MAKING SENSE WITH THE SENSE OF HUMOR
An examination of the joke as a hermeneutic unit and its potential place in education.

by

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Abstract

Heidegger says we are “thrown” into the world. We are then left to our own devices to make sense of that world and our place in it. In our society education plays an important role in helping students consider the world they want and in preparing them to live well. Some scholars and theologians argue that a sense of humor is useful in this sense-making endeavour. In this research, I explore the history of humor, its interpretive capacities, and its potential place in education.

In Chapter 1, I offer evidence that the world is a confounding place and that the challenge of how best to live can be daunting. I outline the origins of hermeneutics as the science and methodology of interpretation and suggest that we consider comic opportunities for hermeneutic engagement.

In Chapter 2, I review the history of humor, summarizing and critiquing the major theories about why people laugh. I propose Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a resource to better make sense of the sense of humor.

In Chapter 3, I examine philosophical hermeneutics in detail, building a case for the joke as a hermeneutic unit.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the educational imperative to help students understand self and the world and I argue that the joke could make a significant contribution to this process of “composing a life” (Bateson, 1989), a hermeneutic process of interpretation, understanding and application.

In Chapter 5, I report preliminary findings from working with teachers to develop their own comic spirits and to build a comic pedagogy. These findings emanate from teachers’ participation in a humor studies course.

In Chapter 6, I evaluate the findings reported in Chapter 5 and speculate on the future of humor studies and the hermeneutic potential of the joke.
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CHAPTER 1 – SEND IN THE CLOWNS!

On his mythical quest Milo, the young protagonist of Norton Juster’s *The Phantom Tollbooth*, meets a demon named the Senses Taker who explains his role to Milo:

*I help people find what they’re not looking for, hear what they’re not listening for, run after what they’re not chasing, and smell what isn’t even there. And furthermore, “* he cackled, hopping around gleefully on his stubby legs, “I’ll steal your sense of purpose, take your sense of duty, destroy your sense of proportion -- and, but for one thing, you’d be helpless yet.”

“What’s that?” asked Milo fearfully.

“As long as you have the sound of laughter,” he groaned unhappily. “I cannot take your sense of humor-- and, with it, you’ve nothing to fear from me.” (Juster, 1961, p. 230)

In this scene Juster foreshadows a role for the sense of humor in making sense, an argument I develop in this thesis. Making sense can be interpreted as understanding; when I understand something I can say that it makes sense to me. Using Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a resource to examine understanding or sense making, I look critically at comedic encounters or jokes to show how they provide an opportunity to understand, or to make sense of both self and the world. Making sense, or exercising judgment is foundational to the choices we must make individually and collectively to live a good life. I argue for humor’s potential contribution to learning, itself a form of sense-making or process of coming to understand. Lastly, I suggest the inclusion of comedic encounters in a teacher’s pedagogical repertoire.

*The Senses Taker Appears to be Succeeding*

Although Juster’s fictional senses taker claims to be unable to take a person’s sense of humor, a quick glance at the daily news suggests that many people are losing this sense, or at
least not invoking it to understand life’s challenges. Common sense is another sense that
seems also to be in short supply. Consider these news items:

*A fistfight broke out when a man who wanted to buy tickets to the Dalai
Lama’s upcoming talks in Vancouver was told the events had sold out.*
*(Vancouver Sun, February 13, 2004)*

Sixty percent of respondents to a newspaper survey about Lower Mainland
traffic reported that they had experienced road rage, while 53 percent claim
that they have been victims of road rage. *(Province, November 16, 2003)*

*Santiago High School in Corona, California suspended student Lee Bollong,
17, who drives to school because he has an after-school job 20 miles away,
because in his truck there was a new, unopened emergency roadside kit that
contained a utility knife.* *(Quick Takes, October 9, 2003)*

*According to a survey, one percent of Americans “don’t know” if they use a
cell phone.* *(Quick Takes, February 18, 2004)*

*A lady who was being issued a parking ticket for illegal parking on a major
roadway stated, “I didn’t see any sign.” The officer pointed to the rear of her
car and told her it was the pole she backed over when she parked her car.*
*(www.escribe.com/humor/bonehead/m676.html, July 10, 2002)*

*Call received [by Radio Shack] during a widespread power outage: “My
computer doesn’t power on. Also, I tried calling you on the cordless phone I
bought there but it isn’t working either.”*
*(www.escribe.com/humor/bonehead, March 25, 2003)*

*A high school in Squamish, BC, has dropped the name “Howe Sound Chiefs”
for its sports teams as ‘sexist’ despite the fact that the local [First Nations]
have a history of female chiefs.* *(Quick Takes, February 18, 2004)*

These anecdotes suggest that we are taking some things far too seriously. At the same time,
the challenge of understanding how to live a good life seems to be escaping our serious
consideration. Consider these items that suggest a world increasingly confounding:

*The national prevalence of obesity [in adult Canadians] more than doubled,
from 5.6% in 1985; 9.2% in 1990; 13.4% in 1994; 12.7% in 1996 and 14.8%
in 1998*
*(http.courseweb.edtedched.uottawa.ca/Medicine_Health/Facts%20&%20Figures/Obesity_e.htm, February 17, 2004)*
American studies have indicated that at least 4 million children under the age of 12 years experience hunger at least part of the year, and that an additional 9.6 million are at risk of hunger during at least one month of the year (Skolnick, 1995; Sidel, 1997). Comparable analyses have not been done in Canada. (McIntrye, Connor and Warren, 1998, p. 10)

More than 13 million Africans have already died of AIDS, 2 million in 1999 alone. This translates into 1,800 deaths per day. More than 10 million children have lost one or both parents. Ten years from now, as many as 40% of all sub-Saharan African children will be orphaned. (http.courseweb.edtech.uottawa.ca/Medicine_Health/Facts%20&%20Figure/s/HIV_Africa_e.htm, February 21, 2004)

Eight hundred and forty million people worldwide suffer the debilitating effects of undernutrition. ... Only a small proportion of hunger deaths are caused by starvation. Most hunger-related deaths are the result of chronic undernutrition, which weakens the body’s ability to ward off diseases, prevalent in poverty-stricken communities. ... When people actually starve to death – where virtually no food is available – the cause is primarily political, not weather-related. (www.bread.org/hungerbasics/faq.html, February 19, 2004)

An estimated 104 million primary school-aged children were not enrolled in school at the turn of the millennium with girls making up 57 percent of the total. Girls are also more likely than boys to fail to complete secondary education because of early marriage, pregnancy and care duties at home. (www.unaids.org/html/pub/una-docs/GCWA_education_02Feb04_en_pdf, February 25, 2004)

“Multiculturalism is no longer an experiment in Canada and even less so in Vancouver where it has simply become a fact of life. In the 2001 Census, visible minorities made up 37 per cent of all the people in the Vancouver census area, up from 31 per cent five years earlier.” Lamenting the beating death of Filipino teen Mao Jomar Lanot, this editorial continues, “Even without the overtones of racism, there is cause for concern that goes beyond simply trying to identify the attackers. We appear to have another appalling case of a young man savagely beaten by a group of other young men after a chance encounter. What were they thinking?” (Vancouver Sun, December 2, 2003)

There is a suggestion in these stories that we are not living well. We are not making sense of our natural environment, not taking care of our own health or that of others despite the availability of abundant resources, not understanding, respecting or embracing the
diversity that could make our lives rich. We are not exercising our senses to make good judgments, judgments that are life enhancing over the long run.

Young Milo had a parallel, though less threatening, experience which resulted in his finding himself unexpectedly on the Island of Conclusions:

"But how did we get here?" asked Milo, who was still a bit puzzled by being there at all.

"You jumped, of course," explained Canby. "That's the way most everyone gets here. It's really quite simple: every time you decide something without having a good reason, you jump to Conclusions whether you like it or not. It's such an easy trip to make that I've been here hundreds of times."

"But this is such an unpleasant-looking place," Milo remarked.

"Yes, that's true," admitted Canby: "it does look much better from a distance."

"Well, I'm going to jump right back," announced the Humbug. ...

"That won't do at all," scolded Canby, helping him to get to his feet. "You can never jump away from Conclusions. Getting back is not so easy. That's why we're so terribly crowded here." (Juster, 1961, p. 168)

Jumping to conclusions is a behavior of thought-less people, those who have abandoned their senses including both common and comic. Unfortunately, the absence of reasoned judgment does not mean the absence of impact. Not thinking, or not thinking carefully and thoroughly still shows results. Based on information from a Greenpeace leaflet, British Green Party activist Icke summarizes man's impact on the history of the planet Earth in a way that suggests an influence out of proportion with the human being's true place in the grand ecological scheme:

Planet Earth is 4,600 million years old. If we condense this inconceivable timespan into an understandable concept, we can liken Earth to a person of 46 years of age.
Nothing is known about the first seven years of this person's life, and whilst only scattered information exists about the middle span, we know that only at the age of 42 did the Earth begin to flower.

Dinosaurs and the great reptiles did not appear until a year ago when the planet was 45. Mammals arrived only eight months ago and in the middle of last week men-like apes evolved into ape-like men, and at the weekend the last ice-age enveloped the Earth.

Modern Man has been around for four hours. During the last hour Man discovered agriculture. The industrial revolution began a minute ago and during those 60 seconds of biological time man has made a rubbish tip of a paradise. He has multiplied his numbers to plague proportions, caused the extinction of 500 species of animals, ransacked the Planet for fuels and now stands like a brutish infant, gloating over his meteoric rise to ascendancy, on the brink of a war to end all wars and of effectively destroying this oasis of life in the solar system. (Icke, 1990, p. 8)

If Icke continued his history lesson into the few modern seconds of the information age, or the biotechnology revolution, we could add several wars, natural and fabricated disasters and plagues, and a seemingly endless parade of corporate criminals. Still, Icke entitles his book, *It doesn't have to be like this: green politics explained.*

What will make it different? It will be different when we are different. Kingwell suggests that it is time to return to a thoughtful form of utopianism:

> Should we dare to be utopian again? Well, why not? After all, it's always too early to give up on the future of our dreams. The times could not be riper for a playful but serious utopianism, an open-minded but political consciousness, an imaginative but hard-headed idea of civic participation. How else can we hope to fashion the world we want? We don't know what the future will bring, but that's because we are ever in the process of creating it, not because it is an alien force to which we will have to submit. And certainly we know this: just as with a first-year philosophy course, the question of how best to live is always on the exam. In this life, on our troubled and beautiful planet, that question is the exam. (Kingwell, 2000, p. 222)

*Considering How Best to Live*

In reminding his students, and the rest of us, that we are ever in the process of creating our future, Kingwell acknowledges that human life is a life of choice, a life of
judgment. Admittedly, we do not control all of the elements that influence life, and any particular life is the result, as Hiedegger says, of "being thrown" into the world. Admittedly, as the joke goes, "shit happens." Still, we do control, or influence those powers of individual and collective consideration that wrote the depressing and destructive Greenpeace history, powers of consideration or judgment that could be engaged to write a different future. Because life, as Kierkegaard said, must be lived forward but can only be understood backward, Kingwell suggests that "critical reflection on the possibilities of life," would stand us well in our consideration of the world we want, the good life we want to live:

Reflection involves the always incomplete attempt to make sense of who we are and what we are up to, trying all the while to do that most difficult of things, to live better. Theory believes it provides answers. Reflection knows that it merely pursues questions, and does that often enough only tentatively or in the midst of perplexity and sadness. (Kingwell, 2000, p. 210)

**Animating Questions**

There doesn't seem to be anything immediately comical about Kingwell's invocation to judgment, this call for critical reflection in an attempt to make sense. Or is there? In this thesis I pursue several questions exploring the potential contribution of humor to the decisions about how best to live. Why do we laugh? How have people theorized about humor and laughter throughout history in Western culture? How does the sense of humor help us to make sense of our crazy world? Does humor have a place in formal education? If so, how can teachers harness its energy to develop a comic pedagogy? To begin, I argue that humor itself is all about judgment or interpretation, part of the tradition of philosophical inquiry called hermeneutics.
Hermes was the Original Trickster

Hermeneutics, the science and methodology of interpretation, traces its etymology to the Greek god Hermes who served as herald and messenger to the Olympian gods (Leadbetter, 2002). Hermes is known as the god of shepherds and travelers and the inventor of weights and measures. He was both a skilled orator and an accomplished athlete. He was also known for his cunning and shrewdness and became the patron of thieves and tricksters. A trickster himself, he is alleged to have escaped his swaddling clothes on the day of his birth, traveled to Thessaly and stolen some of his brother Apollo’s cattle. He was back in his infant wrap before his mother was informed about the robbery, and except for the fact that his father, Zeus, was all knowing, he might have escaped responsibility. Hermes was also the herald whose duty it was to escort the dead to Hades, making him one of the few to cross to the underworld and return. As both trickster and traveler across the boundary between life and death, Hermes had a unique and universal perspective, a special capacity to engage in the interpretive tradition, hermeneutics, that stems from his name. From the day of his birth he challenged the “proper” order of things.

A Brief History of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

According to Mautner, “the word hermeneutics was first used by J.C. Dannhauer in the mid-seventeenth century,” as part of the effort to develop a theory of interpretation for significant texts, including Holy Scripture, legal texts and classical literature (Mautner, 1967, p. 248). Traditional hermeneutic scholars were searching for a method that would provide for both a correct interpretation of the text as well as an authoritative meaning of the law or statute.
Schleiermacher proposed that such hermeneutic understanding was possible in a method that combined an interpretation of the text found in the grammatical and lexical structure of the words with an empathetic interpretation of the author’s intentions. The former was possible because the reader shared a language with the writer. The latter was possible because the reader had the historical advantage of being able to know about the writer and his circumstance, and could imaginatively reconstruct the conditions under which the text was originally created.

Dilthey continued this focus on reconstruction, proposing a methodological hermeneutics that examined a writer’s historical context as well as his autobiography, recreating first the historical situation in which the text was written, and then the meaning of the text in that situation. Knowing the context of the writer allowed the interpreter to build a more thorough view of the writer’s intentions; working historically also reduced the subjectivity introduced by the interpreter’s own values and experiences. Both of these things contributed, according to Dilthey, to a more reliable interpretation of the text or experience under examination, meeting his goal of an interpretation that was both objective and released from dogma.

Twentieth century German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer took up this project of developing a philosophical theory of understanding and interpretation. Dostal writes, “With the publication of Truth and Method in 1960, [Gadamer] helped inaugurate, in philosophy and human studies, an interpretive turn with a worldwide impact” (Dostal, 2002, p. 13). Gadamer’s teacher, Heidegger, had argued that objectivity in intellectual investigations was not possible since human knowledge and action were the results of interpretation which was itself mediated by the situation in which the interpreter found herself. Heidegger said that
man was “thrown” into the world and required to act in life without the opportunity to stand apart from that life to develop an objective plan to guide his actions. Understanding is possible though, by paying attention to our “thrownness” or as Heidegger would suggest by creating opportunities for our thrownness – our ordinary human existence – to be disclosed, and therefore available for our reflection.

Gadamer expanded this work, investigating the understanding of human existence and claiming that the methodologies commonly used for understanding the natural sciences, especially the ideas of objectivity and replication were unsuitable for the task of understanding the human sciences or humanities. Gadamer’s theory of philosophical hermeneutics, instead, began with the recognition that human beings are grounded in their history. Like Heidegger, he saw that thrownness – the actions and experiences of one’s life – represent the horizon of human experience. Interpretation and understanding occur when the individual asks a question about an event, experience or object in her life, and opens it up to a “virtual dialogue” between her history and her present, resulting in what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons” or a different understanding.

In addition to rejecting the method of the natural sciences, Gadamer expanded the sources of information that could be examined in the project of coming to understand both interpretation and understanding. Explaining Gadamer’s project, Mautner writes, “understanding and interpretation are not restricted to the comprehension of written texts, past and present; they are just as much involved in the aesthetic appreciation of art, the juridical application of law and the historical interpretation of past events” (Mautner, 1997, p. 315). In this thesis I argue that interpretation and understanding are “just as much involved” in comedic encounters, as are the other foundational elements of Gadamer’s philosophical
hermeneutics, enabling comedy to make a productive contribution to understanding. This examination of comedy as a form of hermeneutic inquiry is described in detail in Chapter 3.

Gadamer saw both Dilthey’s historical method and Schleiermacher’s romantic method as shifts from interpretation of truth-content to interpretation of intention and while he rejected their methods, his own philosophical hermeneutics did acknowledge their significant attention to history. During the Enlightenment, scholars had urged people to put aside prejudice in an effort to create an objective stance toward inquiry, free from the contamination of pre-formed judgments. Gadamer, following Heidegger, argued that as human beings are thrown into their particular places in the world, they are nurtured and socialized by that world, and as they interact within that world they build traditions and prejudices that are part of their lived experiences and from which they cannot be separated. Any understanding, therefore, is embedded in the interpreter’s “effective history,” such understanding actually employing the experiences and cultural patterns as part of the evolution of a new experience. Rather than denying prejudices or attempting to escape them, Gadamer argues that a critical awareness of the inevitability of one’s prejudices allows the interpreter to put those prejudices forward for re-examination, to test them against other possibilities and to avoid the distortion of interpretation that the Enlightenment scholars feared. Gadamer is therefore said to have “rehabilitated” prejudice from the prejudice directed against it by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, restoring its place in the development of understanding.

Although recognizing the significance of the interpreter’s effective history in any effort to understand, Gadamer does not pursue Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s efforts to reconstruct the original meaning of the author of a text, arguing instead that the only meaning
the interpreter can achieve is his own. In Gadamer’s view, any understanding is a new one, derived from a virtual dialogue between the past and the present that results in a fusion of horizons between old and new conceptions. To achieve this new understanding, the interpreter begins the dialogue with a question, coming to that dialogue with an openness to a range of possible outcomes. Often such an inquiry is initiated by an encounter with an “other,” with a work of art, or with a shock that moves the interpreter out of an unexamined contentment with his traditions. Because any opening question constrains the possible directions of the inquiry, any understanding is only an approximation of truth, requiring an interpreter to engage in repeated efforts at critical inquiry in order to make sense of his being and his world.

The search for the elements of the good life occurs in the midst of living a life – good or not so good. Each shock or encounter with an other provides an opportunity to open to a new interpretation or understanding, or to reassert one’s historic horizon. Key to achieving this awareness is to seek or create shocks, embracing their potential as interpretive opportunities. Comic encounters – jokes – are rich opportunities for hermeneutic engagement.

_Laughing and Learning_

Some scholars have claimed that a person’s sense of humor is a good indicator of that individual’s capacity to make sense. Rogers reports that psychiatrists “define the well-adjusted, emotionally healthy individual as one who has the capacity to laugh, to put things in perspective, to separate genuine tragedy from mere annoyance” (Rogers, 1984, p. 47). Critchley suggests that a humorous attitude is an exemplar of our human ability to make sense, “We might want to describe our sapience and our humanity as powerfully exemplified
in the attainment of a humorous attitude" (Critchley, 2002, p. 41). Hyers argues, “The ability to see the humor in things, to create comic tales and rituals, is among the most profound and imaginative of human achievements. The comic sense is an important part of what it means to be human and humane” (Hyers, 1981, p. 11).

Supporting students to develop fully as human beings, as individuals and as members of society, are among the broad expectations for our public schools, as suggested by the following selection of mission statements for school jurisdictions in British Columbia.

British Columbia Royal Commission on Education, 1988: To enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.

North Vancouver School Board: Education in North Vancouver should be directed toward the development of a student’s personal, social and academic potential. No one of these areas has precedence over another and their interdependence should be manifest in the content and processes of schooling.

New Westminster School District is committed to ensuring that learners become self-assured, self-sufficient, caring, wise, flexible, and able to live successfully in an ever-changing environment.

British Columbia Teachers' Federation: To foster the growth and development of every individual, to the end that he/she will be come a self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating member with a sense of social and environmental responsibility within a democratic society.

As students engage in learning about themselves and their society they are developing understanding, coming to see clearly things which were previously obscure, and “integrating [their] particular meaning into a larger frame” (Grondin, 2002, p. 36). As they make sense of the world, they also make sense of themselves in the world. They and their world become sensible as they make sense of them. Elliott describes it this way:

There is not one real concrete thing that exists independently of the way we read it, understand it, appreciate it, but rather that we make it as we choose in
the process of conceptualizing it, talking about it living with it and in it.
(Elliott, 1999, p. 47)

He continues, describing making sense with a “reading-the-text” metaphor. He urges the
“text reader” or interpreter to approach the text with a particular attitude “of humor and
humanity” in order to maximize the reading/understanding experience:

As with reading any worthwhile work of literature, unless the reader always
retains a spark of creativity, of humor and humanity, of the capacity to
surprise and be surprised, the cutting edge will be lost and the blunted
instrument will, like an edgeless scalpel, do more harm than good. (Elliott,
1999, p. 57)

Although the body of literature is not large, researchers report that humor contributes
to learning in a variety of ways. Humor stimulates attention, reduces boredom, improves
communication between teacher and student, reduces resistance, enhances flexibility and
creativity, builds social relationships, and helps students to cope with the pressures of school.
(Berk, 1998; Bergler, 1956; Chapman and Foot, 1996; Hertzler, 1970; Hill, 1988; McGhee,
1979; Martin, 1998; Martin and Baksh, 1995; Morreall, 1983; Provine, 2000; Shade, 1996;
Ziv, 1984).

Comic Woody Allen says, “Eighty per-cent of success is just showing up.” If
students expect that their classroom is going to be a fun place, the odds of their “showing up”
are increased. Hill writes of the importance of a positive learning environment:

One of the most important functions of humor is to create a positive learning
environment. Laughter in the classroom is a sign that students are enjoying
learning instead of resisting it as a dull effort demanded of them by adults.
Teachers who use humor in their teaching promise enjoyment for students.
(Hill, 1988, p. 20)

Martin and Baksh say that “Classroom humor has an important role in nurturing an open,
warm and friendly climate” (Martin and Baksh, 1995, p. 179), and they report that students
themselves think they learn better from “fun” teachers:
Given the positive attitudes students have toward teachers whom they see as promoting a fun atmosphere in the classroom, it is not surprising that some of them reported doing “better” in subjects that are taught by “fun teachers” than they do in those taught by teachers who are not fun to be with. (Martin and Baksh, 1995, p. 61)

Once they have “shown up,” there is evidence that students are more attentive if the classroom climate is infused with humor:

Learners must be attentive to learn. Using humor throughout a class can ensure this, since the learner is never really sure what is coming next! This creates anticipation, which, as demonstrated previously, helps obtain and maintain attention. (Shade, 1996, p. 71)

Humor is positively correlated with creativity and flexibility.

While many scholars of humor had an implicit belief that humor can facilitate our acquisition of knowledge there is now much stronger empirical support for the claim that it can improve attention in the classroom, help us recall objects and facts, and stimulate creativity of thought by encouraging more flexible thinking. (Chapman and Foot, 1996, p. xxviii)

Humor “provides a legitimate respite from the rigors of work,” offers pleasant relief from the “stifling aspects of schooling,”(Martin and Baksh, 1995, p. 25, 27), and works to counteract boredom, a feature of classroom life that has a negative effect on both attention and participation, and ultimately on learning. Bergler warns, “The after-effects and by-products of boredom are dissatisfaction, emptiness, inability to concentrate on either work or pleasure, restlessness, or its converse, impassivity,” effects obviously not conducive to reflective considerations of living a good life (Bergler, 1956, p. 210).

There is general agreement on the role of humor in sustaining social relationships, both inside the classroom and out:

While there is not a consensus on the issue of whether humor enhances the retention of subject matter, there is widespread agreement that humor enhances the learning experience. The argument is that humor shows the human side of teachers and creates a sense of humanity in the classroom. (Martin and Baksh, 1995, p. 18)
In the model presented by Martineau (1972) for the social function of humor, he emphasizes the tasks of humor as raising the morale of group members and as strengthening ties between them. He also notes that humor contributes to the maintenance of consensus within the group and narrows the social distances between its members. (Ziv, 1984, p. 32)

An individual with a sense of humor can contribute to the social climate, by diffusing tensions and/or by introducing controversial and difficult topics with a light, humorous touch. Hertzler describes this as the use of laughter as "an individual and social psychotherapeutic agent" (Hertzler, 1970, p. 85). Fry and Allen conclude:

There can surely be no doubt that humor has social value and practical usefulness beyond measure. Most observers would agree that humor has an immense impact in easing social conflicts, relieving tensions and promoting order. (Fry and Allen in Chapman and Foot, 1996, p. 248)

There is not unanimity, however, on a positive correlation between humor and learning:

Humor's role in education has received extensive examination, with mixed results. Several reviews suggest that the overall effect of humor is probably positive as it often improves attention in the classroom (Chapman and Crompton, 1978; Zillman and Bryant, 1983), however, the humor ... should be salient with the material to be learned. (Chapman and Foot, 1996, p. xviii)

Martin cautions that, "Children pay greater attention to educational programs that are amusing" but they likewise pay greater attention when the educational programs are supported by music and other forms of "pleasant, engaging stimulus". He points out that "Evidence from cognitive psychology suggests that positive mood induced by comedy can enhance performance on creativity tasks but impairs performance on tasks requiring reasoning" (Martin, 1998, p. 3). Provine challenges the widely held belief about the link between good humor and good health and calls for more empirical evidence about humor's contribution:
There is little scientific support for the popular idea that people with the personality traits of humor, cheerfulness, or optimism are particularly healthy or long-lived, but the possibility remains that situational laughter and humor are effective coping mechanisms for transient stress. The health-sustaining factor may not be laughter itself but how laughter and humor are used to confront life’s challenges. (Provine, 2000, p. 199)

Still, Hertzler attributes to the individual with a sense of humor a sense-making perspective that would go a long way toward meeting the goals of the mission statements of schools:

The person with a sense of humor is able to play his important roles in social life because of certain rather typical characteristics and abilities. He is realistic; he sees persons and situations as they are; he is not confused or flimflammed. He gets behind the fictions, shams, and pretenses. He is in large measure able to free himself from his own subjectivities and uncertainties and objectively view other persons and social actions and conditions. Furthermore, he has a variety of attitudes and perspectives towards life, is not inflexible or bound down. He is imaginative and cognitively creative. Also, a sense of proportion, as he views the many angles and situations, governs his reaction to them. By no means least, he can be playful about serious situations. (Hertzler, 1970, p. 82)

_Humor-conscious Teachers_

Given a fair degree of agreement on the positive contribution of humor to learning, one might expect teachers to embrace laughter as a pedagogical tool. Indeed, Elbow suggests, “The qualities of play and fooling around must be helped to flourish. We now see why children and poets are good at it” (Elbow, 1986, p. 30). Davies reminds us of the link between learning and laughing, between comedy and judgment, “And is not this the true end of scholarship? It is to make us wise, of course, but what is the use of being wise if we are not sometimes merry?” (Davies, 1960, p. 221).

One of the reasons the students aren’t laughing is that their teachers aren’t laughing. Several factors in recent years have silenced teachers’ laughter. In British Columbia, expectations for public schools have broadened. Children with special learning needs are
now included in regular classrooms, and schools are expected to be full service agencies, helping all children develop intellectually, morally, socially and physically. The public typically turns to the schools to “solve” problems from bullying to unplanned pregnancies to unemployment. As expectations have expanded, resources for public education have dwindled putting extra pressure on educators to do more with less.

The current accountability drive, intent on determining if our schools are working well, has faltered in both plan and execution, focusing on standardized tests as the major source of data. Seeing their complex, difficult and creative professional work assessed by the aggregated scores of their students on snapshot provincial tests has angered and frustrated many teachers, creating as it does a conflict between their professional aspirations and the public’s performance expectations.

The purgatory of years on a teacher-on-call list makes it difficult for new teachers to commit to the profession. Some pack up every June and spend the summer in other jobs awaiting an invitation to return to teaching that may not come until the end of September. Some leave the country in search of more stable employment.

The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation has kept a watching brief on teacher experiences and attitudes, producing a series of research reports entitled *Teaching in the '90s*. Kuehn reports that B.C. teachers claim a high stress level, lack of time to provide adequate help for students, inability to influence decisions which directly affect them, a feeling of exhaustion at the end of the day, a workload too heavy to allow them to perform well, and a job that interferes with family life (Kuehn, 1993, WLC-01, p. 2). Only a third of teachers felt respected, and only half would make the same career choice again (Kuehn, 1993, WLC-01, p. 2).
Naylor’s continuing work shows that teachers didn’t just have a “bad patch” between 1986 and 1993, the stresses of working life are not limited to British Columbia, nor are they limited to the teaching profession. His 2001 report, *Teacher workload and stress: an international perspective on human costs and systemic failure* provides evidence of teacher stress and dissatisfaction across Canada, in the UK and Australia, and makes connections with what Drago (1999) termed “the overworked society.” Surely this is not the world we want!

Charles Elliott, an expert in a social organizing strategy called appreciative inquiry, draws our attention to “the heliotropic principle,” explaining that like plants, people and organizations “move towards what gives them life and energy” (Elliott, 1999, p. 43). Teaching is fundamentally heliotropic, or as special education teacher Patricia Murphy writes in a letter to the editor “the most inherently hopeful act I know of.” She continues:

> Teaching is just a short form for being in the business of creating beauty … Every day I get to share in the progress of a group of children who know that the odds are against them, but learn anyway. I get to experience their joy as the world opens up before their eyes and they discover that, despite what they may have heard elsewhere, they are important and worthwhile. (Murphy, *Globe and Mail*, September 11, 1996)

Haberman says bluntly, “No school can be better than its teachers. … teachers’ behaviors and the ideology that undergirds their behaviors cannot be unwrapped. They are of a piece” (Haberman, 1995, p. 777).

Greene argues:

If teachers today are to initiate young people into an ethical existence, they themselves must attend more fully than they normally have to their own lives and its requirements; they have to break with the mechanical life, to overcome their own submergence in the habitual, even in what they conceive to be the virtuous, and ask the “why” with which learning and moral reasoning begin. (Greene, 1978, p. 46)
If students are to laugh then, teachers must laugh. To protect children from the Senses Taker it is necessary for teachers to reclaim their own comic spirits, “attending fully” as Greene says, to the important tasks of understanding so that they can understand again with their students. Using the work of psychologist Harvey Mindness, Rogers argues:

The humor-conscious teacher uses resource materials that offer rich opportunities for the development of flexibility, spontaneity, unconventionality, playfulness, shrewdness, and humility, the characteristics essential to the humorous outlook or frame of mind. (Rogers, 1984, p. 49)

Contrast these rich opportunities with Glazer’s commentary on schools, an observation that certainly doesn’t make him laugh:

Sadly, our current education system, rather than cultivating our sense of openness and engagement, instead heightens our feelings of isolation and insulation. School, especially as inculturation, builds up preconceptions, expectations, and rigid notions of order and behavior. It breaks down our experience of an alive whole into an endless array of categories, taxonomies, concepts, criteria and evaluative judgments. These categories are then studied, almost exclusively, using conceptual and material approaches.

Through approaching the world in this fashion, with each year of schooling our spirit, and the sense of aliveness and richness of the world deflate. This should not be the case. (Glazer, 1999, p. 82)

Indeed it should not! Instead, schools should confront their role of initiating students into the ongoing reflective judgment that will enable them over their lives to choose – and therefore create – the world they want. The heliotropic nature of teaching should be embraced, enriched and enjoyed. The comic spirit should be invoked. The joke needs to take its proper place in the curriculum.

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics provides resources to help us understand understanding, and to build a pedagogy for cultivating openness and engagement. It helps us to get the joke of trying to make sense of the world.
An Outline of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I review the history of humor, a subject that has occupied the attention of writers and philosophers for many years. I summarize the many perspectives about how and why people laugh and resolve these perspectives into the three main theories of humor. Each of these theories claims to explain why people laugh based upon the underlying motivation for finding a circumstance funny. I critique each as insufficient to account for the wide range of possible responses to comic experiences, the background knowledge that must be brought to the comic encounter in order to find it funny, and the context in which the laughing occurs. Indeed, in spite of these theories being considered the major ones, Bergler (1956) identifies significant points of dispute among theorists. While developing an argument in favor of humor as an important tool for making sense of self and the world, I reject these major theories as concentrating excessively on the causes of laughter and insufficiently on its implications. I turn instead to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics for resources to better make sense of the sense of humor.

In Chapter 3, I make a case that joking is essentially a hermeneutic, or interpretive encounter, relying on the elements of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics for guidance. While hermeneutics was originally a form of examination of text, Gadamer’s work had the effect of expanding the work of interpretation beyond text to encompass the work of interpreting, or making sense of aspects of human life from a variety of vantage points. A systematic examination of jokes reveals that the key elements of Gadamer’s hermeneutics are in evidence when a person experiences a joking encounter. Getting the joke can be seen as an interpretation, and since a joke is typically a second look at a condition of human life previously considered normal, proper or natural, the joke functions on an additional level to
initiate a second interpretation of life. Gadamer was not without his critics, and I acknowledge the major concerns expressed about his views. Nonetheless, I am satisfied that he convincingly responds to the criticisms, a response that I test, in turn, by applying it to joking encounters. I return to the big three theories and look at them from Gadamer's perspective, and again I am satisfied that he offers a richer understanding of how and why we find things funny, or not. I conclude in this chapter that the joke qualifies as a hermeneutic unit and could profitably be harnessed as a device for developing understanding.

Because education is primarily concerned with developing understanding of self and the world, the joke could make a significant contribution to the curriculum in our schools, an argument I take up in Chapter 4. Children are in the process of what Bateson (1989) calls "composing a life," a process of interpretation, understanding and application. This process of self-invention (Bateson, 1989) requires children to seek meaning, to build patterns, to develop language, to adjust to changing circumstances and to respond to the self-invention of those around them. They are in the midst of old and new, of particular and universal, of real and invented. They enlarge their reality through the imagination, and in turn enlarge their reality by bringing the imagination to life. This as if thinking (Lieberman, 1977) is typical of child's play, and as it flourishes and deepens it becomes, according to Polanyi (in Bontekoe, 1996) the foundation of scientific hypothesizing. To enable this process of imaginative invention and interpretation, we need a school environment that supports playfulness, imagination, tolerance for ambiguity, appreciation of diversity, and time and conditions for thoughtful reflection. Teaching in these circumstances requires humility, courage, and hope.

In Chapter 5, I report preliminary findings from working with teachers to develop their own comic spirits embracing life as an interpretive experience and to build a comic
pedagogy that celebrates complexity and eschews the simple, the obvious or the tyrannical. Encouraged by Greene’s (1978) urging to be wide-awake, we explored joking as a method of breaking with the mechanical or habitual views of life. Practicing playfulness and openness, teachers faced the world with questions, considered comic alternative interpretations, confronted prejudices, re-evaluated normal, and re-examined their categories. They worked both to appreciate and to create humor, as well as to consider the implications of doing so for themselves and for their students.

In this chapter I also review the literature about the developmental nature of humor and suggest ways that this information can be useful in designing diagnostic and assessment strategies using comedy.

Based on the experiences described in Chapter 5, in Chapter 6 I confirm my belief in the potential of humor’s hermeneutic role while acknowledging that the potential for humor’s transformative power was unrealized in the humor studies course that formed the basis of the investigation. Nonetheless, I believe that the case for humor as a meaning-making device has been made, and the case for education as a way in which young people are initiated into the interpretive work of being in the world has been reiterated. Further work needs to be done to bind the two as Dewey explained, “To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition” (Dewey, 1991 edition, p. 218).
CHAPTER 2 - HUMOR BASICS

The typical teacher education program at a university does not formally include laughing and joking in any course syllabus. With the intention of making a case for the inclusion of humor in a teaching repertoire, I explore in this chapter what scholars already claim to know about humor.

According to humorist E.B. White, “To interpret humor is as futile as explaining a spider’s web in terms of geometry” (White, 1941, p. xx). The alleged futility of the task has not deterred scholars in their attempts to interpret humor, and three traditional theories have held over time. I argue that these three theories fail individually and collectively to explain adequately why we laugh, largely because they focus primarily on causes of laughter that are external to the laugher. This focus fails to account, as Gadamer would point out, for the significance of sense-making elements such as the interpreter’s prejudices and traditions, the context or situatedness of the humorous event, or the application of the meaning derived from it. A detailed exploration of the hermeneutics of humor occurs in Chapter 3. The background on humor is provided here as a foundation for the hermeneutic analysis.

Humor comes from the Latin umor meaning liquid or fluid. An individual’s physiology or temperament (from the Latin temper meaning mixture) was believed to be determined by the balance of the four cardinal humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Each humor contributed a particular quality, and if that humor occurred in excess the temperament was out of balance and the individual’s constitution was affected. Excess blood made the individual sanguine, that is self-confident and cheerful; dominant phlegm made the individual calm or sluggish; too much yellow bile created a choleric, bilious or bad-tempered individual; too much black bile made the individual melancholic, morbid or sad. When the
humors were in balance, the individual was deemed to be of good humor. The significance of this starting point for the exploration of humor is the location of humor in a person's physiology (Critchley, 2002; McGhee, 1979; Shade, 1996; Wickberg, 1998; Ziv, 1984).

Over time, humor “left the body” as it were, and came to be located both inside and outside the laugh, and related to a variety of human faculties. These are some modern definitions of humor:

Humor depends on internal processes such as meaning, knowledge, feelings, intentions and expectations and external factors including context and physical circumstances. (Hill, 1988, p. 38)

A sense of humor is multidimensional, involving the elements (and accompanying ability levels) of identification, appreciation, mirth response, comprehension, and production. (Shade, 1996, p. 110)

Scientists have for years believed all language and linguistic functions are the responsibility of the left hemisphere of the brain. The right hemisphere is now believed to be crucial to comprehending and relating parts of narratives and jokes to each other. ... It appears humor requires an ambidextrous brain. (Shade, 1996, p. 41)

What do we mean when we describe someone as having a sense of humor?

[The answer] is at once anthropological and philosophical: anthropological in the sense of posing an exploration or unpacking of the meaning of a term and value within a particular culture, namely our own; philosophical in the sense of requiring an analysis of a human faculty in terms of its relevance to the constitution of an identity of persons in the abstract.” (Wickberg, 1998, p. 1)

Like humor, laughter has been described, often in decidedly clinical terms, as a primarily physiological experience (Hertzler, 1970; Provine, 2000). Critchley describes laughter as:

a muscular phenomenon, consisting of spasmodic contraction and relaxation of the facial muscles with corresponding movements in the diaphragm. The associated contractions of the larynx and epiglottis interrupt the pattern of breathing and emit sound. (Critchley, 2002, p. 8)
Continuing the physiological explanations is Provine (2000) who separates smiling, which can be produced upon demand, from laughter which is under weak conscious control. He explains that the evolutionary move of humans to an upright physical status uncoupled the link between breathing and vocalization, allowing us to produce more of a range of speech sounds and emotional sounds. Gutwirth reports on scientists who document “the involvement of both the cortex and the hypothalamus in the brain circuitry of laughter. Voluntary and involuntary impulses, mental and emotional factors, thus enter into the onset of hilarity” (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 11).

Sounds hilarious, all right! While not claiming that laughter is itself primarily physical, Cousins writes of its salutary physical effects:

Dr. William Fry, Jr., of the Department of Psychiatry at Stanford Medical School, likens laughter to a form of physical exercise. It causes huffing and puffing, speeds up the heart rate, raises blood pressure, accelerates breathing, increases oxygen consumption, gives the muscles of the face and stomach a workout, and relaxes muscles not involved in laughing. Twenty seconds of laughter, he has contended, can double the heart rate for three to five minutes. That is the equivalent of three minutes of strenuous rowing. (Cousins, 1989, p. 132)

In response, Provine is cautious, arguing that there is not sufficient empirical data to support the claims of the physical benefits of laughter:

There is anecdotal evidence of pain’s highly complex and psychological nature, and the potential for mirthful, analgesic intervention. Case studies of good outcomes reviewed by Norman Cousins and others are at last gaining empirical support as pain reduction is emerging as one of laughter’s most promising applications. ... [but] Faster and better physical healing through laughter remains an unrealized, tantalizing, but still reasonable prospect. (Provine, 2000, p. 207)

Others writers claim that laughter is physical and then some -- some emotion, some cognition, some aggression, some je ne sais quoi. Consider:
Laughter is also much more than a respiratory spasm; much more than a feeling response to the funny, whether of person, object, circumstance, or situation; much more than an expression of humor or mirth. It is a fundamental, complicated, many-faceted physico-psychic-social activity. (Hertzler, 1970, p.11)

Laughter [is] vocalization, perceptual stimulus, linguistic and social event, and response to tactile stimulation. (Provine, 2000, p. 185)

While ... laughter is a piece of behavior and not an emotion, it is obvious that laughter is not a behavior like yawning or coughing. ... Somehow laughter is connected with emotions. (Morreall, 1983, p. 3)

Humor appreciation [expressed through laughter] involves not only cognitive processes (such as those needed for incongruity resolution), but also affective and emotional processes. (Shade, 1996, p. 26)

Laughter is so much the truest expression of our spontaneity that we hate to see it weighed down with the shackles of explanation. (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 14)

According to some, a cause and effect relationship exists between humor and laughter. McGhee says simply, “Humor is ... those attributes of an event that make us laugh” (McGhee, 1979, p. 6). Ziv concurs, “One of the main causes of laughter is humor. As opposed to laughter which is easily observable and can be described with precision, humor is an elusive concept” (Ziv, 1984, p. x).

Provine says “humor and joking are modern cognitive and linguistic triggers of laughter” (Provine, 2000, p. 190) and claims that “all laugh-producing situations are pleasurable” (op. cit. p. 18), though he goes on to distinguish the cause of the “situation” as not only humor but also comedy and joking, which he claims are different. This view of laughter as evoked by pleasure is supported by Hertzler:

Certain kinds of positive situations evoke mirthful laughter; there is the laughter of merriment, of amusement, diversion, joviality, gaiety. Closely related is the laughter of happiness; the laughter of joy and contentment, the response to the congenial, the comforting, the pleasing, the reassuring -- the laughter which comes with the fulfillment of hopes and desires. (Hertzler, 1970, p. 14)
Provoked by pleasure, laughter can provoke pleasure right back. Hearing the laughter of others, either in real life or on a laugh track, can cause contagious laughter. Causality can be two-way. Laughter is a behavior that expresses pleasant feelings, but is itself also pleasant, so that it can simultaneously express and create pleasantness.

The contrary claim is made that some laughter is not caused by humor (Eckardt, 1992; Hertzler, 1970; McGhee, 1979; Morreall, 1983; Provine, 2000; Ziv, 1984). Hyers explains:

Laughter is hardly a reliable indicator of the comic spirit. Laughter can be arrogant, taunting, scornful, contemptuous, sneering, vulgar, cruel, nervous, giddy, hysterical, malicious, bitter, and insane. Laughter ... may also be the result of tickling and laughing gas. (Hyers, 1981, p. 27)

Provine (2000) has documented five neurological conditions that have laughter as a symptom. Laughter has been noted as an expression of both insanity (presumed unpleasant) and sanity (presumed pleasant). As an example of this dual role for laughter I offer from Peter Sellers’ film, The Pink Panther, the transformation of Clouseau’s foil, the laughing, joking “normal” Chief Inspector Dreyfuss into a twitching madman who is still laughing at the end of the film, but by this time, hysterically.

McDougall (in Bergler, 1956) argues that laughter is not an expression of pleasure, but rather a necessary defense against the suffering that unpleasant circumstances engender. Gallows humor, war humor, hospital humor or the humor associated with the Holocaust are more expressions of courage, or at least whistling in the dark, than they are expressions of pleasure. Ziv (1984) describes the laughter in such circumstances as an “active” form of coping. Active coping, I will argue in Chapter 4, makes a significant contribution to education, supporting the learner in the risk of moving through the unknown.
It has been claimed that laughter flourishes only in free societies, presumably pleasant environments in which individuals are safe to criticize or mock the state and its institutions (Hyers, 1981; Palmer, 1987). Wickberg points out, however, increasing support for the contrary argument, namely, "that humor flourishes in totalitarian countries because it is one of the few available means of combating helplessness and despair without directly challenging the political order" (Wickberg, 1998, p. 44). It may be that laughter is more common when it is more necessary to maintain dignity and optimism in the face of stressful or compromising conditions. Mark Twain (1935) captures this idea nicely, "There is no humor in the Garden of Eden."

As if the relationship between humor and laughter were not sufficiently confounding, some writers use humor and laughter interchangeably (including Mark Twain and me), a habit condemned by others (Chapman and Foot, 1996; Dewey, 1894; Potter, 1954; Shibles, 2002) who claim that laughter and humor can be experienced separately from one another; that because of the influence of other factors, laughter is not a reliable indicator of the appreciation of a humorous incident (Berlyne, 1969; Chapman, 1996) and, as previously outlined, that laughter does not reliably or exclusively result from a humorous (or pleasant) situation.

Hair splitting of a different order can be seen in the distinguishing of humor from wit or mirth. McGhee lists seven different adjectives "to describe qualities of events associated with humor," including "absurd, incongruous, ridiculous, ludicrous, funny, amusing, and mirthful," and an additional twenty words that are "subcategories" which he mercifully refrains from defining (McGhee, 1979, p. 7). Wickberg (1998) explicates the distinction
between wit and humor as the difference between intellect and character, with wit dealing primarily with manners and ideas, and humor dealing with character and personality.

There is not consensus, then, on what humor is; there is no agreement on what laughter is. Nor is there agreement on their causal relationship (if any). La Fave, Haddad and Maesen consider "the stubborn insistence on employing the terms humor and laughter interchangeably," (La Fave, Haddad and Maesen, 1996, p. 89) a serious obstacle to the development of a theory of humor. Nonetheless, scholars have produced many theories of humor, others have examined it from multiple perspectives and still others have just as stubbornly claimed that the very examination of humor kills the joke.

The "Big Three" Traditional Theories of Humor

While it may seem funny to think of philosophers laughing, the subject of humor has occupied philosophers' thinking from early times. Piddington (1933) describes more than 50 separate theorists, Bergler (1956) devotes a chapter to 71 different explanations for why we laugh and Ziv (1984) claims that Gregory (1924) had identified over 100 theories of humor. Most modern writers on humor (Brown, 1990; Critchley, 2002; Gelven, 2000; Gutwirth, 1993; Hertzler, 1970; Hill, 1988; McGhee, 1979; Morreall, 1983; Palmer, 1987; Provine, 2000; and Shade, 1996) generally refer to, and critique three central theories to explain why people laugh – the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief/release theory.

The Superiority theory

One of the first to write about superiority as a cause of laughter was Plato (432-348 BCE). In Philebus, he suggested that we laugh maliciously when we believe that we possess superior knowledge over the people we ridicule. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) expanded this view by adding that we laugh at people we consider to be more ugly or distorted than we are.
Both Plato and Aristotle argued that laughter had the power to disrupt the serious business of the state and therefore should be avoided. Quintilian and Cicero produced what are known as nihilistic theories, arguing that humor is unexplainable; still they concurred with Aristotle on its negative affect on civilization. (Chapman and Foot, 1996; Critchley, 2002)

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in *Leviathan* contributed to the superiority theory by arguing that the human condition is a constant struggle for power and that laughter is simply the outward expression of victory over a less able adversary, or a less able former self. Hobbes wrote, “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” (Hobbes, 1985 edition, p. 125).

At the risk of condemning this malicious behavior unfairly, Provine (2000) points out that the culture of Hobbes’ time retained those vestiges of Roman social life that saw the public enjoyment of gladiator battles, torture and executions as resting within the bounds of “good manners.” Hertzler explains that in Roman times the role of the comic or fool was formally articulated in superior/inferior terms through practices that today we might find morally repugnant and not the least bit funny:

The least “professional” of the institutionalized fools have been those funny in their particular societies because of their physical deformities or other grotesque physical characteristics. ... In Imperial Rome, wealthy householders had such fools, and deformed and imbecile creatures fetched high prices in the slave market. (Hertzler, 1970, p.88)

Changing definitions of deformity notwithstanding, the identification of those to whom we feel superior continues to be a situationally and individually (or group) determined project. McGhee notes the contribution of affiliation to laughter in the 1934 work of Wolff,
Smith and Murray who pointed out that "the enjoyment due to feeling superior that is derived from humor is likely to occur only in connection with persons, ideas, or events toward which we have no positive feelings or affiliation" (McGhee, 1979, p. 22).

Finally, our laughter at the expense of the less fortunate may be interpreted not necessarily as an expression of superiority alone, but also an expression of some relief that the disaster did not befall us. We aren't so much superior, as lucky. Gutwirth says, "hostility is not a necessary condition, but it is a great help. The irreplaceable ingredient is the laughers's own security: we only laugh when we can afford to" (Gutwirth, 1993: 61).

Humorist Mark Twain explained it this way, "Everything is funny as long as it's happening to someone else!" (attributed to Mark Twain in Shade, 1996, p. 11).

The Incongruity Theory

The incongruity theory originated with Kant (1724-1804) and saw refinements by Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Provine (2000) calls them "cognitive theorists" because they locate laughter primarily in the intellect rather than in the emotions. According to this theory, it is our human ability to reason that causes us to laugh when we encounter the unreasonable, that is things and experiences that are but cannot be because they do not match our previously reasoned conditions or categories. Kant had argued that laughter was the result when expectations disappeared into nothingness, but Schopenhauer proposed that the expectations did not disappear. Rather they were transformed into something else. Provine explains:

To Schopenhauer, laughter arises from the perceived mismatch between the physical perception and abstract representation of some thing, person, or action, a concept that dates back to Aristotle. Our success at incongruity detection is celebrated with laughter. (Provine, 2000, p. 13)
Detecting an incongruity is one thing, and living with it is another. The very
maintenance of our belief in our own reason may depend on our ability to laugh at reason’s
limitations as we encounter the inevitable and frequent occurrences that cannot be explained
in reasonable terms. We need a way to accept the failure of our perception. This way is
laughter.

Apparently we do more than merely accept this failure of the intellect. Gutwirth
writes of our “joyful embrace of ambiguity” and quotes Schopenhauer himself as describing
the triumph of perception over reflection as “delightful.” Gutwirth elaborates, “Laughter is
thus that privileged condition: the joyous awareness of our finitude. [or as his friend pointed
out, in a sop to the superiority theory] it is my joyous awareness of your finitude” (Gutwirth,
1993, p. 121).

This embrace of topsy turvy has been celebrated in literature, music, theater, festivals
and drag shows throughout history. The Roman Feast of Saturnalia and the medieval feast of
fools stood the formal order of society on its head as slaves became masters for the day, and
madness of all kinds was expressed in song and dance. Gutwirth argues that these
celebrations make it easier for us as individuals to cope with incongruity, and create a public
disorder within acceptable boundaries by conscripting laughter to the purpose of social
control. He says, “It is left to the feast of fools to make annual acknowledgment of our
fallibility in an outburst of high spirits that takes the sting out of it” (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 52).

Arthur Koestler (1905-1983) refined the incongruity theory with the introduction of
the concept of “bisociation,” something essential, he argues, to both the creation and the
understanding of humor. McGhee explains:

Through bisociation, two domains of thought that have never before been
considered to have any meaningful relationship are suddenly seen to have a
common thread. ... to create a cartoon or joke, an object or event must be seen outside its normal context; an unexpected or unusual relationship must turn out to be essential to get the point of the joke. (McGhee, 1979, p.164)

Bisociation foreshadows Gadamer's claim that to make meaning in a new situation the interpreter must put his/her existing prejudices into play in light of new experience, being open to the possibility of what McGhee calls “a common thread.”

Gelven concludes that laughter is itself an expression of reason, the “logical” conclusion of the incongruous experience:

Only the rational can be foolish. To say this is neither sophistry nor cleverness, nor is it an enigma; it is rather the ineluctable and ironic truth. Only those endowed with the faculty of reason are capable of being foolish and recognizing folly, and consequently they alone are enabled to respond to this self-discovery by means of what is perhaps the most curious manifestation of reflective reason, laughter. (Gelven, 2000, p. 1)

Chapman and Foot (1996) cite several authors who argue that incongruity alone is insufficient to account for humor. They claim that humor is biphasic, meaning that the incongruity must be resolved for the circumstance to be identified as a joke rather than a free standing bit of nonsense. The punch line of the joke typically accounts for this resolution. It is the place where the two elements of the bisociation are joined in a new meaning, sublimating their distinct meanings and making their implausible union somehow comically plausible. A joke might help to explain this.

_I saw a man eating shark at the aquarium. That's nothing. I saw a man eating herring at the restaurant._

The surface structure ambiguity of “man eating” creates an incongruity. If man #2 eats a herring, does that mean that man #1 ate a shark? Hardly. This must be a joke. The reader must acknowledge the bisociation of multiple syntactical meanings for the same words to resolve the incongruity by recognizing that he/she momentarily misinterpreted “man eating
herring” to have the same adjectival relationship as “man eating shark.” If the reader is unable or unwilling to do so, she/he typically says, “I don’t get it.” Again, Gadamer is anticipated. “Getting the joke” is the result of a combination of interpretive elements, and could be described as a form of Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” between the past and the present.

*The Relief/Release Theory*

This theory is most associated with Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and is also referred to as the liberation theory, or in Spencer’s case, the “overflow” theory of humor. Spencer and Freud posit that reason and our conceptual systems put constraints upon us, and laughter allows us to break free of those constraints releasing the accompanying tension. According to Shade (1996) these constraints include conventionality, inhibition of sexual and aggressive desire, the rigidity of logic and our own egos. Hertzler expands on the workings of laughter according to this theory:

> It is basic in laughter that in its various forms it is a discharge of energy that occurs when human beings are relieved from a state of suspense or strain or tension; or enjoy relaxation from a situation which has caused surprise, shock, or mishap. It is essentially a way of breaking up or dispelling unused energy, of reducing or easing nervous, mental, emotional, and often physical rigidity or imbalance in the individual or the group in different types of situations. (Hertzler, 1970, p. 13)

Freud focuses specifically on wit and separates forms of laughter according to motive. He also expands the excess energy notion to include socially inappropriate impulses like sexual energy and aggression. He argues that we learn to use humor and jokes to manage this energy movement. Hill explains:

> Freud made a distinction between “harmless” and “tendentious” wit. Harmless wit consists of a return to infantile nonsense and absurdity. This involves a relaxation of mental activity and logical thinking. Tendentious humor is related to disguised or unconscious sexual or aggressive urges.
Freud believed that when children begin to perceive taboos surrounding sex and elimination, they develop a “joke facade” which disguises tendentious humor. (Hill, 1988, p. 37)

Freud’s joke facade and his characterization of many observable behaviors as symbolic of repressed underlying feelings, especially sexual feelings, has itself become somewhat of a joke -- sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

McGhee (1979) points out that theorists following Freud (Kris, 1938; Levine, 1977; Wolfenstein, 1954) have added the dimension of mastery to the relief theory. They argue that people, especially children, will only laugh in relief at those things they have already mastered, ensuring that their laughter returns them to a sense of confidence in the world as orderly and themselves as competent within it. In contrast, adults (or some adults) are capable of laughing regardless of mastery because they have accommodated, philosophically at least, the limitations of human influence and the futility of our expectations of control of our environment. McGhee argues that this laughter-induced relief is:

... important in the maintenance of good mental health. ... It may release pent-up tensions or energy, permit the expression of ideas or feelings that would otherwise be difficult to express, facilitate coping with trying circumstances, and so forth. (McGhee, 1979, p. 3)

**Alternative Interpretations**

Each of the three major theories fails to provide a complete accounting of the multiple aspects of humor and laughter. Bergler (1956) identified twelve points of dispute among theorists, and the disparity of views in the field has only widened in post-modern times. Here is his analysis:

The extensive literature on laughter conveys the impression that the main differences among non-analytic authors center around these strategic points: 1. They cannot agree on whether laughter is of a pleasurable nature or not (see Plato, Descartes, et al. versus McDougall).
2. They cannot agree on whether laughter is an inborn instinct or an individually acquired ability (see Eastman and McDougall versus nearly all other authors).

3. They cannot agree on whether or not laughter contains aggressive components (see the phalanx of Plato-Hobbes-Bergson-Ludovici, et al. versus Voltaire-Eastman).

4. They cannot agree on whether laughter contains moralistic notions of betterment or appears spontaneously (see divergence between the theories of Ben Jonson and those of Dryden, etc.).

5. They cannot agree on terminology: wit, the comic, grim humor, self-derision, humor are constantly confused.

6. They cannot agree on whether a theory on laughter must explain (in addition to the causes of laughter) the “transformation of energy,” or whether it is permissible to delegate this question to posterity and future research (Spencer-Freud versus many authors, notably Eastman.)

7. They cannot agree on whether the utilization of laughter for social purposes is secondary or primary (the latter theory is promoted by Bergson, Dupreel and Piddington).

8. They cannot agree on whether laughter is a purely aesthetic problem (Jean Paul Richter, Theodor Lipps, K. Fischer, Th. Vischer, et al.) or a psychological one.

9. They cannot agree on whether laughter is an exclusively human attribute (nearly all authors versus Darwin, Eastman).

10. They cannot agree on the reasons and the mechanisms which produce laughter, and therefore they produce innumerable theories which by and large magnify one aspect of the problem, mistakenly taking it for the essential.

11. They cannot agree on the mood which precedes a belly laugh: Bergson declares that all emotion must be absent, Greig that laughter essentially involves emotion, Eastman that “you must be in a playful mood,” etc.

12. Last but not least, they cannot agree on whether the unconscious plays any role in laughter at all (Freud versus nearly all authors). (Bergler, 1956, pp. 30-31)

In addition, I suggest 4 limitations of the big three traditional theories:

1. The theories focus excessively on the *causes* of humor and diminish its implications

2. Each theory concentrates on one aspect of humor, whereas a joking encounter is typically a combination of aspects

3. The contextual nature of laughter is insufficiently acknowledged
4. The theories explain adult laughter giving scant attention to the developmental aspects of humor acquisition.

Concentrating on the causes of humor, La Fave and colleagues (1996) go so far as to argue that there is no such thing as a joke. Because “nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone” they claim that it is impossible to define the necessary and sufficient qualities in a joke that allow it to stand alone as a generator of amusement (La Fave et al., 1996, p. 85). It might make more sense to define the joke not as something that causes amusement, but rather something that provides an opportunity for amusement. Whether that opportunity is taken up depends on a host of factors that surround the joke itself. In Chapter 3, using the resources of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, I argue that the interpretation of a comedic encounter, like the interpretation of any encounter, involves a complex array of elements and cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect relationships. A second look at each of the “big three” theories identifies specific shortcomings.

The Superiority Theory Revisited

Plato and Aristotle’s original explanation was that we laugh out of malice at ugly or inferior folk. Laughing at the expense of the ugly or infirm is publicly discouraged in modern civilized adult company. Hobbes’ view that we laugh in victory over our less able former selves may account for that embarrassed laughter following our own error or folly, but this may be as much explained by the relief/release theory – that the error was not of critical proportion – as that of superiority. McGhee (1979) reports that children will laugh only if they see the comic circumstances as ones over which they, themselves, have already achieved mastery. This suggests that the inferiority of the other, represented by
incompetence, only renders some situations laughable. La Fave and colleagues claim that “humor appreciation varies inversely with the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity being disparaged” (La Fave et al., 1996, p. 101). In other words, misfortune experienced by our enemies conjures laughter, while similar misfortune experienced by our friends may conjure sympathy. This evidence suggests, a la Gadamer, that both the determination of inferiority of the other and the choice of laughter as a response are under the control of the laugher rather than being qualities resident in the other. The event may be the same but the superiority/inferiority determination is unpredictable, as is the resulting (or not) laughter. La Fave and colleagues (1996) add another layer of complexity by suggesting that individuals will only laugh when they have done sufficient “joke work” as Freud would call it, to relieve themselves of any sense of guilt in their malice. This would suggest some combination of both relief and superiority theories.

This view that laughter requires distance between subject and object and that mocking demonstrates some measure of contempt for the disparaged is contradicted by Gelven (2000) who cites the insulating capacity of friendship to protect the disparaged individual from any pain caused by the barbs of a joke. Sometimes an individual’s acceptance in a group is signified by that individual becoming the object of light-hearted bantering. To be an outsider would be to be ignored.

Provine describes a laughter of superiority that leads to violence:

Throughout the ages, cripples, mental defectives, and court fools have been injured and perhaps even killed in a crescendo of teasing, laughter, and violence. Laughter scorns the victims and bonds and feeds the wrath of aggressors. On a more massive scale, dark laughter has sometimes accompanied the looting, killing and raping that are among the traditional fruits of war. (Provine, 2000, p. 47)
Such violence does not occur simply because the aggressor finds the victim inferior, or funny. Martineau claims that "When humor is judged as disparaging an outgroup, it may function to increase morale and solidify the ingroup, and/or to introduce and foster a hostile disposition toward that outgroup" (Martineau in McGhee, 1979, p. 29). Even when a "hostile disposition" is fostered through humor, such a disposition is not sufficient to inspire violence.

Saper argues:

The essential point is that not every jibe, joke, jocular name calling, or wordplay is an instance of disguised or outright hostility. While it is true that defamatory ethnic or racial humor can fuel antagonistic beliefs and feelings, it is also true that it can defuse or soften such antagonism. (Saper, 1993, p. 74)

Finally, not all violence is accompanied by laughter. While the superiority theory of humor seems only able to explain malevolent human behavior directed toward others, it can not account necessarily for instances of hostility that are expressed violently.

The Incongruity Theory Revisited

The laughter resulting from incongruous events or behaviors is not entirely intellectual, as Kant would have us believe. Gutwirth points out that even Schopenhauer acknowledged laughter as the "joyous awareness of our finitude," a state requiring participation of emotion as well as cognition. The celebration of madness and disorder during the feast of fools is in part a reworking of superiority – the rulers are brought down, the outsiders are in the seats of power, albeit temporarily – but it is also a form of relief/release from the anticipated and normally enforced rule of law and order.

Proponents of the incongruity theory emphasize the necessity of surprise, provided either through the bisociation of two previously unrelated aspects, or through a sudden change of direction which foils expectation. These explanations are undermined by the repeated laughter generated by the same old joke. Fans of the Three Stooges not only are not
surprised when Curly, Larry and Moe get stuck in the door frame because no one of them will allow another to pass through first, but in fact they laugh time and again at this predictable slapstick example of the Stooges’ foolishness and immature social relationship. This comedic situation is not surprising; it is anticipated. The Stooges’ behavior is obviously incongruous for adults, but the laughter their antics engender can also be partly explained by the superiority theory – we would never act so silly – and partly by the relief we experience in abandoning momentarily our expectations for responsible, logical, socially mature actions.

In the Monty Python sketch about the dead parrot, it is incongruous for the shopkeeper to reject John Cleese’s evidence that the Norwegian Blue Parrot is dead and the laughter begins. This laughter is intensified by Cleese’s tone of voice and his facial expressions, though the skit is as funny on radio as on video. For Monty Python fans, this incongruity requires no surprise. Once we are hooked by their brand of humor, we laugh in anticipation of the comedy, engage in solitary laughing just reminding ourselves of the joke, or adapt lines from the sketch to other purposes to recreate the humor. No individual theory explains why this sketch is tedious for some people, and a comedy classic for others.

Douglas (1968) says that a joke requires both recognition and permission to be deemed funny. A completely incongruous situation therefore runs the risk of failure as a joke because of the possibility that an interpreter won’t have enough background knowledge to bridge the plausibility/implausibility gap. The situation might be adjudicated as bizarre rather than comedic. Palmer (1987) argues that the plausibility/implausibility balance is a delicate one, and if there is an excess of either, the joke will fail. For example, in the classic good guy/bad guy Road Runner cartoon, for us to find the road runner’s punishment of the coyote funny, we need to know that the cartoon coyote will rise to fight again even though
this awareness removes some degree of surprise. We need to know that real coyotes are
neither as stupid nor as vulnerable as the road runner’s opponent in order to see this cartoon
relationship as incongruous. We need to see the weapons used in the cartoon (explosives,
 anvils) as atypical in the lifeworld of animals. Some viewers, both adults and children, do
not give their permission for these skits to be jokes, claiming that the major element of the
cartoon is violence. Other viewers find the repeated situations predictable and tedious. Both
these groups declare that the show is not funny. These contrasting but equally valid
perspectives about the cartoon foreshadow Gadamer’s explanation of the significance of
prejudices in human interpretation of an experience or event, a point that will be taken up in
Chapter 3.

Finally, creating an implausible or incongruous situation is not always done for comic
purposes. The different dress, hairstyles, music and cultural practices of counterpublics such
as dykes or teen Goths helps them to establish their group identities. While outsiders might
find these characteristics incongruous, or might mock them in an attempt to apply
conservative pressure to maintain a more traditional norm, the group members would likely
see this mocking as evidence that they had succeeded in establishing an identity apart from
that norm. In repressive societies this break from the norm might be met with punishment
more severe than ridicule. Incongruity alone is not a sufficient theory to explain laughter.

The Relief/Release Theory Revisited

The relief theory using Freud’s joke facade to explain that we laugh as a way to
disguise inappropriate sexual energy seems to be a concept belonging to another more
sexually repressed period of history. That we laugh because we believe it to be a socially
acceptable alternative to other forms of aggression also seems unsupported in the face of the
significant amount of aggression and violence shown around the world. However, comedic acts of defiance, which generate what I call courageous laughter, might support the relief theory because laughter provides some relief in circumstances where the laugher is powerless, or where the expression of aggression would result in the intensification of an already difficult situation. The humor of war, gallows humor, or humor shared among emergency personnel might be seen to offer relief to people confronting death or inhumane circumstances. Jokes directed at officials of the state in totalitarian regimes can provide such relief, and may contain an element of incongruity when they lampoon laws that are considered counter-intuitive or irrational, and an element of superiority as the jokers share the subversive agreement that they, themselves, would never behave in such stupid or inhumane ways.

Mack, the turtle at the bottom of the heap in Dr. Seuss’s *Yertle the Turtle*, toppled the despotic order with a burp, the kind of socially unacceptable gesture available to any individual with the courage to use it. Swabey claims that the comic spirit:

> Though it lacks a fervent sense of providential control and moral obligation, is nevertheless torn between delight in the incongruities confronting it everywhere and a sense of challenge to resolve them. ... [the spirit] of the comedian remains disobedient, irreverent, and disrespectful. (Swabey, 1970, p. 240)

Our laughing reaction to the Seuss story comes in part out of solidarity with Mack who was clearly the underdog [under turtle?] and in part out of reaction to the unexpected power of the burp. This laughter is a little superiority, a little incongruity, a lot of relief.

While traditional interpretations of the relief/release theory focus on developmental mastery and self-control, a greater source of power and comfort – relief/release – may emanate from laughter’s ability to help the interpreter let go of expectations and flourish in
the fullness of the moment, ridiculous as it might be. Perhaps this could be renamed the Zen theory of laughter. Meeker points out that the original purpose of the comic was to cope, to manage the day-to-day, rather than to aspire to greatness:

Comus [the Greek god of fertility whose name was the root of comedy] was content to leave matters of great intellectual import to Apollo and gigantic passions to Dionysus while he busied himself with the maintenance of the commonplace conditions that are friendly to life. Maintaining equilibrium among living things and restoring it once it had been lost, are Comus’s special talents, and they are shared by the many comic heroes who follow the god’s example. (Meeker, 1972, p. 25)

While it looks like laughter in the face of great challenge might signal that we are giving up, it more likely means we are giving in; giving in to being mortal, giving in to being affected as much by circumstance as by agency, giving in to having only the moment to savor. This giving in provides relief not only from our oppressive or disappointing circumstance but also from our own unreasonable expectations of control.

Hyers describes the “humorous remark or comic gesture [as] the footnote to every pious act and statement of belief that reminds us of our humanity, our mortality, our finiteness and fallibility, our foolishness” (Hyers, 1981, p. 52), nonetheless we are not destroyed by learning that we are not the gods. Meeker welcomes comedy which “demonstrates that man is durable even though he may be weak, stupid, and undignified” (Meeker, 1972, p. 24). He embraces comedy as “the art of accommodation and reconciliation” (Meeker, 1972, p. 38). Though our experiences are clearly incongruous, and we humans are obviously not superior to our circumstances comedy provides some relief from the burden of managing it all. Meeker says, “Comedy is concerned with muddling through, not with progress or perfection” (Meeker, 1972, p. 26). The laugher knows full well that the world is insane, and simply refuses to accept her/his own reasoned awareness of
such. Laughing provides relief not through denial but through defiance, humility and hope. Hyers says, “Where there is laughter there is hope,” (Hyers, 1981, p. 170) and hope always offers relief.

The Situatedness of Humor

Both of Douglas’ requirements for a joke to be a joke, namely recognition and permission, are contextual. A hilarious joke told among friends at a pub may earn the disapproval of those same friends when it is told at a funeral. Jokes about ex-husbands are especially funny when told in groups of ex-wives, except if the experience of becoming “ex” is painfully recent. When adults reprimand children for the use of “off color” language or stories, it’s not about the joke, per se, but about socializing the children into proper public behavior, helping them to identify discourse communities and their related norms. These norms are themselves socially determined, and account for language and stories being considered acceptable in some cultures or situations and offensive in others.

The context is further created by the background knowledge and attitudes that the individual laughers brings to the comic encounter. These subtle influences are not addressed by the more blunt superiority, incongruity and relief/release theories of humor. A hermeneutic interpretation of humor, the subject of Chapter 3, will explore these elements in more detail.

The Laughter of Childhood

Several educators have examined the different stages of laughter appreciation that children experience as they acquire increasingly sophisticated skills for interpreting their lives and their world (Hill, 1988; Lieberman, 1977; McGhee, 1979; Martin and Baksh, 1995; Medgyes, 2002; Shade, 1996). This information is useful for teachers who may want to use
humor for diagnostic, instructional or assessment purposes, a theme that will be taken up in Chapter 5.

These writers describe how children’s laughter patterns change as they acquire background knowledge and skills to bring to a joking encounter. Cultural traditions, emotional maturity and confidence, and individual preferences also determine what each individual child will find funny. Different kinds of comic stimuli – mime, pratfalls, puns, riddles, and jokes embedded in language idioms and usage – engender different responses with different age groups of children as well as with different individuals in different groups. Medgyes (2002), an ESL instructor, not only uses humor in his work but also reports on the parallel development of language and humor appreciation and creation. The major theories concentrate on adult humor, assuming that the laughers have passed through the developmental stages. For teachers, responsible as they are for supporting children through the developmental stages, the big three theories are so broad as to be of limited value.

Why Bother Studying Humor?

Proponents of the major theories of humor document patterns of laughter at a fairly general level. Theorists who delve more deeply into the subtleties still weigh in on the side of explaining why laughter has occurred. Few (Berk, 1998; Cousins, 1989; Hill, 1988; Hyers, 1981; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Sacks, 2000; Worthy, 1975) focus on exploiting our understanding of humor to harness humor itself in service of greater human endeavors. This is a course of investigation I pursue in this thesis.
CHAPTER 3 – JOKING IS ESSENTIALLY HERMENEUTIC

"Joking is essentially hermeneutic," she said, "because an individual experiences a potentially comic moment as a confrontation with tradition, interpreting in that moment and deciding whether or not to laugh."

"Joking is hermeneutic?" he replied. "That's pretty funny all on its own!"

Charlie and Elaine

Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics was originally a form of examination of text, particularly scriptures for purposes of providing a correct interpretation, and a form of examination of legal documents for purposes of providing an authoritative interpretation (Mautner, 1996). As clear as authors might have tried to be, different interpreters of text read different meanings into the words or different meanings between the words and between the lines. They also read different intent from the words, depending on their personal experiences and prejudices, and depending, too, upon what they know about the topic in addition to what they read in the text. Texts, clearly, are not objective records of events but rather communications between the author and the reader, interpreted at each end of the communicative encounter. Heidegger is said to have returned to reading philosophy in the original Greek in an attempt to eliminate some of the imposed interpretations of the text's translators.

Gadamer’s work in philosophical hermeneutics had the effect of expanding the concept of interpretation beyond the effort to make meaning from text to the greater task of making meaning of ourselves and our lives, to understanding the world and our place in it, and to understanding understanding itself. Palmer explains that the word hermeneutics derives from the god Hermes who:

is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp. The various forms of the word suggest the process of bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding. (Palmer, 1969, p. 13)
Palmer continues:

[in interpretation] something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation or translation is somehow “brought to understanding” – “interpreted.” (Palmer, 1969, p. 14)

I argued in Chapter 2 that laughing/joking, a human behavior found in all cultures, has under many circumstances helped with these sense-making tasks. The joke can work as an exercise in dealing with novelty, in interpreting disparate elements, in making meaning. Moreover, in the cases where sense-making seems utterly unachievable, we can invoke laughter to help us to cope with the discomfort of ambiguity, non-meaning, or nonsense.

In this chapter I examine more thoroughly some of the key elements of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics in an attempt to understand the factors that influence understanding. I apply each element to a joking situation to demonstrate that these key elements are typically present, suggesting that the joke is a useful structure for interpreting self and society. If the joke passes the test as a device for making meaning, it seems reasonable, then, to argue that it has a place in education.

Morreall claims that understanding laughter can contribute to understanding human life:

The fact that laughter and humor involve a nonserious attitude does not imply that we cannot adopt a serious attitude toward examining them. Nor does the nonserious attitude in laughter and humor render them somehow unimportant as features of human life, and therefore unworthy of our attention. ... our capacity to laugh is anything but a peripheral aspect of human life, and to understand our laughter is to go a long way toward understanding our humanity. (Morreall, 1983, p. ix)

Specifically in this chapter I investigate aspects of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics including prejudice, tradition, the horizon of understanding, the hermeneutic circle, the anticipation of completeness, doubting, play, openness, attention to the other,
language, confrontation, the hermeneutic imagination and the integration of interpretation, understanding and application, and I attempt to show that they are present in joking encounters. While I describe these elements individually, in an interpretative situation they do not exist separately, nor can any one element alone explain how the interpreter arrives at an understanding of a joke. Each individual description, then, will seem insufficient to account for interpretation; each will only be understood when the entire array of elements is laid out. I also employ a sequential structure that suggests preparation for the interpretive event, the experience of the event, and the results of the event. Here, too, the structure is useful only to unbundle the complexity of Gadamer's thinking; it is not intended to suggest that interpretation occurs in such a linear fashion.

Historical Conditioning, Prejudices and Traditions

Gadamer denies pure subject/object separation, arguing that true objectivity is not possible because as interpreters we do not approach an object or text – or in the case of this study, the joke – with no ideas at all. We come to each interpretive encounter from somewhere, that somewhere being our own, individual historical place. This history influences any interpretations we might consider in a new encounter, excluding some alternatives and promoting others. Warnke calls this "conditioning," explaining, "We are situated in history and historically conditioned. This means that our conception of rationality is subject to the limitations of the historical experiences we have inherited" (Warnke, 1987, p. x).

Historical conditioning takes place because we are each born, or "thrown" as Heidegger says, into a particular culture which existed before we arrived; the conditions, standards and traditions of the community, developed over time, exert a normative force on
us as individuals as we are welcomed into and socialized by the society. As members of the society we have the opportunity and the responsibility to influence the culture back, which we do by living our history into our future. Warnke points out, “both we and the objects we study are located in a history common to us both; it means rather that we determine our history from a position within it” (Warnke, 1987, p. 39). Traditions, or “time honored sets of practices, customs, usages, mode[s] of thought or behavior” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1970), are passed from one generation to another, from one interpretive experience to another, even though they may evolve in some ways. When we attempt to understand a new experience, these traditions are invoked. “Our understanding stems from the way in which the event or work has previously been understood and is thus rooted in the growth of a historical and interpretive tradition” (Warnke, 1987, p. 78).

Moreover, we are influenced by multiple traditions, often conflicting, because each of us as individuals lives and moves in overlapping groups within the larger society. My membership in the tradition of environmental activism moves me to support a better public transit system in Vancouver; my membership in the tradition of car owners moves me to resist higher gasoline prices at the pump. I may be conditioned by religious tradition, by family tradition, by the tradition of my language. While these traditions may have elements in common, they also have differing features. While they are all a part of me, one tradition may exert greater influence on my interpretation in a specific encounter.

Gadamer also explains that the significance of any object or text does not reside in the object itself, but rather is pre-judged or “prejudiced by [our] vantage point, anticipations and the like” (Warnke, 1987, p. 76). As interpreters we bring assumptions or pre-judgments to the interpretive experience which we impose on the object. In each interpretive encounter
these prejudices are either confirmed because the object is consistent with our pre-judgment, or challenged because the object offers a different view. Each interpretive encounter is another opportunity for us to bring forward our assumptions or prejudices and to confront them as we confront the object under study. What is not possible is to approach the encounter objectively, that is, without prejudice.

My vantage point in approaching any new interpretive encounter is the result of a combination of elements of my personal and social experience; I am, on the surface at least, an English speaking, middle-aged Caucasian Canadian woman, living in Vancouver, working in a post-secondary educational institution who likes, among other things, gardening and quilting. These dimensions of my identity influence my approach to, and reaction to, others who may share all, some or none of those dimensions. I can intentionally choose to be open, that is to set aside temporarily a prejudice I recognize emanating from my work or my family background, but I cannot claim to be without prejudice. I cannot come to an encounter without myself. Furthermore, I am never fully aware of all of the traditions that accompany me to an interpretive event.

Not only are these multiple traditions always co-mingling to influence the interpretation of both the individual and the social groups of which the individual is a member, these traditions are, as Kelly points out, not weighted equally in their influence. She explains:

Some traditions are authoritative and dominant, taken by many as ‘common sense’ – to quote Gramsci, they are ‘hegemonic’ – while others are subordinated (that is, they do not compete as equals, carry little weight and are marginalized). This follows, in part, from the fact that social groups have unequal access to power, status, and resources. (Kelly, personal communication, 2004)
The interpreter's cultural traditions and personal experiences combine to create what Gadamer calls our "effective history" which comprises the prejudices we apply in attempting to understand an object or experience. A variety of cultural traditions might influence a reader's reaction to, or interpretation of, the following joke, provoking results on a continuum from hearty laughter to serious offense, including the option of "not getting the joke." Consider this joke:\(^1\)

*Cablegram from the Pope to Michael Jackson:
Cease Your Activities: You Are Not Yet Ordained. (Boskin, 1997, p. 198)*

A reader from a devout Catholic tradition might be offended that a holy figure such as the Pope is included in a joking exchange, or that the Pope or the church might see ordination, even tongue-in-cheek, as a justification for (alleged) sexual assault on young boys. Catholic or not, a reader might find the idea of making a joke about alleged sexual abuse of children to be in bad taste and therefore not funny. Readers who consider the Catholic Church's position on child sexual abuse by its priests to be hypocritical and inconsistent with the espoused tenets of the faith might react with sadness, anger or with cynical laughter. Victims of sexual abuse, perpetrated by the clergy or others, might likewise laugh cynically or be personally hurt or offended. Michael Jackson fans have expressed public anger and disbelief at the charges laid against him. Cultural traditions and personal experiences are not necessarily articulated consciously before the joke is read. They simply exist as the mirror to which we hold the new image. Warnke explains, "understanding [or laughing or not laughing] ... involves ... placing two sets of prejudices into a relationship with one another" (Warnke, 1987, p. 110).

\(^1\) For several years there have been allegations of rock star Michael Jackson's inappropriate sexual activity with adolescents. Recently, formal charges have been laid against him. Likewise there have been allegations and charges against Catholic priests in several North American dioceses for the sexual abuse of children.
For the successful interpretation of a joke, prejudices are not only inevitable, they are essential insofar as they comprise the background knowledge that contributes to the potential meaning assigned to the joke. In the Pope/Michael Jackson joke, the reader’s previous experience needs to contain “data” about alleged sexual activity between adults and young boys that is foundational to the possibility of understanding the connection/contradiction between the Pope and Jackson. Without this background knowledge, the joke is simply words that don’t appear to have much connection.

When we approach new objects or jokes, we “remain subject to the hold of effective history, to the way in which the object has already been understood in the tradition to which [we belong]” (Warnke, 1987, p.79); the experiences that comprise our lives are subject to the normative force of that culture. This history or tradition – or more often these multiple histories and traditions – create a boundary or limitation on the possible array of interpretations which the individual might consider. We often privilege one of our traditions over another when making an interpretation. Sometimes this choice is not a conscious one; sometimes it is not an individual one.

*The Horizon of Understanding*

Gadamer names the boundary created by prejudice and tradition the “horizon of understanding,” which is “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Gadamer, 1979, p.143). Each individual’s horizon of understanding, however, is not permanent. In each new interpretive encounter, traditions and prejudices are brought forth anew, opening the possibility that a new interpretation or meaning could result.
Bernstein explains:

There can never be ... finality in understanding, or complete self-transparency of the knower. We always find ourselves in an open dialogical or conversational situation with the very tradition and history that is effectively shaping us.” (Bernstein, 1986, p.63)

In a joking situation, an interpreter brings a horizon of understanding that may confront, via the joke, a different view/horizon. The results are unpredictable and diverse, but they may include the interpreter’s horizon of understanding shifting to a new place in response to the new information, the alternative interpretation, or the impact of the experience itself. Warnke explains, “Our final perspective reflects the education we have received through our encounter with the object” (Warnke, 1987, p. 107). Consider the potential for a fusion of horizons in this joke from a routine by stand-up comic Suzanne Westenhoffer:

*Are you a lesbian by choice or by nature? Yes. That’s the thing, that whole “choice” thing. People say, “Oh, you chose to be a homosexual.” Oh no, I didn’t choose it — I was chosen!*

*Are you serious? I get to be queer? Oh, thank you. I didn’t even fill out the application, I am sooo thrilled. No, I did. I bought the ticket, I scratched it off ... Look, I’m a lesbian! I won!* (in Flowers, 1995, p. 188)

Consider a similar joke by Reno on lesbian recruitment:

*Hey, great! I can join an oppressed minority, lose my job, my parents, my home, get killed on the street for kissing my lover, and have millions of people hate me for no reason at all? Sign me up!* (Tracey and Pokorny, 1996, p. 182)

Some people have a tradition or a prejudice that interprets sexual orientation as a choice, which in turn may influence them to believe that a gay or lesbian, having chosen “a homosexual lifestyle,” could intentionally choose to reject it. Therefore they see no need to accept homosexuality as an aspect of human life because it is possible to eradicate it intentionally. Characterizing lesbianism either as the result of winning a lottery or as a potentially irrational choice (why would one *choose* persecution?) introduces into the
encounter some possible explanations of homosexuality that would be counter-intuitive to these knowers' prejudices, presenting them with the opportunity to re-interpret their traditions and prejudices. In these jokes, the joker makes different, lighthearted claims for the "cause" of homosexuality – lottery winning or masochism. These interpretations stand in contrast with the interpreter's original views. Under favorable circumstances, these jokes may contribute to the mediation of the understanding of the interpreter, moving her/his historical horizon of understanding about "choice" to a new place. Realistically, these jokes may simply make the interpreter unsettled or confused, but this experience can sow the seeds for possible critical reinterpretation.

Trust and Doubt: The Anticipation of Completeness and the Docta Ignorantia

While the reader approaches the text with prejudices and traditions intact, she/he must also expect that there is something to be learned from the interpretive encounter, that is, the text must be seen to be worth the effort of engagement with it. This granting of authority to the text, at least at the outset, is what Gadamer calls "the anticipation of completeness." He writes:

Who ever wants to understand will not be able to yield to the contingency of his own assumptions and thereby fail to hear the text's opinion as consistently and stubbornly as possible ... Whoever wants to understand a text is rather prepared to let it say something to him. Hence a hermeneutically schooled consciousness must be sensitive to the otherness of the text from the beginning. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 238)

In addition to this preliminary trust in the completeness of the text, the reader must approach the interpretive task with some measure of Socrates' *docta ignorantia*, the wisdom of knowing that one does not know. The reader must acknowledge the existence of her/his biases and be prepared for the text to challenge them. While realizing the normative power of tradition and prejudices, the reader adopts a tentative or humble stance, aware that "the
borders and boundaries which serve to secure our life together and give us identity are permeable” (Smith, 1999, p. 38). This anticipation of completeness combined with an expectation that one will be “disrupted” is typical of a person’s approach to a joke.

When a joker sets up a comic encounter with a line like, “That reminds me of a joke,” or “I’ve got a new joke for you,” we anticipate that we will need to accept the integrity of the joke/story we are about to hear, play along, or suspend disbelief if elements of the joke are not rational – for example, animals are talking. We anticipate, as well, that we do not and cannot know the outcome of the story and that our traditional view will actually be disrupted, confounded or teased by it. Nonetheless, we take the joke seriously, patiently awaiting the punchline which proves that we ought not to have taken the joke seriously. We have put our faith not only in the completeness of this individual story, but also in the joke structure itself, anticipating that something in which we believe, or something that we understand, is about to be interpreted differently. We allow this disruption of our traditions and prejudices, and we often enjoy it, demonstrating that enjoyment through laughter. Consider the anticipation of completeness and the docta ignorantia in this joke.

*How many mice does it take to screw in a lightbulb?*  
Two. That’s all that can fit. (Dundes, 1987, p. 147)

The lightbulb joke structure is a device employed to mock various groups who seem unable, for particular reasons, to complete a simple task such a screwing in a lightbulb. Here are some other examples to clarify the structure.

*How many psychiatrists ...*  
*Only one, but the bulb must want to change.*

*How many WASPs ...*  
*Two. One to mix the martinis and one to call the electrician.*
How many Puerto Ricans ...
Three. One to do the work and two to hold the boombox. (Boskin, 1997, p. 116)

When we approach a “lightbulb” joke, we anticipate that there will be a unreasonable number of people of a particular group required to do a simple, one-person task, and we also anticipate that there will be some “explanation” for that unreasonable number although, applying the docta ignorantia, we assume that we will be surprised by the explanation. This explanation will be a mocking statement based on a stereotype about the particular group’s characteristics or behaviors. We will be required to match that stereotype against our own prejudices or traditions, as well as to determine whether we accept the stereotype as valid, even temporarily, and whether the mocking seems in good fun or in cruelty. This does seem like a lot of work to generate a laugh from a common, simple joke, and in practice the entire interpretive experience is mercifully short, with all of the analysis occurring almost subconsciously. Then we laugh, or we groan, or we object. Meanwhile, back at the mice …

The mice joke is a joke on the joke. It takes the form of a traditional lightbulb joke, setting up the anticipation of completeness for incompetence and a stereotype-based explanation as well as the expectation that the reader will be surprised and possibly amused by that explanation. The mice joke then transforms from one based on stereotypical behavior to a lexical joke based on multiple meanings of the word “screw,” rendering the reader doubly ignorant insofar as the surprise that the she/he was expecting is not even the correct surprise. The joke, then, is not “on” a maligned group (mice), but rather on the reader for a misdirected anticipation of completeness based on a prejudice about the nature of the lightbulb joke. This joke reinforces the good sense of maintaining one’s wisdom of knowing that one doesn’t know, even in the most trivial of encounters!
In the joke that follows, the *docta ignorantia* requires the reader to consider that man can talk to God, that God will reply, and that the subject of the conversation can be outside traditional man-God topics such as faith, hope and charity. Who knows – it may be so!

*Solomon kept praying and beseeching God to let him win the lottery. Every time somebody won he would plead: “Why not me, Lord? I’m so much more pious.” And he would carry on in this way for months and years. Finally God responded: “Give me a break Solomon. Buy a ticket!”* (Saper, 1993, p. 79)

Tradition might suggest that faith and piety will be rewarded, although such a reward is typically not to be delivered during this earthly life. The anticipation of completeness that the reader brings to this joke includes an expectation of a good reason for Solomon’s failure to win the lottery, perhaps having to do with his perceived piety. After the punchline we realize that Solomon had failed to take even the simplest action in support of his goal of winning the lottery, that is, the action of buying a ticket. God’s language, “Give me a break …” suggests a frustration with the human who expects Him to do all of the work. It may be not that God had let Solomon down, but that Solomon has let God down. An anticipation of completeness, the wisdom of not knowing, and the effective history of the reader are all at play in jokes about the relationship between man and God. Saper suggests that this relationship “provides a source of great humor to the Jew” particularly because of their claim to be “the chosen people,” a claim which might cause an anticipation of an insider deal with the Almighty which would guarantee an easy route to eternal salvation, when a reading of history would show that their earthly lives have been anything but easy (Saper, 1993, p. 78).

*A Shock or Confrontation – The Hermeneutic Experience*

Gadamer describes the role of an “experience” in providing the opportunity for making new or different meaning:
Every experience is a confrontation. Because every experience sets something new against something old and in every case it remains open in principle whether the new will prevail – that is, will truly become experience – or whether the old, accustomed, predictable will be confirmed in the end. So it is with all experience. It must either overcome tradition or fail because of tradition. The new would be nothing new if it did not have to assert itself anew against something. (Gadamer, 1979, p. 109)

The understanding is created in the experience. Roth elaborates:

Experience is not only “reportive,” that is it does not merely reflect what is already in existence. It is also creative. When a new situation arises, the mind identifies the problem, projects imaginative solutions or hypotheses, and tests them. In the process, the knower acts upon the environment, changes it, and arrives at a satisfactory solution to the initial problem. ... but it may happen that new phenomena are noticed that do not fit precisely under the laws already in place. ... It may be found that old ways of thinking and acting no longer suffice, and so different methods are sought and tested. In all these cases, new beliefs and new “truths” are brought into existence; truth is not only found, it is also created.” (Roth, 1998, p. 6)

Gadamer, Greene (1995) and Caputo (2000) each refer to the experience of interpreting art as one that may create Roth’s “new situation” such that the knower’s past and present are mediated. Caputo writes, “The work of art springs not from pure madness but from the invasion of reason by madness, from the tension or confrontation between reason and unreason” (Caputo, 2000, p. 23). Greene concurs, “Most would support Marcuse in his claim that art ‘breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle’” (Greene, 1995, p. 138). I believe another experience has the potential to liberate us from the “law of the established reality principle.” That experience is joking.

Consider the break with established reality in the following joke:

*A young ventriloquist is touring the clubs and one night he’s doing a show in a small town in Arkansas. With his dummy on his knee, he starts going through his usual dumb blonde jokes when a blonde woman in the 4th row stands on her chair and starts shouting: *'I've heard enough of your stupid blonde jokes! What makes you think you can stereotype women in that way? What does the*
color of a person's hair have to do with her worth as a human being? It's guys like you who keep women like me from being respected at work and in the community and from reaching our full potential as a person. You and your kind continue to perpetuate discrimination not only against blondes, but women in general ... and all in the name of humor."

The embarrassed ventriloquist begins to apologize, when the blonde yells: "You stay out of this, mister! I'm talking to that little guy sitting on your lap!" (e-mail message)

The “blonde joke” is founded on a stereotype that blonde women are dumb. In the body of this joke the blonde in the audience articulately states her opposition to such stereotyping, providing evidence of the personal and professional damage that it perpetrates. The reader is likely moved by her argument which belies the idea that she is dumb. When the punchline reveals that she thinks the ventriloquist’s dummy is actually talking, our reversal on the stereotype of the dumb blonde is itself reversed leaving us to laugh for having been taken in twice – once by rejecting the stereotype and once by believing it. We are confronted, challenged to look again at what we truly think. Hyers claims this is the true value of comedy, “As in all profound comedy, one soon discovers that the object of laughter is really oneself in the larger predicament and folly of man” (Hyers, 1973, p. 42).

Openness, Play and Attention to the Other

Having been confronted by the joke, we have the opportunity to bring our prejudices into play, to encounter other views as presented by the joke, and potentially to transcend our own horizons. This opportunity is only realized, however, if we bring openness to the encounter. Zen nun Chodron advises, “Inquisitiveness or curiosity involves being gentle, precise, and open – actually being able to let go and open.” (Chodron, 2001, p. 4) This openness allows us to see the view of other and at the same time to see our own prejudices in new relief against the other, introducing the possibility that they might change through this
interpretive experience. Greene argues that we must be "wide-awake" and receptive to the gift of the interpretive situation:

Clearly it takes critical reflection upon our own realities to capture such awareness. It requires a degree of wide-awakeness too many people avoid. Much depends on our ability to be cognizant of our standpoints and to be open to the world. (Greene, 1978, p. 17)

Miller describes the hermeneutic opportunity of humor this way:

It has something to do with the exercise of some sort of perception which enables us to see things for the first time, to reconsider our categories and therefore to be a little bit more flexible and versatile when we come to dealing with the world in future ... it has to do with what I've called a cognitive rehearsal of some sort ... The more we laugh the more we see the point of things, the better we are, the cleverer we are at reconsidering what the world is like. [We use] the experience of humor as a sabbatical leave from the binding categories that we use as rules of thumb to conduct our way around the world. (in Palmer, 1994, p. 58)

Consider the openness required of the largely white audience to put their prejudices into play listening to these jokes delivered in the early 1960s by black stand-up comic, Dick Gregory:

*I sat in at a lunch counter for nine months. They finally integrated and didn't have what I wanted.*

*You gotta say this for whites, their self-confidence knows no bounds. Who else could go to a small island in the South Pacific, where there's no crime, poverty, unemployment, war or worry - and call it a "primitive society."* (reported in Watkins, 1994, p. 502)

And this "two-way" joke mocking racism and his own stand-up comedy career:

*What a country! Where else could I have to ride in the back of the bus, live in the worst neighborhoods, go to the worst schools, eat in the worst restaurants - and average $5,000 a week just talking about it!* (reported in Watkins, 1994, p. 502)

To a confirmed racist, or perhaps to an angry African-American, these jokes are anything but funny, describing as they do a society without basic justice. But openness may
enable the interpreter to laugh at the absurdity of such ridiculous – and offensive – behavior and look differently at human relationships or social policies.

Openness is, in part, achieved by the interpreter’s willingness to put her/his prejudices into “play” as though entering a game that has some pre-determined rules and structure, but an undetermined outcome. The players and conditions in each individual match do actually decide the outcome of that match, but it cannot be predicted. Warnke explains:

Players of a game are, in a sense, also its creators. The rules of the game are not created by the players; hence the particular confluence of actions that constitute any specific instance of the game do not create its structure. Yet, outside particular instances of the game it has no concrete shape or existence. On the one hand, then, a game determines the range of appropriate actions and attitudes on the part of its players; on the other it really exists only in particular actions and attitudes. (Warnke, 1987, p. 50)

She continues, “Although a game remains the same game in some sense it can also be entirely different each time it is played” (Warnke, 1987, p. 51).

When a player/interpreter agrees to enter the game, to be “open” to an unpredictable outcomes, he/she is agreeing to put prejudices and traditions “at risk,” opening up to the possibility that one outcome of the game will be changes to beliefs previously held to be “true.” Consider these stereotypical jokes about Jewish mothers as examples of a game that might challenge long-held beliefs.

One summer Mrs. Saperstein took her little boy Alan to Jones Beach. As soon as she settled under a beach umbrella she cried out to her son: “Alan, Alan, come here! Don’t run in the water. You’ll get drowned! Alan don’t play with the sand. You’ll get it in your eyes! Alan, Alan, don’t stand in the sun. You’ll get sunstroke! Oy Vey! Such a nervous child.” (Novak and Waldoks, 1981:30 cited in Davies, 2002, p. 79)

A Jewish young man was seeing a psychiatrist for an eating and sleeping disorder. "I am so obsessed with my mother... As soon as I go to sleep, I start dreaming, and everyone in my dream turns into my mother. I wake up in such a state, all I can do is go downstairs and eat a piece of toast." The psychiatrist replies: "What, just one piece of toast, for a big boy like you?" (Bethrishon, Retrieved September 30, 2002)
Two Jewish women who were college roommates meet after several years and try to catch up on developments in each other's lives. Mrs. Goldman asks, "So how old are your children now?" Mrs. Fineberg replies, "The doctor is seven and the lawyer is five." (Dundes, 1987, p. 124)

A young Jewish man calls his mother and says, "Mom, I'm bringing home a wonderful woman I want to marry. She's a native American and her name is Shooting Star." "How nice," says his mother. "And I have an Indian name, too," he says. "It's Running Deer and I want you to call me that from now on." "How nice," says his mother. "You should have an Indian name, too, Mom," he says. "I already do," says the mother. "You can call me Sitting Shiva." (dave.editthispage, Retrieved September 30, 2003)

These jokes introduce common stereotypes about Jewish mothers, namely that they are overprotective, obsessively concerned with food, overly ambitious for their children and fixated on making the perfect Jewish marriage for their children. If an interpreter puts these prejudices into "play" and takes an open view of these stories, it is not difficult to see that these qualities could be attributed to all mothers, and secondly that they could be seen as positive qualities, indicating that mothers want the best for their children. If the game moves deeper than the joke, the interpreter might learn that "Jokes about the Jewish mother – the biggest cliché in contemporary Jewish humor – are a relatively recent phenomenon. Traditional Jewish humor had no such jokes" (Dundes, 1987, p. 62). Furthermore, this joke cycle is part of American folklore and not one found in Europe. Still, a connection has been made between the stereotypical traits of Jewish American Mother (J.A.M.) and the "modal maternal pattern among Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe" (Dundes, 1987, p. 63). With this idea "in play," the interpreter might see these qualities as those of the immigrant in a new country working for a better future for their children.

A related joke cycle is that of the Jewish American Princess, a stereotypically spoiled, narcissistic, and materialistic woman interested only in finding a wealthy husband. If the
interpretive “play” about Jewish women jokes includes the reaction of Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin that the jokes are “misogynist, a kind of ‘kosher sexism’,” (in Boskin, 1997, p. 121), or the reaction of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods that, “What began as an object of sexist humor has now become a tool of the anti-Semite … far from being harmless humor, [these jokes] are forms of negative stereotyping and prejudice which demean Jewish women,” (in Boskin, 1997, p. 151), the outcome of the game might include a different understanding of the other, a different understanding of the joke, and a different understanding of the interpreter’s own prejudices and traditions. The key point about the play of the joke is that the cause of laughter, if any, is not in the joke, but in the interpreter engaging with the joke is each particular game. The same joke before the same interpreter told in another game – that could be because of different information or different participants – could elicit a new meaning and a different comic reaction.

Just as the outcome of a game is never the outcome, because the game could be played anew, in Gadamer’s hermeneutics we can never understand something once and for all; we simply put our effective history into play with an object or other and stay open to what that engagement produces. Bernstein explains it this way: “Gadamer introduces the concept of play in order to highlight the subtle dialectical and dialogical relation that exists between the interpreter and what he seeks to interpret” (Bernstein, 1986, p. 97). Each attempt to understand is to understand differently.

*The Hermeneutic Circle*

While each attempt at understanding is a new one, it cannot be separated from the interpreter’s whole effective history, nor can it be separated from the whole of the text, object or event being considered. To understand requires a holistic inquiry that examines both the
whole and the part, judging the particular event in light of its universal place. The continuous, iterative movement between the particular and the universal is known as the "hermeneutic circle." Into a whole that we understand from our traditions we introduce a part which is new; as we try to assimilate the piece into our previous understanding we adjust our horizon of understanding to a new place. As we examine the detail in any specific encounter, either historical or novel, we can make sense only if we place it against the background of the big picture. Frye explains:

I'm saying that everything is new, and yet recognizably the same kind of thing as the old, just as a new baby is a genuinely new individual, although it's also an example of something very common, which is human beings. (Frye, 1964, p. 46)

When we put pieces into the puzzle, not only does the puzzle change, but the individual piece takes on a different look. Understanding each time requires both whole and part, both past and present. As Frye outlines, our particular, fragmented impressions can sometimes make sense to us as representative of the universal event:

Our impressions of human life are picked up one by one, and remain for most of us loose and unorganized. But we constantly find things in literature [or jokes] that suddenly co-ordinate and bring into focus a great many such impressions, and this is part of what Aristotle means by the typical or universal human event. (Frye, 1964, p. 64)

The whole in which a joke encounter is situated is often described as a stereotype, that is a generalization that is applied to everyone in the group about which the specific joke is constructed. Familiarity with the stereotype is part of the prejudice that the interpreter brings to the encounter, and without it, the joke's potential impact is reduced or removed. Consider these jokes about Scots:

While shopping in Scotland an Englishman bought an article, placed a five pound note on the counter and went out without his change. The shopkeeper
tried frantically to attract his attention by knocking on the window with a sponge. (MacHale 1988:73 in Davies, 2002, p. 21)

"Why, McTavish," said the psychiatrist, "you seem to have lost your stutter."
"Yes," said McTavish, "I've been telephoning America a lot recently." (MacHale 1988:41 in Davies, 2002, p. 21)

These particular jokes are only funny against the universal expectation of penny-pinching behavior on the part of Scots. In the interplay between universal and particular individual aspects of meaning come together to make a whole, or qualities of the whole help us to understand the individual pieces. In the McTavish joke, it is unstated that a) Scots are parsimonious, b) long distance telephone calls from Scotland to America are expensive, c) stuttering lengthens a conversation, and d) long distance telephone calls are charged by time. Without access to these particulars, an interpreter may not be able to create the whole that McTavish is so concerned about money that he has overcome his stutter as a cost-saving strategy. A second interpretation of this joke might be that all of the skills of a professional psychiatrist are ineffective, but stinginess triumphs. Weaving a whole from its parts, or deconstructing a whole into parts is the constant. At any time new information may enter the interpretive event either via the interpreter herself, via the object/joke or via the interpreter’s joking companions. Bontekoe summarizes:

All human understanding, by virtue of its occurring in time, is hermeneutically circular. Because as sentient creatures we are located always at some point in space during some moment in time, information becomes available to us only serially. We notice things in succession as one item after another attracts our attention. The sequential appropriation of information, however, is a matter of immediate perception, and does not yet constitute understanding. Understanding occurs only when we recognize the significance of the various items that we notice – which is to say, when we recognize the way in which those items relate to each other. Understanding, then, is an essentially integrative activity. A number of things which antecedently stand in a meaningful pattern of mutual dependence, but which we initially encounter as separate objects of perception, are now seen as belonging together. (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 2)
The joke structure is also hermeneutically circular. The joker lays out “a number of things which antecedently stand in a meaningful pattern of mutual dependence,” typically connecting to the listener’s traditions and prejudices, then introduces new information in the form of a shift in direction, or a punchline. To get the joke, the interpreter must understand, that is “recognize the significance of the various items” as well as the new “way in which those items relate to each other.” To recognize this new way that the items relate, the interpreter must let go of his/her prejudices about these elements of the joke, and fuse horizons with another interpretation. When this happens, there is usually laughter.

Palmer adds a dimension to the hermeneutic circle in joking encounters which highlights the significance of the situation, or context in making meaning, or getting the joke. He describes “joking relationships” (Palmer, 1994, p. 12), patterns of joking behavior that are culturally regulated, defining those with whom one is permitted to joke, and those with whom joking is unacceptable. These regulations have been observed in tribal kinship patterns, gender patterns, work/family patterns, and patterns of hierarchy within workplaces. Coser reports about a hospital setting in which interns joked about but not with doctors, and doctors joked about but not with interns. A study of joking between longshoremen in Portland, Oregon, “found that the types of obscene joking, insults and nicknames which were all considered normal in the work environment were considered grossly offensive elsewhere” (Apte in Palmer, 1994, p. 19).

Through these culturally regulated joking relationships, the community contributes an “other” influence on the interpretation, enlarging the whole of which the joke is a part. The interpreter must attend to the object/joke, the other participants in the joking encounter,
her/his prejudices and traditions, and patterns of joking relationships in making the judgment whether or not to laugh.

Attention to the other also requires the suspension of judgment, at least temporarily, while we allow the other's voice to be heard clearly. Gadamer says:

Thus, it is part of any genuine conversation that one submits to the other, allows his viewpoint really to count and gets inside the other far enough to understand not him, to be sure, as this individual but rather what he says. That which has to be grasped is the substantive validity of his opinion so that we can be united with one another on the subject-matter. (in Warnke, 1987, p. 100)

In a joking encounter, this attention to the other often requires not only attention and suspension of judgment, but also suspension of what one really knows to be true and rational.

Consider this kangaroo joke:

A kangaroo kept getting out of his enclosure at the zoo. Knowing that he could hop high, the zoo officials put up a ten foot fence. He was out the next morning, just roaming around the zoo. A twenty foot fence was put up. Again he got out. When the fence was forty feet high, a camel in the next enclosure asked the kangaroo, "How high do you think they'll go?" The kangaroo said, "About a thousand feet, unless somebody locks the gate at night!" (jokedictionary, Retrieved October 1, 2003)

In this joke, the interpreter must stay with the story as the problem of the escaping kangaroo is developed. He/she must accept that there will be a solution in raising the fence. Then he/she must accept the fanciful notion of a conversation between the kangaroo and the camel even though rationally the interpreter knows that animals can not talk. Lastly, the interpreter must acknowledge the intellectual superiority of the kangaroo over the zoo staff, the latter apparently solving the wrong problem. At any point in the joking encounter, a listener may refuse to attend, interrupting the joke with a refusal to believe that animals can talk, or that kangaroos can predict future human behavior. This refusal to attend to the other/joke will result in the particular interpreter declaring the joke stupid, or saying "I don't get it."
The Importance of Language

For Gadamer, understanding is reached through dialogue which in turn takes place in language. He describes “language [as] a medium, an element: Language is the element in which we live, as fishes live in water” (Gadamer in Hahn, 1997, p. 22). Rorty argues that in modern times real dialogue itself is threatened, and especially vulnerable are any “‘revolutionary’ turns in conversation” (in Bernstein, 1986, p. 80). Bernstein argues, a la Rorty for the importance of:

A defense of the Socratic virtues, ‘the willingness to talk, to listen to the people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people.’ It means taking the conversation seriously (and playfully) without thinking that the only type of conversation that is important is the type that aspires to put an end to conversation by reaching some sort of ‘rational consensus,’ or that all ‘genuine’ conversations are really inquiries about ‘truth.’ It means not being fooled into thinking or feeling that there is or must be something more fundamental than the contingent social practices that have been hammered out in the course of history. It means resisting the ‘urge to substitute theoria for phronesis,’ and appreciating that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones and that even these conversational constraints ‘cannot be anticipated.’ (Bernstein, 1986, p. 86)

This willingness to talk, or to waive conversational constraints opens the door for joking as a way of sharing ideas, hearing from the other, putting prejudices at risk and being open to possible outcomes. In turn, the introductory phrase, “I’ve got a joke for you,” prepares the dialogic participant to let down her/his guard, to become playful, to expect a disruption of tradition. In these ways joking is a good form of exercise for the mind, allowing it to “practice” being open and flexible, actions that will be beneficial in more serious conversations.

At the outset, at least, a joking encounter depends on a type of conversational constraint, namely an expectation of a common starting point or shared background knowledge on which to situate the joke. Soon, of course – and everyone entering a joking
encounter knows this – this secure starting point will turn out to be a banana peel, or a rug which is yanked out from under the interpreter, reminding all that such security is illusion. Still, we need to begin the joking dialogue with some form of mutually understandable language. Palmer explains that jokes depend on:

mutual comprehension ... through the role of presupposition inherent in them, the ‘background knowledge’ they always mobilize in their structure, without which they are incomprehensible. This background knowledge is part of the culture which the joker and appreciative listener [interpreter] share. (Palmer, 1994, p. 153)

Consider these jokes by George Carlin whose comic career is based on challenging the presuppositions that others make, particularly about the shared meaning of language, typically formulating his comedy in the form of questions.

"In the privacy of your own home." As opposed to what? The privacy of someone else’s home? You have no privacy in someone else’s home. That’s why you got your own home. (Carlin, 1997, p. 129)

"Like a bat out of hell." How do we know how fast a bat would leave Hell? Maybe he would leave real slow. In fact, why should we assume that a bat would even want to leave Hell? Maybe he likes it there. Maybe Hell is just right for a bat. (Carlin, 1997, p. 128)

"You never know." Not true. Sometimes you know. (Carlin, 1997, p. 131)

"In the wrong place at the wrong time." How can this be? Shouldn’t it be, "In the right place at the wrong time?" If a guy gets hit by a stray bullet, he is in the right place (where his day’s activities have taken him) at the wrong time (when the bullet is passing by). If it were the wrong place, the bullet wouldn’t have been there. (Carlin, 1997, p. 131)

When Carlin begins this comic routine listeners “understand” him because they share with him a tradition in language. He quickly introduces alternative meanings, shaking the listeners from their possible belief in the absolute meaning of any expression, or possibly even an experience. He has been described as a “language-obsessed cynic.” His humorous
critique of language use, however, is an example of Smith’s claim that “the meaning of anything is always arrived at referentially and relationally” (Smith, 1999, p. 38).

*Imagination*

To get the joke, laughing at the object, or the other, or at one’s own traditions and prejudices requires what Smith calls a “hermeneutic imagination” that:

*has the capacity to reach across national and cultural boundaries to enable dialogue between people and traditions superficially at odds. Hermeneutics is able to shake loose dogmatic notions of tradition to show how all traditions open up onto a broader world which can be engaged from within the language of one’s own space. (Smith, 1999, p. 35)*

Imagination enables us to “believe” long enough to laugh; to believe that kangaroos can talk or that a mother, Jewish or not, could know when her child is 7 years old that she/he is going to be a doctor. It is the foundation of literature, art and humor, because, as Frye says, “Imagination gives us both a better and a worse world than the one we usually live with, and demands that we keep looking steadily at both” (Frye, 1964, p. 98).

In our serious and hurried Western culture we allow our imaginations to atrophy, leaving us unprepared for the rigors of hermeneutic conversation. A call for the return to the childlike state of playfulness and make-believe is suggested by those who lament the restrictive grip of adult traditions. In writing about monk Thomas Merton, Labrie reports that:

*Childhood thus became for Merton a symbol of the starting point, a place where other choices might have been made than those that in fact had been made and thus a world that in this respect could be idealized. He attempted to recover the attributes of what he thought of as the child’s vision: the openness, spontaneity, and imaginative readiness that so clearly mark his writings. (Labrie, 2001, p. 137)*

This imaginative state of mind, open to possibilities is called in Zen Buddhism, “beginner’s mind,” a state that incorporates both the anticipation of completion in new stories, and the
docta ignorantia of one who is new to the experience of the new story. This fertile emptiness is explained in this Zen story:

A Cup of Tea
Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868 – 1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.
Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.
The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself.
"It is overfull. No more will go in!"
"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"
(Reps, 1957, p. x)

Smith too, argues that the work of interpretation and understanding requires a "hermeneutic imagination" characterized by the ongoing development of four qualities; "a deep attentiveness to language ... a deepening of one's sense of the basic interpretability of life itself," looking again at the "everydayness" of our individual lives as well as our place in the larger world, and lastly, learning to focus on "creating meaning, not simply reporting on it"
(Smith, 1999, p. 41-42).

With these four requirements in mind, it would be reasonable to nominate George Carlin as the poster boy for the hermeneutic imagination, though he would likely be quite hostile to such a title. Consider this essay which demonstrates a hermeneutically humorous critical interpretation of sleep:

People say, "I'm going to sleep now," as if it were nothing. But it's really a bizarre activity. "For the next several hours, while the sun is gone, I'm going to become unconscious, temporarily losing command over everything I know and understand. When the sun returns, I will resume my life."

If you didn't know what sleep was, and you had only seen it in a science fiction movie, you would think it was weird and tell all your friends about the movie you'd seen.

"They had these people, you know? And they would walk around all day and be OK. And then, once a day, usually after dark, they would lie down on these special platforms and become unconscious. They would stop functioning
almost completely, except deep in their minds they would have adventures and experiences that were completely impossible in real life. As they lay there, completely vulnerable to their enemies, their only movements were to occasionally shift from one position to another; or, if one of the 'mind adventures' got too real they would sit up and scream and be glad they weren't unconscious anymore. Then they would drink a lot of coffee."

So, next time you see someone sleeping, make believe you're in a science fiction movie. And whisper, "The creature is regenerating itself." (Carlin, 1997, p. 46)

Interpretation, Understanding and Application

One gift that humor offers to the deep challenge of making meaning rather than merely reporting it is the sense it provides to the interpreter that he/she is working "in a parallel universe." Often, in joking confrontations, human foibles are pointed out by kangaroos, everyday tasks like changing lightbulbs are given cultural significance, death is ridiculed, and it's the "other guy" who slips on a banana peel. Whatever is happening is not about me, not about my world, not about my prejudices, necessarily. The interpreter's response can be anywhere along a continuum from simply responding to the surface of the joke and enjoying a brief respite of laughter to embracing the joke's metaphoric potential, experiencing a deeper fusion of horizons. And if the risk of putting one's prejudices into play becomes too great, there is a side exit in the phrase, "It's only a joke" which can be used by joker or by listener to indicate a preference that the whole idea of the joke remain in the parallel universe – for now.

Still, there is always an application of the experience of the joking confrontation. If the interpreter laughs at the other's pratfall, it may be out of relief that the accident did not befall him/her, relief that emanates from a momentary reflection on one's own history combined with a momentary reflection on the delicate balance of human life, banana peels or both. If the interpreter more seriously confronts the stereotyping in Jewish mother jokes,
her/his whole orientation toward mothering as a culturally defined action could undergo a
critical reinterpretation, leading to changed behavior towards mothers. Depending on the
interpreter’s circumstance, some kind of application is inevitable. The application will be
both concrete and particular, representing the “end” of this specific journey from the
interpreter’s particular situation, through the hermeneutic circle of play between the
particular and the universal, to the new horizon which represents the “beginning” of the next
particular situation. Warnke explains:

The way in which a text or any object of understanding challenges our beliefs
is contingent on both the way we interpret the object and on just what our
beliefs are; in other words, it is contingent upon our situation and our
understanding of truth therefore involves application whether we are
conscious of such application or not. (Warnke, 1997, p. 98)

Gutwirth describes the joke as an invitation to reorder:

Our conceptual grids for the ordering and retrieval of experience must be
momentarily interfered with, or rather caused to work against themselves, for
a halt to be called, a reordering to be invited, that briefly foregrounds the
process itself and its inherent limitations. (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 94)

Loosening the grip of the “conceptual grids” and even “briefly foreground[ing] the
process itself and its inherent limitations,” creates an opening, a beginner’s mind, some space
for the hermeneutic imagination.

*Getting the Joke – Really*

In their introduction to a book about the work of Maxine Greene, Ayers and Miller
write:

Maxine Greene invites us to “do philosophy,” to struggle with ideas, with the
arts, with the events of the world, with the daily newspapers and our
idiosyncratic chance encounters – all in order to become more aware of
ourselves and our world, more aware of our inter-subjective predicaments, and
then, importantly, to act on our awarenesses. To act on what we find; to act,
even with partial consciousness; to act, even with contingent understanding; to
act, to be a participant in the world. (Ayers and Miller, 1998, p. ix)
Greene herself suggests that this struggling may be done by breaking out of habitual ways of seeing and doing:

Treating the world as predefined and given, as simply there, is quite separate and different from applying an initiating, constructing mind or consciousness to the world. When habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility. ... Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices. (Greene, 1995, p. 23)

Consider this routine by lesbian comic Sara Cytron who tries to weave her particular life experiences into the general regulations of American society, simultaneously highlighting the universal aggravation of the automated telephone answering system, an aggravation for which sexual orientation is irrelevant:

*Harriet and I decided to register as domestic partners. The most amazing thing about the process to me was how totally normal it seemed. First we called the Office of the City Clerk. The telephone recording instructed us: “For marriage license information, press ‘one’ now. For record room information, press ‘two’ now. For domestic partners information, press ‘three’ now.” It was obvious – we were finally entitled to do something as boring as getting married or accessing records. In just another year or two they’ll probably add: “For transgender license information, press ‘four’ now. For whip and chain registration, press ‘five’ now.”

The truth is, you hardly get any social privileges as domestic partners unless you’re sick, dead, or in jail. I could visit Harriet at Rikers Island, but we still don’t even qualify to be a team on Family Feud. (Cytron and Malinowitz, 1995, p. 33-34)

While the joke renders the real world frivolously unreal – Cytron awaits whip and chain registration and laments not being a candidate for a quiz show – it also hints that current reality could use some adjustment. When Cytron admits that it is “amazing” to feel “normal” in her interactions with the state, she is suggesting that normal could be reexamined. Frye argues that this is the work of the imagination, “The fundamental job of the imagination in
ordinary life, then, is to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in” (Frye, 1964, p. 140).

Hesse writes that “seriousness is an accident of time,” and eternity provides only enough time for a joke, intimating that the meaning or sense we make of the world might well be made through the sense of humor:

Humor alone (perhaps the most inborn and brilliant achievement of the human spirit) attains to the impossible and brings every aspect of human existence within the rays of its prism. To live in the world as though it were not the world, to respect the law and yet to stand above it, to renounce as though it were not renunciation, all the favorite, commonly formulated propositions of an exalted, worldly wisdom, only humor has the power to make those paradoxes obvious. ... it is a third kingdom wherein the spirit becomes tough and elastic, a way of reconciliation, of extolling the saint and the profligate in one breath and making the two poles meet ... You should not take things too seriously ... seriousness is an accident of time, it puts too high a value on time. Eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke. (Hesse, 1929, p. xx).

Gadamer’s Critics

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics has been criticized from several perspectives. While acknowledging these critics, I remain convinced that Gadamer offers resources to help us understand understanding, to help us understand humor, and to help us use humor to understand. What follows is a brief summary of the major points of contention raised about Gadamer’s views.

Too Subjective

Some argue that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics cannot point the way to understanding because it is too vulnerable to the blindness of subjective judgment. If, as Gadamer suggests, the only meaning the interpreter can achieve is his own, derived in each unique confrontation with an other, and all understanding based on the individual’s
experience, a mis-interpreted experience would result in mis-understanding, or a subjective understanding valid only for the individual, some critics argue that the door is then opened to cavalier or entirely subjective ideas, a result Warnke labels “opportunistic interpretation.” She continues, “This result worried Dilthey; the question it raises is whether individual circumstances constitute as valid an orientation to a given subject-matter as any other” (Warnke, 1987, p. 75).

The significance of tradition and prejudice in the creation of an interpreter’s effective history enables Gadamer to defend his theory from this critique. He argues that the interpreter is conditioned by his effective history – prejudices and traditions – such that a purely autonomous, or subjective, interpretation is not possible. The individual makes the judgment, but he carries into it the historic perspective developed over time within his culture, applying to the new interpretation the tradition derived by many other people in many other interpretations. In this way, tradition offers a “tested” beginning or horizon from which the individual can move into a new understanding. Tradition provides a conservative effect in opposition to subjective or cavalier ideas.

The following story, paraphrased from a Shaun Majumder performance on CTV’s Comedy Now illustrates the balancing effect of tradition against opportunistic interpretation. Majumder is of mixed Newfoundland Indo-Canadian ancestry. Among other qualities he has some Indo-Canadian physical features including dark hair and caramel colored skin, and some Newfoundlander qualities including a self-deprecating sense of humor and a musical lilt to his voice. Imagine those qualities as you consider this story:

I grew up in a small town in Newfoundland. We were really friendly there. We were especially friendly at Hallowe’en. We all went out together; we all wore the same costumes, you know those white sheets and the white pointy
hats. Except I didn’t have a costume. But I got to go at the front of the parade. And I got to be in the centre when we did the dancing in a circle. (paraphrased from Majumder, CTV, Comedy Now)

As a stand-alone or entirely subjective interpretation, this is only a silly story about Majumder’s childhood. When the interpreter places the story in a context influenced by an awareness of the tradition of the KKK, the wearers of white sheets and pointy hats who encircled a solitary black at night as a prelude to torture and murder, the meaning of the story is moderated significantly. As this tradition-invoked awareness builds, listeners to Majumder typically begin both to laugh and to squirm, possibly speculating about whether such a racist incident did, or could occur in Newfoundland and what, if any is the interpreter’s complicity in the outcome. In this way, a completely subjective interpretation is mediated by the traditions and prejudices the interpreter brings to the encounter/joke.

The Oppression of Tradition

It is exactly this role for tradition that is the foundation of Habermas’ critique of Gadamer’s theory. Habermas sees tradition as potentially oppressive, constraining an individual’s openness to new interpretations and directing the interpretation to a misunderstanding as invalid as the one derived by the unrestrained individuality that Dilthey feared. Habermas sees tradition itself as something which must be interpreted rather than simply acknowledged. Calling it ideology, he sees it as the source of social and political conditions that are based on unequal distribution of power, and therefore typically oppressive. Habermas, Apel, and other critical theorists argue that the understanding achieved by Gadamer’s fusion of horizons may be a faulty one because the tradition brought forward to the interpretation has not itself been sufficiently interrogated, or that the tradition is imposed upon the interpreter by force. Habermas advises that the hermeneutic
interpretation be tested against an external “reference system” that specifies the impact of social hierarchy, power relations, language and other forms of domination. His remedy is the specific structuring of an ideal speech situation to enable dialogue to occur without the limiting influence of tradition. While not the subject of this thesis, it is significant to note that Habermas’s ideal speech situation has, itself, been criticized as inadequate to compensate for the unequal pressures of social structures and traditions.

Gadamer’s reply is that any examination of tradition that would reveal such social or power inequities is itself a hermeneutic act. Furthermore, interpretation implies criticism insofar as the interpreter acknowledges at the outset that his prejudices may be inappropriately founded, and he enters into the inquiry prepared to have these prejudices either confirmed or challenged. His prejudices are not changed by the text or the other; they are changed – or not – as a result of his own critical reflection on the experience of interpreting. Warnke summarizes:

Gadamer argues that hermeneutics is not only equal to the task of critical reflection but peculiarly suited to it in as much as its task is just that of revealing complexities in meaning and disclosing different dimensions of a text or other aspects of the tradition. ... This means, further, that prejudices, commitments and values that are obscured from one point of view can be illuminated from another. (Warnke, 1987, p. 114)

Each individual participates in multiple, sometimes conflicting traditions which rub against one another in each interpretive encounter, ameliorating the oppressive power of a single tradition.

Gadamer’s approach to a new experience or text is based not only on the assumption of the tradition and prejudice of the interpreter, but also on the assumption that the text had some truth to impart. Calling this an “anticipation of completeness,” he presumes that although we have only a partial view of the text, there is more behind it available to us in
exploration, and he suggests that the interpreter approach the text with "good will" in anticipation of learning more about both the text or object and himself. This good will is expressed as an openness to the ideas of the other in the encounter, as well as an admission of doubt, a letting go of the expectation that one already knows the truth, the whole truth.

Multiple traditions that reduce the potential oppressiveness of any one tradition also contribute to the multiple interpretations that make comedy possible. As described in Chapter 2, things are only funny if there is a way that they are supposed to be, and yet they are not that way. A single, unalterable tradition would make comedy impossible. Consider this George Carlin joke to illustrate this point:

*I put a dollar in the change machine. Nothing changed.* (Carlin, 1997, cover)

Multiple traditions are evident in the interpretation of this joke. One is the multiple meanings of the word change, in one case representing coins as opposed to paper money, in the other case representing a different state of affairs. The second source of meaning is the expectation one has about what will occur when one puts a dollar bill into a machine called a "change" machine. Without understanding both the multiple word meanings and the multiple event meanings, this Carlin line is not a joke. In other, more serious encounters, an individual interpreter's multiple traditions come into play in the interpretive encounter and modify the impact of ideology, though it is important to reiterate that an interpreter is not necessarily conscious of all of his/her traditional influences, nor does he/she weight the traditions equally in each encounter.

*Too Much Trust*

Deconstructionists, represented by Derrida, reject both the idea that a text is coherent, and also the idea that the text has some claim to truth. They challenge Gadamer's proposed
approach with good will, recommending instead an approach with suspicion, and an
anticipation of taking the text apart to reveal its hidden and potentially self-contradictory
motives. Just as Dilthey worried about too much trust in the judgment of the individual,
Derrida worries about too much trust in the authority of the text; both excesses possibly
leading the way to misinterpretation.

Foreshadowed by Heidegger's notion of being in time, Gadamer's response to the
challenges of excessive trust, either in tradition or in text, is that the interpreter gives her trust
conditionally, such trust accompanied by an openness to possibilities of other interpretations.
Each interpretive encounter is a new one with some continuity with the past and some
anticipation of the future, but occurring in this time, in this context. Gadamer writes the
interpreter "may not look away from himself and the concrete situation in which he finds
himself. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all" (in Warnke,
1987, p. 95). In this situation, the interpreter applies both trust and openness. Warnke
summarizes the momentariness of the interpreter's trust, "[Gadamer's] argument is rather
that an openness to the possible truth of the object is the condition of understanding, that one
must at least provisionally concede authority to one's object, even if this concession may
ultimately be rescinded" (Warnke, 1987, p. 89). To be suspicious of everything, Warnke
explains, might result in not being able to take the risk to learn anything new, or to change
any of our traditions, trapping us, ironically, in the place from which Habermas and Derrida
would see us liberated. She writes:

Just as in the case of presuming coherence, it is only by presuming truth that
what may appear first as a "rupture" in the text can be seen to require not only
a new textual interpretation but a new understanding of the subject-matter at
issue. From this perspective, to begin with the deconstructionist assumption
that claims to truth are rarely warranted and in fact undermine themselves is to
sacrifice a clear opportunity not simply to understand, but moreover, to learn.
(Warnke, 1987, p. 89)

For Gadamer, the acknowledgment of tradition, prejudice and the authority of the text or
experience represent the beginning of the interpretive engagement. Each of them influences
the interpretation, and is influenced by it. Acknowledgment does not imply eternal or
transcendental acceptance.

Again, a joke may be helpful. Jokes are, by design, temporary. We step out of our
real lives momentarily to embrace the comic encounter. While we attend to them with
intention and attention, we don’t ever take them seriously. Even better, they function to help
us understand that we ought not to take our real lives all that seriously either! The
deconstructionists may be correct that life isn’t truth, but it is life, and as the comics point
out, it is better than the alternatives.

Too much trust in self or tradition or text renders the interpreter vulnerable to an
expectation that he/she need not interpret, that the status quo has some status, that life is
normal and predictable. Comics are born to knock such believers off their feet. Believers in
such aphorisms as “cleanliness is next to godliness” and “children should be seen and not
heard” are the folks Phyllis Diller had in her sights when she offered the following
housekeeping tips:

*If they [the children] write their names in the dust on the furniture, don’t let
them put the year.*

*Dont’t feel you need to give him [the baby] a bath every single day. He won’t
tell anybody.*

*Place a tipped-over flower pot in view. Any dirt within 50 feet can be blamed
on this. (Diller, 1966, pp. 70, 74, 57)*
Diller was, of course, in the early days of feminism also mocking the *Better Homes and Gardens* standards for housekeeping and the accompanying definitions of women's work.

**Dialogue is Essential to Interpretation**

Critics highlight what Warnke calls Gadamer's "oscillation" in an interpretive encounter between the expectation that an open anticipation of completeness of the text will prevent an arbitrary or cavalier interpretation and the expectation that arbitrary interpretation will be avoided by subjecting the text to the conservative influence of effective history. In identifying both of these influences, I believe Gadamer is setting the stage for his argument that understanding is fundamentally dialogic.

Assuming one's own fallibility, a participant enters:

a genuine conversation ... concerned with discovering the real strength of every other participant's position. ... Each begins with certain views and assumptions but in confronting opposing views and assumptions has to reconsider and develop his or her own. The process, then, is one of integration and appropriation. (Warnke, 1987, pp. 100 – 101)

In describing this genuine conversation, Gadamer speaks to some of the same concerns raised by Habermas in his delineation of an ideal speech situation, particularly a leveling of power, an anticipation of both the right and the capacity of participants to contribute, and a humility about the validity of one's initial views. Gadamer writes:

Coming to an understanding in conversation presupposes that the partners are ready for it and that they try to allow for the validity of what is alien and contrary to themselves. If this happens on a reciprocal basis and each of the partners, while holding to his own ground simultaneously weighs the counter-arguments, they can ultimately achieve a common language and a common judgment in an imperceptible and non-arbitrary transfer of viewpoints. (Gadamer, 1969, p. 348)
While the assumption of our own fallibility – the *docta ignorantia* – prepares us for a challenge both to our traditions and to our conditional trust in the text, a successful dialogue with others may result in our new understanding that is neither opportunistic nor oppressed.

A joke inserts itself into the interpreter’s path, creating a dialogic moment by redirecting that path, albeit momentarily. This is Carlin’s signature comedy, in which he creates a dialogue, talking back to a commonly expressed idea or slogan, insisting that the speaker consider an alternative meaning. Here is an illustration:

“*You can talk until you’re blue in the face*” ... Well, you can’t talk until you’re blue in the face. In order to talk, you need oxygen. Blueness of the face is caused by a lack of oxygen. So, if you’re blue in the face, you probably stopped talking a long time ago. You might be making some gestures. In fact, if you’re running out of oxygen, I would imagine you’re making quite a number of gestures. And rather flamboyant ones at that. (Carlin, 1997, p. 130)

*The “Vicious” Hermeneutic Circle*

Hermeneutic inquiry is understood to occur in a circular fashion because the interpretation of a particular text or an experience requires some knowledge of the whole text of which the selection is a part. At the same time, the whole cannot be understood except by examining the parts that comprise it. This hermeneutic circle is sometimes criticized as a vicious circle because of this unending movement from part to whole and back again. Bontekoe claims that while understanding is hermeneutically circular, it is possible because we bring into the circle of each inquiry some new information which we interpret and integrate so that when we momentarily “leave” the circle of inquiry, we understand differently. This different understanding is always beginning again, and is never complete. Nonetheless, it is not vicious. Bontekoe explains:

Understanding always begins *in media res*: that which has already been understood always forms the basis for grasping that which still remains to be
understood. By the same token, understanding always comes to an end short of its ideal completion: no matter how far we may push our inquiry, there always remains things bearing upon the object of inquiry which are not yet understood. ... At the beginning we choose to trust what might be questioned; at the end we choose to rest content with what might be pursued further. (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 2)

The image of the circle reminds us that the end of an inquiry and the beginning of a subsequent one, are the same place.

Revisiting the Big Three Theories of Humor

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides resources to help us understand the complexity of the human task of making sense, in both serious and comic encounters. Holland explains how joking itself is dialogical and circular with the cause indistinguishable from the effect:

Laughing is dialectic: ... when we respond to the world, stimulus and response do not have any simple cause-and-effect relationship. Rather, stimulus “causes” response only as one side of a dialogue prompts another: it cues a response without determining its particular form. ... Our amusement defines a joke as a joke as much as the joke defines our amusement. (Holland, 1982, p. 19)

The superiority theory of laughter concludes that the laughter is the outward expression of a feeling, typically either malice (Aristotle, Plato) or self aggrandizement from a sense of victory over another individual or circumstance (Hobbes). From Gadamer's view, the role of multiple traditions and prejudices in any judgment about whether or not a confrontation is humorous would suggest that laughter may emanate from malice, but may also be the result of a host of other emotions that the interpreter puts into play. Just as there can be no single generalizable interpretation of the situation, there can be no single interpretation of the motivation behind the laughter. Inferiority, deformity, accident or failure seen in another might just as likely induce feelings of empathy or concern as they
would induce feelings of malice or superiority, engendering in turn tears rather than laughter. The superiority theory held sway at a time when some people or classes were deemed superior to others in a host of ways, including in their ability to interpret, make sense of, or control the world around them. While momentary victory over circumstance might cause the victor to laugh, any truly thoughtful person knows the victory is momentary indeed, whereas making sense of the world is ongoing and complex.

The incongruity theory suggests that we laugh when we have experiences in the world that are unpredictable, unreliable, inexplicable. Here, too, Gadamer’s explanation about how we understand suggests that every interpretive experience is potentially ambiguous, calling upon us to put our prejudices into play in an atmosphere of openness with a recognition of the limitations of our knowledge and an expectation that our current interpretation will be revised. While this work of making sense of the world is sometimes comic, and sometimes supported by the ability to laugh, these meaning making encounters are not always humorous. Experiencing ambiguity may also results in rigid, sometimes thoughtless reiteration of an existing prejudice, or worse, a violent expression of opposition to the point of view of the other. Fear, anxiety and distress are also present when some interpreters anticipate ambiguity, or when they experience it. Laughter is, I believe, a more useful response to incongruity, but interpreters need to practice laughing at the small stuff in order to be prepared for the really confounding confrontations of life.

Lastly, the relief/release theory suggests that the interpreter laughs in relief when the confounding confrontation is concluded with no ill effect, and the world returns to order. Gadamer might argue that this is the most ill-conceived theory because the return to order is an illusion. While the interpreter might feel relieved, confident that all is normal, he/she is
actually especially vulnerable having stepped away from the ongoing opportunity and responsibility to make sense of the volatile experience of being thrown into the world. The world has its way of continuing to challenge any interpretation of normal, any sense of security, as Judith Viorst explains in the following poem, exhorting people to laugh:

You might as well laugh
So your ex-husband’s much younger wife is having a baby.
So your stockbroker says your best stock is down 42 points.
So your mother has broken her hip and your cute little grandson has just switched from Oreo cookies to joints,
And you need a new hot-water heater and roof, immediately.

It’s important to gaze without flinching at life’s cruel afflictions.
It’s important to let yourself grieve, but please don’t overdo.
Remember, that given a choice between laughter and slashing your wrists with a razor,
You might as well laugh.

So you got a D-minus on your last physical checkup.
So the claims court has finished deciding your case, and you lose.
So your dog ran away and your cute little granddaughter just switched from pigtails to dying her hair chartreuse,
And your auto insurance has doubled – effective immediately.

It’s useful to face the harsh facts and decline self-deception.
It’s no good denying the truth, but do try to eschew Dark thoughts. For given a choice between laughter and throwing yourself off a building,
You might as well laugh.

So you’ve disappointed your parents and failed all your children.
So nobody’s tried to seduce you since ’76.
So your hair’s falling out and your cute little father has just switched from Chaplin revivals to porno flicks,
And your orthodontist recommends braces – immediately.

It’s mature to endure the full pain. But avoid thoughts of nooses.
And continue the trip in your ever-more-leaky canoe.
For given a choice between laughter and pistols or pills or carbon monoxide,
Or dumping a large dose of arsenic into your stew,
You might as well laugh. (Viorst, 1989, p. 49)
As Bergler’s work (1956) cited in Chapter 2 attests, there is no single comprehensive theory to explain why people laugh. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, however, helps to explain the elements of human interpretive experience that are invoked when we are in a comic encounter. Understanding how we interpret a potential joke can, in turn, help us to consider how we might use comic situations as learning opportunities, the focus of Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4 – A PLACE FOR HUMOR IN EDUCATION

For Gadamer, it is in the application that any interpretation or understanding of an experience demonstrates its value. He describes his own motivation for his philosophical work as emanating from his intention to be “theoretically accountable” for his research and teaching practices:

In fact, the rise of my “hermeneutical philosophy” must be traced back to nothing more pretentious than my effort to be theoretically accountable for the style of my studies and my teaching. Practice came first. For as long ago as I can remember, I have been concerned not to say too much and not to lose myself in theoretical constructions which were not fully made good by experience. (Gadamer, quoted in Hahn, 1997, p. 16)

Risser concurs that there is more to do than merely to interpret or theorize about life when he describes the purpose of understanding as exceeding the understanding itself:

The intention of a philosophical hermeneutics is not to ask how understanding occurs in the human sciences, but to ask the question of understanding relative to the entire human experience of the world and the practice of life. ... a philosophical hermeneutics is effectively a hermeneutics of experience. (Risser, 1997, pp. 8 – 9)

Similarly, Rabinow and Sullivan write that meanings are not resident in the theoretical interpretations but in practices which they define as “socially constituted actions.”

They continue:

The baseline realities for both the observer and the observed in the human sciences are practices, socially constituted actions ... these baseline practices ... form the most general level of shared meaning. They are the basis of community, argument, and discourse. ... These meanings are intersubjective; they are not reducible to individual subjective psychological states, beliefs, or propositions. They are neither subjective nor objective but what lies behind both. (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979, p. 6)

The unending interpretation, understanding and application that comprise the work of the hermeneutic circle, or what Bateson (1989) calls “composing a life,” is also the work of the classroom. Young says, “The conversation of humankind should be drawn into the
classroom so that those in the classroom, partly via their own experience inside and outside it, should be drawn into that conversation" (Young, 2003, p. 126). In Chapter 3, I examined the interpretive quality of the joke, arguing that the sense of humor is a resource for making sense. In this chapter, I join Young in the call to draw the conversation of humankind into the classroom. This conversation is composed of Gadamer’s elements of interpretation, understanding and application. It is the work necessary to compose a life. It is part of the purpose for which we are educated.

I argue here for an educational role for humor by bringing forward those aspects of philosophical hermeneutics essential to developing understanding, and showing how they can flourish in a comic context, but as each is foregrounded in turn for purposes of examination, it is important to remember that the other aspects are also present in a real life interpretive encounter. Additionally, while a humorous encounter always requires interpretation, that interpretation is not necessarily always a valuable educational experience. The challenge is to understand how humor provides an opportunity for interpretation, understanding and application, and how it might be harnessed for educational purposes.

Confrontational Humor

The practice of humor has a long history as an educational resource, formally embodied by the court jester, the town fool, the lord of misrule at the feast of fools, the trickster, the Greek chorus or the Shakespearean stage clown. Videbaek explains that in Shakespeare’s theatre, “A clown performer simultaneously participates in the proceedings and stands apart from them” (Videbaek, 1996, p. 3), providing on behalf of the audience an interpretive stance, a critical second opinion on the experience of the play which suggests that alternative interpretations and practices of life are possible. Each comic encounter
serves as an opportunity for what Gadamer calls the shock or confrontation, that moment when it is possible to engage with a new perspective. Radin calls the trickster “A speculum mentis wherein is depicted man’s struggle with himself and with a world into which he had been thrust without his volition and consent” (Radin, 1956, p. x). As humans watch, the trickster/fool plays out the human struggle of interpretation and application.

In schools we are charged with the responsibility of supporting students to confront the human struggle for themselves, making their own interpretations and applications as they learn about themselves and their places in the world. Bateson writes, “we are engaged in a day-to-day process of self-invention – not discovery, for what we search for does not exist until we find it – both the past and the future are raw material, shaped and reshaped by each individual” (Bateson, 1989, p. 9). She emphasizes that this individual act of invention takes place in the social world, simultaneously inventing social relationships. “It is not the individual organism that survives but the organism in the environment that gives it life. We need to find ways to encourage a sense of self as continuing to develop through responsive interaction” (Bateson, 1994, p. 74).

When we arrive in the world – or are “thrown” – we have done the equivalent of landing from another planet: the entire experience of being human is alien. Supported by family and community, we begin to compose a life. We arrive with resources, though, not the least of which is wonder. Barth elaborates, “Each of us entered the world with a magical, even spiritual sense of wonder -- wonder about the universe, about ourselves, about those around us. We were blessed with the poetry of life” (Barth, 2001, p.157). This wonder motivates us, even as children, to make sense, to understand the universe, ourselves and others. Brain researchers Caine and Caine (1994) report that the human brain itself is
directed to understanding because it is structured to detect patterns and make approximations, store data in the form of memory, self-correct and learn from experience, and finally, to create. They write:

Children are seekers of meaning. No sooner do they learn how to talk than they begin asking questions about simple things as well as about the dilemmas of human existence that have perplexed philosophers and theologians from the dawn of time. Children are intensely interested in exploring questions of values, feelings, meaning, and the relationship of self to others. (Caine and Caine, 1994, p. 11)

This fundamental human motivation to make meaning, combined with a typical child-like state of “not knowing” provide fertile space for children to begin composing their lives. Most healthy children live with an anticipation of completeness, a non-threatening state of doubt, an openness to new experiences, imagination and a willingness to put their prejudices and experiences into play in search of new ones. Newman and Holzman, in describing language acquisition, emphasize that children don’t begin with the rules as they make meaning, they simply begin:

Very young children -- unencumbered by knowing what (or even that) language is, ignorant of the rules by which one is judged a societally correct speaker, not yet possessing the culturally produced and commodified need to ‘express yourself’ nor the craving for generality -- are marvelous meaning makers. Year-old toddlers do not say, “Give me a dictionary and a grammar book. I’ll be back in a couple of years.” No. They say things -- they babble, use words, make meaning -- as an inseparable part of the process of participating in social life. (Newman and Holzman, 1996, p. 182)

hooks concurs, citing Eagleton’s description of children as theorists:

Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as ‘natural,’ and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. (hooks, 1994, p. 59)
Consider the following particular interpretations from a limited understanding of universal circumstance. Although each is comic in its misunderstanding, each is also able to communicate meaning-in-progress:

"Ms. Shaw, can I have a kleeneck?"
"Yes, you may, Cameron. And the word is Kleenex."
"No, Ms. Shaw. I only want one." (personal communication, circa 1973)

_The little girl...was notified that a baby brother or baby sister was on the way. She listened in thoughtful silence, then raised her gaze from her mother's belly to her eyes and said, “Yes, but who will be the new baby’s mommy?”_ (Viorst, 1986, p. 87)

Unfortunately, in Western culture, development and maturation can often mean the gradual disappearance of the playful, open, inventive state of mind that is foundational to genuine hermeneutic inquiry. Shade (1996) claims that the average child laughs 400 times a day, the average adult only 15, a sad situation in every sense of the word! As we fall victim to the Senses Taker, our maturing seriousness interferes not only with our ability to enjoy the benefits of laughter. More significantly, excessive seriousness can contribute to our belief that our particular interpretations are universal, that there is no longer any need to be open or to consider the other, that life has been composed, once and for all. Defense, denial and certainty interrupt our composition. Sacks argues for a role for laughter in keeping us open: "I like jokes because they are unserious ways of saying serious things. They get past our defenses. What we can laugh at, we can face. What we cannot laugh at, we often deny" (Sacks, 2000, p. 1).

Ironically, taking ourselves too seriously interferes with our capacity to address the serious issues in our lives. Britzman and Dippo explain, “In the struggle to make an everyday life, people are understandably disinclined to open their world to disruption. Part of the problem ... is the difficulty of noticing that one is submerged, numbed by routine and
thoughtlessness in everyday life” (Britzman and Dippo, 2003, p. 133). Hyers (1981) suggests that a return to a childlike perspective may help us as adults to rise from submersion in our routines or belief in our “sanctimonious facade and sacrosanct presuppositions.” He continues:

The child has certain secrets on the subject of living, secrets that are shared by clowns and fools and great sages. ... Children have a remarkable talent for not taking the adult world with the kind of respect which we are so confident it ought to be given. ... They refuse to appreciate the gravity of our monumental concerns, while we forget that if we were to become more like children our concerns might not be so monumental. (Hyers, 1981, p. 78)

The way of the child is primarily imaginative, playful and open to multiple realities. They experience, intuitively, what Bateson calls insight, “that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another” (Bateson, 1994, p. 14), because for children the day-to-day of life is both new and old, familiar and exotic. Consider this emerging insight:

*The mother had read to her three year old son the book, “Hey, Little Ant!”, a morality tale about a child who has a habit of stepping on ants, only to meet one day a talking ant who engages him in conversation about life and death. The mother asked her son if he stepped on ants. He replied, “I step on ants all the time. But if I ever met one that talked, I sure wouldn’t step on that one! (participant in humor studies course, 2003)*

A mingling of the old and new is the natural state for children as they expand their experiences in the world. As adults, however, staying open to possibilities requires more intentional effort. Being playful, exercising the imagination and taking every opportunity to laugh help to maintain an attitude hospitable to insight.
Imagination

Egan writes, “When people try to describe the imagination, most frequently they refer to the capacity we have in common to hold images in our minds of what may not be present or even exist, and sometimes to allow these images to affect us as though they were present and real.” He continues that imagination “involves our capacity to think of the possible rather than just the actual” (Egan, 1992, pp. 3, 4). C.S. Lewis “held that a healthy imagination in adults and children is vital because of the enlargement of being and enrichment of life it offers, and because of the potential it holds for the deepening of faith and understanding” (Schakel, 2002, p. 2). I argue, too, that imagination is fundamental to interpretation underwriting both the anticipation of completeness (there will be a point to this text or task), and the docta ignorantia (I don’t understand this now but it is possible for me to imagine that I will come to understand).

A healthy imagination is nourished in comedy where things are by definition not what they are supposed to be. Gutwirth (1993) credits the comic with the ability to use a variety of paralogical moves that evade the logical censor, freeing us from what Hyers calls “the prison house of the self, its opinions and its situations. One is free to laugh. And in that freedom, life opens up to a different light and a larger perspective” (Hyers, 1981, p. 26).

In a stand up routine entitled “Death,” Rowan Atkinson plays the part of the devil and describes an afterlife in Hell, something many of us may have imagined. Atkinson’s description is based on a process of grouping the newcomers according to their past behavior.

Murderers, over here thank you. Looters and pillagers over there, thieves, if you would join them, and (he pauses) bank managers.

Fornicators, if you could step forward. My God, there’s a lot of you. Could I split you up into adulterers and the rest? Adulterers, if you could just form a line in front of that small guillotine. ...
Americans, are you here? Yes, look I'm sorry about this. Apparently, God had some fracas with your founding fathers and damned the entire race in perpetuity. He sends particular condolences to the Mormons who he realizes put in a lot of work. ...

The Iranians, I'm afraid, can't be with us. Someone’s been holding them in purgatory for about nine hundred years.

Atheists, atheists, over here please. You must be feeling a right bunch of Charlies ...

Moonies, maniacs, marmite eaters, male models, masochists, mass murders, and masseurs, if you could just take a pew at the back with the Methodists. ...

Everyone who saw Monty Python’s Life of Brian. Ah, yes, I’m afraid he can’t take a joke after all. (Atkinson, 1980)

While it is illogical to consider Atkinson as the devil or as a reporter from Hell, not to mention his irrational “groups,” in the imagination it is logical to collect data from a variety of sources. Atkinson as devil is making a direct connection between past behavior and future result, creating an educational opportunity for the listener to consider her/his own behavior and its possible implications.

Bontekoe says, “by an act of imagination one can, temporarily at least, alter the distribution of relative weights normally assigned in one’s own mental life to various impulses, evaluations, and patterns of reasoning” (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 56). Lieberman (1977) calls this altering of relative weights as if thinking, a behavior pattern common in children as they set up their games and use of toys with elaborate let’s pretend conditions. We might overhear a conversation like this between two five-year-olds when the new television arrives in its big box:

OK, let’s cut a hole in the side of the box and let’s pretend it’s a house. And I am the grandma and I have come from Ontario for Christmas. I’ll wear this blanket and pretend it’s her shawl. Let’s pretend that these paper clips and
erasers and buttons are food in the bowl – but don’t really eat them, OK?
Let’s pretend that you invite me for tea.

As previously mentioned, this as if thinking is the child’s emerging hypothesizing, or meaning-making about the world and its possibilities. Bontekoe explains Polanyi’s notion:

A scientific hypothesis of any real complexity (Einstein’s theory of relativity, say, or Darwin’s theory of evolution) is as much a product of the imagination as is a sonata, a novel, or a painting. True products of the imagination, moreover, ultimately have hidden origins. Arising, it seems, from our subconscious, they defy our control, sometimes stubbornly resisting our attempts to call them forth and at other times arriving unbidden. (Bonetkoe, 1996, p. 201)

To invent, create, hypothesize or learn requires that we let go of our known universe and imagine a different one so that we can go there through our inventions and creations. Hertzler claims that a person with a sense of humor can do just that:

The person with a sense of humor is able to play his important roles in social life because of certain rather typical characteristics and abilities. ... He has a variety of attitudes and perspectives towards life, is not inflexible or bound down. He is imaginative and cognitively creative. Also, a sense of proportion, as he views the many angles and situations, governs his reaction to them. By no means least, he can be playful about serious situations. (Hertzler, 1970, p. 82)

Since we are committed through education to enable our children to play their important roles in life, cultivating the imagination is a valuable activity. Since humor lubricates imagination, its place in education deserves more attention. Morreall summarizes, “All of the features of humor we have been discussing, especially its connection with imagination and creativity, and the flexibility of perspective which it brings, are valuable not just in aesthetic education but in all education” (Morreall, 1983, p. 97).  

Putting Ideas into Play

Gadamer explains that in an interpretive encounter participants put their prejudices “into play,” engaging with good will in an exchange of ideas with another, possibly
experiencing a fusion of horizons that may result in an imagined notion becoming a real one.

This play creates an openness, a climate hospitable to friendly, imaginative exchange, the joint exploration of options different from, or greater than, those brought by each player to the encounter. Contrast this climate with the serious, combative climate of the debate in which all effort is directed to winning the language battle, gaining supremacy for the idea that one brought, simultaneously destroying any contribution made by the other. The learning opportunities in the former are less precise, and potentially more significant.

Bontekoe argues for the place of playfulness in inquiry:

To say that the spirit of inquiry should be playful is not to suggest that the enterprise is in any sense trivial or unimportant. Rather, it is to stress two key features of the process of interpretation: on the one hand, the responsive to-and-fro movement of understanding which is to be found in the dialectic of question and answer, and in the shifting of focus from part to whole and back again which typifies the hermeneutic circle, and, on the other hand, the fact that ultimately we pursue understanding – just as we engage in play – for its own sake. (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 240)

He points to engagement in play as an expression of the spirit of inquiry. As many have argued, an orientation of playfulness is the natural state of the child. Lieberman likewise claims a relationship between imagination and playfulness:

It is common to talk about imaginative play in young children and about a creative person who is imaginative. That implies that, in naturalistic observation, we consider imagination to be part of play and creativity. Similarly, we often characterize an individual as playful, thereby implying that some ingredient of play is still part of the behavioral repertoire. (Leiberman, 1977, p. 2)

Retaining an ingredient of play in one’s behavioral repertoire requires practice, and in our hurried, serious culture, it may also require resistance to pressures to become deadly serious. Ironically, we subvert our educational intentions of opening students to multiple realities if
we shut down their opportunities for play, for its own sake. Worthy writes about creativity as “aha! thinking” and argues that it depends on play:

All of us experience aha! thinking from time to time. Creative people are just better prepared, more primed, for this type of thought than others. ... No experience will strengthen aha! thinking unless the person is able to treat the experience as fun, a challenge, a game, a time to play. This playful attitude toward work has been noted repeatedly in the lives of creative people. Repeatedly, these people refer to their creative solutions and breakthroughs and preliminary work involved as a game or a puzzle. (Worthy, 1975, p. 10 – 11)

In Hook (Spielberg, 1995), the Robin Williams’ movie version of the Peter Pan tale, Williams plays the adult Pan, an ambitious, impatient, serious lawyer. On an airplane trip he is sitting next to his adolescent son, Jack, who is entertaining himself by throwing his baseball up to the ceiling of the airplane. Williams, obviously annoyed, snaps, “Stop that. Stop acting like a child!” to which Jack wisely replies, “But I am a child.”

Elkind, a critic of educational practices that interfere with young children’s spontaneous play activities, writes about the significance of play that allows children to explore and understand their worlds with an increasing sense of personal competence and confidence:

[Play] is young children’s only defense against the many real or imagined attacks and slights they encounter. In play, children can assert their competence as “superheroes” more powerful and competent than the most powerful and competent adults. Through dramatic play and role-playing, they can assert their competence to assume adult roles eventually. (italics added). And through their play with peers they assert their social competence, their ability to make and keep friends. Play is always transformation of reality in the service of the self. (Elkind, 1987, p. 156)

It is easy to introduce play into the classroom with games, puzzles, jokes, riddles and dramatic inventions. What is more difficult for us as adults is to resist the impulse to organize the play, to control it, to put play into the service of learning outcomes, rather than to stand apart and allow play and learning to occur for their own sake. In Gadamer’s hermeneutic notion of play, the game has an uncertain outcome, dependent as it is on the
specific nature of both players and context. Play, then, as a learning opportunity, must belong to the players.

A comic vision may help us to realize that the purpose of the journey is the journey. Hyers uses the metaphor of the dance:

In the comic vision the meaning of life, like the meaning of art, is primarily within itself, within the spirit and the process of living. The purpose of life is fundamentally to live, just as the purpose of the dance is to dance – not to arrive at some distant point on the dance floor. (Hyers, 1981, p. 179)

_Openness to Ambiguity_

While bisociation – the linking of two domains that have not previously seemed to enjoy a common thread – is fundamental to jokes, ambiguity was not invented in comedy. Rather comedy merely capitalizes on the ambiguity of human experience, to good effect, according to Swabey who says, “Perception of the ludicrous helps us to comprehend both ourselves and the world (Swabey, 1970 p. 238). Hyers describes the clown in distinctly hermeneutic terms, as one who intentionally embraces ambiguity and challenges all finitude, one who demonstrates openness about how things are and how they might be:

The clown is lord of that no-man’s-land between contending forces, moving back and forth along all those human lines drawn (not without arbitrariness) between law and order, social and antisocial, reason and irrationality, friend and foe, fashionable and unfashionable, important and unimportant. The clown is now on one side, now on the other, and ultimately both and neither. And one of the ritual functions of clowning is to convey a sense of this ambiguity and of the relativity that clings to all finite categories. (Hyers, 1981, p. 70)

Rather than help us to feel comfortable, the clown is committed to irritate, to agitate, to render our most serious and pious perspectives foolish, to remind us that our certainty makes us ridiculous, to shake us out of our sleepy and habituated state. Critchley calls this a "basic strategy of defamiliarization: common sense is disrupted, the unexpected is evoked,
familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, even shocking contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions” (Driessen in Critchley, 2002, p. 64). Gutwirth explains, “The telling of a joke is by its very nature a challenge, an announcement that something is sneaking up on us and will pop out, taking us – though fairly and more than fairly put on notice – unawares” (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 92).

This comic challenge is consistent with Gadamer’s call for a confrontation, and Greene’s (1995) search for a “shock” to encourage us to be alert, imaginative, willing to put our prejudices into play, and open to possibilities. We can experience these confrontations and exercise our funny bones by attending comic performances, reading funny books and watching funny movies, or, as educators, building comic lessons to teach serious concepts.

Consider this playful pedagogical strategy called genre bending that challenges the familiar, invoking openness and imagination. Working in groups, students are asked to retell a familiar nursery rhyme like Little Bo Peep in the voice of a non-nursery character such as George W. Bush, Nellie McClung, Scarlett O’Hara or Marcel Marceau whose name they have chosen at random. Background knowledge about the nursery rhyme and the concept of voice is required, prejudices about the character are invoked, and students are usually surprised to realize both how much they know about these characters and from what sources. In addition, students must negotiate with others in their groups and work outside their individual identities to assume the persona of the randomly chosen other. All these elements are combined, or fused, into a new telling of the traditional story, usually with great comic effect. Both presenters and audience members laugh in recognition of an experienced reality not previously considered but obviously real in its own way. They may be awakened then, “to see [their] givens as contingencies” (Greene, 1978, p. 23).
This playful engagement of ambiguity is an educational experience. Seeing the contingent nature of reality and realizing that one can be other than oneself in a comic or playful circumstance opens the individual to being other than the same in serious circumstance. Subsequent ambiguities may seem less daunting.

*Reflection*

Understanding requires reflection. The interpreter confronts a new idea, pauses to consider both its particular and universal aspects, hypotheses about its implications and then takes action in light of the hypothesis. Gadamer writes that interpretation, understanding and application are tightly linked, and in most joking encounters this is not a drawn-out theoretical process but more like the "reflection in action" that Schon identifies as a working tool of most professionals. Reflection is embedded in the interpretation of a joke, too.

The interpreter approaches the joke with, on the one hand, an anticipation of completeness expecting that there will be a story, a change of direction, and some laughter, and on the other hand, a *docta ignorantia* expecting that expectations will be stood aside by the punch line. After the joke itself has been experienced and interpreted as funny (or not), the interpreter may be left with questions, concerns or possibilities larger than those directly offered in the particular of the joke. Jokes themselves are founded on the turning of givens into contingencies, and both the laughter and the educational opportunity come from the realization of the incongruity of the play between the universal and the particular – a hermeneutic circle of humor. This requirement for contraries provides grist for reflection on those contraries. Ziv explains:

> In order to recognize an incongruous situation, we must first be able to recognize a situation of congruity; that is, we must be acquainted with the reality in which the stimuli are suited to past experiences and/or logical thought. (Ziv, 1984, p. 72)
And no, it doesn’t spoil the joke to explain it, or to reflect upon why it was or wasn’t funny.

Cartoonist Hollander’s character, Sylvia, interprets the universal world from a specific feminist perspective, usually in conversation with the television. I describe in words some of her cartoon commentary, though the dialogue is “spoken” by the cartoon characters:

The TV shows a man and a woman in a deep embrace. She says, “Frank, Frank, make me feel like a woman.” He replies, “Could you pick up my laundry?” (Hollander, 1983, p. 30)

A man visits the guru seeking enlightenment. He says, “Oh Guru, ancient mother of the world, we men have been crippled. We have never learned how to feel; we don’t know how to cry. Oh my wise guru, can you teach me to cry?” The ancient mother of the world replies, “Sure. No problem. Tomorrow I’ll start you at a dead-end job, pay you at women’s wages and then I’ll throw in sole support of a pre-school child.” The seeker speaks again, “Actually, Guru, I saw myself starting out slowly, watching old Shirley Temple flicks, maybe a few scenes from Bambi ....” (Hollander, 1980, p. 101)

That collecting the laundry could contribute to a feeling of womanliness, or the achievement of emotional growth attained by watching “a few scenes from Bambi” are, in the particular, ridiculous. Sexist social policies and patterns that would give rise to such thoughts are shown in these jokes to be equally ridiculous. Given this comic opportunity to consider other realities, the man might think again about the reality of the woman, or the concept of being crippled by social practices. Or not.

In a cartoon in Sister City, Eliot’s characters discuss marriage at a decidedly particular level with universal implications, should the interpreter choose to reflect on the suggestion:

One woman asks another, “Do you ever think about getting married again?”
Her sister replies, “You mean when I can’t open a jar or something?” (Eliot, 1997, p. 154)
Korean-American comic Margaret Cho plays with race, gender and ambiguous sexuality in her standup routines. Born in the United States, she describes a childhood of racism and exclusion and an early adulthood of pills, drugs and alcohol. In her sketches she moves from disarming candor and self-critique to direct attacks on the racists. Her Caucasian boyfriend invites her to Sarasota, Florida to meet his family, and she describes her experience at the “whites only” country club:

"The mothers pulled their kids away from me, as if they feared I would steal them and teach them how to stir-fry their vegetables." (Cho, 2001, p. 191)

It is possible to accept that the white women of Florida fear alternative cooking methods. However, a moment of reflection might open the listener to the possibility that this fear of Cho is founded on something else, although that something else may be as ludicrous as fear of stir-frying. That such fear would lead to exclusion is another awareness that is possible from this joke, an awareness that might lead in application to different social practices.

In an article entitled, “Naked Vocabulary” Eisenbach does a tongue-in-cheek review of labels for gays and lesbians under two headings, “common usage,” and “current approved usage.” She targets often pejorative words like queer, homo, fag, and dyke. Here is her explanation of “queer”:

_The word has a certain undeniable power. Bold, brazen, taking no prisoners, queer admits not even the remotest possibility that its owner could ever be misinformed or misguided about anything. By claiming queer as our own, we empower those against whom the term is traditionally wielded while disarming those who wield the epithet ... witness the skillful and empowering use of the word “nigger” in film, rap songs, drive-by shootings, and videotaped police actions._ (Eisenbach, 1996, p. 46)

At first reading, the word “queer” seems to be empowering, used with confidence, claimed by the gay counterpublic. Her comparison with the word “nigger” seems
appropriate. The scenarios in which the word “nigger” is used, however, serve as a painful reminder that changing the words doesn’t change such heinous social practices as racially motivated shootings and police violence. We laugh, and then when we reflect, we may laugh differently. Gadamer might say that we had experienced a fusion of horizons, adjusting our own vantage point as a result.

Building on the work of Davies (2002) and Saper (1993) I constructed a simple heuristic device to interrogate a joke with the intention of increasing the depth of reflection in response to a joke. There are five questions:

1. What quality of the butt is being mocked in this joke?
2. Is this quality unique to, or exaggerated by the butt or found in others?
3. Is this quality found universally in members of the butt group?
4. Could this quality be interpreted as a positive characteristic?
5. What feelings or actions are invoked or reinforced in you as a result of your encounter with this joke?

Teachers in humor studies were given a series of jokes and this list of five questions. Working in small groups they were instructed to read the jokes and enjoy them, or not. They were then to respond to the five questions individually and lastly, to discuss their answers with members of the group. While this does not represent testing in any rigorous empirical way, the tool shows some promise in helping students of humor to tease apart universal and particular qualities, and to reconsider their own feelings and actions in response to jokes.

When this interrogation was applied to a series of Jewish mother jokes, the teachers recognized that parental concern is not specific to mothers, or to Jewish mothers, that what seems overbearing in one situation might be deemed appropriate in another, that being a
concerned parent is generally a good thing, and that if Jewish mothers turn out to be overly indulgent or ambitious on the part of their offspring, that in itself isn’t a solid foundation for hostility, exclusion, or dogmatic condemnation of another. It may simply be funny. Or not.

Attention to the Other

Many professional comics tell jokes not simply for the jokes themselves but for the educational possibilities these comedic openings provide for their listeners. Following are some examples from comics who intentionally use their joking routines to encourage a fusion of horizons, to bring people together with a different perspective on difference.

Comic Chris Rock, in his monologue, *We all look the same in the dark*, pokes fun at racism in the United States, leaving the interpreter to reflect upon the “welcoming” promise of American democracy:

> Since the Indians got swindled over some beads, nobody in America has been too excited about newcomers. Every racial and ethnic group gets treated like shit when they get here — by the racial and ethnic group that got treated like shit when they came in on the earlier flight. Nobody says, “Hey, here are the new guys. Let’s welcome them. Let’s bake a cake for the Irish.” (Rock, 1997, p.8)

As Rock describes hostile social relationships he hints at a better option, although the solution to racial and ethnic tension is obviously not merely baking a cake for the newcomer. The hermeneutic circle of movement from particular – baking a cake to welcome someone – to the general – historically violent and inhospitable intergroup relationships – is here in this joke. Rock is also creating an opening for the listener to consider her/his particular role in welcoming others, both individuals and groups, in light of tradition and a future of possibility.
Black comic Dick Gregory puts into play both the conditions of apartheid America and the stereotypes about blacks’ eating preferences as well as capitalizing on lexical humor with this joke about going to a restaurant and being told:

“We don’t serve colored people in here.” “That’s all right,” was his reply, “I don’t eat ‘em. Just bring me a whole fried chicken.” (Gregory in Nachman, 2003, p. 491)

After we laugh, we think, of course, we shouldn’t serve colored people. That would be cannibalism! But why shouldn’t we serve them in a restaurant? This contentious social policy question is sidestepped somewhat by the turning of our attention to Gregory’s order of a whole fried chicken, which renders him both a particular restaurant customer and a generalized fried chicken-eating black, even more difficult to categorize. Jokes like this one not only enable rethinking, they almost demand it.

Arab American comic Ray Hanania “sees comedy as a means to humanize perceptions of Arabs” (Kaufman, 2002, p. 1). In the post-September 11 climate of intense airport security, Hanania tells jokes that highlight the silly side of the new screening procedures:

You’ve heard some of these questions: “Did you pack your bag?” You say “yes,” they let you on the plane. I say “yes,” they arrest me. ... The one that is always embarrassing is, “Anybody suspicious give you anything to put in your bag?” “Yeah, my mother, my brother, my sister, how much time do you have? I have a very large family.”

In an interview with the Washington File’s Kaufman, Hanania elaborates on the potential for understanding anew in his comic airport material:

The silly questions they ask – when you really hear them in a comedy stage – they’re really stupid. Who’s going to confess to being a bomber? Who’s going to confess to anybody suspicious-looking giving them anything to put in their bag? I mean when you hear these things, the ridiculousness of them comes up further and makes the point: why are we doing this? (Hanania quoted by Kaufman, 2002, p. 1)
Palestinian-American comic Aron Kader confronts other “Middle East” issues:

_The problem in the Middle East is that the Jews and the Arabs think they’re God’s chosen people. If you are God’s chosen people, why is there nothing but war and death over there? Look around you, you’re in the desert. I mean, have you been to Hawaii? It’s gorgeous over there. Maybe the Samoans are the chosen people. Have you ever thought of that?_ (Kader quoted by Ali, 2002, p. 1)

_Newsweek_ reporter Lorraine Ali says:

Kader & Co. represent a new twist on an American tradition of self-deprecating and edgy ethnic humor. They are doing for Middle Easterners what Richard Pryor, Margaret Cho and John Leguizamo did for African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics – carrying their culture from the margins to the mainstream. (Ali, 2002, p. 1)

What these professional comics are “doing” is intentional, and not, as Ali suggests only for their own cultures. They are welcoming others into a hermeneutic encounter, offering what Boskin describes as, “A rebellious humor [that reaffirms] communal identities and empowerment while enlarging personal and national perspective” (Boskin, 1997, p. 11). Hanania agrees:

_Sometimes laughter is the only way to break the cycle of hatred and racism, and force people to really stop and look at what they are doing. Actually, people use humor all the time to shock the system. To get an audience’s attention. To make people stop and think._ (Hanania, 2002, p. 1)

In these relationships, the comic plays the role of the other, sometimes linking with the audience, sometimes backing away, treating a serious subject like racism with the velvet gloves of comedy and then taking off the gloves to punch the listener square in her/his stereotypes. The comic is creating an educational experience, a chance for dialogue.

Vancouver teacher-turned-comic, Paul Bae says that building the relationship with the audience is fundamental to a successful stand-up comedy routine; it is not simply a matter of telling jokes. “First I try to get them to like me by telling stories that reveal that I am an
individual but that I have similar concerns to theirs,” says Bae (personal communication, August 18, 2003). He adjusts these initial relationship-building stories depending on whether the venue is a bar, a club or a theatre, whether the audience is predominantly male or female, whether or not the audience is drinking alcohol. In other words, he considers the difference(s) before he begins the dialogue. Bae says he tries to speak to the perceived truth of the listeners and to transcend his Korean identity. Then when the audience is with him, he separates himself from them by jokes that make it clear that he is Korean and that the majority of them can’t even distinguish between a Korean and any of the many others of Asian ancestry in Canada, typically lumping them all together under the racist epithet, “Chink.”

Bae’s approach is similar to the one reportedly used by Dick Gregory. Nilsen and Nilsen write that Gregory, who was:

one of the first African Americans to perform in front of predominantly white audiences found that people were too nervous to laugh if he started right off by drawing attention to his race. He would therefore start with neutral topics, but once the audience had laughed with him he would move on to tease them about their prejudices. (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2002, p. 116)

Bae says that his goal as a Korean-Canadian stand up comic is to enable the audience to see “beauty in difference.” Having experienced the pain of racism in his young childhood, he says he now understands that pain to be indistinguishable from other pain inflicted on people because of a perception that difference is not beautiful. “It all represents the pain of being rejected, of not being valued as an individual. I want people to leave my show realizing that there was a real individual on the stage. I am a controlled representation of things Korean. I am not ALL there is to Korea, and Korea is not ALL there is to Paul Bae. I
just want people to recognize that I exist, and by extension, I guess, that many other interesting people exist!"

Is it possible to open people to relationships that acknowledge the beauty in diverse individuals through humor? Bae laughs. “If I can get laughs telling stories about my Korean identity in Red Deer, Alberta, then yes, there is hope for democracy!”

Greene sees a new kind of community as a possible outcome of such “opening up”:

To open up our experiences ... to existential possibilities of multiple kinds is to extend and deepen what each of us thinks of when he or she speaks of a community. If we break through our surface equilibrium and uniformity, it does not mean that a particular ethnic or racial tradition will, or ought to, replace our own. (Greene, 1978, p. 156)

As outlined in Chapter 2, theorists traditionally have attempted to explain why we laugh by focusing on the objects of the jokes in an effort to discern common characteristics. Munro points out that this is “to presuppose that the cause of laughter is in them [the objects] and not in ourselves” (Munro, 1951, p. 14). Douglas (1968) reminds us that to succeed, a joke requires both recognition and permission. Recognition and permission evolve out of the relationship between the listener and the joke material, the listener and her/his context, the listener and the joker. Neither the recognition of something as a joke nor the willingness to laugh at it is fixed in time or in the individual. What was once funny may be so no longer, or not in this situation. The joke isn’t static; it isn’t out there. Greene describes the limitations of looking elsewhere to understand ourselves:

The problem is that we do not remain aware of our reality as existing beings when we look out upon (or inquire into) what too often strikes us as an independently existing, “alien and hostile” place. We close our eyes to our situatedness, our location in an intersubjective world. We become unable to think about the ways in which our perspectives are affected by our involvements, by our projects, by the work we do. (Greene, 1978, p. 16)
Comics bring the “out there” into our intersubjective worlds by applying the rules of “normal” against normal itself, exposing the nonsense that is taken for sense. Bing and Heller describe how lesbian comic Robin Tyler stands deviance on its head in this routine:

“If homosexuality is a disease, let’s all call in queer to work.”
“Hello, can’t work today. Still queer.”

What’s funny about the joke, of course is that everyone – gay or straight – has probably at least one time called in sick for work when in fact he or she was not sick. The twist, however, is that Tyler highlights the absurdity of the idea that homosexuality as “sickness” by taking to an extreme the illogic inherent in that assumption. Indeed, being “queer” is a condition that one does not recuperate from after a day or two of bed rest and plenty of liquids. (Bing and Heller, 2003, p. 169)

Moving to a Fusion of Horizons

Education is both a private and a public experience. Lave and Wenger claim “learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 51). Hanks concurs, claiming “learning is a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it. Learners are engaged both in the contexts of their learning and in the broader social world within which these contexts are produced” (Hanks, 1991, p. 24). Gadamer argues that people are thrown into a social world and that interpretation itself occurs in the social encounter of the dialogue with another.

I suggest that laughing is one way of being in the social world, as well as a way of coming to know about it. Researchers have considered humor’s social role and the role of the social in humor, providing evidence of humor’s positive and negative influence on group norms and behaviors, as well as the influence of the group on humor – that is in the determination of what is funny (Bergler, 1956; Bergson, 1911; Chapman and Foot, 1996; Critchley, 2002; Fry and Allen, 1996; Gelven, 2000; Gutwirth, 1993; Hertzler, 1970; Hill,
Bergson claims that "all laughter is inherently social. ... [it] loses its meaning and disappears outside of the context of the group" (in Provine, 2000, p. 16). Martineau (1972) concurs, providing a complex matrix of "intragroup" and "intergroup" situations in which laughter, when viewed as esteeming can solidify group identity and morale, build affiliation, and control group behavior; and alternatively, when viewed as disparaging laughter can foster conflict, and contribute to demoralization and social disintegration. Hertzler reminds us, "Laughter is not an indiscriminate response, and nothing is laughable in itself. The laughable is what particular persons or groups laugh about or at" (Hertzler, 1970, p. 49).

Shade agrees:

Shared knowledge, rituals, customs, beliefs, and behaviors specific to a group, along with a history of shared experiences and events, provide the catalyst for numerous forms of humor that are only comprehended and appreciated fully by members of the group. (Shade, 1996, p. 29)

Members of a group may use laughter to preserve the group's internal hierarchy, demonstrated when higher-status people joke about lower-status people and peers joke with one another about higher status authority figures (Coser, 1960). We laugh when we share an inside joke, confirming our affiliation with other group members; we laugh at others outside the group confirming our distinctiveness and superiority. We laugh at a joke that is deemed to be funny by those whose affiliation we seek; we are drawn to another in friendship because we discover that we laugh at the same things. If when we laugh we experience a disapproval response from group members, we must decide whether or not to laugh at that stimulus again if we intend to maintain our group membership. The joke helps us to create and recreate the boundaries of a group's acceptance, to build what Critchley calls a sensus
"Jokes have a sense of thereeness; they illuminate a social world that is held in common with others" (Critchley, 2002, p. 86).

Identifying the patterns in the social world is part of being educated. Norms may determine laughter, but laughter also talks back to social norms applying either a conservation or a renovation effect (Hertzler, 1970). Laughter's conservative power is seen when we laugh at novel customs, clothing, people and ideas, demanding that they prove themselves to be worthy of our serious consideration before they gain acceptance into normative thinking or practice. Similarly, we may ridicule old-fashioned behavior, restrictive customs and rigid bureaucracies, using laughter's renovation effect to encourage innovation. Hertzler says this critical laughter, "pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement and functions as a check on social rigidity, social decadence, and social obsolescence" (Hertzler, 1970, p. 121). Checking rigidity, decadence and obsolescence, laughter helps to keep social patterns fluid and alive, interpreted and contested. It helps us to define ourselves both individually and collectively, and to understand that we can never have a complete, or final understanding of our world. We continue to interpret, learn, and laugh from our specific vantage point. Hertzler explains:

Each group, each collectivity, each subculture, in addition to having the general determinants of culture or nation as a whole, has its special variations of the national culture. This simply means that each also sees the world from its own special point of view. Hence, each also has its own peculiar laughter themes, awareness of the laughable, and causes of laughter. (Hertzler, 1970, p. 52)

While laughter helps us to define our peculiar themes, interrogating the laughter themes of groups or subcultures can help us come to know them, and get a glimpse of the world from their special point of view.
Having recognized the dimensions of the social world, we may then choose to act to change them, and sometimes when we can’t change them, laughter helps us build coping skills for the real pressures of moment-to-moment living:

Laughter may in a general way keep us in line. ... It relieves us from the very real and unshakable constraints of daily living. It lavishes on us the chance, many times a day, to bond and rebond with our fellows in unholy communion. (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 58)

_Courage, Humility and Hope_

The educated person retains a humility grounded in the _docta ignorantia_ throughout life’s experiences, but nonetheless embraces the experiences as opportunities to be and become truly human, acting out Gadamer’s anticipation of completeness by showing both courage and hope. These characteristics are found in those described as having a sense of humor, and they contribute to those individuals’ orientation to interpret the world with a comic vision. It may not be possible to teach someone these qualities, but it is definitely possible to discuss when they might be appropriate, to model them, to practice them, and to reflect on the results of having responded to life’s challenges with laughter. Critchley says, “Humor does not redeem us from this world, but returns us to it eluctably by showing that there is no alternative” (Critchley, 2002, p. 17).

Learning is always risk-taking, requiring as it does the abandonment, at least temporarily, of the confidence and ease that come with “already knowing.” Putting one’s prejudices into play, acknowledging that one will be for a time consciously incompetent, requires courage. Particularly as learning occurs publicly, courage is required to manage ego’s injury as the learner battles both internal anxiety and external bemusement or possibly ridicule. Being able to take the learning task seriously, acknowledging effort on the way to competence, shifting the target as competence develops and simultaneously maintaining self-
Esteem without benefit of external markers of accomplishment is a difficult emotional and cognitive assignment. There are many reasons to abandon the enterprise. To stay this challenging course — to learn — requires courage. Self-forgiving laughter can help. Gutwirth puts it this way, “Courage, then, is of the essence. It is the strength to laugh in the face of the abyss that swallowed up our absolutes. … it is the backbone of our wisdom” (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 166).

Laughing at oneself and one’s condition is also an act of humility. It “recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation, but comic acknowledgement” (Critchley, 2002, p. 102). Hertzler writes:

The most salutary of all laughter, the laughter which is the greatest solvent of complications and the greatest civilizing force, is the laughter which we laugh at ourselves. For this laughter means we have laid bare and discarded some weakness, some power of injustice in ourselves, that we have risen to a higher understanding of others. A vain man, a frightened man, or an angry man cannot laugh at himself. (Hertzler, 1970, p. 67)

This humble laughter often accompanies our learning, the applying of our emerging interpretations, becoming educated. Well aware of limitations, we laugh and press on.

Consider the sparrow:

A rider on horseback nearly trampled a sparrow who was lying in the road, legs stretched toward the sky. The rider chastised the sparrow, “You are in the middle of the road. You are so small that I saw you only by chance. Why are you lying in such a dangerous place?” The sparrow replied, “I have been told that the sky is going to fall and I am waiting here to hold it up.” The rider scoffed. “Look at you. Look at the sky. Look at your skinny little legs. Even if this rumor were true, how could you possibly believe that you would have any effect in preventing disaster?” The sparrow sighed and said, “One does what one can.” (unattributed)

Meeker makes an argument consistent with the aphorism “pride goeth before a fall,” namely that the biological survival of the human species requires we learn to live with a comic
perspective. He elaborates:

If the lesson of ecology is balance and equilibrium, the lesson of comedy is humility and endurance. The comic mode of human behavior represented in literature is the closest art has come to describing man as an adaptive animal. Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon man’s ability to change himself rather than his environment, and upon his ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting him. It is a strategy for living which agrees well with the demands of ecological wisdom, and it cannot be ignored as a model for human behavior if man hopes to keep a place for himself among the animals who live according to the comic mode. (Meeker, 1972, p. 39)

While humility and endurance help humans to adapt and learn, the lessons would not be undertaken at all without the anticipation of completeness, or the hope that sense can be made. The tasks of learning and living may be seen as difficult and according to all rational analysis as improbable, but if they are seen as impossible, the challenge will not be taken up. Hope is the motivation to engage. Anecdotal evidence from war, disasters such as earthquakes and fires, operating rooms or firehalls confirm that humor is part of the repertoire of human responses to the ultimate paradox of life and death. Hyers say the human spirit thrives on hope:

As gallows humor or concentration camp humor will attest, it [humor] may also express a certain heroic defiance in the face of life’s most crushing defeats, an unquenchable nobility of spirit that refuses to permit a given fate or oppressor to have the last word – to be absolute. The human spirit has not been utterly vanquished. The will to live and the determination to continue the struggle, or the faith that the struggle will be continued, has not been finally conquered. Where there is humor, there is hope. (Hyers, 1981, p. 36)

When hope is present, laughter wins over seriousness. Consider this joke about being born, or thrown into the challenge of living:

"Perhaps," said the sage, putting down his volume of the Talmud, "considering all of life's suffering, it would have been better not to have been born. But how many are so lucky? (Sacks, 2000, p. 39)

As always, life is open to interpretation.
Sometimes, for Some People, It’s Just Not Funny!

Saper writes:

Many thoughtful and concerned humanists deplore all types of ethnic, racial or religious humor. Among the reasons they give, with some justification, are that such humor slanders the target or butt of the joke, provides ammunition for the nefarious deeds of bigots, validates false belief systems, and perpetuates malicious stereotypes. In a word, they find ethnic humor to be unredeemingly destructive. (Saper, 1993, p. 74)

Other scholars argue that ethnic or stereotype-based jokes are neither fundamentally aggressive nor necessarily likely to lead to violence and exclusion (Boskin, 1997; Davies, 1990; Dundes, 1987; Mintz, 1998; Saper, 1993). Still, there is significant evidence that humor can cause pain. Boskin writes that:

derogatory joking is a seasoned American ploy. Especially in the competitive atmosphere of American culture has a considerable portion of humor been used to inflict psychological harm, to humiliate through stereotyping. (Boskin, 1997, p. 11)

There are both creators and appreciators of humor who are wedded to what Gadamer calls “blind” prejudices, views that they have no intention of putting into play in a joking encounter. Instead, they joke in a manner consistent with the original superiority theory of humor, a manner intended to diminish the worth of others. Hyers concurs, describing many inhospitable intentions played out through joking and laughter, “Laughter is hardly a reliable indicator of the comic spirit. Laughter can be arrogant, taunting, scornful, contemptuous, sneering, vulgar, cruel, nervous, giddy, hysterical, malicious, bitter, and insane” (Hyers, 1981, p. 27). Steinem jokes about a particular prejudice that is alive and well in various blind corners:

A white minority of the world has spent centuries conning us into thinking that a white skin makes people superior — even though the only thing it really does is make them more subject to ultraviolet rays and wrinkles. (Steinem, 1997, p. 137)
Derogatory humor as “a seasoned American ploy” is represented in the popular animated television program, *The Simpsons*. There is a debate, both within my family and among scholars, about whether the program is ironic social commentary or is base and cruel. For the record, my son and comic advisor holds the former view, and I hold the latter. Matheson claims that “*The Simpsons* revels in the attack. It treats nearly everything as a target, every stereotypical character, every foible, every institution. It plays games of one-upmanship with its audience members by challenging them to identify the avalanche of allusion it throws down to them” (Matheson, 2001, p. 120). I share Wallace’s view that the show is nihilistic:

While the jokes, taken individually, can be exceptionally funny – incongruous, surprising, challenging – taken together in the totality of *The Simpsons*, they add up only to a view that is at once nihilistic (everything is a target) and conservative (the traditional social order endures). The satire collapses into a shower of individual jokes, and we are left with what we had to start with – a world of exploitation and struggle. (Wallace, 2001, p. 246)

Homer Simpson exemplifies this conservative view with this fatherly advice to his daughter Lisa who is dissatisfied with her job.

“*Lisa, if you don’t like your job, you don’t strike. You just go in every day and do it really half-assed. That’s the American way.* (from Wallace, 2001, p. 247)

What is missing for me in this joking encounter, then, is the willingness of both the joker and the listener to put their prejudices into play, to be open to possibility, to be prepared for what Greene calls “incompleteness …along with the refusal of false finalities and total systems of thought” (Greene, 1978, p. 53). Homer’s capitulation to the inevitability of the status quo is, for me, a false finality. The show generates a coping laughter to be sure, but without the benefit of hope for a better outcome.
Others find the program sharply on point as a social commentary and are particularly buoyed by the character of Lisa who is sometimes an intellectual, sometimes a social activist, and usually a considerate family member in sharp contrast to brother Bart.

When pressed to re-examine my hostility to the show, especially in light of my generally favorable response to most forms of humor, I admit that my dislike centers on the character of Bart, a rude, smart-mouthed young boy. It could be that the program emerged at the same time as adolescent boys took up big space in my own family life. As a mother, Bart was definitely not the model I had been seeking! Some have suggested that my prejudice might be grounded in my identity as an elementary school teacher with definite ideas about appropriate social behavior. I also harbor prejudices that I am reluctant to put into play against sexually explicit comedy, a common warm-up shtick at comedy clubs, and against broad physical comedy such as The Three Stooges although I do enjoy both Charlie Chaplin’s and Mr. Bean’s physicality and the performance of any accomplished mime. My varied personal reactions to comedy speak to Kelly’s (2004) warning that stance, vantage point and prejudice are complicated contributors to any meaning making encounter.

As comics put their prejudices into play, they can draw the prejudices of others into the open, creating opportunities for new interpretations for both the joker and the laugher, new relationships between individuals and new structures in society. As Douglas (1968) reminds us, a joke requires both recognition and permission to be deemed funny. Early feminists intentionally did not laugh at jokes about women simply refusing to give their permission for women to be mocked, disrespected or held in contempt. Walker points out:

The first step toward the creation of a truly feminist humor is for women to stop laughing at what no longer seems funny to them. Yet to the extent that women have done just that – have stopped smiling merely to appear charming,
have stopped laughing when the joke is on them – they are accused of having no sense of humor. (Walker, 1988, p. 152).

As earlier reported, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods decried Jewish mother jokes as anti-Semitic. Consistent with the situatedness of hermeneutic judgment, and the circular link between the particular and the universal, it is clear that the degree of comedy in any joke depends on whose ox is being gored. However, the multiplicity of interpretations says that no marginal group necessarily need allow another to have the last laugh. Levine suggests another role for stereotypical humor:

Marginal groups often embraced the stereotypes of themselves in a manner designed not to assimilate it but to smother it. ... To tell jokes containing the stereotype was not invariably to accept it but frequently to laugh at it, to strip it naked, to expose it to scrutiny.” (Levine, 1977, p. 336)

Walker agrees, explaining that women use humor for similar purposes, that is, to highlight aspects of general culture that are mistakenly attributed to the individual; in Gadamer’s terms to identify a confusion of the universal with the particular:

A dominant theme in women’s humor is how it feels to be a member of a subordinate group in a culture that prides itself on equity, what it is like to try to meet standards for behavior that are based on stereotypes rather than on human beings. (Walker, 1988, p. 150)

She claims, “Feminist humor, then, both elucidates and challenges women’s subordination and oppression” (Walker, 1988, p. 152).

Davies continues this notion of elucidation and challenge reminding us that the joke is always an opportunity for multiple interpretations:

Jokes about the crafty, stingy, dour, joyless Scots are also jokes about the shrewd, thrifty, serious Scots; jokes about the wild, drunken Irish are also jokes about the madcap, convivial Irish; jokes about the crude, coarse, unrefined Australians are also jokes about the matey, democratic, uninhibited, classless Australians. (Davies, 1993, p. 33)
Finally, political correctness, multiple interpretations or role models notwithstanding, there are some people who are simply unwilling to laugh. Hyers calls these folks “humorless crusaders,” individuals so seriously devoted to human perfection that to laugh would be unseemly. He writes:

With steeled jaw and knitted brow, looking neither to the right nor to the left, ... humorless crusaders are unwilling and perhaps no longer able to laugh, as long as “the cause” has not been victorious, injustice prevails, poverty and pollution persist, warfare continues, textbooks are inaccurate, magazines are sexist – in short, as long as there is evil and suffering in the world – which is to say that they are not likely to be free to laugh in the near future. (Hyers, 1981, p. 12)

Just as Gadamer’s fusion of horizons can only occur when the interpreter puts her/his prejudices into play, humor has no power “from the outside” to influence an individual’s perspective. One humor studies participant felt that the entire concept of the course was inappropriate and that “humor studies had no place in a graduate program in education.”

There is some comfort in the research of Davies and others who argue that derogatory humor alone does not necessarily lead to violence and exclusion; however approaching issues like democracy, diversity, justice and the world we want through humor requires a delicate touch. The humor studies participant quoted above obviously believed that laughing about matters such as racism meant not taking those matters seriously. As Gadamer’s concept of tradition would suggest, the insider’s interpretation of a joke differs from the interpretation of the outsider. Bringing comedy into a judgment about life, or bringing comedy into the classroom to make sense of life, is a task that must be handled seriously. When we open up to comedy, we surrender the kind of control over our circumstances that many people seek. Simmer-Brown warns that our openness draws us to action in the world, forcing us to
confront difference and suffering:

Openness draws us more deeply into our experience and our hearts. But it is important that this openness draws us out into engagement with diversity, with difficulty, and all the rough edges in the suffering world. ... The main point is this: opening up, having contact with others, engaging each other, really connecting, and cultivating intimacy which does not annihilate difference. (Simmer-Brown, 1999, p. 104)

We can, I believe, enjoy the joke and reflect on what it suggests about ourselves and our world. Studying the joke using Gadamer's resources then prepares us to better harness the qualities of a joking encounter to support the educational project of becoming truly human and truly connected. I claim that there is a special assignment here for teachers and I elaborate on its dimensions in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5 – TEACHING WITH A COMIC SPIRIT

One should take good care not to grow too wise for so
great a pleasure of life as laughter.

Joseph Addison
1672-1719, British poet and statesman

In a classroom with a Gadamerian perspective, one takes care not to grow too wise.

One takes care, also, not to grow too certain, or too finished. While working to enlarge the
horizons of her students, and to deepen and broaden understanding, a teacher influenced by
Gadamer’s work recognizes:

that we are always involved in interpretations and that we can have no access
to anything like “the truth” about justice, the self, reality, or the “moral law.”
Our notions of these “truths” are rather conditioned by the cultures to which
we belong and the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves.
Hence, we must face the fact of our finitude and the utterly contingent
character of our effort to understand. (Warnke, 1987, p. 3)

In Vonnegut’s Cat’s Cradle, man tries to figure out why he has been thrown into the
world and so he asks God. God ducks the question, leaving Vonnegut’s man and the rest of
us to find purpose in the experience itself. The man-god conversation, which I read as a joke,
goes like this:

And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man.
Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up,
looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. “What is the purpose of all this?” he asked politely.
“Everything must have a purpose?” asked God.
“Certainly,” said man.
“Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,” said God.
And he went away. (Vonnegut, 1963, p. 177)

Not only are we, as humans, “thrown” into the world without benefit of God’s precise
plan, we also “throw” our children into schools with some general, though often contested,
expectations that they will there experience life as individuals and as members of society,
and as they interpret that experience, come to know their purpose. It is expected, too, that
teachers will help students with this interpretive experience. Given "the fact of our finitude and the utterly contingent character of our effort to understand," where do teachers begin? Smith describes the project as "a concern for how we shall proceed pedagogically after we have given up the presumption of ever being able to define in unequivocal foundational terms all of the key referents in our professional lexicon" (Smith, 1999, p. 28).

According to Smith, "It is that assumption, of truth being ultimately a methodological affair, that much of contemporary hermeneutics wishes to challenge" (Smith, 1999, p. 29). In this chapter I wish to challenge the parallel assumption that teaching is ultimately a methodological affair. I propose for consideration the development of a comic pedagogy — a combination of teacher awareness and critical reflection, playfulness, hermeneutic imagination, humility, courage and hope. It is a pedagogy grounded in "a commitment to generativity and rejuvenation and to the question of how we can go on together in the midst of constraints and difficulties that constantly threaten to foreclose on the future" (Smith, 1999, p. 29).

Most importantly, this comic pedagogy is engaged in service of the "highest priority ... having children and young people gain precisely a sense of the human world as being a construction that can be entered and engaged creatively" (Smith, 1999, p. 42). Like understanding, a comic pedagogy develops in experience, the experience of a teacher open to possibilities — actually, a teacher open to jokes, playfulness and joy.

Dillon defines pedagogy as "planned behavior that is adjusted in the process of enacting it." He continues, characterizing pedagogical action as rooted in both understanding and welcoming:

The first pedagogical act is to understand. ... Informed by our understanding, practice moves us to take action before, during, and after a student asks a
question. First we provide for student questions, making systematic room for them in our classroom, inviting them in, and awaiting them patiently. Next we welcome them when they come, listening and attending to them as they are being asked. Then we sustain the student and the question in the asking. (Dillon, 1988, p. 7)

Dillon does not suggest that we move the student to the right answer, but that we sustain the student and the question. Most teachers share his recognition that the profession of teaching is like understanding itself, contingent. Lyons reports that when teachers are questioned “about conflicts they faced in their professional lives ... 70 per cent characterized their conflict as moral or ethical and a majority connected the dilemma either directly or indirectly to his or her sense of self” (Lyons, 1990, p. 167). She continues:

As one woman put it, “Well, you know, morality and everyday actions get pretty tied together when you’re teaching. There are very few situations I’ve run into where there’s a clear right way and a wrong way, or the shadings are very simple.” (Lyons, 1990, p. 168)

In the absence of a clear right way, Nussbaum says we must adjust our “image of learning” and “stress responsiveness and an attention to complexity; ... discourage[ing] the search for the simple, and above all, for the reductive” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 96).

A comic pedagogy not only attends to complexity and discourages the search for the simple. It also celebrates complexity by actively interpreting a situation from another viewpoint. It rejects the simple or obvious solution, embracing instead the punch line, the unexpected, the clearly counter-intuitive option. It accepts as rational, momentarily at least, a situation that rationally cannot be. It practices a way of being that is constantly open to the possibility of another way of being. The aim of comic pedagogy is the same as the aim of interpretation, that is “not just another interpretation but human freedom, which finds it light, identity and dignity in those few brief moments when one’s lived burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things” (Smith, 1999, p. 29).
Greene urges teachers to escape from a limited view of things by attending fully:

If teachers today are to initiate young people into an ethical existence, they themselves must attend more fully than they normally have to their own lives and its requirements; they have to break with the mechanical life, to overcome their own submergence in the habitual, even in what they conceive to be the virtuous, and ask the "why" with which learning and moral reasoning begin. (Greene, 1978, p. 46)

Attending fully is the beginning of a break with the mechanical life. It is an expression of Gadamer's anticipation of completeness, a generous commitment on the part of the interpreter that there is more that can be seen, learned and experienced in this new encounter. It can also be the beginning of a recognition that the world is not only constructed and contingent, it is often ridiculous. Consider the inadvertent gaffes in these sample (but real) headlines that "lift the message from the blandly literal to the sublimely absurd."

- Two convicts evade noose; jury hung.
- Police begin campaign to run down jaywalkers.
- Prostitutes appeal to Pope.
- American ships head to Libya.
- New housing for elderly not yet dead. (Lederer, 1987, pp. 84 – 93)

Baker writes, “the creation of the ridiculous is almost impossible because of the competition it receives from reality” (Baker, 1963, p. ix). We can’t merely stop at recognition, though. Critchley describes humor’s assignment in a way that echoes the teacher’s assignment, “By showing us the folly of the world, humor does not save us from that folly by turning our attention elsewhere … but calls on us to face the folly of the world and change the situation in which we find ourselves” (Critchley, 2002, p. 18). In this chapter, I argue that teachers can face the folly of the world and potentially change it with and for their students if they harness their own comic spirit to the task, and build a comic pedagogy.
Many of the anecdotes in this chapter come from humor workshops I have conducted between 2002 and 2004, and/or a course in humor studies that I was privileged to teach three times in the year 2003. Participants were teachers who either volunteered to join the workshop or selected the course as part of a cohort master of education program. The latter choice was a circumscribed one since no other course was offered on site at the time, though cohort members could have chosen not to take humor studies. Altogether about two hundred teachers have participated in these workshops or courses.

The quotes from teachers are real but they are not attributed to individuals by name. Other data that might identify any individual have also been changed to provide anonymity. These quotes are primarily from the teachers' journals which some people voluntarily allowed me to read after the course was completed. A few of the quotes were jotted down by me during class.

While the comic strategies have not been examined in a formally empirical way, some patterns of teacher responses did emerge, and they are reported as tentative evidence of the influence of working with a comic spirit. Games were among the comic strategies employed frequently. Normally a game is played, the teacher/players reflect on their individual experiences, and they then contribute their ideas to small groups or the whole group. In a second round of conversation, the implications of their experience for their role as educators are explored. The games reported here have been chosen because they show particular promise as part of a comic pedagogy of understanding.

**Attending Fully**

Humor studies participants tried to reacquaint themselves with their senses of humor by keeping track of the times they laughed over a period of approximately a week, noting the
stimulus for the laughter, and ascertaining any patterns. Abridged versions of Muller's (1996) log sheet (How to watch yourself be alive) and Kabat-Zinn's (1994) log sheets (Awareness of pleasant events calendar; Awareness of unpleasant events calendar) were provided. In addition to completing the log sheets, teachers kept journals throughout the course, recording not only the experiences of humor studies but also reflecting on the significance of the experiences to them as individuals and as teachers.

They found cause for laughter everywhere, stimulated by books, films, unpredictable experiences, family, friends and especially by their students. Many reported that because of the assignment, they concentrated on finding things that made them laugh, admitting that these things had been there all along but they hadn't been noticed. One said, "I can see the humor if I let myself be spontaneous." Another noticed many different purposes for humor - letting go, having fun, serving as a defense, building a relationship. Some realized that they weren't laughing; "Since I became a principal I don't laugh as much as I did when I was a teacher," or "I realize that I was too rushed, too stressed, too tired to laugh much. I'm certain I must have at some point, but the humor in my life was definitely not outstanding." Many were reminded about laughter as a choice, "When all hell breaks loose, I like knowing that I could choose [to laugh]." Many, too, saw reasons to build laughter into their pedagogical repertoires as these journal entries attest:

Humor should be near the surface. When we laugh we are involved, reflecting and separating ourselves from a culture of silence. We should not be silent about what is going on in the world. We should try to bring about change.

My kids are really getting into the telling of jokes every morning. They’re bringing joke books from home and signing them out of the library. It’s awesome to see some of my reluctant readers keen to be reading these books. Hey, if that’s what gets them reading at this point, that’s fine by me.
So if I can utilize those skills that I have actually identified instead of randomly and unexpectedly being funny – I could make it intentional. Such as joking with students about themselves, ridiculing myself, laughing at the course, laughing at our predicament. This is all available to me when I relax, ignore the hullabaloo, open my eyes, see the other and not look for the negative.

One of the final course assignments is the contribution of three learning resources for teaching with humor. When this assignment was discussed in the first class, teachers were suspicious, expressing concern about the proposition that they could teach serious material in a comic way. As their own comic spirits were exercised over the weeks, however, they embraced this challenge with greater confidence. Some tested possible resources with their own students, and many described difficulty limiting their contributions to only three. It seems that once you are looking, everything is funny! Gadamer might see this change of perspective as the result of putting into play one’s prejudice about the seriousness of learning resources, creating an openness to the possibility of learning through laughter. Berk, a professor who uses humor to teach statistics, simply calls it twistedness:

Where do you find ideas to create humor? You don’t have to look far. The most unlimited source is your own imagination. To say that the ability to see and think humorously is a God-given gift is probably true. However, that means God gave you a “twisted mind” to notice that third side of a coin and the incongruity in an ordinary situation. This does not preclude anyone else from learning to be twisted or from improving his or her twistedness. (Berk, 1998, p. 51)

The final class collective repertoire contains books, videos, CDs, cartoons, art projects, science lessons, Rube Goldberg machines, URLs, games, sports, recipes, and grouping strategies for K-12, in both English and French. The trading of jokes and stories on the class listserv continued after the course had been completed, and in some cases after the students had graduated from their degree program.
One teacher wrote:

I believe using humor definitely helps. The students feel more comfortable when we share a laugh. I used several brain teasers this week which led to bouts of laughter from all involved. The students really got into the spirit and volunteered their own brain teasers to the class. Students who rarely get involved in class discussions stood up to deliver their brain teasers. It was a lot of fun.

In part because of the experience of laughing and learning himself, this teacher has reinterpreted his teacher tradition of seriousness, shifting his pedagogy to intentionally include the possibility of laughter. He saw changes in climate and participation that pleases him. Rogers summarizes other possible advantages for teaching with humor:

The humor-conscious teacher uses resource materials that offer rich opportunities for the development of flexibility, spontaneity, unconventionality, playfulness, shrewdness, and humility. (Rogers, 1984, p. 49)

The qualities that Rogers claims can be developed through working with comic resources are qualities of consequence for education in a Gadamerian tradition of openness, inquiry and tentativeness.

**Playfulness**

Many teachers have forgotten how to play. Under constant pressure to focus on ends and outcomes, prerequisites and readiness, they minimize the experience of the moment and fail to celebrate the joy of the encounter as they hurry children along to the next stage. But Bontekoe argues such outcome-based behavior is counterproductive if it is a true understanding that we seek:

What is called for in any genuine attempt to understand, is the sort of concentrated absorption in the things before us which Gadamer suggests is to be found in serious play, where the nature of those things is not obscured for us by our prior commitment to extraneous purposes. Play, which, according to Gadamer, is in essence a “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal
that would bring it to an end (TM, 103) contains its own, even sacred seriousness. (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 239).

He continues, “Thus the open-ended process of interpretation which carries us toward the truth without ever permitting us actually to arrive at it should be entered upon in a spirit that is at once resolute and playful” (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 240).

In humor studies, the playful spirit was beckoned to class from the beginning. Participants were divided into groups based on their selection of a chocolate bar, and then required to introduce their group to the community by explaining what they had in common with each other and the chocolate they have chosen. This warm-up activity is a bonding ritual across non-traditional markers, and makes for a silly, light-hearted start.

Each group then identified as their leader the individual with the shortest last name. The leader served the group by acting as a runner, choosing a task from a variety of games, puzzles, riddles, and brain teasers. When a group decided that it has completed the task, or has lost interest in it, the leader ran to the puzzle table and honked the bicycle horn, signaling to the community that their group has completed a puzzle. Everyone else was expected to stop all activity, rise to their feet and applaud and cheer wildly for their “successful” colleagues. This process continued for several rounds until each group had completed two or three puzzles and/or general interest in the silly project was seen to be waning. A discussion about the activity followed this playtime, providing some insights into the teachers’ views of playfulness generally, and their own playful spirits particularly.

Most people enjoyed the process of identifying with the chocolate bar. It seemed curious and silly, setting a playful tone for the class, and calling upon them to show an anticipation of completeness about its purpose. The challenge of developing a group chocolate identity piqued their imaginations, causing them to consider personal qualities that
may not be frequently considered, such as nutty, airy, sweet on the inside but hard on the outside. Most people also enjoyed the idea of playing with puzzles, especially playing in a group. They liked the sense of accomplishment and relished both the sound of the bicycle horn and the applause of the community to celebrate their success.

On the other hand, many expressed frustration that their concentration on their own task was interrupted when they were required to honor the work of others with applause. Some described feelings of guilt that they were able to determine for themselves when they had completed the task. “Why should we bother to complete the whole puzzle if it isn’t going to be checked?”, and “What if some of our answers are wrong?” were among the questions asked. These questioners felt that a carte blanche honking of the horn was somehow unfair. Some felt like “quitters” if they didn’t do all of the parts of a task, and as quitters they then felt guilty. Many expressed surprise at how competitive they found themselves, even in dealing with inconsequential content like these games and puzzles.

In a second round of debriefing, most agreed that they had not, as Gadamer recommends, engaged in the to-and-fro of play without tying it to any goal. Play for the sake of play had been easily overtaken by seriousness. This seriousness closed opportunities for imagination, for conversation, for joy, and possibly for the achievement of the best understanding of the puzzle itself (although these puzzles are not necessarily intellectually challenging and consequential). Rogers, twenty years ago, described seriousness as the state of many classrooms:

Laughter is far too rare in today’s classrooms. Our obsession with effectiveness and efficiency, time-on-task, standards, discipline, skills, objectives, inputs, outputs, test scores, fear, and failure have turned schools into rather grim places. (Rogers, 1984, p. 46)
Shocked to see themselves as too wise for laughter, most teachers expressed a desire to be more playful, to create for their students opportunities for play for play’s sake, and to explore methods for pursuing serious learning outcomes in a playful way. Feeling themselves trapped between performance pressures put upon them by government and society and their genuine desires to do the best by their students, some teachers found the idea of more play provocative, but they struggled to justify it. Issues from the “serious” teacher tradition including fairness, correctness, play, cheating, responsibility, community, completeness, and individual vs. group work all surfaced in discussion about this puzzle game, as the players put their prejudices and traditions into play in the conversation about play.

Questions – The Docta Ignorantia at Work

In a cartoon, a child is challenging the teacher, “How do you expect me to learn when you are the one asking all of the questions?”

For Gadamer, the question is fundamental if one is to experience fully, and if the experience is to move toward a new understanding. He writes, “We cannot have experiences without asking questions. Recognizing that an object is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that” (TM, 362 in Bontekoe 1996, p. 114). The act of asking the question places the object of the question “in the open” so that it can be explored. At the same time, the particular question limits the extent of this particular exploration by the simple fact that is it this question and not that one. There is no suggestion that this is the only or the final question. With an open stance, the questioner begins, and each question potentially leads to another. This is the demonstration simultaneously of the docta ignorantia and the anticipation of completeness.

In classrooms, the cartoon child is more the norm than is Gadamer’s open questioner, and although understanding is the official purpose of the experience, the question seems to
serve other purposes, and the purposes of those other than the student. In 1988, Dillon visited 27 classrooms and heard only eleven student questions. He saw “721 students engaged in discussion and ... heard questions from eight of them. No questions from the other 99 percent. Not a single question from 713 adolescents nearing graduation from secondary school” (Dillon, 1988, p. 9). According to Dillon’s research, the question definitely belongs to the teacher, accounting “for over 60 per cent of the teachers’ talk and for less than one per cent of the students’ talk. The overall rate works out to 80 questions per hour from each teacher and two questions per hour from all of the students combined” (Dillon, 1988, p. 9).

Dillon continues to describe the typical teacher question “cycle” which “turns tightly from (a) teacher question to (b) student answer to (c) teacher evaluation of answer plus next question. In their one turn, students can do nothing but answer; and they have no other turn to talk” (Dillon, 1988, p. 13). In this question cycle, the teacher question is often asked in search of the right answer (also teacher-determined), implying finitude, certainty, and an expectation of the question as a stand-alone move, rather than the beginning move in an ongoing inquiry. The docta ignorantia, the awareness of one’s own ignorance, is not embraced by the teacher/questioner. Worse, the pattern of searching for the answer to the teacher’s question teaches the student not to ask her/his own questions. Dillon elaborates:

It is anti-normative to display ignorance in school, to show perplexity, incomprehension, and need in the asking – especially when the matter is so simple and you seem to be the only one in the room who still does not understand! Further, in some classrooms, it is anti-normative to display interest in the subject-matter or the teacher. From long experience, most poignantly in the earliest years of schooling, watching what happens to self and others who ask questions, students have reasonably drawn the appropriate lesson: ‘Don’t ask questions.’ (Dillon, 1988, p. 17)
In an attempt to examine playfully the asking of questions, in humor studies we played the “Jewish mother” game, in which pairs engage in conversation on an assigned topic but must respond to each question with a question, a behavior representative of the stereotypical Jewish mother. The “winners” are the pair who can generate the most questions. No answering is permitted!

In debriefing this activity, teachers typically described their frustration and sense of lack of progress in this endless exchange of questions. They said the conversation had no momentum, that it felt silly, that it lacked substance. They described a question as “unfulfilled” when it did not “produce” an answer. They acknowledged that in their classrooms there was typically a one-to-one correspondence between a question and an answer, with the question simply considered an “introduction” to the answer. From their perspectives, the answer is the truth, the fact, the meat of the matter.

This contrasts with the Gadamerian notion of a question begetting another question to bring another aspect of the object “into the open.” He writes that to have experience, the questioner (or learner) must be “able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning even further” (TM, 367, in Bontekoe, 1996, p. 115).

Teachers in the humor course expressed skepticism that the value resides in the question, pointing to the entire school assessment methodology founded on the right answer, or on a limited number of acceptable answers. They described their own discomfort with unanswered questions, and speculated that their students would feel unsatisfied also. They agreed that common pedagogical strategies like brainstorming, mind mapping, webbing and outlining could be seen as forms of open questioning begetting questioning, and most said
that they do encourage their students to gather or generate lots of ideas before they proceed with a piece of writing or a project. They also agreed that it would be worthwhile to research the balance of teacher-asked versus student-asked questions in their classrooms. Finding ways to open teachers to the priority of the question remains a significant project.

Bontekoe explains:

One must want to learn in order to be able to ask the right questions – those questions that still “reach into the sphere of the truly open” – and this desire can only exist when one is aware of one’s own ignorance. Mastering the art of asking questions, then, is not a matter of learning some method, but rather of cultivating a readiness to see what remains to be shown. (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 115)

The natural orientation of young children to ask many, many questions is itself often curtailed as children age and become socialized into a world where others, namely adults, are the ones who know, and where asking questions can sometimes be dangerous. In this anecdote, wanting to learn is insufficient, as Kaufman, an instructor at City University of New York makes it clear whose questions he thinks are valid. He shows, too, how a single answer can end, rather than begin, any search for meaning:

It is not fashionable to blame the student for anything, but there are plenty of fools among them too. What is most shocking is the fact that many of them seem not to have even a clue as to what’s good for them. When we were studying Saint Anselm’s proof for the existence of God, one girl was noticeably impatient; finally, I called on her. She wanted to know why she needed to learn “this stuff,” of what use it would be to her. My answer was short: “Because it is better to be smart than stupid. Because there is dignity in being educated and cultivated.” Her face was a mask of utter puzzlement … And so she simply stopped coming to class. (Kaufman, 1996, pp. 47 – 48)

Bringing something into the open through questioning is only productive if there is, indeed, an opening. In Kaufman’s class, this open space is not provided. The student realizes that, and stops coming to class. We don’t know from our limited access to the story whether or not the student stops asking questions.
Creating the opening for openness is the teacher’s responsibility, one made easier if
the teacher has broken with her “mechanical life,” and lives with a playful to-and-fro, open to
new experiences. Bontekoe writes:

To be experienced, in other words, is less a matter of facing the world with
answers than it is of facing the world with further questions in mind.
According to Gadamer, there is no end to this process of asking questions, and
thus no final question to be articulated. (Bontekoe; 1996, p. 115)

Another game we played in humor studies, called “therapeutic grunts” is a variation
on the “Jewish mother” game and is similarly intended to keep the conversation going, to
postpone the final question. Again, pairs engaged in a dialogue about an assigned topic.
Person A speaks on the topic, and Person B responds periodically with therapeutic grunts
intended to indicate that she is listening, is interested, has heard Person A’s idea and would
like to hear more. Person B, however, is not permitted to add any content to the
conversation, nor to ask specific, content-oriented questions. Samples of therapeutic grunts
include, “tell me more,” “I see,” “uh huh,” “oh,” “hmm,” “that’s interesting.” Physical
grunts like nodding and smiling also count. Partners then switch roles and play the game
again. As in the Jewish mother game, the winner in this game is the one with the greatest
number of grunts.

The last conversation game is not directly about questioning, but does introduce
issues about understanding and being understood. Each member of a pair was given a script
outlining his interests and activities. There were some sentence stems to complete, such as,
“My last charitable donation was to ....” “My favorite author is ...”. Each completed his
script, then translated it into Pig Latin, a playful childhood code created by moving the initial
vowel sound of a word to the end, and combining it with “ay” so that, for example, Pig Latin
becomes Ig-pay Atin-lay. Each speaker introduced himself to his partner using his prepared
script. The partner listened with care, trying to grasp the key points (note taking was permitted). After the conversation, the listening partner confirmed, in standard English, what he understood from the “foreign” language conversation, paraphrasing the original speaker’s interests.

In debriefing both the therapeutic grunts and Pig Latin games, teachers spoke of frustration about the slow pace of the conversation, and the effort they must make to restrain themselves from jumping in to move it along. In the Pig Latin game, teachers described the intensity with which they must listen to make sense of words that are not in their normal vocabularies. Empathy for students whose first language is not the language of class instruction was also often expressed. The greatest challenge seemed to be staying in the to-and-fro of the game and restraining the impulse to determine what its value was, whether it was useful or a “waste of time.” Creating an open space to be, to play, to talk and to think is not easy in a time-on-task classroom culture.

Burbules and Rice describe an array of “communicative virtues” that “help make dialogue possible and help sustain the dialogical relation over time.” They write:

These virtues include tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the ability to reinterpret or translate one’s own concerns in a way that makes them comprehensible to others, the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may “have a turn” to speak, and the disposition to express one’s self honestly and sincerely. The possession of these virtues influences one’s capacities both to express one’s own beliefs, values, and feelings accurately, and to listen and hear those of others. (Burbules and Rice, 1991, p. 411)

Games that require the practice of restraint, or the translation of one’s concerns into a new form, can help teachers become aware of the role of these communicative virtues, as well as helping them to enhance their own virtues. In brainstorming about their own classroom practices that are consistent with these virtues, teachers listed things like
increasing wait time, receiving but not answering student questions, and directly teaching students turn-taking, listening, paraphrasing, and questioning skills, as well as modeling and encouraging these skills in day-to-day work. Most admitted that they were aware of the importance of these orientations and skills, that they tried both to teach them and to practice them, and that under the pressure of the curriculum they frequently lapsed on both accounts. They admitted to feeling humbled by their performances in the game situations.

Cartoon character, Maxine, tells this encouraging joke:

*If you woke up breathing, congratulations. You have another chance.*

Gadamer might more seriously advise that if you woke up humbled, or if you woke up at all, congratulations. You have another chance to work for a critical understanding, to correct your prejudices, to expose your immediate horizon to another, and to emerge with a new, but still incomplete, understanding. The questioning games helped teachers to become conscious of questions.

*Openness*

Taylor explains that being open creates an opportunity to experience the other, be it a text, a person, an experience, or a different way of understanding ourselves:

The crucial moment is the one in which we allow ourselves to be interpellated by the other; in which the difference escapes from its categorization as an error, a fault, or a lesser, undeveloped version of what we are, and challenges us to see it as a viable human alternative. It is this that unavoidably calls our own self-understanding into question. This is the stance Gadamer calls “openness.” (Taylor, 2002, p. 141)

Escaping from the categorization of difference as “an error, a fault or a lesser, undeveloped version of what we are” is part of becoming educated. It isn’t easy. Moving to a new understanding requires letting go of the old one, which, however unproductive or
unsatisfying it might have been, was at least recognizable and in some ways secure.

Consider this allegedly rational response to an inquiry about an undeveloped version:

*Why don’t you quit smoking, Nellie? You know how bad it is for your body, and for the people around you breathing second hand smoke.*
*I’d like to, Jas, but I’ve got a fortune invested in ashtrays.* (unattributed)

In humor studies, acknowledging that learning is risk taking, we reinforced the courage of the learner by guaranteeing a hospitable climate and a warm reception for any attempts to stretch and reach into the unknown, to be open. We established group norms including Disney cartoon character Thumper Rabbit’s mother’s rule – *if you can’t say nothin’ nice, don’t say nothin’ at all.* When an individual or group took the stage to make a presentation, the audience acknowledged the beginning by applauding and cheering enthusiastically. When the performance was underway, each audience member was committed to focusing intently on the performer, smiling when eye contact was made, and participating with sincerity and enthusiasm when audience involvement was required. Time was taken to discuss the performance as a relationship between the actor and the audience, requiring the exchange of energy and attention for its best effect. Teachers commented that they planned to address audience roles more directly in their own classrooms as a result of the support they felt the audience has provided to them in their learning in this class.

The nature of humor itself suggests not only that difference is not an error. In comedy, an error or a difference is normal, common or expected. In comedy, difference is required and welcomed with laughter. The joy of humor is in embracing the seemingly endless variety of ways that the world of expectations can be disrupted. In class, strategies for grouping provided a fruitful way to disrupt expectations, to demonstrate possibilities, to complete a serious task (grouping for instruction) with laughter and to avoid what I call
"hardening of the categories." We have organized based upon selection of a chocolate bar; length of first, last or middle name; province of birth (with an "exotic" group for those born outside Canada); birth order; number of languages spoken; favorite seasonal sports; random numbers; partners across two lines; names drawn at random that have something in common with some others in the room; single lines from a poem that must be restored to its original stanzas which then become the groups. These organizing activities were used as warm-ups or pace changers, usually requiring individuals to move about the room and to engage in inquiry with different folks. The organizing content was on the surface typically silly or inconsequential, but it often revealed information about participants that might not previously have been made public, and it always resulted in work groups that contained a different mix of people. The knowledge resident in the large group was shared in different conversations; communicative virtues were practiced with different partners; different ways of thinking were experienced and usually appreciated. Difference was expected, and difference was usually considered valuable.

*Confronting Prejudices*

In humor studies we pushed the consideration of the other and the reconsideration of teaching about the other by examining jokes founded on stereotypes. We turned to professional comics like Chris Rock, Shaun Majumder, Margaret Cho, Suzanne Westenhoffer or Ray Hanania who provided for us a vicarious experience of life from the place of an outsider. We usually engaged with the material in a large group and then followed with a discussion in small groups about reactions to the material and secondly about the place such an activity might merit in participants' own classrooms. The heuristic described in Chapter 4 for interrogating the Jewish mother joke was used on some occasions.
Mind mapping on two levels—what was funny and what would you do with this sketch, if anything—was also used. Open-ended conversations were also employed. We used print, audio and video resources, the richness of which cannot really be duplicated in print alone.

Here are some sample sketches that provided grist for the mill about how others live in our shared world:

_Sometimes I hate life because I was born a suspect. All black men are born suspects. When I came out of my mother, right away, if anything happened within a three-block radius, I was a suspect. As a matter of fact, the day I was born, somebody’s car got stolen from the hospital parking lot. They made me stand in a lineup. That was pretty tough, considering I wasn’t even a day old and couldn’t crawl, much less walk. Good thing I had a couple of black nurses to help hold me up. I got lucky. They were in the lineup, too._ (Rock, 1997, p. 10)

_What are Sam Nunn and General Colin Powell and all the other colons so worried about? Why can’t they lift the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military? Are they afraid that millions of us will enlist? I doubt it. Don’t you have to get up early there? I’ll do that one day a year—for the parade. We just want the right to enlist. Like my girlfriend and I want the right to have a legal wedding. We don’t want to get married. We’re queer, we aren’t crazy._ (Gomez in Flowers, 1995, p. 87)

_From “Cowboys and colored people”_
_The Indians aren’t ready yet. ... Do you want to build a fifty thousand dollar home and have some guy build a wigwam next to it? I’m not against Indians, now. I don’t want anyone to leave here feeling I’m against Indians. There have been Indians I’ve admired. Guys I’ve looked up to. Fellows who in my mind didn’t let the fact that they were Indians hold them back. They were aggressive, they went out and asserted that aggressiveness and made a name for themselves. Guys like Tonto, Little Beaver, those guys ... (Wilson in Watkins, 1994, p. 521)_

In these comic sketches, stereotypes that the listener may hold about others are placed in the open for possible examination on their own merits, though when the sketches are delivered in a comedy club environment a formal exploration is not typically required. In class, however, we did attend to these comic routines with the expectation that we would experience them and then examine that experience, looking for our own prejudices and
stereotypes, and looking for ways to learn through critical reflection on those prejudices. We engaged in conversation in pairs, small groups and occasionally in the whole group, discussing the relationship between the particular and the general, sharing our own direct experience, if any, with the butt of the joke and challenging the generalizability of that experience. Using the heuristic described in Chapter 4 we tried to adjudicate the reliability of characterizations in a joke, as well as to discuss the significance, if any, of the truth or fallacy of the stereotype.

In Kaplan’s description of stereotypes, he highlights a la Gadamer the particular-universal relationship as a place where our sense often falters. Stereotypes are:

Patterns of illogic ... summed up as the fallacy of simple prediction: the individual is not responded to as an individual but as a member of the minority group whose stereotyped attributes are then imputed to the individual. Foregone conclusions classify the individual as a member of that group rather than the countless other groups always possible; however a minority be defined, its members always belong as well to majorities in countless other respects. (Kaplan, 1999, p. 82)

Stereotypes are maintained, then, partly because the interpreter considers the group as the defining unit rather than the individual, and partly because the holder of the stereotype has submerged these ideas in the habitual (Greene, 1978) and built a world of thought-less activity that accepts stereotypes as expressions of normal. Jokes that confront these stereotypes provide a new experience, offering the interpreter a chance to reconsider. Gadamer describes how hidden prejudices may become “dislodged” through such an experience:

One of the fundamental structures of all speaking is that we are guided by preconceptions and anticipations in our talking in such a way that these continually remain hidden and that it takes a disruption in oneself of the intended meaning of what one is saying to become conscious of these prejudices as such. In general the disruption comes about through some new experience in which a previous opinion revealed itself to be untenable. But
the basic prejudices are not easily dislodged and protect themselves by claiming self-evident certainty for themselves. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 92)

As Bae pointed out in Chapter 4, the fact that the stereotype is challenged by an individual who is simultaneously a member of the stereotyped group and of many other groups (Gadamer's notion of multiple, potentially conflicting traditions), creates both ambiguity and disruption. If this is a unique individual, how can my prejudice about his consistency with all others like him be tenable? The laughter that accompanies this awareness may express the embarrassment we feel when we realize that we have held unwarranted beliefs. Happily, it may also help us to forgive ourselves, or even to soften the blow to our egos as we recognize that our finitude in judging this individual, or this group, was inappropriate.

In humor studies, confrontation with these stereotypes did not readily appear to result in the dislodging of teachers' prejudices. Of the various ideas and activities of the course, examining stereotypical jokes and sketches generated the least laughter, and frequently resulted in a less animated conversation, often one in which many class members remained silent. Common reactions to the comic pieces (examples include the "nigger work song" scene from Blazing Saddles, the "Mr. White" sketch from Eddie Murphy's Best of Saturday Night Live, the song "Rednecks" from Randy Newman's Good Old Boys) were general discomfort, a reluctance to laugh, and frequent suggestions that "this kind" of humor was demeaning, unkind, and unacceptable in polite society. Teachers did not seem to want to interrogate the jokes; they wanted to silence them. While they were theoretically open to the idea of learning about the other, they did not want to do so through a comedy experience that they thought might result for some in alienation, pain or embarrassment. They were aware of the darker side of human relationships and they chose not to confront it directly. Moreover,
they found a comic approach especially inappropriate because of the possibility that it is, or would be seen to be a thinly disguised effort to demean people or to show a lack of respect for such important social issues as racism, or homophobia. They worried that laughing at the butt of a hostile joke might develop into more overtly aggressive action against that butt. Lastly, they did not see a suitable place for such comedy in their classrooms, speculating that their students might feel encouraged to make fun of one another if this mocking behavior was sanctioned by the teacher, and that they would therefore be teaching more about aggressive behavior than about understanding stereotypes.

Several scholars have considered this question in their examination of the aggressive nature of humor, and have found such a causal link between laughter and violence wanting (Davies, 2002; Oring, 1992; Saper, 1993). Oring calls Freud and his followers “aggression theorists” because they claim a joke is used to mask an expression of aggression. He says:

> from a psychoanalytic perspective, all expressive forms – myths, fairytales, songs, rituals – serve to disguise forbidden impulses so they can be expressed in a socially acceptable fashion. Consequently, aggression theory does not adequately distinguish humorous communication from other forms of expression” (Oring, 1993, p. 16).

Secondly, he points out that some of the jokes that have been analyzed as aggressive are often told by the groups themselves, which, according to aggression theory, would make these folks masochistic. Thirdly, according to this theory, the joke is a disguise to render socially acceptable a point of view that could not be expressed otherwise. Oring argues that these points of view can be and are otherwise expressed, rendering the joke obsolete. I would add that if the choice in expressing aggression is between a joke and actual violence, better the joke.
Davies warns that avoiding the subject of what he calls "ethnic humor" results in avoiding the opportunity to learn from the experience, to put one's prejudices into play, to consider a "perhaps." He writes, "To become angry about such jokes and to seek to censor them because they impinge on sensitive issues is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is" (Davies in Nilsen and Nilsen, 2000, p. 116).

In many ways the very act of teaching is an act that "impinges on sensitive issues." Goodlad argues that teachers must engage with sensitive – he calls them "moral" – issues:

If the answer to the question of what schools are for is ... seen to encompass such things as responsibility for critical enculturation into a political democracy, the cultivation (with the family) of character and decency, and the preparation for full participation in the human conversation, then teachers (carefully selected teachers, themselves well educated, who understand the layers of contextual complexity and who have engaged in reflection and dialogue on the moral issues involved) are necessary. (Goodlad, 1990, p. 28)

Ironically, wanting to build community may actually interfere with the work of getting to know those who are "outside." Palmer explains:

If being in community equals being intimate, a vast range of others and otherness falls beyond our reach. When intimacy becomes the norm, we lose our capacity for connectedness with the strange and the stranger that is at the heart of being educated. We lose our capacity to entertain people and ideas that are alien to what we think and who we are. (Palmer, 1998, p. 91)

Perhaps the lead-up to a discussion of ethnic or racial humor needed to be longer, the community more secure, the expectation of discomfort more explicitly explored, or the rules of engagement more explicit than those we created in humor studies if we are to confront our prejudices via such hot material. Still, while humor might not be the best pedagogical resource for confronting ethnic, racial or sexual stereotyping, silence on these issues is not a suitable alternative.
While teachers did not appear ready to embrace humor as a way of reinterpreting relationships between groups, it has been harnessed by many marginal groups themselves to define those relationships in ways more consistent with equality and respect. Walker writes, “Jokes told by blacks since the late nineteenth century point up the absurd extremes of racism, the inability of whites to survive without the black servant class on which they have come to rely, and – most important – the shared sense of community among blacks” (Walker, 1988, p. 106). Levine agrees:

Marginal groups often embraced the stereotypes of themselves in a manner designed not to assimilate it but to smother it. ... To tell jokes containing the stereotype was not invariably to accept it but frequently to laugh at it, to strip it naked, to expose it to scrutiny. (Levine, 1977, p. 336)

Apte explains why the study of humor has the potential to help us to know each other:

Humor is primarily the result of cultural perceptions, both individual and collective, of incongruity, exaggeration, distortion, and any unnamed combinations of the cultural elements in external events ... Familiarity with a cultural code is a prerequisite for the spontaneous mental restructuring of elements that results in amusement and laughter. ... If the foundation of most humor is cultural, then understanding how humorous experiences are cognitively formulated, either intentionally or accidentally, should lead us to better insights into the cultural system. (Apte in Walker, 1988, p. 16)

Harnessing humor for the pedagogical purpose of dislodging prejudices and learning about the other is, in the classroom at least, an unfulfilled task. In Chapter 6, I will speculate further on why this was the case in the humor studies course.

Living with Ambiguity

Oring argues that humor “depends on the perception of an appropriate incongruity; that is, the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily
be regarded as incongruous" (Oring, 2003, p. 1). He illustrates his point with this joke:

_ A man goes to see a psychiatrist. The doctor asks him, "What seems to be the problem?" The patient says, "Doc, no one believes anything I say." The doctor replies, "You're kidding!" (Oring, 2003, p. 1)_

Determining categories and perceiving relationships between them as inappropriate or not, is part of the task of making sense. Recognizing the temporal and cultural nature of any categories and remaining open to shifting category boundaries and possibilities for entirely new categories is, as Gadamer would say, "to have an experience." He writes:

_ Experience is initially always experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be. In view of the experience that we have of another object, both things change – our knowledge and its object. We know better now, and that means the object itself “does not pass the test.” The new object contains the truth about the old one. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 354)_

Always required, though, for the experience to be a genuine one, is the interpreter’s approach to the experience ready to play, that is open to the possibility of other possibilities. Joking which puts incongruities into play, continually suggesting that “something is not what we supposed it to be,” works on “the truth” like physical exercise works on the body. It keeps us nimble, flexible, humble, dancing like the boxer on our toes, ready to move quickly to a new point of view, free from the restraints of certainty and happily disposed to coming to know an object “better now.” In a joking world, not knowing is common, being surprised is common, seeing differently is common. It is not that we don’t seek the truth, or try to find clarity; it is that we know any moment of truth is just a moment. We may enjoy some certainty momentarily, just as we enjoy a joke typically for a brief time, but we know that life, and the search for knowledge, goes on. As this Buddhist “joke” explains, there is no escape from the seeking:

_ A Zen monk walks up a mountain determined to find enlightenment, and on the way he meets an old man carrying a bundle of sticks. He asks the old man _
if he knows about enlightenment. The old man, who is actually the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, puts his bundle on the ground. The monk is astonished. “It’s that simple?” he asks. “Just let go and don’t grasp anything? Now what?” The old man picks up his bundle and continues his journey down the mountain. (Myss, 1997, p. 36)

Even with the benefit of enlightenment, the work of pursuing the questions of life remains, and a comic looseness helps to take the edge off the anxiety emanating from uncertainty. To learn we must be ever willing to play, to put our traditions forward for examination from a different perspective.

Morgan and Saxton explored the nature of teacher’s questions, and report that “teachers tend to lose their confidence when they find themselves in the same position as their students: pursuing a question which has no right answer,” and “teachers become uncomfortable when dealing with material that cannot be measured in traditional ways” (Morgan and Saxton, 1991, p. 5). Working with comedic material provides a low stakes opportunity to be uncomfortable and to lose one’s confidence in the right answer, to find oneself in the same position as one’s students; to be prepared for a Gadamerian “experience,” namely a confrontation with alien ideas that challenge one’s prejudices and traditions. The comic experience allows us to experience the discomfort of no right answer with the side door exit that in this case, at least, not having a right answer doesn’t matter much. Still, we have the practice of being open to the no-right-answer option.

In humor studies, one grouping game required teachers to select a name from an envelope and to find, in the room, the four other people who belonged in the same group. No background knowledge was provided about the names, though participants were encouraged to ask others for information if they did not know their character. Ambiguity was further introduced because some characters could conceivably be in more than one group. Henry
Kissinger, for example, could be with the “Henry” group which also contained Hank Aaron, or he could be with the Nobel peace prize winners. Hank Aaron could be with the athletes, who, it turns out after deeper analysis, were not the general category of athletes but runners, and Canadian runners at that. This was a noisy activity with wandering, interviewing and arguing. Formulating a hypothesis about the nature of a group was necessary, as was letting that hypothesis go in response to a more compelling one. In the end, each group was supposed to have the same number of members; this is not always the case, as some groups simply refuse to put Kissinger in the same group as Lester B. Pearson and insist on squeezing five people into the “Henrys”. The genre bending game described in Chapter 4 was also designed to create an opportunity for appropriate incongruity, as well as a chance for teachers to move playfully away from the right answer, or the way things are supposed to be.

The “let’s do lunch” game (adapted from von Oech, 1983) served similar purposes. Participants arranged themselves in two lines, A and B, and partnered with the person opposite them in the other line. Participant A chose a number at random which then dictated which pair of lunch guests they would play from the choices on the numbered list. Some sample lunch dates were between a circus clown and an air traffic controller, embalmer and aerobics instructor, jazz singer and nurse in a cancer ward. A topic of conversation was given and each pair discussed it, as if over lunch, staying in their assigned roles to the extent possible. Conversation topics have included things like the decriminalization of marijuana, the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, airport security measures, daily physical education in school.

Besides having fun, the point of this game was to try to represent the views of one’s chosen character rather than one’s personal views, as well as to try to build a dialogue with the other, an other that might be outside the typical range of conversational acquaintance of a
teacher. Imagine a conversation between a physicist and a tarot card reader about standardized testing in elementary schools—it’s been done! Initially, there was disbelief that the other would have anything of value to contribute to the conversation, and there was difficulty in moving toward a fusion of horizons, but as it turned out, there was also remarkable use of communicative virtues to keep the conversations alive.

In debriefing this game, teachers expressed surprise that they were able to get into role, and they speculated about the sources of their ideas about these different characters, as well as about the degree to which their ideas represented unexplored stereotypes. In this game more than any other, players realized that they were working from their own effective history, the personal experiences and cultural traditions that form them, influence their understanding and constrain their possible interpretations of a new experience such as being in character as a trapeze artist.

They found the multiple concentrations—trying to be their own character, trying to address the subject matter, trying to listen carefully to the other—difficult, and they expressed empathy for their students facing similar complex tasks. Lastly, they realized that all of these characters, and more, comprise the world offering a variety of truths that could be experienced, and they expressed concern about how they were working as teachers to help their students “keep their options open.” They stated an intention to create a broader range of experience for their students, playing more games, and working more with an imaginary world. They also reported that they intended to engage their students more often in the debriefing of classroom activities with the intention of building skills for critical reflection.
Context is Critical

Gadamer explains that the effective history of the interpreter brings forth some possible understandings in a new situation and simultaneously excludes others, effectively limiting the range of potential outcomes in any one context of interpretation. Laughing, like other interpretive acts, is itself limited by the effective history of the laugher in part because it depends on the intellectual and social development of the individual, and/or the maturation of the group in which the comic encounter occurs (Hertzler, 1970; McGhee, 1979; Morreall, 1983; Shade, 1996). Understanding these developmental stages can help a teacher situate humor appropriately as a resource for understanding self and others, or as a diagnostic or assessment resource. If humor is introduced in an inappropriate context, or with a group of children who are not developmentally or socially prepared to engage with the particular type of comedy, the humor will contribute little to the educational goals. Gadamer might say that the child does not have access to the tradition that “explains” how a particular comedic encounter might be interpreted and so even if the learner has an anticipation of completeness, the completeness never occurs.

Teachers intending to develop a comic pedagogy would benefit from consulting the many scholars who have studied the developmental nature of humor, to deepen their understanding of age-appropriate comedy. The following chart, adapted from Shade, tracks some gross levels of development of the sense of humor, suggesting that different forms of humor appeal to people at different levels of development, with verbal humor deemed the most “mature.” This reinforces Gadamer’s notion that each interpreter is trapped in her/his effective history. A child (or adult) is only able to make sense of a joke by using the tools available at that particular moment. As the child matures and builds a broader interpretive
repertoire, essentially adjusting the boundaries of her/his effective history, other options for making sense of a joke present themselves.

The developmental nature of humor
(adapted from Shade, 1996, p. 111)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>week 1</td>
<td>smiles during sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>grins at discovery of human face, funny faces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>laughs at tickling; peekaboo, play with large, colorful toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>laughs at rhymes, nonsense words, their own mistakes, general silliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 years</td>
<td>laughs at physical comedy, clowning, body functions and noises, surprises and exaggeration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8 years</td>
<td>enjoys literal humor, practical jokes, riddles and knock-knock jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12 years</td>
<td>laughs at wider range of verbal humor including jokes, riddles, puns, word play; increased use of teasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 years +</td>
<td>increased verbal wit, laughs at advanced forms of humor including sarcasm, social and political satire, puns, irony, parody</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both Piagetian stages of thinking and Vygotskian notions of prior experience seem to be at play in determining what a child finds funny. McGhee (1979) argues that in the early stages children laugh only if they have the security of knowing that the incongruous situation they are experiencing is only a fantasy (rather than a reality conflicting with their existing repertoire of realities) and only if they themselves have a sense of mastery over a similar situation. He explains that children are capable of “conceptualizing humor as a result of achieving prior cognitive mastery over an event, and as a means of achieving mastery over sources of anxiety or distress” (McGhee, 1979, p. 34).

As children mature, the degree of incongruity in a joke must increase for them to continue to find the circumstance funny. In the early years, funny words or faces evoke laughter; next basic language errors or the use of taboo words are hilarious; next riddles and
jokes, even repeated, are considered funny; adolescents, however, require more elaborate
jokes or anecdotes. Consider this lexical joke:

   Order! Order in the court!
   Ham and cheese on rye, your honor.

Seven year olds who are coming to terms with multiple meanings for words will laugh at this
joke. Adults will groan. However, younger children will laugh even if the joke teller says:

   Silence! Silence in the court!
   Ham and cheese on rye, your honor.

because it is funny enough to be talking about food in a courtroom or to be ordering lunch
from the judge. McGhee calls the latter joke “resolution removed” because it doesn’t really
have a twist or a punch line that causes us to jump to another track to make sense of the
incongruity. As children mature the existence of a joke resolution is increasingly significant
in their appreciation of the joke. McGhee (1979) cites Edward Zigler’s work in determining
the degree of intellectual challenge required to appreciate a joke or a cartoon. Zigler reports
that if it is too difficult to understand the joke a listener typically doesn’t find it funny, and no
amount of explaining moves a joke from the mild to the moderate or strong response. If the
initial encounter with a joke seems more work than play, the joke fails to earn a laugh.

   Intellectual development is significant, too, because background knowledge, or
appropriate prejudice, is part of establishing the expectation from which the joke will deviate.
Young people may not yet have gathered the appropriate background to perceive the
incongruity. If a joke is based on the violation of such principles as conservation or
classification and the child has not yet acquired these principles, the joke dies. Consider this
example:

   The patron is asked, “Do you want your pizza cut into six or eight pieces?
   The patron replies, “Six. I couldn’t eat eight.”
If a child has not mastered conservation, and doesn’t realize that the pizza is the same size regardless of the number of pieces into which it is cut, this story is not heard as a joke. It is simply a narrative.

Lave and Wenger (1991) and others have made the case that learning is both an individual and a social experience. The development of the “social” influences the role of comedy in the classroom as much as the development of the individual does. The social structures that are involved in these humorous experiences are themselves “developmental,” that is, they are not created overnight. It takes time for a group to develop its criteria for joke recognition and permission (Douglas, 1969) and these criteria are not static, evolving as the group matures or regroups. They form the whole against which the particular joke is placed, and they influence whether or not it is considered funny. Morreall (1983) describes humor as a friendly social gesture that makes an individual more approachable, facilitates social interaction, has a cohesive effect on group members, creates a common experience and fills a basic need for play.

Humor-conscious teachers work to develop the contextual conditions and interpersonal relationships that will enable broad participation in joking encounters, maximize humor’s potential as a friendly social gesture and prevent cruel humor, or scapegoating.

**Comic Diagnostic and Assessment Tools**

Teachers use a variety of diagnostic tools and strategies to determine the traditions and prejudices of students, to ascertain students’ current horizons of understanding, to help them create learning opportunities that will function as Gadamerian confrontations in which students can examine both doubt and truth. Some humor-conscious teachers use comedy for
diagnostic and/or assessment purposes, creating low stakes opportunities for students to provide that they have mastered concepts or skills. A humor studies participant explained that the reaction to the following jokes allows her to determine if a student understands some basic science principles, without that student even realizing that he is being “tested”:

*An ion was walking down the street with a friend when she commented, “I think I have lost an electron.” Her companion asked, “Are you sure?” The ion replied, “Yes. I’m positive.”*

*You’re either part of the solution or part of the precipitate.*

Another teacher emphasized the contribution of humor to language development, without necessarily calling for formal “instruction”:

*Today we watched *The Reluctant Dragon*, a children’s cartoon, in class. Everyone sat glued to the set. They enjoyed every sonnet and every bit of witty repartee. They giggled and laughed and rolled in their chairs, repeating lines and rhyming couplets every moment or two. ... I think that early school age is when we begin to develop a joy in manipulating language to create humor.*

Post-secondary educators Berk (1998) and Kaufman (2004) use comic content in instruction, assignments and examinations to enliven potentially deadly subjects like mathematics and statistics, and to reduce student anxiety in test taking or class presentations. Kaufman has created comic role play scenarios for medical interns who are practicing taking a medical history to help them adjust to the unpredictable nature of patients attempting to describe their pain.

According to Berk, in the post-secondary classroom – and I suspect in many K-12 classes as well – “one of the greatest challenges ... is to tackle course content that students perceive as super-boring, ultra-difficult, or anxiety-producing” (Berk, 1998, p. 10). He continues outlining the problem, “A national survey of more than 250,000 freshmen at nearly
500 universities [reported] that a 30-year record high 35.6% of the students said that they were frequently bored in class” (Berk, 1998, p. 10).

Engaging in genuine questions in order to make sense of the world is a sufficiently difficult task. I think it is an impossible task to accomplish when one is bored into numbness. Fortunately, there is laughter. As Berk reminds us, “It is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time. Humor involves active learning” (Beck, 1998, p. 10).

*Taking Risks*

Thrown into such a life, and responsible as Greene says not only for “attending fully” to their own places in it, but also for “initiat[ing] young people into an ethical existence,” teachers are in particular need of humility, courage and hope. They are always called upon to put their own prejudices into play, to focus their attention on others, to imagine a variety of ways to open new opportunities for their students. In humor studies teachers demonstrated these qualities in what they described as the most stressful of all the assignments, the comic performance, in which they moved from being interpreters or appreciators of comedy to being creators. Television comedy writer Gelbart, one of the creators of M*A*S*H, describes the creation of comedy this way:

To write comedy is to report on life as viewed through a special lens, one that shows us and reminds us of all that we share in common, and all that we refuse to admit we do. The ultimate reward of illuminating those truths, dreads, and denials in surprising and entertaining ways is laughter – the outward expression of a nerve well struck. (Gelbart, 1998, introduction)

In spite of their experience in public speaking, presenting, or demonstrating in front of a group, many teachers claimed that they were “not funny,” and they found the requirement to make a humorous presentation to their peers daunting. They described fear of failure and public humiliation, physical symptoms of anxiety such as sweaty palms and
nervous stomachs. The challenge of creating humor was seen to be significantly more
difficult than the day-to-day exercise of appreciating humor.

In the end, it seemed that the work of attending to what they found funny and the
project of contributing to a collective comic teaching repertoire showed most teachers that
there was much humor in their own personal and professional lives. It was typically to these
sources that they turned for material for their comic performances. They told stories about
fishing expeditions, rodents in the house, the building inspector, standardized tests,
unrecognizable rashes, being lost, foreign travel, menopause, and children's misuse of
language. They wrote and performed songs, invented quiz shows (with prizes), presented
television newscasts, and did impressions of politicians. They tap danced, created slide
shows, and drew cartoons. Very often they told tales about themselves that were
deprecating, embarrassing, or humbling. They led the laughter about themselves, about the
nonsense of normal life and the search for a roadmap and a clear sense of purpose for the
journey of life, and especially about the silly idea that someone else would provide this
purpose or roadmap. The range of comic performances was remarkably diverse; the standard
of comedy remarkably high.

Having had to call upon their own courage, they reconsidered what learning might
feel like for their own students facing the work of interpreting a complex and unpredictable
world. One teacher put it this way:

But we are all bringing something different to each of these experiences. We
are interpreting the joke/experience with different tools. Greene tells us this is
OK – no right or wrong. But what is wrong is not to experience humor. To
not be open to seeing the laughable moments in each day. As teachers we
need to provide students with these opportunities to laugh and we must model
this openness to them.
A comic pedagogy then, is a liberating one, open to the other and to the specific context of learning, prepared for the fusion of horizons, continuously adjusted as it is enacted. It is safe from both the straightjacket of certainty and the paralyzing fear of uncertainty. It is a pedagogy founded on humility, courage and hope. Humility is the expression of Gadamer’s *docta ignorantia*, hope is based in Gadamer’s anticipation of completeness, and courage represents Gadamer’s expectation of openness and willingness to put one’s prejudices into play, combine, enabling the humor conscious teacher to create opportunities for students to interpret and to enjoy. Dewey describes it this way:

Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of the mind upon a topic. To give the mind this free play is not to encourage toying with a subject, but is to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its own account, apart from its subservience to a preconceived belief or habitual aim. (Dewey, 1991 edition, p. 219)

What’s more, Dewey exhorts us to play, saying “the playful attitude is one of freedom,” not at odds with the serious and difficult task of making sense of the world (Dewey, 1991 edition, p. 218).
CHAPTER 6 – HUMOR’S HERMENEUTIC ROLE

The seemingly simple question, “Why do we laugh?” really leads into much more complicated questions about how we perceive, how we decide what is real, and how we share values, methods, ideas—and jokes—with others.

Norman Holland
1982

The question in this thesis has been not “why do we laugh?” but rather how can laughter help with the “more complicated questions” of learning to live a good life, of creating with others the world we want. In the news during the week of my writing this chapter were the violent bombing of commuter trains in Madrid and the violent play in hockey, Canada’s national game. This snapshot suggests that our traditional methods for making sense of and in our world have limited utility. The complicated questions are indeed, more complicated, requiring different, more complicated or more thoughtful interpretations.

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate that humor can contribute to the hermeneutic repertoire, to help us make sense of the complicated questions.

In Chapter 3, I examined core elements of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and provided evidence of their appearance in joking encounters. In this concluding chapter I take a second look at the joking experiences of teachers in humor studies to determine the extent to which they experienced the comic encounters as interpretive opportunities. This belief in the interpretive power of comedy seems fundamental to teachers’ decision to include comedy in their pedagogical repertoires.

Comic Gilda Radner often posed the complicated questions in her professional work, and in her personal struggle with ovarian cancer and her imminent death. In this conversation with her long-time friend, Alan Zweibel she describes the merits of ten minutes’ notice of one’s death. I’ve italicized this text because I think it qualifies as comic.
It's a compromise. Let me live my life. Let me do what I do. And then, ten minutes before I'm supposed to die, God should let me know so I can make a few phone calls and maybe wolf down a couple of cheeseburgers. ... Plus, you get to ask God a question.

What do you mean?
Look, you're about to die anyway, right? So, as part of the deal, just before you close your eyes for the last time – so even you couldn't blabber it to everyone – you get to ask God any question that's been bugging you like, "Who killed Kennedy?" or "Where is Hoffa buried?" You know, questions like that.
Sure.
Not a bad idea, huh?
It's a great idea. Do you know what you would ask him?
Probably the Kennedy question. That whole thing's always fascinated me so I'd really like to find out the truth about it once and for all.
I understand.
What about you, Zweibel?
What would I ask God?
Uh-huh.
And you only get one question?
Only one question.
Avocado pits. Why did he make them so big? They take up all that space inside the avocado and it's dumb and it's disproportionate and I want to know what he was thinking when he designed it that way.
That's what you'd ask him?
Uh-huh.
You get one question about anything in life and you're going to ask about the size of avocado pits?
Why not?
You're an idiot.
Why? Because it's a waste of a question.
Oh, is that so?
Yes, that's so.
And do you know the answer?
No.
Then why's it a waste? (Zweibel, 1994, pp. 147 – 149)

In our search to understand both life and death, no question is a waste. Kabat-Zinn echoes Greene's call for wide-awareness to help clarify the path:

It is all too easy to remain on something of a fog-enshrouded, slippery slope right into our graves; or, in the fog-dispelling clarity which on occasion precedes the moment of death, to wake up and realize that what we had thought all those years about how life was to be lived and what was important
were at best unexamined half-truths based on fear or ignorance, only our own life-limiting ideas, and not the way our life had to be at all. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. xvi)

The limited experiences of the humor studies course suggest that there is potential merit in building a comic pedagogy to support the examination of truths and half-truths. With few exceptions, teachers in the course approached the array of comic experiences with an orientation that Gadamer would claim necessary in order to interpret the experiences productively, to understand, to learn. When an encounter was foreshadowed with the comic stem, “I’ve got a joke for you,” or variations on that theme, they demonstrated an anticipation of completeness, an open-minded expectation that their current understanding of the subject matter of the joke would be mocked, twisted or challenged in some way. They demonstrated, too, some degree of the docta ignorantia, the wisdom of knowing that they did not know the direction this challenge would take, and they prepared themselves to be surprised, and possibly entertained and/or amused by the new perspective injected into the interpretation by the joke itself. While they were subject to the hold of their own effective history (Warnke, 1987), they were willing to put their prejudices into play to consider the perspective provided by the joke. They attended honorably to this other perspective, drawing it into their own interpretive space and matching it against their own traditions, looking for confirmation, or more likely for conflict with the way they had historically interpreted the subject matter of the joke. They called upon the hermeneutic imagination to enable them to see the alternative interpretation proposed in a joke. Finally, they integrated their interpretation and novel understanding demonstrating this integration by responding with laughter, or groans.

Repeating this interpretive process with jokes, skits, videos, songs and comic performances,
the teachers represented themselves as appreciators of humor, one of the key parts of comedy.

Interpretation and appreciation of comedy were also evident as teachers provided feedback to colleagues presenting comic performances, and as they assembled comic resources they considered suitable for the introduction of traditionally serious subjects to their own students. The array of resources was both broad and rich, demonstrating attention to the other of comedy, but also to the many others of their students and their school subjects. Research to follow up on teachers' actual use of comic resources in their classrooms would provide useful data about the impact of teaching with a comic spirit.

Aspects of Gadamer's elements of interpretation were evident, too, as teachers fulfilled the other part of the comic equation, the creation of humor. Imagination, attention to a possible other way of seeing, and the relinquishing of devotion to one's traditional understanding were integrated and applied in individual and group comic performances. Both the variety and the quality of these performances were remarkable.

*The Transformative Potential of Humor*

The concept of the hermeneutic circle symbolizes that each interpretation exists in a context, ending one idea while simultaneously beginning another, closing one pathway while opening a new one. Teachers in humor studies were clearly both willing and able to engage in comic encounters as both appreciators and creators, putting their prejudices into play, interpreting with openness and imagination and responding with laughter, or not. While appreciating myself the ongoing-ness of human interpretation, whether comic or not, my goals in understanding humor and in teaching humor studies were more ambitious ones, including exploiting humor's potential for opening different interpretations of self and the
world that would have “staying power”, and building the transformative power of a comic pedagogy. There was not evidence over the length of the humor studies course that these ambitious goals were realized.

Discussions in class and entries in teachers’ journals indicated that they appreciated and understood the potential of engaging playfully. They remembered earlier and other times in their lives when they laughed more, and they valued the opportunity to work comically, joyfully and seemingly with less pressure. They were generally committed to creating more open and playful classrooms for their own students through the judicious use of games and comic encounters, and they commented that they believed this would be an easy thing to do, as long as they retained their own comic orientation. As previously reported, they were able to create a rich library of resources to introduce traditionally serious subjects to their own students and they anticipated using them to good effect.

Limitations

Joking and laughing as stand alone activities seemed readily possible and usually enjoyable. Invoking a comic point of view to take a second look at unanticipated or ambiguous experiences or effects of the world at large enabled teachers to create sophisticated and entertaining comic performances. Yet these comic interludes were just that. They did not flow together to show that the teachers had necessarily embraced a comic perspective on self and the world.

This restriction of a humorous perspective for the “funny things” was shown in two major areas, namely the class business, and the attempts to investigate diversity through jokes about racism, sexism or homophobia. In terms of class business, teachers continued to consider the traditions of schooling as serious stuff. They worried and complained about
marking schemes, fairness in evaluation, the precise word-count expectations of written assignments, the required number of journal entries, demonstrating the hold of the schooling tradition, "what's counted, counts." They were, in reality, worrying about how successfully they were performing in a class devoted to ambiguity, letting go, and being silly. Within the class, then, they demonstrated Gadamer's understanding that people interpret based on their participation in multiple identities, their effective history developed by multiple traditions that may be in tension one with another. In the case of humor studies, the tradition of grades often trumped the tradition of playfulness, the tradition of doing one's best trumped the tradition of letting go and exploring in the moment.

This tension between competing traditions within the individual teachers is of consequence because it makes vulnerable their initial promise to take a comic spirit with them into their classrooms. When the pressure of external accountability combines with their own professional traditions of grading and performance, I anticipate that the infant tradition of responding to life as/with a joke will not flourish.

Using laughter to consider ambiguity or contradictions in their own traditions and prejudices was both less common and less comfortable. The tradition of schooling as one of transmitting the right interpretation/answer to society's novitiates, and the tradition of the teacher as one who knows are among the traditions most of the teachers embraced. Laughing at these traditions meant placing them under the spotlight momentarily; it did not necessarily mean adjusting them, or abandoning them in favor of newly formed interpretations of teaching and learning. A small number of teachers valued these traditions so highly as to argue that comedy did not have a legitimate place in the curriculum, and that encouraging students to be playful was to squander precious time that ought better to be focused on the
serious business of learning. One participant wrote, “I don’t think stand up comedy or
philosophy as presented here belongs in a master of education class.”

The humor studies course introduced a range of comic genres but did not offer an
opportunity to probe any one deeply. There was regular and frequent opportunity to explore
and comment on why we laughed; there was not a parallel discussion about what prevents us
from laughing. While Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics was one of the philosophical
schools examined, this examination was also modest, and did not inaugurate an exploration
of how traditions and prejudices are or are not put into play in particular situations, and why
some horizons are more mutable than others. While one teacher did comment, “This course
really isn’t about humor, is it?” it was, perhaps, for many participants too much about humor,
and not clearly enough about humor’s role in learning or making sense. There is, however,
danger in trying to make humor studies good for you, as opposed to simply good. As Canby
pointed out to our hero, Milo, “you can swim all day in the Sea of Knowledge and still come
out completely dry. Most people do” (Juster, 1961, p. 169). Indeed, pressuring people to
lighten up seems like a pretty funny thing to attempt.

Secondly, the hope that humor would be a gentle entry to topics considered more
controversial than basic ambiguity, topics such as racism, sexism, or homophobia, was not
realized in the course. Teachers continued to consider those topics as serious, and
consequently not suitable for comic inquiry. Approaching them with a comic spirit seemed
to make humor studies participants uncomfortable, and they generally believed that they
would be doing a disservice to their students to use comedy to examine such topics in their
own classes. While the heuristic to interrogate jokes provided some relief from their
emotional dissonance, most reported that they considered it inappropriate to introduce
comedy such as Eddie Murphy's *Mr. White* into their classes. In spite of evidence provided from the work of Davies and Dundes, the generally held view of participants in the humor studies course was that laughing *at* another was fundamentally cruel and could lead to no good. Teachers are strongly committed to helping their students develop socially acceptable behaviors and attitudes, and are expected to do so by the society around them. Engaging in any activity that might be seen to demean any individual or group seems to be at cross purposes with the social justice agenda.

This view is at odds with the reports of the power of comedy cited by social activist comics like Gregory, Bae, Hanania and Hollander. Still, there are obvious reasons why teachers might feel that the public schools are not places to study the collected works of Chris Rock. Clearly the traditions and prejudices of the teachers differ from those of the stand-up comic, creating different conditions for putting one's views into play. Preparing the context for a comic confrontation in the classroom is different from preparing the context in a bar or club. The stand up comic is a public figure expected by her/his audience to challenge the status quo. The teacher is a public figure expected by her/his audience to uphold the status quo, or at least the generally accepted social structures of the state. To challenge these structures may be accepted as part of a social studies or liberal studies inquiry conducted in a scholarly and critically thoughtful way; to challenge the same structures by poking fun at them is entirely more dangerous.

The public nature of teaching often results in stories going home with children that are told from the child's perspective. The chances are good that the teacher's intentions or actions might be misunderstood as a result of this chain of communication. Furthermore, what might make sense to one student might offend another, and the teacher's commitment
to community building suggests that this is another risk that ought not to be taken. While the stand up comic is almost expected to offend, the teacher offends at her peril.

Research on the developmental nature of humor reported in Chapter 5 indicates that young children enjoy physical humor, nonsense words, literal humor and practical jokes. Early adolescence is the typical period at which children begin to appreciate forms of verbal humor and social and political satire. The additional level of analysis required to use the joke as a tool to interpret social circumstances might be seen to be beyond the grasp of K-12 students without significant preparation and a particularly managed classroom context. Since our experience with these comic tools in humor studies was limited and likely shallow, it is reasonable that teachers did not embrace them as strategies to use on Monday morning.

Many participants in humor studies did not only deem inappropriate the idea of investigating racist or stereotypical humor in their own classrooms; they were themselves offended and uncomfortable investigating it in class with their colleagues. Once again, it may be that they felt they were working under a degree of public scrutiny, potentially subject to the critical response of others who might misinterpret their laughter, or who might tell tales out of school about who laughed at what.

Lastly, there was understandably a degree of doubt about my intentions or point of view as instructor. In spite of having chosen examples that universally mocked the racist and stereotypical attitudes of a white majority, participants were nervous about the appropriateness of laughing at the scenes and situations in front of me or their colleagues. Randy Newman's song, *Rednecks*, for example, describes redneck behavior and then shifts to mocking the behavior of redneck-critical liberals. Listening to it for the first time is as likely to make a person fidget as it is to make her laugh. Having had the benefit of hearing this and
other Newman songs many times over many years, my enjoyment of his acid wit is considerable. Participants in humor studies did not have as long to adjust to Newman, or comedy, or me, and were probably behaving quite reasonably in their unwillingness to embrace some of the more pointed comic material. For the record, Newman’s song *Short People* set off a howl of protest from short people when it was originally released and was actually banned from some radio stations. Newman insisted it was a satirical look at difference.

**Possibilities**

Gadamer offers some resources for examining these more complicated questions, resources that were not directly utilized in the humor studies course. The interrogation of the joke described in Chapter 5 might have been accompanied by an interrogation of the interpreters’ traditions and prejudices. For example, the question, “What is the stereotype represented by the butt of this joke?” could have had a parallel personal inquiry, “What is the source of your coming to know this stereotype?” The unending human interpretive activity represented by the hermeneutic circle could have been explored more thoroughly with an emphasis on realizing that to interpret anew does not mean that the previous interpretation was wrong. It simply means that it was previous. Over time this may have permitted teachers to reduce the influence of their prejudice to be *one who knows* and to increase the influence of a prejudice to become *one who tries to know*. More recognition could have been given to the likelihood that attention to the other sometimes disrupts the sense of confidence in self. While much effort was given to creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere, it is clear that the additional risk taking required to explore hot topics needed to be undergirded by additional support.
As previously outlined, the notion of laughing about race, prejudice and death is controversial. The notion of joking as a way of learning is controversial, too. It was clearly unreasonable to expect that teachers would quickly come to embrace the notion of teaching about prejudice with comedy. The stand-up comics will hold primary control of that tradition for now.

Next steps might include a series of humor-related courses that examine in more detail particular aspects of sense making with the sense of humor. The humor studies course that formed the basis of this thesis could qualify as an introductory course, acquainting students with the array of comic genres, or as we describe it, "something to offend everyone." There is opportunity to explore the role of humor in both pre-service and continuing teacher education, and humor in educational research. A study of humor as hermeneutic might permit a more in-depth exploration of Gadamer’s interpretive resources, allowing students to explore how they make meaning, how humor makes meaning, and how they might make meaning using humor. Other studies of value would be continuation of the work of Walker (1988) or Hollander (1980, 1983) on gender differences in humor, Hertzler’s (1970) work on in-group, out-group impact of laughter, or that of Hill (1988) and Shade (1996) on the developmental nature of humor. Increasing the sophistication of understanding of the elements of comedy might increase teachers’ confidence about teaching with a comic spirit.

Paying specific attention to a classroom climate hospitable to learning with and about humor seems a worthwhile pursuit. Developing a list of affirmations similar to this model by Hagaseth could be a first step in establishing a context that confirms that serious study and consideration of others are expected even though the topic is humor.
The Twelve Affirmations of Positive Humor
by Christian Hagaseth III, MD
from www.learnwell.org/positivehumor.htm

1. I am determined to use my humor for positive, playful, uplifting, healing and loving purposes.
2. I will take myself lightly while I take my work in life seriously.
3. I will not seek to be offended by other's attempts at humor. When in doubt, I will see others as meaning well.
4. I will express my humor physically, using my whole face and (when so moved) my entire body.
5. I refuse to use my humor to camouflage hostility or prejudice.
6. I understand that the gift of humor is a treasured gift, so I will laugh generously at other's attempts to be humorous.
7. All teasing and ethnic humor will be by mutual consent and will go both ways or I will not engage in such humor.
8. I will respect the forbidden subject topics of my listeners. I will avoid giving offense with my humor.
9. If I offend another by my use of humor, I will make amends.
10. I will be eternally vigilant for the jokes and absurdities of the universe, and I will share my observations with my companions in life.
11. In the midst of adversity, I will continue to use my humor to cope, to survive, to heal, to grow, and to pass on loving-kindness.
12. On the day of my death I will look back and know that I laughed lovingly, fully and well.

Research is underway in other fields including health, human relations and business to identify the contribution of humor to general well-being and success, research that if positive, might encourage teachers to embrace humor as a learning resource. In addition, anti-oppression pedagogies developed to address sexism, racism and homophobia in a serious way could be studied to determine how humor might contribute to this important work.

Laughter and the Good Life

I have attempted to make the argument that the joke is a productive interpretive device. Interpretation is the unending experience of being human; part of our effort to become educated, both in schools and out, is directed toward becoming accomplished in this
unending work of interpretation or judgment, making sense of our world. Laughing is a way of demonstrating that we understand Kabat-Zinn’s notion of the spirit of inquiry:

Inquiry doesn’t mean looking for answers, especially quick answers which come out of superficial thinking. It means asking without expecting answers, just pondering the question, carrying the wondering with you, letting it percolate, bubble, cook, ripen, come in and out of awareness, just as everything else comes in and out of awareness. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 233)

Jardine suggests that the inquiry itself anticipates that we might need to laugh. He explains, “Thus, hermeneutics sits squarely on the same cusp as education itself: the roiling space between the established and the new, between the young and the old. A sometimes dangerous, sometimes funny spot” (Jardine, 1998, p. 2). For this dangerous and funny work of learning and living, we need to cultivate the sense of humor. It is a useful tool for the exploration of self and the world, for the challenge of addressing our “thrownness” and deciding how to live. Freadman claims:

In its more sophisticated forms humor is often a mode of exploration, a profoundly heuristic activity which may probe the laughable and lamentable dimensions of life, and the ways in which these dimensions may in fact interact in a given situation. (Freadman, 1993, p. 108)

In the end, our hero, Milo, returns from his quest to his bedroom where his adventure had begun, and true to Gadamer’s notion that each experience is a new opportunity to make meaning, he sees his familiar surroundings with an unfamiliar eye:

And, in the very room in which he sat, there were books that could take you anywhere, and things to invent, and make, and build, and break, and all the puzzle and excitement of everything he didn’t know – music to play, songs to sing, and worlds to imagine and then someday make real. His thoughts darted eagerly about as everything looked new – and worth trying.

“Well, I would like to make another trip,” he said, jumping to his feet; “but I really don’t know when I’ll have the time. There’s so much to do right here.” (Juster, 1961, p. 256)
Milo’s quest provided him the chance to develop a hermeneutic imagination which in turn enriched his world view substantially. It’s a chance open to each of us. Richard Corliss in an obituary for cartoon genius Chuck Jones reminds us, “After all, just one little letter separates the cosmic from the comic” (International Journal of Humor Research, 15-3, 2002, p. 364).
Bibliography


Appendix A

EADM 565A/93A Humor Studies
learning with and about humor

Aims
Schools are charged with helping students “make sense” of themselves and the world. This complex task is difficult for two reasons:
• students are individuals following their own dreams, moving on their independent timelines, and
• the world is inconsistent, illogical, unpredictable and chaotic.

Making sense of these absurd expectations requires creativity, energy, and humility. A sense of humor helps, too.

This course is both a conceptual and practical examination of humor. We will:
• cultivate “wide-awakeness” by adopting a novel stance on ourselves and our experiences, breaking the rules, embracing ambiguity
• experience playfulness, exploring games, puzzles, jokes and cartoons, exercising our laughing muscles
• appreciate professional comedy including physical comedy, mime, stand up, music, movies
• become comics, taking risks to make humorous presentations to classmates.

Based on these experiences we will theorize about humor. We will:
• read representative philosophers from the existential, pragmatic, hermeneutic and Zen traditions to build a philosophy of humor
• consider the implications of humor in teaching
• build repertoire to create a playful and serious classroom

Students should be prepared to read both scholarly and silly writing, play games, engage in physical activities, look foolish, participate in a community of curious, risk-taking folks, examine their own personal and professional perspectives on self and the world, write academic papers, create curriculum, and laugh while doing it!

Materials
A custom course package is available from the UBC Bookstore.
Audio, video, games, and other materials will be provided by the instructor.

Requirements
1. Participation (10%)
   “Letting go” of inhibitions and prejudices is fundamental to learning playfully.
   Supportive, patient, flexible colleagues make an important contribution to the growth of each developing comic/teacher. You are expected, therefore, to participate with curiosity, energy, humility and respect both “on stage” and in the audience. Attendance at every class is also expected.
"If you can't say nuthin' nice, don't say nuthin' at all." Thumper Rabbit's mother

2. Humor journal (25%)
   - Over a period of time (a week or so), conduct research to answer the question, "What makes you laugh?" by documenting movies, conversations, TV shows, books, articles, road signs, dreams, or hairstyles that have tickled your fancy. Also be aware of the circumstances that surrounded the laughing moment. What did you learn about yourself and your life?
   - Complete the various exercises included in the custom course package and/or assigned by the instructor. Analyze your results to see if they offer any insights about you and your sense of humor.
   - Make weekly entries in your journal about your experiences in or out of class. Is your awareness of, or use of, humor changing?

2. Philosophical interpretations (25%)
   - Read the article(s) you have been assigned and write a conversation between the philosopher and you (maximum of 2 pages) that explains how your laughable moments are consistent with the author's interpretation of how people make sense of the world (philosophy).
   - Discuss your work with others who have been assigned the same philosopher. Look for similarities and differences in your interpretations (some class time will be provided for this task).
   - Make a group presentation to the whole community that highlights how this particular philosophical perspective helped you to make sense of laughter, and vice versa. (NOTE: it doesn’t have to be funny, but you bore us at your peril!)

3. A playful and serious classroom (15%)
   Contribute three resources, such as a funny website, book, video, lesson plan to a humor “goodie bag” for your colleagues. Briefly describe the resource, identify a suitable audience (it could be adults, teachers, a specific grade level) and make some suggestions for how the resource could be used. Provide source data (an ISBN number, exact video title, website URL) and bring a copy of your resources for each member of the class. We want to ensure that people feel their time in this course was, to quote the comedy channel, well-wasted.

4. A comic performance (25%)
   Having had an opportunity to appreciate a range of comic inspirations, you're up. Prepare a comic performance for the class (10 minutes MAXIMUM strictly enforced!). Within the bounds of good taste, anything goes -- a song, dance, cartoon, stand-up routine, impersonation, satirical writing, novel puzzle or game. The easiest approach is to copy something you enjoyed in class, adding a little touch of your own. Everyone in the class will be supportive and appreciative. -- see Thumper Rabbit.
“To write comedy is to report on life as viewed through a special lens, one that shows us and reminds us of all that we share in common, and all that we refuse to admit we do. The ultimate reward of illuminating those truths, dreads, and denials in surprising and entertaining ways is laughter -- the outward expression of a nerve well struck.” Larry Gelbart, 1998

Criteria for evaluation
Just as we will share the responsibility for attending with enthusiasm to each other’s performances, we will all participate in the evaluation of these assignments. There are two reasons for this:
• Humor, as you will experience, is in the eye of the beholder, so the more beholders the better, or the fairer, the assessment will be. Someone is sure to appreciate your point!
• Assessment is the toughest part of teaching because it is the place where we really admit what matters most to us, what makes sense in our world. There simply isn’t one right answer, or one best judge. Get used to it!

Written work will be evaluated on the basis of UBC standards for scholarly writing, including organization, development of an argument, and appropriate language. Spelling doesn’t exactly count but if you aren’t using a spellchecker, shame on you!

Performance work should be novel, engaging and appropriate to the chosen genre. Delivery will count in a peripheral way, for example, if you write and perform a hilarious song, you won’t lose marks for singing off key (like I would know!)

Classroom resources should be thoroughly documented and practical.

Readings
1. Mindfulness

How to watch yourself be alive
Awareness of pleasant events calendar

2. Satire
www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~benjamin/316fall/316ktexts/swift/html, pp. 1-6

3. Philosophical perspectives


4. Word games


Spell that Dan Quayle!


New words, 2003 [www.tech-sol.net/humor/vocabulary32.htm](http://www.tech-sol.net/humor/vocabulary32.htm)

Achtung!


5. Laughing at death
University of California, Berkeley (2001). “Positive emotions, including laughter are important paths out of trauma according to UC Berkeley psychologist” www.Berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2001/09/20_happy.html
More ironic celebrity deaths www.humorcafe.com/death/ironic_deaths.htm

6. Physical comedy
video examples
Rube Goldberg machines

7. Genre bending
Update contest winners
Genre-bending
A comparative guide to major religions
Newman, Terry (2002). New policy on the twelve days of Christmas
Haiku error messages (source unknown)

8. Cartoons

9. Ethnic humor

10. Classroom applications
Cantor, Nancy & Schomberg, Steven. “What we want students to learn: cultivating Playfulness and responsibility in liberal education” in Change, vol. 34, no. 6, November/December 2002, pp. 47-49