotal evidence by the author. It also has some factual inaccuracies (cf. Platt & Ruch, 2015), although these were of no consequence for the composition classroom. Judging from experiences reported by Goodfleisch (2016) and my own readings, Morreall's (2009), *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* might provide a better affordable introductory text.<sup>3</sup>

As expected, the honors students fared better than non-honors freshmen in terms of grasping many of the complex issues that are needed to explain humor. The main tool—script theory as in the popularized form presented in Raskin (1985b) and applied in Dean (2000)—was easier for the honors student to grasp, and thus the focus could shift more quickly to further applications and the analysis of more types and instances of humor. The course had otherwise similar outcomes to those described above.

##### **4.2. Core course on humor in the humanities and the psychology of humor**

During spring 2016, I taught a third iteration of the course, as a sophomore-level, lecture-based core curriculum class called "Humor in the Humanities." The course was a required core curriculum course, and thus like the original composition course and like second language courses, motivation among students was anticipated to be a concern (Boyer, 1987). Additionally, many students with low likelihood of retention became participants in the course. This was because the course started "on flex terms," later in the semester, to "scoop up" students with financial aid issues or students with other reasons to join the semester with a delay, such as students on academic probation lifted only at the last minute. Thus, the hope was that the motivating effect of humor would again support students in the course.

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the introductory lectures for the TAMUC composition course could be adapted from course materials I had developed for participants of International Summer Schools for Research in Humour and Laughter ([www.humoursummerschool.org](http://www.humoursummerschool.org)) in the years 2003-2008 and 2013. The audience of these summer schools is sufficiently similar to the students in the class, as non-experts in humor research, but summer school participants are generally graduate students, sometimes established researchers, with solid knowledge in their fields and an initial interest in a thesis, dissertation, or a first project in humor research. They are also usually second-language speakers of English.

Goals for this class were largely different from the other implementations in that the course was designed to introduce students to major historical, social, psychological, and communicative concepts in the humanities, in this case as they manifest in humor. While mainly lecture-based, including guest lectures by experts in humor research, the course made extensive use of videos and other humorous media products. The course took the following trajectory:

- 1) Introduction: Humor and Laughter
- 2) Mechanisms of Incongruity I: Psychology of Humor
- 3) Mechanisms of Incongruity II: Humor and Cognitive Development
- 4) Mechanisms of Incongruity III: The "Logic" of Humor
- 5) World History of Humor
- 6) Universality and Diversity of Humor I: The English-Speaking World
- 7) Universality and Diversity of Humor II: Non-English Cultures
- 8) Midterm
- 9) Sociology of Humor
- 10) Conversational Humor: Gender and Power
- 11) Humor and Confrontation: Ethnic Humor
- 12) Conclusions and Wrap-up
- 13) Finals Week

While students in this course were assessed through traditional means of quizzes, short writing assignments, online discussions, and a midterm and final exam, rather than through extensive field work and writing, the course still required students to develop critical thinking habits, as they engaged in analyses and value judgments about the positive as well as negative aspects of humor, including their own. In addition to their course work, several students regularly sought discussion with the instructor after class and during office hours to informally discuss humor in terms of the class material as well as based on students' daily humorous interactions and media products they consumed.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, humor as an explicit topic in the classroom, particularly the first-language writing classroom, has been argued to facilitate students' participation and their learning outcomes. Materials and activities were presented, which could be adapted by teachers in the writing classroom and in writing-intensive classes in general. Based on research as to the parallels between first and second language writing, these materials could be extended into the second-language writing classroom, as well. Additionally, the tools presented in this paper would support students in general second-language classrooms, particularly in the study of L2 pragmatics. In sum, the uses of humor in the classroom presented here—not in the form of isolated jokes or humorous items injected at random into classroom materials, but as a focused topic of study and the explicit theme of readings and writings—aligns with research findings presented in Sections 1 and 2: that humor can provide students with intrinsic motivation, insight into the workings of language, and a window into human interaction in general.

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For the convenience of the reader, references used as course material are marked with an asterisk.

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## Appendix

### APPENDIX A1: ORIGINAL FIELD NOTES WRITING PROMPT

Start writing field notes on an event involving laughter. Take the examples and information from the handout as a guide. Make sure you include as much of any occurring dialogue as necessary into your notes, as well as anything else that may become relevant later. The trick is, of course, that you don't know yet what might become important. But that's why we're starting this early and practicing it. Take these field notes asap, put them into a notebook, keep them. Type them up later and add a short sentence or two of reflection to them: anything that comes to mind when you revisit the instance of laughter as you type it up. Note if the humor seems to be directed at one or more of the participants in the event. Note that it is not important if you or anyone detected humor in the situation, merely someone laughing qualifies it for your notebook. Please pseudonymize all participants, especially if you describe illegal acts, including yourself consistently. Keep a list of real names and pseudonyms with short descriptions of the persons for your own use, but never share it with anyone.

### APPENDIX A2: ORIGINAL CHARACTER STUDY WRITING PROMPT

Learning about humor tells us a lot about the people who use it, what they joke about, why they use it, and how they use it. It provides insights not only into the psyche of the individual, but also into the dynamics of whole communities. You have looked at the humor of a certain community for quite a while now, and you have collected many field notes about laughter events in that community and elsewhere. Previously in the semester you have read about humor, how it works, and what people use it for. And you have of course written a lot about it. In this project, you will bring these pieces together and write an analysis of the humor of the community that you observed. You have all the material that you need in the form of the field notes. These will form the appendix of your paper (start a new page, titled "Appendix" and include all your field notes in chronological order, number them). And you have done some of the analytic work already, either two character studies or one character study and a location study. Now it is time to bring these together and take the analysis further.

### APPENDIX A3: ORIGINAL LOCATION STUDY WRITING PROMPT

Some communities' humor is influenced or reflected by the location where you have observed them. Analyze how the location influences the people and their use of humor, the specific circumstances under which they meet, the way they get to the location, the activities they habitually do there. GSU, or more specifically your dorm, would be a good example of a location. If there is no specific location that has an influence on the humor of your community, you can do a detailed analysis of one of the events that you took field notes about. Pick a typical one, so that it can become a section in your paper. Give your audience all the details necessary (who, where, what) and then analyze: Who uses humor, who is the butt, is it typical for these people, what are similar events, if untypical what are events that contrast with it, how does the humor of this event reflect these people's character, how does it influence your feelings about them, why?

**Christian F. Hempelmann, Texas A&M University-Commerce**  
 c.hempelmann@tamuc.edu

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- EN** | **Christian F. “Kiki” Hempelmann** is an Assistant Professor of Computational Linguistics in the Department of Literature and Languages of Texas A&M University-Commerce. He has worked on humor from a multidisciplinary perspective for both his Master’s Degree and his Ph.D. on the phonosemantics of puns completed at Purdue University in 2003. Apart from concentrating on computational semantics and the linguistics of humor, he is a consultant and former Chief Scientific Officer and Director of Research in the search engine industry.
- ES** | **Christian F. “Kiki” Hempelmann** es profesor contratado de Lingüística Computacional en el Departamento de Literatura y Lenguas de Texas A&M University-Commerce. Ha trabajado el humor desde una perspectiva pluridisciplinaria, tanto en sus estudios de máster como de doctorado. Su tesis doctoral, finalizada en Purdue University en 2003, versó sobre la fonosemántica de los juegos de palabras. Aparte de centrarse en la semántica computacional y la lingüística del humor, se dedica a la consultoría y anteriormente trabajó como director científico y director de investigación en el sector de los motores de búsqueda en línea.
- IT** | **Christian F. “Kiki” Hempelmann** è Ricercatore di Linguistica Computazionale presso il Dipartimento di Letteratura e Lingue della Texas A&M University-Commerce. Ha trattato il tema del comico da una prospettiva multidisciplinare sia nei suoi studi per il Master, sia per il Dottorato sulla fonosemantica dei giochi di parole (*puns*) che ha completato presso la Purdue University nel 2003. Oltre ad occuparsi di semantica computazionale e di linguistica del comico è consulente e già direttore scientifico e direttore di ricerca nell’industria dei motori di ricerca.