

Outside the Box and Then Even Further Outside – Into the World:  
Teaching American Literature and Performing Stand-Up Comedy  
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"Teachers need to keep a sense of play in teaching...teaching is an improviser's art."

Kenneth J. Eble

There is a long tradition of older comedians giving advice and informal tuition to less experienced acts...In other cases, it is not so much older comics giving advice to younger ones, as of comedians sharing knowledge among themselves on a more equal basis.

Oliver Double

It is almost certainly a mistake to assume that in the opening years of the twenty first century, teachers of American Literature will best serve their students by continuing to "teach" them the contextual, biographical, and textual intricacies of individual American texts. "Inside the box" there can be found the teaching professions' habits, traditions and inflexibility, as well as individual teacher's caution, dutifulness and fear. Also inside the box, in quite a prominent place, are such lauded scholarly qualities as formidable knowledge of a subject and/or of a period, or periods, and yet also intensive, textually specific preparation before a seminar, prior to dispensing knowledge to the students. Within the teaching profession, just as within the box, these ostensibly admirable customs, qualities and attitudes are perceived as admirable, even essential. I argue otherwise. There is almost no value at all for the American Literature student in copying down pages of textually-specific

notes delivered by teachers who believe they have a greater responsibility to the American literary canon than they do to their own students.

In what is often referred to as a global age, students of American literature will receive considerably more benefit from teaching that lies outside the box. The word "global" does not now immediately summon up, as it once did, geographical images; actually, our Western images are completely opposed to the natural, primeval specificity of "geography." Technology, especially email and the internet, dominate *our* understanding of the word global. We know that anybody, anywhere, with internet access, can receive information from Google, or Wikipedia on any subject in the world. The most important implication of this for the teaching of American Literature is that in a culture where knowledge can be instantaneously accessed, knowledge transmission pedagogy serves little purpose; at least, not for the student. Teaching that lies outside the box could be a pedagogy that persuades some teachers of American Literature to reappraise the value to their students of what currently amounts to a hermetic valorising of specific American texts. Such teaching also rejects extravagant, exhausting and unnecessary preparation by teachers before classes, in favour of spontaneity and flexibility *during* the class. Teaching outside the box means resisting the urge to prioritise the American literary canon above the needs of students; whatever books are taught the teacher's objective should be to *use* them to help students learn about issues that the set texts exemplify. The teacher should lead the discussion in such a way as to transcend the specificity of any text, not focus on its uniqueness, and not treat individual texts, no matter how canonical, as ends in themselves.

Kenneth J. Eble writes: "Professors do not need to court media popularity, but they can learn from the performing arts" (13), and I argue here for the desirability of teachers learning specifically from stand-up comedians. For exactly half the twenty years that I have been an academic, I have also worked throughout Great Britain, and also in

France and Spain, as a stand-up comedian. Despite the chronological symmetry, I have opposed attitudes and indeed objectives as a teacher and a comedian. As a comedian I want to make myself indispensable to an audience. I want the crowd to demand that I be installed as the MC so they can see me every week, but as a teacher my goal is to make myself redundant to the students before the end of every course. What struck me first about performing stand-up comedy was that although it was much harder than I had ever realized to be professionally funny, as an objective it was refreshingly clear: my job was to make people laugh. If they laughed I was doing a good job; if they didn't laugh, I wasn't. Naturally, I compared that purity of purpose with what I realized was the indefinable, never articulated (at least certainly not to me) imperatives of the seminar. The comedian's job is to make people laugh. However, on a course entitled, say, "The American Short Story," in a class discussing Raymond Carver's "Fat," what, exactly, is the teacher's job?

My attitude to students and my teaching approach in the seminar room changed as soon as I began performing stand-up comedy. For the first time I saw students not as people who had to be there, but as an *audience*, as people who could be working, or travelling, instead of attending University, and, more specifically, my American Literature seminars. It is not uncommon to hear academics referring to teaching as a performance – what is uncommon is to encounter any further analysis of what *kind* of performance it is. I am aware that the moment a teacher uses words such as "audience" and "performance," battle lines are drawn. Some teachers agree, to more or less a degree that there is a performance element, at the very least, to teaching, but others see only cringe-worthy images of desperate and misguided teachers dumbing down their subject by quoting Eminem lyrics to embarrassing and pointless effect. Elaine Showalter observes that "many teachers feel anxiety about the very idea of performance, which strikes them as cheap, hammy and anti-intellectual" (15). It is likely that what most teachers mean, particularly younger ones, when

they refer to themselves as performers is that they perceive themselves as actors, pretending to be more knowledgeable than they actually believe themselves to be. But this is a mistake - teachers are *not* actors; they *are* knowledgeable.

For many teachers the word performance has intimations of pretence within it. There are, no doubt, large numbers of teachers who would empathise with this observation by the English stand-up comedian and author Alexi Sayle: "One of the comedian's tricks is to pretend to be much more erudite than you are. Lenny Bruce used to do that all the time" (Double 135). There is, of course, another type of academic 'performance', more sophisticated and self-aware, neatly summarised by Jody Norton in a provocative discussion of guerrilla pedagogy: "The initial point of guerrilla pedagogy is to split the traditionally univocal interpretive authority of the instructor in two. The authority of each pole of this dyad is further decentred by the open practice of illusion: Judy's and my interpretive positions do not represent the 'truth' for either of us, but comprise a *critical method-acting*" (140, my emphasis). However, I want to suggest that if academics are indeed performers then the one branch of performance they are actually connected to most closely is stand-up comedy: *only the teacher and the stand-up comedian rely on the continuous interaction between themselves and the people in front of them*. The difference between all other performers (dancers, actors, musicians...) and then teachers and comedians is that we require the people in front of us to also perform. For the seminar to work, to be considered a success, I need the students to contribute, to actually impose themselves and their views so that they help shape the dynamic and the direction of the seminar; just as good stand-up comedians will always interact with the particular audience in front of them. In this, we teachers and comedians are together all alone. No actor or dancer, when they walk out on stage, wants to see the audience declaiming their own soliloquies or performing their own pirouettes.

Elaine Showalter cites Camille Paglia on the relationship between stand-up comedy and university teaching:

In her memoir of her Birmingham professor Milton Kessler, Paglia describes him as a master teacher: "With the improvisation of great Jewish comedians like Lenny Bruce, Kessler would weave in and out of the class his own passing thoughts, reminiscences, disasters." Paglia and Kessler are not the only teachers to mention stand-up comedy as a model. "The basic equipment for a classroom teacher is the same as for a stand-up comedian", writes Lionel Basney (Calvin College); "a striking voice, a direct gaze, and the inner freedom to say more or less anything that comes to mind." (33)

Showalter's personal reservation about this connection centres on the emphasis placed on the charisma of the teacher: "Teaching that is like stand-up comedy or postmodern performance art is seductive and exhilarating, but it can be very difficult to carry off. Not everyone can be a Paglia or a Kessler, nor do they need to be" (33). Nevertheless, many comedians, for example, Bill Hicks, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Jeremy Hardy, Brendan Burns, Robert Newman and Mark Thomas were, and are, clearly motivated by a desire to teach their audiences; reciprocally; then, teachers can sometimes use comedians' *techniques* to help their students to learn; they do not have to constantly perform as stand-up comedians themselves. Stand-up comedy has influenced my teaching in three principal ways: Performance, Preparation, and Curriculum Design. In order to keep students engaged and learning I employ some techniques and strategies borrowed from the stand-up comedy circuit, only some of which I have the space to mention here; secondly, I have learned that too much preparation before a comedy performance rarely benefits the audience, and that too much preparation before a class rarely benefits the students, although it can protect the teacher. Thirdly, the ideology of stand-up comedy has influenced my thinking on such

issues as the syllabus, bibliographies and curriculum design. Although I am a stand-up comedian, or perhaps because I am a stand-up comedian, I have no interest here in the subject of comedy itself. All teachers know that a sense of humour can be invaluable when they are in front of a class, but there are other aspects of stand-up comedy which I wish to suggest are worth the attention of teachers of American Literature.

I very rarely tell jokes in seminars. When I do, I have an agenda that goes beyond getting a laugh from the students. For example, in a class on Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* I focus on the episode where Natty has to temporarily abandon Alice and Cora and leaps into the waterfall to escape Magua. I quote Natty's plea to the young women, "Stay alive, I will find you." At this point, I tell the students, at the time the novel is set, 1757, America had not yet been divided into states; it had a landmass exceeding three million square miles: "Stay alive, I will find you." A few pages later, of course, he does, "but last Saturday," I tell the students, "I couldn't find my wife in Wal Mart." This joke serves several functions: it reminds, or actually informs, the students the book is an historical novel (so raising issues about genre), it dramatizes for students living in England and studying American Literature the enormous size of America, it mocks my temporary authority as their teacher and turns me into a man who cannot follow simple domestic instructions, and, perhaps most importantly, it demonstrates to the students that studying nineteenth-century American Literature at university does not have to be a relentlessly solemn enterprise.

### **Techniques**

Prior to performing stand-up comedy I had been content to *teach* students, but, I see now, I had at that time no interest in helping them to *learn*. It was only after performing stand-up that I saw my job as a teacher was not to inform, or instruct, the students; the most valuable part of their learning was not in the passive receipt of the material I had

been unthinkingly offering them, but in their engagement with it, and with me. In *Theory and Resistance in Education*, Henry Giroux writes:

The active nature of students' participation in the learning process must be stressed. This means that transmission modes of pedagogy must be replaced by classroom social relations in which students are able to challenge, engage, and question the form and substance of the learning process. Hence, classroom relations must be structured to give students the opportunity to both produce as well as criticize classroom meanings...a critical pedagogy must provide the conditions that give students the opportunity to speak with their own voices. (202-3)

I became committed to encouraging continuous student response, and to frustrating or blocking any of their attempts to sit in a seminar as passive consumers who were receiving an education.

Although the stand-up comedian and academic Oliver Double correctly observes that, paradoxically, not all stand-up comedians *do* stand-up during their performances, and offers as examples such well known American acts as Shelley Berman and Dick Gregory, and, in the United Kingdom, Dave Allen and Daniel Kitson (42), most stand-up comedians do, in fact, stand-up. Since I started performing it I have never sat down while teaching a seminar. I not only 'stand up', I move continuously throughout the seminar, forcing the students to remain alert. More usefully though, when standing and moving about it is harder to work from a lesson plan; this forces the teacher to be more spontaneous and flexible. One of the principal reasons comedy clubs are so popular (and it is worth noting that students are the single biggest audience for live comedy in Great Britain) is that the interaction with the audience that is fundamental to live comedy means the audience know the night is unique; unlike a film, or play, or recital, it can never be done in the same way again, even if all the performers were on the same bill on another night. Students value something

similar in a seminar. They don't want to see all their teachers always sitting at a desk, always working from a lesson plan; when they do see this, students come to the unflattering conclusion that last year and the year before, the same issues were discussed in the same order, irrespective of who was in the class. There is no space here for the students to believe that the teacher is there to teach *them*, uniquely; instead the students understandably believe that only texts will be taught, not people. There is no reason why a seminar cannot be an event for the students, something memorable and unrepeatable. I never have a lesson plan but I do have a very broad, yet perfectly sufficient, agenda. While encouraging the students' comments, I always stay alert for an opportunity to introduce the handful of issues that determined the text's presence on the course, but then these issues are seen to emerge organically – not perceived to have been imposed by me upon the students. For example, if the set text was *The Great Gatsby* I would do no more preparation for the class than remind myself why I wanted the students to read it, then write down three or four reminders to myself: American Romanticism, The Jazz Age, Fitzgerald's extravagant rhetoric, the book's title. Each one of these issues opens out into a much bigger issue, or set of issues; to take one example, the last – is the title ironic? Is, say, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* also an ironic title? Is Hemingway's *Fiesta*? What other novels can they think of which are ironically titled? Why would an author give a book an ironic title? If the set text was as historically important as, for example, *The Scarlet Letter*, I might reduce my issues to just two: American Puritanism and allegory. The advantage of working with the students in such a broad way is to lessen preparation for the teacher and, more importantly, it allows the seminars to function as opportunities to address issues that transcend the specificity of an individual text.

I learned from performing stand-up and watching talented comedians what I now think of as omission strategies. When I started, I left nothing for the audience to fill in for themselves, because even



though I believed I was focused on them, in reality I was not thinking about them at all; what I really cared about was how they responded to *me*. This, I later discovered, is a remarkably similar experience to one Jane Tompkins had regarding her teaching: "I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me" (119). In my case, if my audience anticipated a punch line and laughed, I should have stopped there: they would have been flattered by their ability to anticipate it, while I would actually have received a big laugh without saying anything. But I would ruin it by thinking (actually, not thinking) that I had to say the punch line, and I would get back, at best, a muted, anti-climactic laugh. If someone heckled me and got a big laugh I was not confident enough to acknowledge the wit gracefully and give him the laugh, perhaps even asking for a round of applause; instead I always had to have the last word; again, my reward was usually, and quite rightly, unenthusiastic. Eventually I learned that not saying something, not doing something, both on stage and in a seminar, are not necessarily derelictions of duty – instead they can be the result of experience and discipline.

It is frightening for comedians when they walk on stage for the first time knowing they have not prepared their set meticulously in advance. But professional comedians do not learn their material and then always deliver it in that exact order, irrespective of the actual circumstances on the night. As the English stand-up comedian Dave Gorman points out: "What you do isn't *say those words in that order*; it's play the audience" (Double 107). Professional stand-up comedians are constantly developing performance qualities such as spontaneity of thought and flexibility of response; these aspects of their job are no less important to them than the writing of new material. Many teachers, however, are far more concerned with constantly adding to their material than they are in thinking about the manner in which this material is going to be offered to their students. However, just as

comedians can move material around in the set, or drop it completely, replacing it with something more appropriate, depending on the response they are getting, so too teachers should be able to shift their material, or drop it, depending on the response of their students. Often, though, teachers lack flexibility or spontaneity in their teaching, and this is only to be expected. While academics like to see themselves as bolder, livelier; as the swashbuckling, unconventional members of the professional classes, this is largely unfounded. Academics can be as cautious as solicitors and as niggardly as accountants, and this is not surprising.

The entry level requirement now, in the United Kingdom and in America, for our profession is a Ph.D. Carl Woodring writes: "Emphasis on research has promoted the overemphasis on the Ph.D degree as the only acceptable qualification for permanence as a college teacher; reductions in course loads go to Ph.D's as productive researchers" (103). As a direct result of the profession's obsession with research, caution is the cardinal virtue in academe. This caution, of course, is entirely appropriate for academic research: footnotes, sources, references; phrases like "it is possible to suggest," and "it is not unreasonable to assume" are inevitable and necessary. But this professional caution is not necessarily an advantage in the seminar; in fact, it is quite the opposite, particularly with respect to preparation. Many academics only manage to combine research with teaching, two completely opposed practices, by making sure that before they go out there, they are thoroughly well prepared; often, in fact, far too well prepared to be of any service to their students. Nor are students particularly helped by those teachers who obviously begrudge teaching as time taken away from their research, and who introduce as much of this research as possible into undergraduate seminars. Wayne Booth observes: "My own worst teaching has often been about those subjects on which I consider myself most expert. The novel that I have taught most ineptly, the one that I now refuse to teach, is one I did my

dissertation on, *Tristram Shandy*. I just know too much about it – and I try to stuff it all in at once" (Showalter 46).

Some teachers are relentlessly, oppressively, spirit crushing too well prepared for seminars. Some just read their script; hours and hours of diligent work must have gone into writing it; they avoid looking at students because they do not want to be asked a question they cannot answer, and the seminar is rigid and unaccommodating for the students. This is the extreme result of the teacher following too rigidly schematic a lesson plan, written as though the whole point of the seminar is what the teacher says, not the students. Academics take for granted that the more they know about a subject, the better they can teach it. However, many teachers also talk of how one of their most memorable seminars was on a subject they felt under-prepared to discuss. Teachers usually attribute this very common experience to the energy generated by the new; they were not, as is often the case, bored with a text they had taught for years, the class went well because the teacher was energised by novelty. Larry Danson says: "When I think of the best classes I've taught, I always think of classes I taught a long time ago, when I was dealing with material that was fresh to me. And I shared a sense of excitement in being, quite literally, one step ahead of the students" (Showalter 45).

But it is possible to suggest that, really, such classes go well because of the teacher's lack of specific textual knowledge and subsequent inability to impose themselves on the discussion. The seminar cannot be a space for the teacher to tell the students everything he or she knows about the text, so the students are forced into active engagement. The students' understanding of the subject, the aspects of it that they found interesting, incomprehensible, sentimental...not those the teacher believes are important, now become the substance of the seminar. Additionally, when the teacher is unable to speak confidently about the text, the students are likely to raise broader, wider, deeper issues; these are more interesting and more useful to them than the minutiae of a specific literary text, to

which teachers will insist on dragging them back. I am in favour of using ignorance of a text as a deliberate teaching strategy. Knowledge is the point of teachers; as a profession we find it difficult to imagine that our ignorance could ever be beneficial to the student. But sometimes the less we know, particularly about a specific text, the more the students might learn. It can be very productive for students if their teachers are disciplined enough to do no preparation at all for a class. William McKeachie writes, "What is important is learning, not teaching. Teaching effectiveness depends not on what the teacher does, but rather on what the student does. Teaching involves listening as much as talking" (Showalter 36).

However, academics hate waste, especially of their own efforts – if they have spent hours preparing for a class on, say, the *Grapes of Wrath*, then the students will certainly be the recipients of all that preparation. The teacher will talk; the students will listen. Such teachers do not seem to apprehend the illogicality here: their students are listening to the results of a highly labour intensive, professional practice called seminar preparation, but they are listening to this preparation *during* the actual seminar, even though the very word preparation, in virtually all contexts, establishes an emphatic separation from the more important activity which follows it. Some teachers are so cautious, in fact, that, appearances to the contrary, they never actually teach at all – preparation for teaching, rather than teaching itself, has become the more important of the two acts; indeed, so important that preparation *for* teaching is offered to the students as if it were the very act of teaching itself. Oliver Double writes that a very large number of professional comedians "realize that, with experience, preparation becomes unnecessary, even counterproductive...the fact that comedians can reduce the amount of preparation they do and still perform as effectively (or possibly even better) when they are faced with an audience, is a testament to the skills they have acquired" (256). Many teachers would benefit from acquiring similar skills, as would their students.

It is not necessarily the case that teachers prepare far too much for seminars for the sake of their students; it is just as likely that this excessive preparation is done to protect themselves *from* their students. Obviously, extensive preparation has an understandable appeal for academics: it seems the right thing to do, thus appealing to the dutiful; and it also seems to offer protection from being exposed as a fraud, so also appealing to the cautious. This neat economy of purpose is hard to resist. But it is worth resisting. When a comedian who regularly performs 20-40-60 minute sets does a 10 minute spot, the extra material is there in every aspect of the performance, except the actual utterance. Academics, too, have years of reading and writing behind them when they go into seminars, and, if this is self-acknowledged, the textually specific preparation can be kept to a minimum. All academics, even the very newest, know much more than they give themselves credit for: if they could move away from the notion that the point of the class is to teach the students everything they can about *The Awakening*, or "Benito Cereno" or "The Red Wheelbarrow," the preparation need take no more time than a brief reminder to themselves of why the text is on the course. Academics do not need any more *knowledge* to be good teachers; what many teachers need to do is re-appraise the value to their students of knowledge-based teaching, and then cultivate such performative qualities as flexibility and spontaneity. Of course, such cultivation is not easy, especially for academics. Steven Jacobi, an academic who performed stand-up comedy on the open mic circuit in London for several months, eventually realized the enormous importance of flexibility and spontaneity to the stand-up comedian and writes: "'Living in the moment' was, of course, precisely what I was brought up, educated, trained and conditioned *not* to do. Anything but. Generally speaking, I avoided the moment and often took great pains to do so" (91). Academics are often needlessly nervous about abandoning their script to engage directly with their students, choosing, as the safer option, knowledge transmission. However, teachers are not in the

seminar room to teach texts; their job is to teach students. Larry Danson observes of teaching: "Being in the now, present, at this moment, thinking out loud, rather than being bound to overwhelming notes, is absolutely essential" (Showalter 17). Similarly, the English writer and stand-up comedian Tony Allen writes:

There's no getting away from it. The secret of comedy is good timing. Unfortunately, it's not a technique that can be learned in front of the bathroom mirror; it's an intuitive state of grace that has to be discovered, an elusive abstract lubricant that exists in the eternal now and can only be found by taking risks and playing around with a live audience. (19)

Many students leave university without finishing their studies because they are victims of Western culture's powerful and persuasive assertion that education is always a positive and productive accumulation, an uncomplicated acquisition of knowledge which involves benevolent guides leading them effortlessly from ignorance to revelation. This is deeply misleading, and even actively untrue. Learning, in any meaningful sense of the word, can be difficult, demanding and unrewarding for the student; indeed, for anybody. It can be chaotic and painful, not at all enjoyable and reassuring. The seminar room should not be painless either. I do not think seminars should be cosy or friendly – on the contrary, I try to incorporate the slightly adversarial atmosphere of the comedy club, itself based on an essential anonymity, into the seminar. I always start with questions. The very first question I ask students on my course *The History, Theory and Performance of Stand-Up Comedy*, is "Why is 'stand-up' hyphenated?" I want them to work from the start. I do not want them relaxed, or cosy. I want them working, thinking, even a little uneasy. They need to know from the beginning that this is an interactive process. When we talk of keeping students engaged in higher education, we insist on seeing this engagement as always enthralling

and enjoyable for the student. But engagement and even enjoyment are not always accompanied by smiles. It is a common mistake to assume that all stand-up comedians are only interested in getting a laugh, all the time. Many of the most highly respected acts on the contemporary British and American live comedy circuit are renowned for provoking audiences, for irritating them, for insulting them, for, basically, forcing them to think, quite as much as they are for making audiences laugh. Double writes, "Some of the best comedians don't just use their tricks of sharing and rapport to get laughs and keep the lurking hostility at bay, they also use them to challenge some of the audience's most basic assumptions" (138). Similarly, if I have to provoke or irritate my students to get them to think for themselves, I am happy to do it. Jody Norton writes of the value in promoting discord among students: "Discursive conflict can be intellectually and emotionally challenging, and can produce more complex understandings, not just of texts, but of worlds and selves. With sensitive facilitation, it can be made relatively safe" (141).

When the English political comic Mark Thomas comes on stage he is likely to begin by asking a series of questions, such as "Who is the President of the World Bank?" He has the discipline and the confidence to let the silences build, so that the audience is forced to recognize its collective ignorance. Then, he begins. At times, depending on the circumstances, I do this in the seminar. I know the likelihood of any of them having read any seminal American texts that I have not made compulsory reading is remote but to work from this assumption seems a wasted opportunity. So I ask them, "Who has read Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams*?" Long pause, much fidgeting and eye avoidance..."Well, what about Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*? Has anybody read that?" Just as Mark Thomas does, I let the silences build. Sometimes, I want the students to feel poorly read. I want them to realize that they should be working harder. Obviously, exhortation and encouragement have their place in a seminar, but so too do excoriation and exasperation. Double writes of

a Mark Thomas performance: "When I saw the show in Canterbury, the people pouring out of the theatre at the end looked subdued and shaken" (230). Subdued and shaken – after a stand-up comedy performance! At least occasionally, why don't teachers aim for the same response from their students after a seminar? Teachers are often far too willing to believe that the learning experience for students should only ever be optimistic and pleasurable; on this issue teachers are actually culpable; we have voluntarily colluded with a myth central to the economic and social ideologies of both America and the UK, a myth, moreover, which we know as individual teachers and as a profession is completely untrue – that learning is never painful.

Comedians are notorious for deceiving their audiences, for tricking them and then betraying them. Double recounts an audience's response to the opening of the Iranian comic Omid Djalli's stand-up set: "The audience realise that they've been had" (72). I also lay traps for my students. For example, I might elicit enthusiasm from them for a passage in a book, or sometimes, as in the case of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, for the entire novel. In this latter case, I deliberately give the impression that I agree with their far too hasty endorsements of it as moving; I smile along when they naively describe it as a book about real people and so forth. Then, when we all seem to be in sunny agreement, I betray them. I suggest to them that they like *The Jungle* because it is unambiguous propaganda; its attraction for them actually lies in its implacable resistance to conflicting interpretations, unlike, say, *The Age of Innocence*, which precedes it on my twentieth-century American Literature course and about which they are usually much less enthusiastic. I further suggest to them they have not thought to interrogate *The Jungle's* preposterous sentimentality, or its ludicrous anthropomorphism, or its hysterical and strident critique of capitalism – the enjoyment they received from reading the novel was, actually, a complete surrender to its numerous flaws. Each one of my criticisms raises issues that transcend the specificities of Sinclair's novel and provide the grounding for a wider-ranging discussion. Similarly, I



pretend to agree with their objections to, say, the way whales are killed just for money in *Moby-Dick*, or the cultural approbation awarded to bull-fighting in Hemingway's *Fiesta*, having myself encouraged these criticisms in the first place, and then, as the atmosphere of communal self-righteousness peaks, I invite them to reconsider their anachronistic sentimentality. Inevitably, some students are aggrieved; it all seems somehow unfair to them. But discontent of this kind, irritation, and even anger, are all valid forms of engagement, and I remain unrepentant. Students who are sufficiently involved to become disgruntled at such strategies always come back. Usually, students leave a course because they are not connected to it; then they leave without anger or drama of any kind – they just stop attending.

In *Teaching Large Classes in Higher Education*, Andrew Wood and Alan Jenkins cite a lecturer's response to a questionnaire: "Teaching is about relationships...Large numbers plus one-term modules mean staff hardly get to know most students and vice versa. Construction of any sort of relationship, *the basis of best teaching*, is therefore impossible" (30) (my emphasis). Strikingly, no evidence is offered to support the phrase "*the basis of best teaching*." Nor is any offered for this statement which immediately succeeds it: "A two-way problem between students and staff is getting to know each other and developing a rapport" (30). I do not accept that this is in any way a problem. Perhaps relationships and rapport with students are not 'the basis of best teaching'; they may well be hostile to it. I often wonder what teachers in higher education, particularly those teaching in the Humanities, think they are teaching their students that requires a relationship with individual students. Certainly a smaller group is easier for the teacher to dominate than a larger group, but just as comedians invariably prefer a large audience to a small one, I reject the pervasive belief in the teaching profession that smaller classes are 'better' than larger classes. A small audience in a comedy club is much more difficult to make laugh than a larger audience; this is primarily because the smaller audience is self-conscious about laughing when they are so

few. Although it is widely believed among teachers that students are less afraid to speak in a small group nobody can be sure that these students are saying what they are *thinking* in the smaller group. Most experienced teachers are aware that there is often a great deal of conformity in smaller groups; it is easier to see where the most powerful factions, or individuals, are in them. Furthermore, bullying and sabotage can occur in small groups and particularly affect those who disagree or who are different. However, when the class is student-centred then the more students who are present in the seminar, the more responses, questions, and objections (heckles) the teacher can incorporate into the discussion, just as in stand-up comedy, the larger the audience the less self-conscious the individuals within it will be, and the more laughter the comedian will usually receive.

Double writes of an important stand-up technique:

Voicing the audience's thoughts is a common technique and it's useful in various ways. It allows comedians to anticipate and neutralise any potential bad reactions to what they're saying...Also, by showing that the comedian understands how the audience might be reacting, he or she demonstrates control of the situation, as well as strengthening the rapport between stage and auditorium. (225)

This technique can also be very useful in the seminar. For example, I might ask a group who had already demonstrated a reluctance to engage with me a very general, unstructured question such as, "So, what did you think of *The Age of Innocence*?" Long pause, much shoe gazing and coughing. "OK, I know what you're thinking. I know. Lots of improbably named, upper class characters not doing very much for several hundred pages. Am I right?" If they agree, I now, immediately, have something to work with; something, moreover, which they have been manipulated into owning. If anybody in the group does not agree, I will have even more to work with, and, as a bonus, depending on how

tactfully and supportively I deal with this resistance, the group will have been encouraged as a whole to realize that agreement with their teacher is not at all the point of the seminar.

There is an increasing tendency in Higher Education in the UK to confuse, or conflate, words like helping, supporting, assisting, caring, and teaching. However, teaching and helping, to take only two words, are not synonyms, and a "culture of care" which lacks the rigour to separate the two is in trouble, and in need of help itself. Helping is actually more often than not, a hindrance to teaching. When I give out essay questions to students I utilise another "omission strategy" and tell my students I will not be giving them bibliographies. Naturally, they are upset, of course they complain; they know perfectly well this means a lot more work for them, and they are used to teachers doing much of their work for them. It is possible that some teachers, particularly in the Humanities, never really consider student learning occurring in any other form than that of reading a book the teacher has set, or hearing the same teacher speak. But perhaps some lessons do most good in the absence of the teacher, when students experience them in a visual and tactile form, in essence, dramatically. Teachers should ask themselves this question: Why am I able to write a bibliography for the students? It is true that most of our students will not become teachers, but my view is that as much as possible of what we teach needs to be explained as having value that transcends the specificity of the texts set for study, and of the single task itself. If, for example, a student is thinking of answering an essay question such as "Discuss the importance of landscape in any two American novels written between the wars," what the student wants is to be given a list which contains the titles of several books that would be useful, the names of the authors, and even exactly where to find them on the shelves (I have seen bibliographies with accession numbers next to the individual texts). If this is indeed what students are given, naturally they go directly to the texts on their list and so ignore all those other hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other books on the shelves. This is to do the

student a disservice. Students of American Literature can learn an enormous amount about their subject if they browse through the library stacks; among other things, they could certainly discover for themselves, rather than being told, the composition of the American literary canon.

When I was an undergraduate, having just started a course in American Literature, I was aware of the major modern American writers: Wharton, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Heller, Roth...I was, therefore, extremely surprised when I was browsing through the library stacks and noticed that more critical books had been written on the work of an author of whom I had never heard than had been published on Fitzgerald's writings. I immediately borrowed one of the author's books (the smallest one) and when, several years later, I got my first job teaching American Literature, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* was the first book I emphatically placed on the contemporary literature syllabus, where it still remains. If a teacher had told me that Pynchon's work had attracted an unusual amount of critical attention I very much doubt I would have taken much notice, but to see this critical interest, dramatically displayed on the library shelves, had a powerful, dramatic impact on me. Moreover, Pynchon was *my* discovery, and I appreciated his writing all the more for that.

If the teacher refuses to help the students by not giving them a bibliography, the students are forced into scrutinising the library stacks and so they begin to learn – away from the teacher. It is possible, for example, that desperate students looking for critical texts which might be helpful for the 'nature' question, and having no knowledge about American Literature at all, could take down off the shelf a book entitled *The Jewish American Novel*. Of course, they would find nothing in it of any immediate use to them, but by the time they discovered this they would have learned that Jewish American writers rarely set their work outside the biggest of America's cities. What students are learning, particularly, during this process is how to choose, evaluate, discriminate, compare, and select; learning more all the time, no matter

how anarchically or promiscuously, about American Literature. Moreover, they can learn a lot more. In the absence of specific secondary criticism, they could try writing an essay without support, offering a close reading of the texts, with suitable cross referencing to other primary texts. Or, they could turn to another discipline entirely, Sociology, for example, or Anthropology, or Theology. Or, in such desperate circumstances, students of American Literature can even be persuaded to love literary theory; they can be persuaded if their teacher refuses to give them a list of secondary reading but then points out that the great strength of literary theory lies precisely in its universal applicability. By refusing to provide the help they are used to receiving, students can be manoeuvred into a situation where they see theory, not as boring beyond belief, or far too intellectually demanding for them, but as their saviour. Persuasion does not always work with students; rougher tools may be required, such as a refusal to 'help' them, which really means to give them what they want; it is, however, truly helpful to their learning to deliberately put obstacles in the direction they conventionally take. When a teacher gives a student a bibliography all that has usually been achieved is that the student starts doing a job they will probably do poorly, quicker. What is useful to students, and they do see this, is being forced to think about different ways of doing something; they then have to think about alternative ways of working and so they develop skills such as resourcefulness and flexibility; skills which will have life-long value for them, and which go well beyond the limited learning they will receive from writing an essay on – well, any subject.

### **Curriculum Design**

Until recently, during my twelve week nineteenth-century American Literature course, my colleague and I taught a four week option each; she offered "American Romance" and I offered "Slave Narratives." Then, in another of my classes, The History, Theory and Performance

of Stand-Up Comedy," I discussed the comic "rule of three" with students, suggesting that the reason it is always three people who go into a bar: an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman, for example, is that three is the most economical number for this type of joke. One person's behaviour could be idiosyncratic, but two set up a pattern that the third then disrupts for comic effect. It occurred to me that this rule of three could be applicable to the American Literature curriculum itself. I had recently read Joycelyn K. Moody's essay "Personal Places: Slavery and Mission in Graduate Seminars" and I was very well aware that her demand that teachers of African American Literature be proficient meant that I was precisely the type of teacher she disapproved of, strongly:

What exactly does *proficiency* for the African American literature classroom entail? Not "blackness," not an African phenotype. But also not simply a background in generic American Literature, if such an entity exists. The instructor who would pick up, say, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and presume to select a few items for inclusion in a syllabus, on the basis that they are, after all, literature, insults both the traditions from which the selections emerge and colleagues long trained in holistic historical and theoretical contextualizations of those traditions. (Hall 29)

This was clearly a scolding but after my realization that the comedy rule of three could be applied to the curriculum itself, I was so far from thinking that I should learn more about all slave narratives, as well as their "holistic historical and theoretical contextualizations" so that I could teach them "proficiently," that I began to wonder if I even needed as many as four of them. Showalter writes that "obsession with coverage and content is one of the main barriers to good teaching" (13). Within any genre two texts is sufficient to set the pattern; the students would almost certainly learn more by comparing

two slave narratives with another kind of writing than they would by adding two more, that is to say, by superfluity. Accordingly, I then set just two: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. For week three I set William Burroughs' *Junky*, and instead of asking the students to read a fourth text I gave them the extracts which follow below and asked them to spend their normal weekly reading time thinking through the extracts and their implications and comparing and contrasting the nineteenth-century slave narratives with a twentieth-century addiction narrative.

When Thomas De Quincey wrote in *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge that he was a slave to opium no less abject than Caliban to Prospero he utilized a trope that has long been common literary currency, particularly in the more lurid descriptions of the horrors of drug addiction. Is it possible, though, that the discourse of slavery is inappropriate when applied to the phenomenon of drug addiction?

I worked in factories and offices. I played around the edges of crime. But my hundred and fifty dollars per month was always there. I did not have to have money. It seemed a romantic extravagance to jeopardize my freedom by some token act of crime. It was at this time and under these circumstances that I came in contact with junk, became an addict, and thereby gained the motivation, the real need for money I had never had before. (*Junky*, William Burroughs)

The first three classes were very enjoyable but the final class was perhaps the most memorable teaching experience of my career. Among a number of issues the students raised themselves, perhaps the most rewarding for me was their perception that freedom was

represented in very different ways: the narrator's desire for freedom is a characteristic feature of the slave narrative, and the class were in agreement that the invariable attainment of it is a crucial aspect of the genre's appeal to the modern reader. In what are virtually the last words of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs writes: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (Gates 513) I suggested to the students that although many slave narratives abound with descriptions of life under slavery, the texts which are currently regarded as pre-eminent in the genre all end in freedom and this may well be where much of their appeal lies, not solely in the quasi-anthropological descriptions of a brutal and discredited system.

The students also noted that slave narratives are polemical texts which seek political change; but this is clearly not the case in *Junky*. They were quick to notice the absence in *Junky* of values such as determination, fortitude, respect for literacy, and a developing political consciousness that drive the slave narrative. The crucial question which *Junky* poses, and which my students answered, is this one: what is freedom for? What if freedom is not enough? What if beyond freedom, a zone the slave narrative hardly considers, one sees only emptiness, pointlessness, futility? Why not, then, reject freedom? Why not actually seek slavery? Perhaps this, the students agreed, was the most crucial difference between Burroughs' book and the slave narratives: the voluntary nature of the enslavement in *Junky*. It is freedom which the junkie wishes to surrender, to aggressively reject, while the slave yearns for nothing else.

Frederick Douglass's status as a slave is legally constructed, and can be altered by a political decision, as indeed it was for all slaves by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. I suggested to the class, however, that this could also be viewed as a philosophical issue. The narrators of slave narratives are Berkeleyan in that they must be recognized as free by others. Bishop Berkeley's celebrated dictum "to be is to be perceived," possesses a particular resonance for the



narrators of slave narratives, as can be evidenced by the genre's interest in manumission. In *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, for example, the manumission document is so important to Equiano that he reproduces it in full, as Appendix A, at the end of his book. It is not sufficient for slaves to believe themselves free, in their hearts; they must be perceived by others as free.

The junkie, however, is thoroughly Cartesian, not reliant upon the gaze of others to define him. The junkie is ceaselessly preoccupied with gazing at himself; but there is, so to speak, two of him: a mind and a body. The junkie sees the mind as clearly separate from the body, and incontestably superior to it. The mind is the master in junk narratives, the body is the slave. In the final minutes of the seminar a group of four volunteers offered to try and define the essential differences between the texts in a sentence or two, and the entire class, as well as their teacher, was fully in agreement with what they returned to us with: while the slave narrative initially emphasizes isolation but concludes by depicting incorporation and stressing the value of community, the junk narrative begins within a community and concludes in isolation. It was strikingly clear to me that virtually all the students in this group had learned more and thought more and talked more about the two slave narratives that they had read, because they had been asked to compare them with *Junky*, than previous cohorts had done having read four of them. Actually, this was another of the many lessons I have been given by stand-up comedy: repetition is rarely effective on stage; it just eats up your time and prevents you from doing better material.

To teach outside the box is to recognise the potential every seminar has to become an event. It is to trust in the teacher's own considerable knowledge, integrity and commitment to student learning, instead of trusting in piles of late night notes and intimidating stacks of critical texts. To teach outside the box means that the teacher will not wish to always remain securely encased in courses derived from their research, but will, instead, actively seek out an opportunity to teach

periods and texts about which they are not particularly knowledgeable; it is to, even then, do little preparation for the seminars. This teaching recognizes that in a culture that is constantly changing, we need to teach students how to think for themselves, quickly. Above all, teaching outside the box, because student-centred, will be of life-long value to the students, and they will be aware of this, even while they are actually participating in the seminars.

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Every stand-up comic should read a good stand-up comedy memoir, and perhaps the best one out there is *Born Standing Up*, by comedy legend Steve Martin. Even if you're not a fan of his style of humor, the story of his journey, and his insights into performance and persistence, are worth the read. Like, how real is this? Reading any of the books can help you get into the right mood and mindset to write your own original material. At the very worst, even if you don't get inspired, you get to take in humor from one of the all-time greats.

'How To Write Funny' By Scott Dikkers. 'We Killed: The Rise Of Women In American Comedy' By Yael Kohen. An oral history of women in comedy. Sarah Crichton Books. *We Killed* is a 60-year oral history of women's comedy, from stand-up to television. I have recently got into stand up comedy and wanted to find out more about how stand ups do their stuff. Reading this book gave me lots of fascinating insights and eye openers. Relying a lot on interviews with stand ups and also using a study of comedians to illustrate his points, the author has done a great job and has come up with an easy to read, well written and thorough work. I couldn't put the book down and felt disappointed when I came to the end. Hope he does volume 2. Also recommend you look at his DVD *Saint Pancreas* which shows how comedy can be used in a really great way in rel bit: a section of a stand-up comedy show or routine, also a short routine or a section of a routine.

blue material: jokes using graphic sexual overtones, scatological (toilet) references, and swear words.  
bomb: to perform a comedy show which gets no or few laughs.  
booker: a person who hires and/or pays comedians to work in nightclubs.  
callback: a joke that refers back to another joke performed earlier in the show; often presented in a different context.  
capper: an antiquated term for the final in a series of jokes on the same subject matter which ends the routine with the biggest laugh.  
cat