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Laughing with the lecturer: the use of humour in shaping university teaching

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ways in which humour is used by university academics to shape teaching personas. Based upon the work of Mauss and Foucault, and employing semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a range of university teachers, this research suggests that most tertiary teachers deliberately fashion various kinds of teaching persona, which they then perform in lectures and tutorials. The use of humour is widely seen as an important component within this form of self-shaping, as it fits within dominant frameworks of expectation regarding contemporary models of “edutainment”. This research demonstrates that a wide range of practices of the self—including physical, verbal, and relational elements—are employed by academics as part of shaping various humorous teaching personas. Some boundaries exist limiting the use of these pedagogic characters; for example, arguments about natural ability with humour prefigure who is most likely to deploy humour as a practice of professional self-formation. Also, professional concerns regarding seniority and job security are also factored into decision-making regarding those humorous personas likely to be considered appropriate within particular tertiary teaching contexts.

Keywords

University teaching, humour, identity, performance

Introduction – Humour and Performance in the Modern University

In their book on tertiary teaching, Davis and Arrend (2013, pp.78-79) set out the fundamental rules of how to conduct successful lectures and tutorials. While they also address issues of signposting, effective organisation and overload avoidance, their first imperative is clear and unambiguous: “*Rule 1: Whatever it takes, get their attention.* Students won’t learn much of anything from a presentation unless they are inspired to pay attention to it.”

Unfortunately, getting students’ attention has never been a straightforward matter. As the authors note, students have always daydreamed and allowed their attention to wander; however, in addition to this perennial problem, contemporary lecturers now have other issues to deal with when it comes to student attention. For one, they have to compete for the students’ attention with a range of portable electronic devices, which, for many in attendance, are switched on and fully operational for the duration of the class (Fried 2006). Hammer et al. (2010, p.301) note the division between the students, who generally consider such usage a legitimate variant on multitasking, and lecturers, who normally regard the operation of such devices during teaching time as inappropriate, resulting in a kind of “continual partial attention”. Hammer’s principal solution to this dilemma is: work harder to better engage your students. A further problem involves the pedagogic expectations of the students themselves, steeped as they are within popular culture. The pressure to better engage students within the modern university – both from the institution and the “consumers” themselves – has resulted in the rise of a new genre of lecturing, widely referred to as *edutainment*. This is a “hybrid mix of education and entertainment”, which relies on more informal, less didactic forms of presentation (Buckingham & Scanlon 2003, p.8). The notion of edutainment is regarded by some as a shameful signifier of a university sector that has lost its bearings, and by others as a positive step towards a more contemporary, interesting and egalitarian form of teaching (Pellegrino 2004).

Two particular issues arise with regards to the notion of edutainment that specifically pertain to this paper. The first relates to that of *performance*. Arguably there has always been an element of performance within university teaching; the panoptic architecture of the lecture theatre –indeed the term “theatre” itself – prefigures a degree of performativity within the task of lecturing. The issue becomes whether in the world of contemporary tertiary edutainment, the consumer-student must now be engaged at all costs, and the required register for that engagement is one of perpetual performance – especially within in the context of the mass lecture (Rodney 2012). The second issue involves the degree to which the use of humour constitutes an important component of the pedagogy of edutainment. The literature on the utility of humour in teaching seems unequivocal. Laughter in the classroom acts to relieve stress and anxiety (Shibinski & Martin 2010), helps students retain information (Garner 2006) and improves teacher-pupil relationships (Nesi 2012) and students’ enjoyment of the subject (Torok et al. 2004). Of specific importance here, the use of humour in the lecture theatre focuses

student attention (Ulloth 2002) and helps students engage with the subject matter (Glenn 2002). Humour, it seems, is a perfect vehicle for edutainment.

Research on the nexus between performance and humour-use is by no means limited to the lecture theatre; there is also a significant literature on the performance of stand-up comedy. Indeed, the links between the two types of performance – university lecturing and stand-up comedy – have been the subject of some academic discussion. For instance, McCarron and Savin-Baden (2008) note that similar rules can apply for both professional stand-up comedians and university teachers when trying to get their audiences to laugh. They argue that both have an interactive relationship with their audiences; that both adopt particular kinds of performative strategies to elicit the desired responses from that audience; and finally that both are generally looking for responses beyond simply laughter.

Whether a performance occurs in a comedy club or a lecture theatre, a prerequisite for having a “performance” is that there be “performers”. Sarason (1999) makes the case that good teaching is a form of acting. Teachers are essentially actors taking on roles; they are doing particular kinds of work on the self to achieve desired educational outcomes. Importantly, personas such as “the engaging and humorous lecturer” do not magically appear without any kind of training; rather, they are the product of deliberate self-shaping. This position is supported by Bruner (2002), who makes a series of suggestions for how academics can assemble specifically humorous teaching personas that can readily command the attention of students, and from there, better engage them with the material.

Such assertions about the complex relationship between tertiary teaching, theatrical performance and the use of humour in the processes of professional-identity formation constitute the core problem examined in this paper. This problem is addressed through three central questions: first, to what extent is lecturing a form of performance? Second, to what extent, and in what ways, do academics adopt specific personas for their teaching? Finally, what role does humour play in the shaping of these personas?

Shaping a Teaching “Self”

In his paper on teaching as stand-up comedy, Armstrong (2003, p.2) discusses the use of scripts for both teaching and stand-up routines; in doing so, he speaks to the relationship – as he sees it – between the role played by the performer-lecturer and their true inner self: “The issue about scripts is how far our performances are already determined for us, leaving little room for the expression of our own identity. We can hide behind the mask, and distance our sense of self from the role. We are only *playing* a role.” This approach to identity, built around the notion of an inner self, constitutes the dominant, common-sense understanding of personhood. That is, we may wear a range of social and professional masks, such as “the funny lecturer”, but underlying these masks is an authentic self, a unique inner person, the homunculus of identity.

This paper understands identity and personhood differently. Mauss (1985) contends that the idea of the authentic inner person is a historical contingency, and that the contours of personhood depend within any given moment on the social and historical contexts of their formation. Thus, “the person” neither has its genesis in some unrefined biological and psychological essence of the individual, nor is the inevitable outcome of simply being human, as access to this category has at times been restricted along clan and fraternity lines. Rather, personhood should be regarded as a set of statuses, rights and obligations that may be allocated under certain circumstances. It is a contingent mechanism for publicly organising the attributes and social relations available to members of the society.

Mauss cites a range of cultures where particular “persons” were special configurations of rights, statuses, capacities and traits primarily invested in trans-individual entities, such as names, totems and masks. In marked contrast to current western beliefs, the specificities of any of these “persons” were not invested in the inner self of that individual. Indeed, the etymology of the word *person* is itself germane to the issue, as it evolved from the Latin *persona*: “a mask, a tragic mask, a ritual mask, and the ancestral mask,” in that the attributes of personhood were originally understood as being allocated to that mask and not to its wearer (Mauss 1985, p.13). For example, in the case of the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest of America, it was possible not only to acquire possessions and prestige through the conquests of war, but also to accumulate the personages – such as “Walks-with-a-mighty-tread” or “Crashing-thunder” – previously attached to other individuals. By killing the previous owner or taking ritual trappings, one could also “inherit his names, his goods, his obligations, his ancestors, his ‘person’ (personne), in the fullest sense of the word. In this way ranks, goods, personal rights, and things, as well as their particular spirit, are acquired” (Mauss 1985, pp.8-9).

Mauss argues that the “inner self” came about primarily as a consequence of three important changes in the institutions of European law and morality. The first change involved the advent of Roman Law, which resulted in a more general distribution of the status of person than had been available through pre-existing clan structures. The second change involved attempts by the Stoics to construct a philosophical system based upon individuals becoming responsible for their own conduct; instead of the attributes of the person being acquired at public ceremonies and rituals, they were now seen as being attached to an inner principle that regulated social behaviour. Finally, developments in Christian theology made a metaphysical entity of the moral person; it was the arrival of “the soul” which completed the fusion of personhood and the self. This fusion has now become axiomatic within contemporary western society.

The salient point here is that the binary between particular kinds of performance persona – the mask of “the funny lecturer” – and the notion of an authentic inner self, upon which that mask is placed – in Armstrong’s words “our own identity” – is not one that stands up to close scrutiny. As will be discussed shortly, this has consequences both for how university teachers

understand the fashioning of their “teaching persona” and for who they think can use humour effectively within their teaching practice.

Methodology

This research forms one part of a large-scale study into humour and pedagogy. Conducted within the Faculty of Education of a large, metropolitan Australian university, the research consisted of: 1) a survey of all education students into their attitudes, expectations and intentions regarding the use of humour in teaching; 2) a similar survey of all Faculty of Education teaching staff; and 3) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members of the teaching staff.

This paper addresses one particular theme that emerged from those interviews regarding humour and identity-formation. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each; they were then followed by several additional interviews of 15 minutes, clarifying particular issues and ideas. Of the 75 members of the teaching staff who completed the survey, 40 agreed to be interviewed; of the 40 willing staff, 15 were ultimately selected. These interviewees consisted of three sessional teachers, three lecturers, three senior lecturers, three associate professors and three professors. Reflecting the gender balance of the faculty, in each of these categories there were two females and one male. The interviewees were also selected on the basis of a range of different abilities with humour – some were widely regarded as funny, others not so.

Results and Discussion: Performance, Teaching Personas and Humour

As discussed in the introduction, this paper is based around three central questions: To what extent is lecturing a form of performance? Do academics adopt specific personas for their teaching? What role does humour play in the shaping of these personas?

Teaching as Performance

The processes of teaching and learning, indeed the philosophy of education itself, remain the subject of considerable debate. Disagreements continue to occur between various education idealists, materialists, romantics, pragmatists, critical theorists and post-modernists over what education is about, and how it should best be conducted (Tait 2013). Irrespective of pre-existing philosophical allegiances and the various nuances of these debates, there is little disagreement over the fundamental driving assumption that students are there to learn something; that is, irrespective of issues over identity formation and entertainment value, the first responsibility of a teacher is to teach. Of

those academics interviewed for this study, all saw their principal task as “teaching”, in the fairly traditional sense of the word. However, for one academic, that was the sum total of the process.

People ask me, how do I teach? I don't know...I just go in and do it, and hopefully they learn something. Is it a performance? ...I'm not sure I even understand the question. Professor 1, female

With this one exception, each of the other university teachers considered that there is a significant overlap between “performing” and “teaching”; indeed, most regard the former as a virtual prerequisite for the effective execution of the latter.

But I think all teaching – all good teaching – is a kind of performance anyway, whether it's a serious performance or a light-hearted performance. Senior Lecturer, male

Furthermore, given that the interviewees in this study were all from a faculty of education, and their students were almost exclusively future teachers, this understanding of the relationship between performing and teaching not only had currency among the academics themselves, it was also part of the pedagogic message passed on to their students, both overtly and covertly.

I say to my students that I think there's a bit of an actor in all teachers. I spend eight hours a day sometimes entertaining people – teaching but entertaining – and there has to be an element of taking on a role. Sessional Lecturer 1, female

It was well understood by the academics that the nature of the teaching performance is contingent upon where that performance is occurring. The forms of presentation required in a tutorial are regarded as more muted and naturalistic than those in a mass lecture; however, they still constitute a performance. The lecture performance was regarded as often requiring an entirely different register:

I'm an actress, that's my stage. I get up there and I act. Lecturer 1, female

While performances are constituted by an array of functioning components – some administrative, some intellectual, some presentational, some pedagogic – a large number of the interviewees regarded humour as having a significant role to play in the way they organised their teaching.

This is the culture of the lecture theatre...but once you've got the first laugh, you relax and feel good about it. Sometimes you think, “I'm slipping into stand-up comic here.” But we all know that working those big lectures is performance. Associate Professor 1, female

Interestingly, “the stand-up comic” constitutes a very particular role, which may be inhabited by any number of different personas (Limon 2000). In terms

of comedic stage personas, Lenny Bruce and Jerry Seinfeld shaped themselves very differently while still occupying the general role of “comic”. The same is true for teachers employing humour, and not only can these personas have different relationships to the role of teacher, they can be understood as having different relationships to personas employed within broader social and personal contexts.

Teaching Personas

These things – identities – are fluid things. They are not of my own making. They are constructed by the context in which I’m located...such as the lecture theatre.” Lecturer, male

As discussed in the preceding section, Mauss (1985) contends that all identities are ultimately variations on the notion of a mask, whether they are obviously external personas, such as “the funny lecturer”, or whether they are those we have convinced ourselves are the true, essential us. The relationship between such teaching personas and the wearer of the mask was understood and manifested in four quite distinct ways by the interviewees in this study.

1) A small number of interviewees stated that they only use their own, real selves when they teach. This self is not regarded as a fabricated persona, but rather as their fundamental identity. There is no notion of performance within this logic; it is premised upon the idea of an “authentic self” that is simply transported, unmodified, to the confines of the classroom.

What you see is what you get with me. I have no persona. I do not act. I am just myself. I am the same when I am teaching as I am here talking to you. Professor 1, female

I don’t think my behaviour inside or outside of the classroom is any different. That’s just the person I am...it’s just the way I get through life. Sessional Lecturer, male

This position garnered very limited support from the other interviewees. By far the dominant position was the belief that everyone performs to some degree in their teaching, and that performance is the manifestation of a particular persona, or personas.

For reasons of honesty, I would say yes, I do have a teaching persona because I find it really disingenuous when people say, “No, I don’t at all.” Senior Lecturer 1, female

2) Another interviewee also premised her understanding of identity on the notion of an authentic inner self, but did not necessarily deploy this personal essence in her teaching. That is, she regarded herself as having a singular true self, but placed various masks upon this self to teach more effectively.

I’m an introvert. I play a role in front of my students; it’s a role that’s more open and responsive to interactions than I would be at home.

When I finish teaching I creep into my office and I don't want to talk to anybody. I want to go home and be in my pajamas, and that's it.
Sessional Lecture 1, female

In contrast to the previous interviewees, this interviewee's understanding of teaching emphasises the idea of performance. Indeed, the lecturer actively required a different teaching persona to compensate for the situational inadequacies she perceived in her personality; the performative mask covered the shortcomings of her true self.

3) The majority of the interviewed academics did not frame their answers to questions about teaching and persona-formation in term of a real self/false (teaching) self-dichotomy. Instead, they recognised that by framing the issue as one of “performance”, they necessarily include the notion of a “performer”. This then raises the question: what is the ontological status of the persona doing the performing?

I don't think being performative is being fake. Whenever you're the focus – so certainly in lectures, and when you're doing explicit teaching in a tutorial – it's quite performative. I see that as part of the pedagogy.
Lecturer 2, female

Consequently, it is possible to position a teaching persona as different from other types of persona, without then assuming that one of those other personas is somehow the “real” one. A number of academics stated that they had a specific teaching persona, which they understood as a deliberate professional fabrication, but this fabrication was fairly similar to all the other fabricated personas deployed within other domains of their lives.

I have a teaching persona, but I work to ensure that while I'm professional in teaching contexts, there's not a huge deal of difference between my more day-to-day persona, and my teaching persona. Senior Lecturer 1, female

This understanding of personhood meshes neatly with the Maussian account outlined earlier, in that it sidesteps any requirement for an authentic inner self. However, it is not the only possible account to do so, as teaching personas and day-to-day personas need have no necessary connection or similarity.

4) The final way the teaching/personal identity relationship was conceptualised by the interviewees also uses an understanding of selfhood as non-essential. According to this reasoning, teaching is most certainly a performance, and that performance constitutes one functioning part of a particular kind of pedagogic persona, but that persona has no necessary relationship to any of the other personas that may be deployed by that academic in different contexts. That is, while they are unlikely to be entirely different, fictional teaching personas need not mirror fictional “day-to-day” personas.

I have several teaching personas; I use them as I need them. A couple blur over into my ordinary life – probably more now than when I first

started teaching. I used to try to keep them fairly separate. Lecturer 1, female

I don't think in terms of there being a singular "real me", and I certainly don't think of that "real me" having much to do with the how I strategically manage myself in lectures and tutorials. Associate Professor 2, female

In summary, almost all of the interviewees consciously shaped specific teaching personas—"the witty lecturer", "the pastoral tutor"—with the principal intention of better achieving specific pedagogic ends. For the most part, those personas were regarded as having no *necessary* connection to constructs of an "essential self", although there were likely to be common elements, practices and forms of self-representation within all. The issue then arises: what role does humour have in all of this?

I just know that how we cobble together a persona, and one that works well within the professional terrain—for me—necessarily involves humour. Associate Professor 1, female

Humour and Persona Formation

The question now arises: having recognised that teaching can be understood as a form of public performance, and that for the most part academics are required to shape their teaching personas for the purposes of that performance, how does this process actually occur, as specifically related to the use of humour? In *The history of sexuality, volume II: The uses of pleasure*, Foucault (1987, pp.26-29) outlines a four-part model that provides a viable set of theoretical coordinates for analysing the doing of work on the self, as part of forming a particular persona. First is *the determination of the ethical substance*, which involves ascertaining the nature of the domain upon which work is actually to be done. Second is *the mode of subjectification*, which is comprised of an examination of the mechanisms by which targeted populations are persuaded to carry out such work on the self. Third is *forms of ethical work*, which an investigation of mental and physical ways the work on the self is actually done. The final element of Foucault's model is *teleology*, which involves an analysis of the kind of person that such practices of the self are directed at producing.

Determination of the Ethical Substance

Given the focus of this paper, the issue of what needs to be addressed to be doing relevant work on the self is relatively straightforward. The ethical substance here is "teaching practice". In forming a persona that can effectively deploy humor in the university lecture theatre and the tutorial room, the substance of that deployment is to be found solely in the actions of the teacher. If an academic has successfully molded themselves into "the funny lecturer", it is because the various components of their teaching practice – speech, gesture, content – shape them as such.

Mode of Subjectification

Having targeted an area of concern within a particular population, in this case the teaching practices of university lecturers, the question now arises: how are member of this category to be persuaded to carry out their moral and professional obligations? If “teaching practice” constitutes the material basis for this form of self-shaping, what prompts or induces adherence to perceived requirements?

This research suggests that there are a number of modes of subjectification operating here. These function to not only recruit academics into doing work on their teaching practice, but also to use humour as part of that work. The first is the visible construction of the notion of “the good teacher”. Just as the character of “the good mother” enabled various organs of governance to effectively manage maternal responsibilities at a distance (Bell 1993; Donzelot 1979), so too the character of “the good teacher” acts to recruit academics into given forms of conduct.

For the most part, no-one wants to be thought of as a bad teacher, especially in an education faculty. Let's face it, we all know who the good ones are.... I think they get a lot of respect. Senior Lecturer 2, female

I still think of myself as a teacher, first and foremost...it's important to me to be good at this. Sessional Lecturer 2, female

Of course, the notion of “the good teacher” is shaped by the pedagogic environment of the contemporary university. As discussed earlier, the teaching philosophy of “edutainment” plays a significant role in determining student and faculty expectations. Teachers find themselves organising their pedagogy in relation to this framework.

Well...most of the good lectures are infotainers now, aren't they? I deliberately [plan] humour, but I also then ensure that my style of lecturing is one of...well, I suppose...I don't know if evangelical is a word that I would use, but it's about making it interactive, and a good way of defusing any apprehension that students might have about engaging is through the use of humour. Lecturer, male

Academics are also persuaded to work on their teaching through the dual system of student evaluations and teaching awards. Lecturers are continually assessed. The poorer lecturers are counseled, and given strategic advice for improvement (or in the worst cases, removed); the better lecturers are rewarded. The use of humour in teaching is widely seen to play a positive role in this evaluation, an observation supported by other research (Javidi et al. 1988).

When people write back about whether they love or hate me in the (student survey) or whatever it's called – the love/hate survey – just about everyone on the love end, they say something about the humour. The few on the hate end, they probably don't have a sense of humour.... Senior Lecturer 2, female

Forms of Ethical Work

Once academics are persuaded in various ways (*modes of subjectification*) to work on their teaching practices (*the ethical substance*), the question becomes: what is the nature of that work? How do university teachers actually go about making themselves funny in the classroom? The research suggests that this happens in a variety of ways. Some pertain directly to the use of the body, in the production of particular kinds of humorous bodily habitus (Mauss 1973). Though not necessarily the most sophisticated type of humour, “clowning” and various types of other bodily humour are common among lecturers:

When we're dealing with a large group, you've got to accentuate your body movements...the hands on the hips, the frown, the stare, the looking dumb...it really is a performance like an actor on stage.
Lecturer, male

Physical humour's part of it...facial expressions can be good...I use my body in weird ways, in part because I'm pigeon-toed. I naturally walk in a funny way, and my arms are double-jointed. Sessional Lecturer 2, female

A far more significant practice of the self for university academics appears to be verbal humour. As part of a repertoire of strategies for eliciting laughter – and hence getting students’ attention and encouraging engagement – university teachers tell jokes, make witty observations, recount humorous anecdotes, self-deprecate and engage in repartee with the audience. All of these practices act to shape the teacher’s persona in chosen ways.

You stand up...a couple of jokes settles everyone down. Okay, we'll stop thinking about other stuff. We'll listen to this guy; he's got something worth saying. Professor, male

I'm not so much on telling jokes, but more telling humorous anecdotes...using funny stories as teachable moments. I use that, probably across all my teaching areas. Lecturer 2, female

In addition to physical and verbal forms of self-shaping, teaching personas are organised in a relational manner with the students. A dominant theme in the interviews involved the complexity of teasing students for humorous purposes. While much of the instructional literature of the use of humour in teaching expresses extreme caution when dealing with the issue of teasing students (Berk 2002, 2003; Lundberg & Miller-Thurston 2002), the interviewees generally stated a willingness to tease their students; however, only when they had reached a point in the pedagogic relationship when it was obvious that the mockery is relatively benign, and where trust had developed.

I tease students all the time...but I've got to build up some kind of rapport with them so they will allow me to tease them. Professor, male

When they knew me and I knew them, then it was fine, but when I just walked in cold they went, who are you, sister? ...A lot of humour has to do with trust. Associate Professor 1, female

One final form of humorous self-shaping involves demonstrations that the teacher is the kind of person who likes to laugh themselves, often accomplished by the use of a variety of amusing resources. This practice of the self was used by almost all the interviewees, and had the advantage of appealing to those who, while enjoying and valuing laughter themselves, lacked confidence in their own ability to make students laugh.

I always look for humorous sorts of things to exemplify points that I'm making, whether it be from the Simpsons, or other forms of popular culture...from the ABC, or even, God forbid, Channel 10 or Channel 7.... Lecturer, male

The issue of whether lecturers regard themselves as inherently funny is an important one. If a teacher has not included the use of humour to any great degree in the shaping of their non-teaching personas, they appear far less likely to make it a significant part of the personas they employ for teaching. These arguments are normally couched in terms of an innate ability with humour.

I don't think of myself as a funny person; I think if anything I come over as a bit too serious. Senior Lecturer, male

I think I'm not really very funny.... Associate Professor 2, female

That is, arguments about “natural ability” with humour prefigure who is likely to deploy humour as a practice of professional self-formation, as well as how. It would seem apparent from this study that the discourse of “innate good sense of humour” dominates the choices many university teachers make about how they shape their teaching personas – even among those who explicitly reject the idea of an “essential self”, let alone a funny one. This ability to employ humour effectively – to be funny – is most generally referred to in the literature as “humour orientation” (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield 1991). This is not a measure of the degree to which someone appreciates humour, but rather a measure of how well they are able to produce humorous messages (Banas et al. 2011). Importantly, humour orientation does not necessarily have to be conceptually tied to a belief in an innate capacity. Arguably, assembling various personas that incorporate a high humour orientation is often a matter of trial and error over a long period – finding out what audiences will laugh at, and when. While almost all the teachers in this sample place a high value on humour, it became clear that teachers with a high humour orientation used humour more frequently than those teachers with a lower humour orientation.

If the opportunity is there, I tend to always take it; and in a classroom where there is no humour, I feel like there's a lack of life. Lecturer 2, female

Teleology

The last component of Foucault's model argues that all these practices of the self are directed at the development of individuals towards particular goals. The focus on teleology asks the question: what kind of persona are these practices of self-formation trying to produce? At first analysis, the answer here is quite simple: "the funny lecturer". However, on closer scrutiny, this process is far more nuanced. For example, some academics constructed themselves as "the funny lecturer" simply for its own sake. This was a persona with which they felt comfortable, as it had significant elements in common with personas they regularly used in other contexts.

I like being thought of as funny, irrespective of the context. That how I think of myself. It sort of defines who I am. Lecturer 1, female

While this may still be the case for some university teachers, in that they like to be thought of as funny, others adopt this persona because they consider "the funny lecturer" to be a subset of an even more important persona, "the good lecturer". As stated in the introduction, the preponderance of evidence suggests that humour has a wide range of pedagogic benefits, extending beyond student attention and engagement, to information retention and subject enjoyment. Consequently, many university teachers consider that adopting the persona of "the funny lecturer" leads to improved educational outcomes.

An additional nuance is that "the funny lecturer" comes in a variety of forms. In practice, the funny lecturer acts as an umbrella term, which can successfully encompass "the witty lecturer", "the goofy lecturer", "the humorously cynical lecturer" or "the self-deprecating lecturer", each of which can be deployed as a stock character or used for specific ends at particular moments. Importantly, however, the ability to use any of this familiar cast-list of characters when teaching is contingent upon other factors. For example, the adoption of any persona other than "the traditional teacher" was regarded as something of a risk by very junior members of the teaching faculty.

Because I'm new, I'm just conscious that if someone was to say something really bad [about me], it would probably affect my chances of being asked to do it again. Sessional Lecturer 2, female

I do become mindful of not wanting to be too frivolous with older students, because my age already somewhat undercuts my authority with them. It's a bit dicey to push that boundary when they could be coming back and saying, "Not only is she young, but she's also unprofessional." Lecturer 2, female

In addition to this general concern, a persona such as "the self-deprecating teacher" is regarded as perfectly appropriate for a professor to adopt, and this can work very well with traditional Socratic pedagogies (for example, "What do I know? I'm just a complete idiot...you explain it to me"). However, this can be a problematic character to adopt if the adoptee is also a junior member of staff.

As a young teacher, I can't play that [self-deprecation] line, because it's a hop, skip and a jump to people saying to your head of school, :She didn't even know what she was talking about." Lecturer 2, female

At the other end of the professional scale, senior academics appear to have far greater latitude in the cast list of characters they can choose from, and in the ways they can piece together particular types of humorous teaching persona. Not only are they largely secure in their employment, but they tend to have the social and professional status to shape themselves as they see fit. Indeed, the academy has a long tradition of tolerating an eccentric professoriate, and even within the era of edutainment and corporate universities, this still appears to be the case:

You could define it as a privilege (of seniority).... I think its part of that. "Let's see how far we can push this." Professor, male

I'm an old woman...I can get away with saying what the hell I like.
Professor 1, female

Conclusion

It could be convincingly argued that what counts as a “good teacher” within the contemporary university sector has little in common with the same “good teacher” from 100 years ago. We are now firmly in the pedagogic era of edutainment, wherein students have come to expect a particular kind of performance from their lecturers and tutors, particularly those who wish to be regarded as good at what they do. All “performances” require “actors”, and it has been argued here, following the work of Mauss and Foucault, that these actors do not draw their inspiration from a wellspring of some inner “teaching” self; rather, it is suggested that those actors work from a cast list of possible characters. One such character, or persona, with a significant presence in the tertiary landscape is “the funny lecturer”.

Those university lecturers who choose to adopt the persona of “the funny lecturer” are persuaded to do so in a variety of ways. The research suggests that humour has a significant role to play in engaging students, improving educational outcomes and increasing enjoyment, and academics who want to be regarded as good teachers sometimes elect to do so through the vehicle of “the funny lecturer”. This process of professional persona-formation is given added institutional impetus through devices such as student evaluation and lecturing awards, which both coerce and encourage the doing of work on the self. Interestingly, the work on the self necessary to shape “the funny lecturer” can take a number of forms. Academics can enact this, and related humorous personas, by using the body in particular ways, using humorous language and linguistic forms and constructing particular kinds of joking relationships with students.

This process is not without its constraints and its boundaries. This research suggests that while almost all the academics interviewed recognised the value

of humour within tertiary teaching, and used it as a pedagogic tactic when the opportunity presented itself, a more limited number of the interviewees actively shaped a teaching persona incorporating humour as one of its central elements. Perhaps not surprisingly, the academics who chose to shape themselves as “the funny lecturer” were generally those with a higher humour orientation; that is, they tended to use humour as a practice of the self across a range of different contexts and personas, not just teaching. Finally, “the funny lecturer” is a label that can be attached to a cluster of associated personas, characters that possess a certain “family resemblance” in a Wittgensteinian (1953) sense, but which describe an assortment of somewhat different ways of organising a teaching self. These different personas are not necessarily equally available to all members of a faculty, but are often distributed according to job security, academic status and professional seniority.

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