
DEMOCRATIZING LAUGHTER

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According to John Banas and colleagues, the research on laughter in the classroom indicates that a classroom full of laughter increases learning.¹ In contrast, Plato argued that laughter is a vice and chastised those who would give in to it. Nonetheless, between the ancient concept of laughter as vice and the modern concept of laughter as learning tool, I explore a way in which laughter can be central to the learning experience in American classrooms; that is, the way laughter can help to shape a more democratic learning environment.

To begin, I draw on the work of John Morreall, the preeminent philosopher of humor and laughter, to briefly outline three common theories of laughter: The Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory, and the Relief Theory. Noting that a central weakness of these theories is the lack of attention paid to the embodied nature of laughter, I use Joris Vlieghe, Maarten Simons, and Jan Masschelein's essay "The Educational Meaning of Communal Laughter" to critique this weakness.² Employing a Foucauldian understanding of education as "leading out" or "disruptive," they argue that certain instances of communal laughter, a student pulling out a chair from beneath a professor³ is their example, can lead to a "radical democratic moment" where the professor takes advantage of the ways such laughter disrupts the hierarchical classroom and builds on this experience in order to create a more equal learning community.

While this seems beneficial, I argue that Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein's essay skirts the type of attitude needed for a teacher to take advantage of the "radical democratic moment" of communal, corporeal laughter. This skirting, I claim, can be addressed by using the ideas in Mordechai Gordon's essay "Learning to Laugh at Ourselves."⁴ Further, in their zest for hierarchical destruction, Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein miss an opportunity to discuss the complicated nature of the type of communal laughter

¹ John A. Banas, Norah Dunbar, Dariela Rodriguez, and Shr-Jie Liu. "A Review of Humor in Educational Settings: Four Decades of Research," *Communication Education* 60, no. 1 (2011): 115-144.

² Joris Vlieghe, Maarten Simons, and Jan Masschelein, "The Educational Meaning of Communal Laughter: On the Experience of Corporeal Democracy," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 6 (2010): 719-734.

³ I take Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein to be using "professor" in a general way to mean teacher, as opposed to one who teaches at the university level.

⁴ Mordechai Gordon, "Learning to Laugh at Ourselves: Humor, Self-Transcendence, and the Cultivation of Moral Virtues," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 6 (2010): 735-749.

they discuss. I argue that as democratizing as communal laughter can be, if one wants a democratic classroom filled with laughter, then one must address the dangers of laughter as well. However, to begin, let's begin at the beginning: with a caveat and ancient laughter theory.

LAUGHTER THEORY

A small caveat about laughter and humor before I launch in to the bulk of this essay. The theories on laughter I subsequently discuss examine the why of laughter in the sense of motivation as opposed to cause. Therefore, I won't be examining humor and its relation to laughter directly. I do use examples of humor such as jokes to make certain points, but an analysis of the relationship between humor and laughter is beyond the scope of this essay.

The most common theory of laughter and perhaps the oldest as well, is the Superiority Theory. This theory claims that why one laughs is due to feelings of superiority or sudden glory over the subject of the laughter. Plato claimed in his dialogue *Philebus* this reason as the cause of laughter, going so far as to argue in the *Republic* that the Guardians must not give into laughter too often, since it may incline them to violence.⁵ Thomas Hobbes gave perhaps the most well known formulation of this theory. In the *Leviathan* he states:

Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.⁶

Here Hobbes, like Plato, thinks of laughter as being evidence of a bad character, one produced by a vice such as cowardliness. We laugh at others to hide our own weakness, or because our weakness isn't as great as others. Morreall notes that while explaining some laughter, this theory falls short of explaining all laughter. Take for example Juanita, who loves playing practical jokes on her friend Pablo. One day when Pablo leaves for work, he finds a plastic rooster strapped to his car's hood. He finds this terribly amusing and laughs aloud. In instances like this, where the absurdity of a situation causes laughter, the Superiority Theory does not offer a good explanation as to why Pablo laughs.

The second theory of laughter, which is currently the dominant one, is the Incongruity Theory. The rooster-as-hood-ornament scenario is an example of this theory. Morreall explains the theory thusly:

⁵ Morreall notes this. John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 36.

The incongruity theory . . . [shifts] our focus from the emotional or feeling side of laughter to the cognitive or thinking side. While amusement for the superiority theory is primarily affective—it is self-glory or the feeling of triumph—for the incongruity theory amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way.⁷

While the Incongruity Theory does not deny feelings of superiority can exist in laughter situations, the cognitive side of laughter is primary. “The core meaning of ‘incongruity,’” according to Morreall, “in standard incongruity theories is that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations.”⁸ We react with laughter when something happens to upset that sequence. Of course, the incongruous does not always result in laughter; sometimes the situation makes us angry or frustrated.⁹

Perhaps the two most famous philosophical proponents of the Incongruity Theory are Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. Kant describes laughter as an emotive response to a situation (such as a joke) where what we expect doesn’t come to pass. He states:

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.*¹⁰

For Kant, while incongruity plays a central role, the release of emotion is also important, since it relieves us of the strain of our expectations dissolving into nothingness. However, the release of emotion is grounded on the recognition by the understanding of the absurd, in which its expectations are thwarted.

Schopenhauer disagreed with Kant, claiming that we laugh because something unexpected happens. Take the following popular children’s joke as an example, Q: What’s the largest pencil in the world? A: Pennsylvania. Here we see the expectation built of a discussion of a sizable pencil and its relation to other such sizable pencils. However, by employing a pun, the unexpected happens and the answer is given in the form of the name of a state. For Kant,

⁷ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 15.

⁸ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11.

⁹ Morreall notes that not addressing this fact is a “serious flaw in several older versions” of the Incongruity Theory. *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1892), pt. 1, div. 1, sec. 54, quoted in Morreall, *Philosophy of Laughter*, 47.

the reason we laugh is because there was no discussion of, say, the actual dimensions of the largest pencil in the world. However, for Schopenhauer, “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and the real laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.”¹¹

In spite of the fact that this seems like an accurate description of many laughter situations, Schopenhauer is wrong that this explanation accounts for laughter “in every case.” It’s certainly true that people laugh at others simply because they feel superior in some way. Or, just having come through a brush with death, they relieve the tension of the situation by laughing. This is not to deny that in some instances of superiority and relief that the laugher laughs also because of the incongruity of the situation, just that Schopenhauer is too quick to claim victory for the Incongruity Theory.

The last classic theory of laughter is the Relief Theory. The Relief Theory is a psychological theory (as opposed to purely cognitive or emotive) and argues that laughter is the release of nervous energy caused by the laughter situation. Sigmund Freud, the primary proponent of the psychic power premise, develops his version of this theory mainly in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, but continues to develop the theory in subsequent essays. Morreall describes Freud’s theory in this way:

The core of his theory is that in all laughter situations we save a certain quantity of psychic energy, energy that we have summoned for some psychic purpose but which turns out not to be needed, and this surplus energy is discharged in laughter. In joking . . . we save energy that is normally used to suppress forbidden feelings and thoughts; in reacting to the comic we save an expenditure of energy in thought; and in humor we save an expenditure of energy in emotion.¹²

Surely Freud is correct to an extent (especially concerning obscene or racist jokes). When we laugh at such jokes, “there is a release of psychic energy, not the energy of repressed feelings, but the energy that normally represses those feelings.”¹³ We release the energy typically needed to suppress such taboo thoughts and are able to participate in a moment of breaking social convention.

However, someone might object that this doesn’t hold for a certain class of jokes, such as the pencil joke told previously. There is no taboo being

¹¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 1, trans. R.B. Haldane and John Kemp, 6th ed. (London: Kegan Paul, 1907), bk. 1, sec. 13, quoted in Morreall, *Philosophy of Laughter*, 52.

¹² Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 27.

¹³ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 18.

broken, no forbidden fruit to be cut from the tree of good and evil. Freud's answer is that these are not jokes but jests, since they are neither obscene nor hostile.¹⁴ Freud describes three stages of humor development, with the second stage being where children create jokes that have some logical structure to them, but are usually silly. This is where jests originate. Freud admits that there is such a thing as adult jesting, but argues that the pleasure derived from such is of a different kind than jokes. As Morreall explains, "Lacking the hostile or sexual purpose that a joke has, the jest works on clever technique and not on content."¹⁵

For Freud, this building up and storing of psychic energy happens unconsciously. Some questions to ask, then, are what is this energy exactly? How would we measure it or even detect it in the first place? To quote Morreall, "The notion of psychic energy used to inhibit feelings, which can be released when it is not needed, is not at all familiar." It's a type of energy, "about which we have few or no intuitions."¹⁶ Further, the Relief Theory, at least by its name, indicates that we laugh not only to relieve the energy used to suppress the taboo, but to relieve all types of energy (or, more broadly, stress). That is, Freud's ideas on laughter are too focused on the taboo, and thus too narrow. Often people laugh, for instance, because they're embarrassed. The relief of pent up energy one would use to suppress other reactions such as frustration or anger, or simply to relieve the stress of such situations can explain instances of embarrassment.

All of this is to say that what Freud offers is, like the other two theories, incomplete. While the Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief theories accurately describe most laughter situations, they fail individually as comprehensive explanations. What is needed is a view of these three theories that understands them as interactive and overlapping, instead of competing with each other to offer *the* explanation of why people laugh. As an alternative to comprehensive theoretical explanations, a more fruitful approach is to consider each theory as a general category that explains various laughter situations. Arguably, this is a more accurate portrayal as to why people laugh, since ascribing a single motivating force to any action is rarely accurate. People act for multiple, often conflicting reasons, and laughter is no different.

Moreover, each category overlaps with the others, and a more robust explanation of why people laugh will often include more than one theory. So, for instance, Pablo might laugh at Juanita's practical joke mostly because of the

¹⁴ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 28. According to Morreall, Freud's use of the terms "obscene" and "hostile" is meant to cover more than just a dirty or racist joke. The obscene joke serves the purpose of exposure, while the hostile joke serves the purposes of aggressiveness, satire, or defensiveness.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

incongruity the situation, but also because Juanita's been down lately, and he's relieved to see her up to her old tricks.

However, there is one aspect of laughter none of these theories address, the physical act of laughing, and Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein's ideas help to rectify this through their treatment of laughter in the classroom and its democratic potential.

LAUGHTER IN THE CLASSROOM

Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein note a range of responses to classroom laughter, stating

As a rule laughter and education do not go well together. This is because the sphere of education is usually defined as a place of seriousness, discipline, and quasi sacred organized hierarchy. Roaring with laughter disturbs all this and should thus be fended off at any price. Laughter appears as a nuisance to be overcome.¹⁷

Certainly, personal experience confirms this. Some teachers allow laughter but seek to stem it after a little while, believing it to be a distraction from the serious business of learning. Others seek to quash laughter almost immediately, fearing the classroom will spiral out of control. Rhetorically then, what would happen if laughter were understood as a central part of the learning experience, instead of something to either be allowed or quashed?

First, let's admit that in most instances teachers enjoy and even promote a certain amount of laughter in the classroom, partly because it's a useful communication strategy and partly because it's unavoidable. When Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein note that laughter should be "fended off at any price," they are addressing the prevailing attitude within education that thinks of laughter as being incompatible with the serious endeavor of creating a proper learning environment. Laughter is fine to an extent, so the argument might go, but it's not something to be considered as an important part of what the classroom should look like; it's a luxury, not a necessity.

Everywhere and anywhere students laugh, and it is a distraction at times in the classroom. Laughter decreases time on task, those laughing distract others or cause them to laugh, and it can be difficult for a teacher to get a class back on track after a laughing episode. But in some sense, I ask: so what? Not to disregard the difficulty of teaching a distracted classroom, but to point out that part of the struggle in dealing with laughter in the classroom is looking at it as something to be "dealt" with, as opposed to something with democratic

¹⁷ Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein, "The Educational Meaning of Communal Laughter," 719.

potential. Contrapuntally, Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein argue for a different understanding of classroom laughter, claiming,

The fear and aversion to laughter in pedagogical contexts could be seen as an immunizing strategy toward [the] basic democratic dimension that education potentially bears....[I]n every pedagogical situation there are moments that allow for a sense of unconditional equality and community, that contradict all desire to stick to fixated identities and positions, and that therefore open the possibility of a different future.¹⁸

Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein make an important contribution to the pedagogy of laughter in focusing on the corporeal act of laughing, while treating the cause of laughter as secondary. They understand laughter both as inevitable and as something that potentially disrupts traditional classroom hierarchies in positive ways. They break with traditional theorists and theories of laughter, arguing the traditional theories don't take laughter seriously enough, since they treat the physical act of laughter with secondary importance.

All laughter is physical, but Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein explore communal laughter, where a group of people laughs at something in common, though what the group shares between them might be minimal at best. Communal laughter comes in various varieties, such as spontaneous outbursts, pointing and laughing, and the polite communal chuckle and headshake. Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein, "borrowing" from Georges Bataille, choose a challenging example to explore. They ask the reader to imagine a scenario where a student moves a chair out from underneath a teacher just as he's about to sit, thus causing him to tumble to the ground, while the class erupts in guffaws. Within traditional theories of laughter, this episode fits inside the Superiority Theory (as well as the Relief Theory), where the people laughing enjoy the sore bottom of the professor, mixed with a tinge of fear and excitement most experience when an authority figure is revealed as all-too-human. However, this only accounts for the why of the laughter, and not what they call the "radical democratic moment" of communal laughter. This community is democratic in the sense that, through the physical act of laughing, everyone is, in that moment, equal. Hierarchies are destructed or at least made meaningless, the social order is disturbed, and god in his heaven claps for joy. Further, they clarify that this type of experience is democratic "not in the strict institutional meaning of this word of course, but *in an experiential sense*. We feel a kind of equalizing bond against which we cannot argue, a community that exists solely as a result of undergoing the same experience."¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 721.

¹⁹ Ibid., 731-32.

Of course, in order for the moment to be truly democratic, the professor needs to join in as well. Instead of jumping up and handing out detentions, or acting as if nothing happened, Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein argue that the professor needs to recognize the democratizing potential of being made the butt of the joke and laugh along in order to make real the moment's democratic potential. Admittedly, it's difficult to laugh along with those who've wronged you, especially if they're younger and under your care. Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein implicitly acknowledge the difficulty in adopting this attitude by noting the training that most everyone receives, whether directly or indirectly, about proper classroom laughter etiquette: It's something to either be tolerated or quashed as noted. However, I argue, this seems shortsighted, especially considering the nature of Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein's desire to reconceptualize laughter, not just along corporeal lines, but also as something to be embraced as educationally productive. To just imply one needs an attitude adjustment in order to realize this revelation about laughter and education is problematic. In order to embrace the radical democratic moment created by the corporeal action of laughter, one needs to develop a certain sense of humor.

Mordechai Gordon describes one's sense of humor as "that capacity that enables us to identify ironical, cynical, sarcastic, witty, ludicrous, and generally funny expressions, comments, or actions."²⁰ Further, I argue one's sense of humor is more than what one finds funny; it is a stance toward the absurdity of life. One's sense of humor creates a reflective distance between oneself and the ways in which human experience seems arbitrary and contradictory.²¹ Of course, one's sense of humor is tied closely to one's sense of self, what one holds sacred, and what one finds funny, amusing, absurd, and so forth. But, like most things dealing with the self, one's sense of humor evolves, and one can actively work toward developing a more robust sense of humor. Robust here indicates not only one's ability to laugh at both the highbrow and the crude, but also one's attitude toward the absurdities one suffers. It's easy to laugh at others, to find their flaws funny and ridiculous. It's much harder to enjoy one's own flaws and find comfort in one's experience of the absurd, that is, to laugh at oneself. As Gordon argues, "Laughing at ourselves is very beneficial in that it promotes a critical attitude, helps us be more flexible and forgiving, and enables us to better cope both with the ordinary incongruities we encounter and the general absurdity of human existence."²²

Moreover, Gordon argues learning to laugh at oneself helps in the development of certain moral virtues, such as patience, humility, and open-

²⁰ Gordon, "Learning to Laugh at Ourselves," 737.

²¹ Gordon notes this as well.

²² *Ibid.*, 742.

mindedness. Gordon isn't claiming that a robust sense of humor guarantees such virtues; just that it helps in their development. These virtues and, more importantly I argue, a robust sense of humor, are the missing ingredients that are needed in order to take advantage of the radical democratic moment when a student pulls your chair out from under you, causing injury to both your coccyx and pride.

Let's assume that Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein recognize the force of my critique and adopt the necessity for the professor to develop a robust sense of humor in order to laugh along with his students. I still see a further problem with their arguments. It seems that for the sore-bottomed professor to take advantage of the democratic moment, ideally there would already need to be in place a democratic attitude in the classroom. Here I use democratic in a more traditional sense of the students having an equal voice, being respected as individuals, and so on. Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein recognize the fleeting nature of communal laughter, but don't acknowledge the difficulty present in their example. They claim the radical democratic moment of communal laughter occurs passively; it is something that happens to us in the moment when we are performing the physical act of laughing. In their sense, then, there is little the professor can do to create such a moment, but must act after the fact to build on its momentum. Without a more traditional democratic framework present, however, it's hard to imagine the professor capitalizing on such communal laughter to build a hierarchy-free classroom *ex nihilo*.

In their defense, Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein note,

When we concentrate on the content of this laughable event, we might perhaps conclude that this reaction [of the professor laughing along with his students] is improper and that we should try *not* to laugh with this kind of ill-mannered joke. At the same time, irrespective of the inappropriateness of the student's prank, there is a fair chance that we will actually burst out in laughter.²³

As mentioned previously, their concern isn't with the why of the laughter, but how the physical act of communal laughter possibly produces an "experience of *indisputable* democracy."²⁴

However, they pay short shrift to the harm caused by the student to both the professor and the cause of democracy in that classroom. Laughter comes with its own dangers, both to the powers that be, but also as a way to degrade those in the classroom. Even accepting their conception of the

²³ Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein, "The Educational Meaning of Communal Laughter," 730.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

educative nature of laughter as that which leads us away from what's comfortable, if such an experience cripples the opportunity for further democratic possibilities, then it's counterproductive. This is the challenging aspect of their example. On the one hand we have an action that seeks to breakdown traditional classroom roles by making a fool of the professor. And, on the other hand, we have an action that causes both mental and physical harm: an act of bullying. In the middle sits laughter, both the physical act and its cause.

For laughter to be educational, we need to pay attention to why the laughter happens just as much as the act of laughing itself. The three traditional theories of laughter help us grasp the various reasons people laugh, and help to determine when laughter should be encouraged. As mentioned, the students' prank is best explained by an overlap between the Superiority and Relief theories. The Incongruity Theory is there in the contradiction of a person in power appearing a fool, but its explanatory power seems relatively weak in comparison to the other theories. One interpretation of the prank is as a cry for the teacher to pay more attention to the voice of the students. Perhaps the teacher is overbearing, readily snapping at students for the smallest infraction and ignoring any suggestions about possible pedagogical and curricular improvements. The students are frustrated with feeling inferior, and so make a fool of the teacher in order to reassert their own importance and to bring the teacher down a peg. If the teacher wants to take advantage of this moment in order to reinvent the classroom in a more democratic way, he needs to address the reasons behind the prank, and the classic theories of laughter help to guide his thinking. This is not to claim that other things such as dialog, reflective listening, and the like aren't also necessary to get at the heart of the problem in the classroom that would lead to such a prank. But it is to argue that in instances where laughter is involved, a reflective practitioner can employ his or her understanding of these classical theories to reach the goal of a more democratic classroom, while at the same time recognizing the corporeal democracy of Vlieghe, Simons, and Masschelein and striving for a robust sense of humor à la Gordon.

In summary, for teachers to take advantage of these "radical democratic moments," they need to develop a robust sense of humor, have in place a framework in the classroom that allows them to exploit such moments, and pay attention to the cause of the communal laughter to determine whether the moment is actually ripe for capitalizing on democracy. Part of this happens when we stop seeing laughter as something to be "dealt with," and start accepting it both as inevitable and educationally valuable. Laughter is valuable in the ways it reveals to us the absurdity of our existence, and the ways it creates a reflective distance so we can better enjoy such absurdity. And through this reflective distance develop virtues of patience and open-mindedness. Laughter also creates community among those with little in common through the shared,

bodily experience of laughing. In the classroom, this can lead to teachable moments, an experience of utter equality, or a simple break from schoolwork to enjoy whatever is laughable at that moment. More than just a tool to increase learning, laughter is part of what it means to be human. That's right, if you don't laugh, you're not human.
