

HUMOR AND THE RHETORICAL PROPRIETIES IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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A writing emphasis teacher begins class the way he always does, by telling a joke. The joke itself is less important than the students' reaction to it. When the professor delivers the punch line and pauses for laughter, his students look down at their books or stare up at him with stony expressions. The professor turns to a colleague, who is observing the class, and says, "I like to start each day with a joke."

"Do they always go over so well?" the colleague asks. At the question, the students erupt in laughter.

This incident illustrates one of the least advantageous ways to use wit in the classroom. A canned joke shows that a teacher may be trying too hard and preparing too much. Such "wit" lacks spontaneity and surprise, especially if the teacher begins every class with a joke. Unless the joke connects to the content of the course, students may see their teacher's attempt at humor as an annoying irrelevance. Also, by telling a daily joke, the teacher obliges his captive audience to laugh, if only out of politeness. The students' silence today suggests they have by this time rejected the burden of this obligation.¹

Had the great Roman rhetorician and teacher Quintilian witnessed this incident, he might have warned the professor that audiences do not like wit that gives "the appearance of studied premeditation, or smell[s] of the lamp" (*Institutio Oratoria* VI. iii. 33). Other classical rhetoricians, especially Aristotle and Cicero, would offer wisdom of their own. In their discussions of the

rhetorical proprieties of character, circumstance, and audience, which governed the use of wit by Aristotle's "truly witty person," by Cicero's *urbanus*, or refined orator, and by Quintilian's ideal orator, these rhetoricians offer contemporary writing teachers much of what they need to know in order to use humor effectively in the writing emphasis classroom. These lessons include drawing primarily on self-deprecation and irony, remaining sensitive to circumstance, or *kairos*, and improvising wit to suit a particular group of students (rather than forcing premeditated wit upon an unwilling audience). If contemporary writing teachers can take these lessons to heart, they can learn to use wit to enhance their *ethos* as good persons speaking well, build effective relationships with students, rise above embarrassing moments, soften criticism, stimulate creative thinking, and make their students feel less like prisoners and more like welcome guests in the classroom.

Aristotle's Witty Person

When using humor as a rhetorical tool, Aristotle's truly witty person embodies all that is appropriate and tasteful. Such a rhetor uses wit sparingly, makes jokes that "seem to spring from the character" (*Ethics* IV. viii. 3), has the judgment to "regulate [his or her] wit" (IV. viii. 10), and observes the proprieties of character, situation, and audience. At the same time, the truly witty person exercises tact, using humor to amuse, not to hurt. At the extremes of humorous behavior are the buffoon (or *βωμολόχος*) and the boor (or *αγροϊκος*), while the person who engages in true wit (or *εὐτράπελος*) serves as the ideal mean (IV. viii. 3-10). Buffoons violate propriety by making jokes too often or in poor taste—showing themselves as "too fond of fun and raillery" (IV. viii. 3). Buffoons "itch to have their joke at all costs, and are more concerned to raise a laugh than to keep within the bounds of decorum and avoid giving pain to the object of their raillery" (IV. viii. 3). By contrast, the boor "is of no use in playful conversation: he contributes nothing and takes offense at everything" (IV. viii. 11). Throughout the *Ethics*, Aristotle argues for the "middle

character” he sees as the representation of refined behavior; in the case of wit, the truly witty person, “will say, and allow to be said to him, only the sort of things that are suitable to a virtuous man and a gentleman” (IV. viii. 3-7). The witty person is versatile or “full of good turns” (IV. viii. 3), responding to a situation as it develops, and uses jokes that “seem to spring from the character” (IV. viii. 3). The witty person also prefers innuendo to the more obvious—and often obscene—humor of the buffoon. As a “cultivated” person, he possesses the judgment to “regulate his wit, and will be as it were a law to himself” (IV. viii. 3-10). In short, the middle character intends his or her humor to amuse, not to hurt, and unlike the buffoon, who often inflicts premeditated humor on an audience, the middle character’s wit tends to be subtle and spontaneous, arising out of the opportunities presented by a conversation.

Cicero’s *Urbanus*

Similar to the truly witty person, Cicero’s *urbanus* uses wit sparingly, spontaneously, and “with a delicate charm and urbanity” (*De Oratore* I. v. 17). The *urbanus* remains conscious of his or her dignity, observes the relevant rules of propriety, and uses wit not merely to entertain but to achieve a valid rhetorical purpose (II. lxi. 247). The *urbanus* relies primarily on irony, which combines elegance, wit, and gravity in such a way that the speaker amuses and delights an audience with humorous ambiguities while maintaining a sophisticated and serious demeanor during the presentation of key ideas. Above all, such a rhetor avoids striving overeagerly after wit and can, as circumstances dictate, shift readily from a humorous to a serious demeanor. A keen sensitivity to the proprieties of the rhetorical situation, particularly to *kairos*, makes the truly witty person and the *urbanus* opportunists when it comes to wit—jesting only when circumstances are favorable. Unlike the buffoon, these rhetors tend not to make clumsy, forced, tasteless, offensive, or ill-timed jests.

Quintilian's Ideal Orator

In developing the notion of the ideal orator—a good person skilled in speaking (*vir bonus dicendi peritus*)—Quintilian emphasizes many of the same principles governing the wit of the truly witty person and the *urbanus*. Such a person “must above all things devote his attention to the formation of a moral character and must acquire a complete knowledge of all that is just and honorable” (*Institutio Oratoria* XII. ii. 2). On all occasions for speech, Quintilian observes, “Too much insistence cannot be laid upon the point that no one can be said to speak appropriately who has not considered not merely what is expedient, but also what it is becoming to say” (XI. i. 8). This principle applies with particular force to wit since “we pay too dear for the laugh we raise if it is at the cost of our own integrity” (VI. iii. 35). Therefore, the orator who wishes to amuse an audience should do so with care and only when wit is appropriate. When the character of the audience or the seriousness of the situation renders wit inappropriate, the ideal orator should rely on other strategies. And on occasions when wit is appropriate, the orator’s “jests should never be designed to wound” (VI. iii. 28) and should avoid arrogance, insolence, sarcasm that targets large groups of people, and remarks that incite revenge or lead to groveling apologies (VI. iii. 33-34). On most occasions, the orator’s best approach to wit is to assume a tone of “gentle raillery” (VI. iii. 28). Indeed, Quintilian says, “the most agreeable of all jests are those which are good humoured and easily digested” (VI. iii. 93). Such jests tend, after all, to reveal the intelligence and benevolent intentions of the rhetor and, therefore, win the goodwill of the audience. Of high importance, Quintilian suggests, is an orator’s capacity for improvisation—“the crown of all our study and the highest reward of our long labours” (X. vii. 1). Orators cannot prepare for every challenge they may confront in a case, and the intellectual flexibility fostered by the practice of improvisation can help them respond to changing circumstances in the courtroom (or classroom), which often call for the spontaneous exercise of invention and wit (X. vii. 1).

The Proprieties and Contemporary Writing Teachers

These rules of propriety set forth by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, aimed at guiding the wit of a refined rhetor, can also guide the wit of college writing teachers. These teachers may find it beneficial, while attempting to deliver instruction, to delight and move their students. After all, teaching writing is often an act of persuasion, with the instructor using all the rhetorical tools in her repertoire—including wit and humor—to convince students of her ability to teach them something valuable. Ideally, of course, all students who take college writing courses should come equipped with high levels of motivation to learn and grow as writers. As Sharon Crowley has observed, however, compulsory composition courses tend to inspire negative attitudes in writing students (242), many of whom resist the efforts of their teachers. Some students, for example, view composition as unnecessary—because they already know how to write—or irrelevant to their chosen field of study; others feel beaten down, having heard during their entire academic careers that they are poor writers. A serious approach to teaching will not necessarily overcome such resistance or guarantee that students take the material or the teacher seriously. Students may rebel when told the importance of a class, of a skill, or of specific information, taking the attitude—perhaps correctly—that they themselves must judge the importance. A good deal of the effectiveness of teaching writing, then, will involve not simply the transmission of facts and knowledge to students through logical means but also the building and maintaining of a teacher-student relationship conducive to learning. And the viability of such a relationship will often depend upon the teacher’s sensitivity to the proprieties of character, circumstance, and audience.

Proprieties of Character

In a way similar to the truly witty person, the *urbanus*, or the ideal orator, the writing teacher will, when using wit, want to convey the *ethos* of an ethical, intelligent, humble, benevolent

person who speaks with sensitivity and good taste—a good person skilled in speaking.² Such a person, ever mindful that learning is the primary purpose of the class, seeks a balance between gravity and humor, responding to a given situation with an appropriate demeanor. She must command respect and quiet at times in order to communicate or guide students toward the central ideas of the discipline. At other times, in the service of these ideas, she must draw on her wit in a manner consistent with her own tastes and those of her students. Clumsy, tasteless, or ill-timed attempts at humor will tend to work against the *ethos* of a good person skilled in speaking. So will instances of sarcasm or jests that wound students and reveal, in the teacher, an attitude of arrogance, spite, or intellectual snobbery. We may make someone laugh, but in the process we may sacrifice our dignity or integrity, hurt others, surrender too much authority, and lose track of key classroom goals.

A few years ago, for example, on the first day of a freshman composition course, I failed to maintain the *ethos* of an *urbanus* when a young man glared up at me and said, “I’ve always hated my English teachers.” Instead of ignoring him or responding in a way that spared us both, I took offense at this attack on my profession. With a bit too much asperity, I said, “Well, I’m sure they all *loved* you.” This response got a few laughs but started our relationship on the wrong footing. My bitter riposte revealed an inappropriate hostility toward this student, and as a teacher I should have kept a firmer grip on my emotions. It also played into the student’s hands, giving him added reason to dislike English teachers. For the rest of the semester, he attempted at every opportunity to erode my authority or question the accuracy of my statements. Targeting him with sarcasm was the act of a boor or a buffoon, not of the gentler, self-deprecatory wit of an *urbanus*, and it did not win me the goodwill of the audience. Perhaps on a better day, I would have nodded and said, “Yeah, no one likes a critic” or “You’re right to hate English teachers—we’re horrible people.”

Such a riposte, witty or not, might have helped me build rather than burn a bridge with this student. After all, modern psychology

confirms Quintilian's notion of the power of humor to increase mutual regard between individuals. Psychologist Rod Martin argues that mirth serves important social functions in establishing and maintaining close relationships, enhancing feelings of attraction and commitment, and coordinating mutually beneficial activities" (114), including such mutually beneficial activities as writing workshops. Contemporary Americans, and among them college students, often see humility in authority figures as consistent with a democratic ideal—and therefore the mark of a good and just person. So in spite of Quintilian's caution against the use of self-deprecation as harmful to a rhetor's dignity (*Institutio Oratoria* VI. iii. 82), writing teachers will find that self-deprecatory humor, used judiciously, can enhance rather than detract from their *ethos*. The composition teacher who shows she can laugh with students at her own mistakes or faults reveals that she does not have an inflated, overly serious view of herself or her job. She reveals at once a humble awareness of her fallibility as a human being and an essential confidence in herself and her abilities. And she reveals a willingness to turn her critical judgment—often spent on students' work—on her own flawed speech and actions, poking fun at her factual errors or slips of the tongue. By encouraging students to laugh at and with her, she lets them know such errors are forgivable and invites them to relax and participate in the business of the classroom.

This attitude of self-deprecation becomes especially important when teachers respond to students' insults or criticisms. For example, in one composition classroom, a student told his professor, "I have an uncle who combs his hair like you, to cover up *his* bald spot." The male professor, beginning to lose his hair, could have chosen to take this remark as a personal attack, especially since the student had in earlier meetings issued similar insults. The professor chose instead to smile, run his fingers through the remnants of his hair, and say, "Tell your uncle he has my heartfelt sympathy, as one balding man to another." The professor then continued with the discussion, which the student may have been trying to disrupt, of a new essay assignment. To

take the student's remark to heart—registering anger or hurt feelings—might have given the insult far more weight than it deserved. Such a reaction, like the sarcastic remark I made to my student, might also have had several other effects—derailing the legitimate class discussion, eroding the professor's *ethos* and authority, revealing feelings of spite toward the student, and telling other students with questionable motives that they too could “get” to him through mild personal attacks. By accepting the student's observation as a statement of fact, the professor derailed the attempted derailment, demonstrated the quickness of his wit, amused the class, maintained his *ethos* as an intelligent and benevolent person, and kept open the chance of building a better relationship with the offending student, who, as the professor later acknowledged, was a talented writer. In short, self-deprecation allows writing teachers to rise above such moments.

Another beneficial effect of self-deprecatory wit, as it relates to *ethos*, involves the writing teacher's function as a role model, demonstrating appropriate ways of dealing with mistakes, criticisms, or disappointments. Since a great deal of learning to write involves learning to revise, doing so often means coping with setbacks, including the sort of criticism one receives in a workshop session. A teacher who uses wit to deal with criticism and setbacks shows students she has the ability to take what she often dishes out, make corrections, and return to work without undue embarrassment or loss of self-esteem—a useful attitude to take during a writing workshop. As Claudia Cornett says, “Teachers should be models for students. This includes showing how your sense of humor gets you through embarrassing moments and enables you to accept problems that have no solutions. Students learn more from the teachers they laugh with” (32). To the extent that students learn to adopt a self-deprecating attitude toward themselves and their writing, the workshop can become a place where students interact without threatening each other's ego or taking offense at each other's remarks. In such a place, productive collaboration can occur. In the same way, a teacher's demonstration of grace and wit in her communication with

students serves as an example of the effective use of rhetorical techniques the students can attempt to put into practice in their own work. Some students may already possess well-developed senses of humor, but they may not know how or when to use this facility with good effect in their speech and writing. Other students may, by observing their teacher's and fellow students' use of wit in the workshop, dare to try their hand at it and learn from the experience. By attending to the proprieties of wit—such as timing, taste, balance, and frequency—the teacher not only builds her *ethos* but also shows student writers how to build their own.

Proprieties of Circumstance

The development of a sensitivity to *kairos*, which encompasses both the circumstances out of which a rhetorical need develops and a rhetor's invention of a response to this need, is as important for the contemporary writing teacher as for the sophists of ancient Greece. As John Poulakos has observed, rhetorical situations tend to unfold in unique, unpredictable ways and defy prefabricated responses. A rhetor who understands the contingent nature of discourse “addresses each occasion in its particularity, its singularity, its uniqueness” (Poulakos 61), making her “both a hunter and a maker of unique opportunities, always ready to address improvisationally and confer meaning on new and emerging situations” (61)—some of which may require seriousness and others wit.

In ways strikingly similar to Quintilian's ideal orator, who must improvise arguments in the courtroom, a writing teacher must often improvise responses to the emerging rhetorical situations in the classroom. Just as the orator prepares an argument for a court case, a writing teacher often goes into class each day with a good idea of what she hopes to accomplish, as outlined in her syllabus. And depending on the level of authority she assumes as a teacher, and the extent to which she relies on prepared lectures or lessons, she has a modicum of control over what gets said and done. But interchanges with students often take

unexpected turns—sometimes fruitful, sometimes not. Students may interrupt, ask unanticipated questions for which she has no definite answer, and express misunderstandings she needs to address. And one can argue that students have a right to put their teacher on the spot, ask questions, lead the conversation astray, misunderstand points, and resist lessons, especially when such discourse leads them to a deeper understanding of their own or each other's composing processes. Students often ask such challenging questions as "If Cormac McCarthy can use dashes instead of quotation marks, why can't I?" or "How can you be so sure of the difference between an 'A-' and 'B+' paper?" In these cases, learning may hinge on the teacher's ability to improvise situationally appropriate responses—some of which may call for wit. Consider, for example, the question one second-year composition student, a nursing major, asked when given an essay assignment to analyze a piece of children's literature: "We're in the middle of a war and an AIDS epidemic and you want us to write about Dr. Seuss? We should be trying to solve the world's problems, not analyzing fairy tales and children's books."

The professor nodded solemnly and said, "Yes, but you're forgetting Dr. Seuss was a genius. A careful reader can discover answers to some of humankind's great dilemmas in the pages of *Horton Hears a Who*."

A few of the students laughed at the reply, but when the nursing major continued to argue that the assignment was a trivial waste of her time, the professor explained that many children's books have serious themes and suggested she work with one.

"What if I write my own children's book and analyze it?" she asked.

"Even better," the professor said, and though the student's first attempt to write a book explaining AIDS to young children fell short of her own standards, she acknowledged in her analysis how much she learned about the difficulties of writing for children—a lesson not specifically intended by the professor but sparked by their improvised conversation.

Such improvisation is an especially important skill during workshop sessions. After all, as Joseph Petraglia points out, writing is by nature “a variety of what is termed *ill-structured problem solving*” (“Writing” 80, emphasis in original). As Petraglia argues, “In ill-structured problem-solving, contingency permeates the task environment and solutions are always equivocal. The idea of ‘getting it right’ gives way to ‘making it acceptable in the circumstances’” (83). These statements apply both to writing and the teaching of writing. One reason a workshop session helps writers cope with ill-structured problems created by a piece of writing is that the workshop not only tailors learning to fit individual needs but also encourages trial, error, and on-going course corrections. This learning process consists of “on-line anticipation and adjustment,” of “continuous detection and correction of error,” which Donald A. Schön—who studies the learning processes of architects—calls “reflection-in-action” (26). In the workshop, a writer gains a firsthand knowledge of writing by presenting her work, reflecting on his or her successes and failures, and trying to do better the next time—with feedback, as needed, from others who have negotiated similar intellectual terrain. From the initial plunge (or series of plunges) into writing, during which failure at various levels is likely, the writer learns lessons he or she can apply to subsequent drafts or projects. Meanwhile, the writer also learns to become a better improviser, which Schön believes is an essential aspect of professional artistry. Faced with an unfamiliar situation, in which competing ideas and agendas pose a new and difficult challenge, the writer or artist improvises a solution that draws the diverse parts into a harmonious whole. This act, Schön says, is comparable to the artistry of jazz musicians, who by “listening to one another, listening to themselves, . . . ‘feel’ where the music is going and adjust their playing accordingly” (30). Ordinary conversation, in which “participants pick up and develop themes of talk . . . is collective verbal improvisation” (30), as is the more purposeful conversation between a teacher and her students.

This type of conversation has several similarities to the Roman *sermo*, the preferred form of discourse for Cicero's *urbanus*. Both the *sermo* and the teacher-student conversation occur in a casual or "plain" style of speech, both consist of exchanges of dialogue, and both have the aim of moving, delighting, or informing an audience. Both also achieve these aims, in part, through the extemporaneous use of wit. In the case of the *sermo*, the *urbanus* uses what Cicero describes as solemn jesting or *severe ludus* (*De Oratore* lixvi. 269), which allows the speaker to use irony or other forms of wit appropriate to the circumstances while keeping the primary focus on the meat of the conversation. Because the conversation is a dialogue, members of the audience also act as speakers, engaging in both serious and witty discourse, which can lead in surprising directions and to unanticipated conclusions. Cicero's solemn jesting, then, could form a natural and appropriate part of the conversations carried on during a writing class. Solemn jesting might involve ironic allusions made by the professor or by the students themselves to points raised as part of a legitimate classroom discussion. In many ways, allusions that play on the ambiguity of a term or concept raised in a lecture heighten students' alertness to what is going on in the class and may even enhance their understanding and memory of an important concept. In creative writing classes, I use the phrase "writing from packages of experience" to describe a technique in which writers examine their life experiences and identify unique experiences that might form the basis of essays, stories, or novels. As I often say, "A large package of experience might lead to a novel, but a smaller package might lead to an essay or short story." One day, a clever student began using "package" as a sexually-charged double-entendre. With a serious expression, she asked, "Is it okay if the guys show us their packages?" and "But what if someone's package is too small to satisfy the requirements of a good story?" As the teacher, I had to hold to the original, more serious meaning and answer her questions with a straight face even as her fellow students laughed. Otherwise, I risked letting the student twist a useful concept into an obscenity. She continued,

during the semester, to put extra emphasis on the term during brainstorming sessions, getting laughs by saying things like, “I’m not so sure I like your *package*,” but in some ways, this jest only helped remind her fellow students about both meanings of the term.

As it happens, opportunities for wit and humor occur often, thanks in part to the social tensions inherent in presenting and critiquing student writing, and in part to the ambiguities of intention and meaning that arise. Sometimes, though, the laughter resulting from well-intentioned wit can result in hurt feelings, requiring a spontaneous yet appropriate response from the teacher. One day, for example, a distraught young man stayed after a creative writing class to explain that everyone, including his teacher, had misunderstood his short story, which the class found hilarious. With a wounded expression, he said, “I never meant the piece to be a parody. It’s a serious story about a cowboy who can’t live with the idea that the evil sheriff stole his ranch, his horse, and his girl.” The story contained nearly every dusty cliché ever used in a Western novel, but the author had warped each tired phrase enough to make it, and the story, somewhat fresh and funny. Assuming too much, the teacher had seen these moves as satiric, and so had the student’s classmates, but as the student explained, he simply got the clichés wrong. In response, the teacher said he once had the opposite experience when critics took his one-act play—a comedy—more seriously than intended. Produced by a university theater, the play portrayed a scene in which a street artist smeared ketchup on the white wall of a man whose home he had invaded. A bank of critics in the audience later said they saw this mess, intended to satirize graffiti, as a serious artistic statement. One critic even claimed to be so moved by this work of art—created as the audience looked on—that he found it difficult to enjoy the rest of the play.

“At first, I thought he was putting me on,” the teacher said. “I never expected anyone to see the ketchup as art.”

“What did you say?” the student asked.

The teacher smiled. “What could I say? You can’t control how critics will interpret your work.”

“So you think I should go with the parody idea?”

“Only if you think the class is right,” the teacher said. “If not, maybe you should eliminate the clichés and come up with some fresh metaphors of your own.”

In this instance, a misunderstanding led to laughter that hurt the feelings of the student writer who submitted his work. In an effort to salve the student’s wounds, the professor improvised a lesson on a number of issues writers often face—cutting clichéd language, coping with unexpected reactions to one’s writing, and making decisions about how to proceed. The teacher’s self-deprecatory tale offered these hard lessons together with some consolation and support. Much of a writing teacher’s work, whether in the lecture, workshop, or individual conference, will involve a degree of improvisation in order to adjust to changing rhetorical circumstances. And much of this work will involve the impromptu use of wit.

Proprieties of Audience

While improvising wit appropriate to one’s character and circumstances, one must give equal consideration to the character of one’s audience—a matter of special importance when the audience consists of student writers. The audience in each writing classroom differs from the audience in every other, due to the specific mixture of students’ attitudes, backgrounds, levels of maturity, and personalities. The students in a particular class may feel fatigued, insecure, beaten down by deadlines or poor grades, hostile toward the teacher or toward authority figures in general, or so serious about their studies they have no tolerance for frivolity. In such cases, any attempt at levity on the teacher’s part may prove futile—and harmful to her *ethos*. In another class, students who respond positively to wit on one day may on the next reject the teacher’s every effort to lighten the mood. Sometimes this rejection occurs for such obvious reasons as the teacher’s returning graded quizzes or papers to the students, a

proportion of whom will likely receive lower grades than expected. At other times, the rejection may have no apparent cause other than the fickle nature of the audience.

Often, a keen awareness of the classroom *kairos* will alert a teacher to opportunities, or the lack, for wit. So, quite obviously, will the presence or absence of laughter. In any event, a writing teacher should, in the spirit of an *urbanus*, have the sensitivity, taste, and good sense to read and respect each audience's moods and adjust the use of her wit accordingly. She may also wish to avail herself of Plato's version of *kairos*, based on adapting one's speech, whether serious or witty, to fit the souls of one's listeners. This capability, to which Socrates refers in *The Phaedrus*, involves gaining an accurate insight into the sort of people who make up one's audience and choosing the proper words to instruct or persuade them. As Socrates says, one offers to a "complex soul complex speeches containing all the modes, and simple speeches to the simple soul" (277 b-c). A rhetor who addresses a large, diverse crowd may have difficulty judging the nature of the individual souls who make up the crowd and must rely, instead, on his or her best sense of the crowd as an entity. A writing teacher, however, has a far better chance of gaining an accurate insight into the nature of her audience—as a group and as individuals. After all, she not only meets the entire class several times a week, for an entire semester, but also holds individual conferences and reads each student's work, often including essays, stories, and journal entries containing personal information and anecdotes. These encounters—in person and in print—may provide crucial clues to the type of wit that will, and will not, appeal to the students. Something in a student's background may lead him or her to feel offended by a joke that amuses everyone else. For example, a teacher who stumbles over a difficult passage in a reading, and pokes fun at his own stuttering, may unwittingly offend a student whose close relative is a stutterer. If the student has revealed this personal information in conversation or writing, an alert teacher could avoid making such a joke.

By contrast, this knowledge also helps establish the type of wit a teacher can use in appealing to a particular audience. Consider, for example, a conversation that occurred several years ago in an advanced nonfiction writing class composed of fifteen college seniors. In his piece, one of the students used the term “wanker,” and the teacher, genuinely puzzled, asked what the word meant. The students laughed and expressed amazement at her ignorance. Finally, the author of the story said, “It’s British.”

“British for what?”

Another student said, “You know.”

“No I don’t.”

The student rolled his eyes. “Masturbator.”

“Seriously?” the teacher asked, and everyone laughed again.

“Why haven’t I heard it before?”

The students shrugged. One of them said, “Maybe you don’t watch enough TV.”

The teacher reflected for a moment. “If you think about it, the term applies to just about everybody, doesn’t it?”

Such an exchange would not likely occur in a freshman or sophomore composition class, in part because of the students’ ages and in part because “wanker” would not normally appear in an essay composed for such a class. In this writing workshop, though, the students were older and sophisticated enough not only to instruct the teacher on the meaning of a slang term but also to appreciate both the teacher’s honest admission of ignorance and her face-saving joke at the end. In any event, they laughed and got back to work. A small, intimate group of writers used to engaging in candid discussions of the actions, scenes, and diction in each other’s essays, the students appeared to accept the witticism in the spirit the professor intended, making a conversation that would no doubt be utterly unacceptable in another context, appropriate—or appropriately inappropriate.

Contrast this type of spontaneous wit with the “canned” jokes, props (funny hats, unlit cigars), and skits (which involve adopting personae ranging from Mr. Rogers to Tim “Tool Time” Taylor) Ronald A. Berk urges teachers to use (39-42). Improvisational wit

has a bit more risk associated with it, thanks largely to the lack of time to prepare and think through the implications of a joke. The chances of offending someone in the audience therefore increase. And improvised wit can, like prefabricated humor, often bomb. But a writing teacher's willingness to take such risks reveals several important factors relating to audiences. First, by attempting to use wit, she shows she is relaxed and feels sufficiently at ease among the students to let down her guard. Second, by tailoring wit to suit the tastes and needs of a particular group of students, she shows she possesses an intimate knowledge of these students as individuals. Third, by engaging in exchanges of wit, an activity normally reserved for peers, she shows respect for the students as people, treating them as social and intellectual equals. Such treatment is especially important in classrooms rooted in a critical pedagogy, in which a teacher shares a portion of her power of office with students, thus encouraging them to invest and participate in their learning. By improvising wit to suit a particular audience's needs and tastes, a teacher helps her students feel less like unwilling captives and more like welcome guests or even part-owners of a classroom space. In many ways, the students in a writing class truly are members of a captive audience, and, at the least, a teacher shows good manners by making the prisoners' experience more pleasant.

By attending to the proprieties of character, circumstance, and audience, and using wit with the proper mix of gravity and levity, a writing teacher joins a tradition of rhetorical education going back to Aristotle. She acknowledges the reality that one must persuade an audience, including an audience of student writers, to laugh. After all, no teacher can, or should want to, make her students laugh by intimidation or force. The proprieties serve as an overarching heuristic, establishing the parameters within which she can use wit effectively as a teaching tool—in ways that enhance rather than detract from her *ethos* as a good person skilled in speaking and writing, that allow her to adapt to changing conditions in the classroom, and that help her meet the specific needs and tastes of her students. These proprieties, in plainer

words, guide the teacher's use of wit to achieve pedagogical goals and construct in the classroom a playful environment in which learning can thrive.

Notes

¹Another questionable approach to using humor in the classroom comes from Ronald A. Berk, a professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing and author of two books about using humor as a teaching tool. Sporting an unlit cigar, Berk goes to class dressed as a clown, in comical hats, ties, and a tool belt held up by tape-measure suspenders (Bartlett A8). He makes use of props and stunts in teaching students biostatistics and measurement, arguing that his clowning attracts students' attention and makes lessons memorable (A8-A9). As Berk acknowledges, "There are people who think that it's frivolous, it's undignified" (A9). Even so, he cites favorable student evaluations and claims that his playful approach to teaching—which draws heavily on self-deprecation and avoids sarcasm—cuts tension, makes difficult lessons palatable, improves the student-teacher relationship, and "helps students learn" (A9). In fact, a colleague says he is "a very effective, engaging teacher" (A9). One of the chief objections one might raise to a teacher's playing the class clown, complete with funny hat, involves a potential loss of dignity and credibility. To pull off the clown role, a teacher must have a high level of expertise in her field, confidence, good timing and delivery, and the respect and understanding of her students. She must also be funny. If Berk satisfies all these conditions, he may indeed make the clown role work. If not, he risks coming across as a buffoon who, as Cicero tells us, uses humor too often and at the wrong time. Another major disadvantage to going dressed as a clown—or building humor irrevocably into one's syllabus—involves the inability to respond to changing circumstances, or *kairos*. Even if a teacher, such as Berk, could be equally funny every day, the students' needs or responses may often warrant seriousness instead of humor. Dressed for clowning and prepared to deliver stunts or jokes, the teacher may feel so committed to a humorous performance that he or she may be unwilling to change course. Such clowning, then, does not accommodate a flexible approach to teaching.

²She will also, of course, want to *be* such a person.

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