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Eamon Tewell

*Long Island University*, [eamon.tewell@liu.edu](mailto:eamon.tewell@liu.edu)

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Eamon C. Tewell

# What stand-up comedians teach us about library instruction

## Four lessons for the classroom

Imagine a typical stand-up comedian speaking to audiences from a stage in a dark comedy club, holding a microphone and leaning on a stool, perhaps making observations about airline food. Now picture a typical instruction librarian in a classroom, presenting resources and evaluation strategies to students, perhaps making observations about scholarly communication.

At first glance, the two appear to have little in common. After watching stand-up comedians perform in a wide variety of venues, I have found that there are not only more similarities than one might expect, but several compelling lessons that librarians can learn from comedians and apply to their own instruction to lead more dynamic classes.

Stand-up comedy has seen a renaissance in recent years due to a burgeoning number of creative alternative comedians and the prevalence of tools such as Twitter and YouTube that make access to comics effortless.

Comedians present their jokes, or “material,” in settings ranging from neighborhood bars to stadiums, and perform anywhere between ten minutes and one hour. Given comedians’ extensive experience in public speaking, engaging audiences, and performing for new faces night after night, it is only sensible that some rules and techniques for stand-up can be used to deliver quality library instruction.

From the beginning of an instruction session to its conclusion, below are four lessons librarians can learn from seasoned stand-ups.

### Know how to read an audience

Every reference librarian has led a class that,

for whatever reason, did not go as well as anticipated. The comedy world has a dramatic term for unappreciated performances. *Bombing*—telling jokes and receiving no laughs from the audience—is the worst possible outcome for a comedian. Although even a great comic has an occasional off-night, bombing is frequently the result of miscommunicating with a crowd.

The key to preventing bombing is to assess an audience’s expectations on the fly. Comedians, like library instructors, know to vary their material according to the crowd. The jokes that tourists enjoy may be met with blank, uninterested stares by locals in the same way that graduate students are likely to react to being taught freshmen-level research concepts.

Many comedians use crowd work to begin their performance, which involves calling on an audience member, asking him or her a simple question such as, “Where are you from?” or “What do you do?” and quickly finding a response that the crowd will laugh at. This engages the audience and gives the comic an immediate feel for what types of jokes they find humorous.

Eddie Murphy, an immensely popular comedy veteran who made the transition from stand-up to famous actor, skillfully improvises with a large crowd during his classic 1983 cable special *Delirious*.<sup>1</sup> Murphy not only seizes natural breaks in his performance as

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Eamon C. Tewell is reference and instruction librarian at Long Island University, e-mail: eamon.tewell@liu.edu  
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an opportunity to acknowledge his audience and take a moment's rest, but he devises quick retorts to hecklers' remarks, which wins the crowd's complete attention.

Applying these principles to library instruction, try commencing class with an ice-breaker or a short humorous anecdote. If the group is responsive, ask someone to share a "something-that-happened-to-me" story about an experience in a library. A little crowd work as you begin a session can help students connect with each other and yourself, while setting the tone for the class.

### **Vary your teaching methods**

Librarians providing instruction understand that their teaching methods should go beyond a traditional lecture. What may not be apparent is just how many pedagogical approaches are at one's disposal. In an entertainment industry where standing on a stage and speaking is *de rigueur*, the cerebral comic Demetri Martin has successfully incorporated props, visual aids, and music into his work. Take Martin's 2012 comedy special *Standup Comedian* as an example. In the space of one hour, only ten minutes longer than the typical one-shot instruction session, Martin captivates audiences with his easel pad for humorous drawings and charts, examples of fake flyers he posted at coffee shops, and by playing guitar and harmonica while telling jokes.

Thankfully, instruction librarians are not expected to play multiple instruments while teaching classes, much less deliver jokes. Taking a closer look at Martin's methods, he explains the logic behind using an easel pad to convey ideas during his performance in *Standup Comedian*:

Sometimes when I do jokes they don't work the way I intended, they don't work as well as I wanted them to, and it's frustrating, but I hate to give up on a joke...these are some of my jokes that didn't work the first time around, but I think it's because I didn't convey the picture that was in my head, the visual that I was trying to communicate to the

audience. But I think that with these "material enhancers" they might work.<sup>2</sup>

Different teaching methods will be appropriate for different messages. A task that students often find challenging, such as selecting pertinent keywords for searches, could be made easier and more fun by drawing concept maps on an easel pad a la Martin's approach. Depending on your objectives you may choose to integrate clickers, an interactive game, or a chalkboard into instruction sessions, but Martin demonstrates that the key is to use a variety of methods to reach the audience's diverse learning styles and keep them involved.

### **Relate on a personal level**

Building empathy and relating with students on a personal level is an effective means of decreasing barriers and the library anxiety of those who may see librarians as unapproachable. All good comedians understand the importance of relatability and incorporating individual experiences into their acts, but perhaps none more so than Louis C.K. As a divorced father of two attempting to balance his longtime comedy career with being a single parent, many of C.K.'s jokes are based on his personal life.

In his critically acclaimed television show *Louie*, C.K. touches on the same subjects as in his stand-up, from living in New York City ("I like New York. This is the only city where you actually have to say things like, 'Hey, that's mine. Don't pee on that.'") to divorce ("Being single at 41 after ten years of marriage and two kids is difficult. That's like having a bunch of money in the currency of a country that doesn't exist anymore.")

The best way to create relatability is to teach as your authentic self. If you do not consider yourself a naturally funny person, there is no need to laboriously work jokes into your instruction routine. Instead, try smiling and being natural, and be conversational if the session calls for it. In both the comedy club and the classroom, a dash of personality and spontaneity will improve your performance,



and has the added benefit of making you more approachable afterwards.

### **Use feedback to hone your performance**

It is not unheard of for superstar Aziz Ansari of the TV series *Parks and Recreation* to make surprise guest appearances at small comedy clubs in New York City and Los Angeles. Lucky audience members will see Ansari walk onstage, take his iPhone out of his pocket, press “record,” and set the phone on a stool next to him. After approximately ten minutes of testing new jokes, he will thank the audience and leave to go try his material at another club. Well-known comics will visit up to four shows in one night, recording reactions to their jokes at each appearance. Later they listen to what got big laughs, and what did not, to fine-tune their performances.

Librarians must assess their instruction for the same reason that Ansari records his impromptu performances: to get feedback. Whether asking students questions regarding comprehension using Poll Everywhere, suggesting to a colleague that he or she attend a session to offer advice, or concluding class by having students complete a One-Minute Paper, it is essential to solicit feedback frequently and from a variety of sources. No successful comedian would attempt to spice up a punch line by delivering the identical joke every night without gauging each audience’s reaction. In this same way, instruction should be modified according to the reaction of students, faculty, and colleagues to improve delivery and, consequently, maximize learning opportunities.

### **Try it again**

After receiving feedback on your performance, rework your material and try it again with a new audience. Joan Rivers, a comedian and entertainer for more than 50 years, understands the importance of persistence. The 2010 documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* portrays the comedian’s continual struggle of making people laugh despite in-the-moment challenges she would never have anticipated. In one interview Rivers claims, “The worst


thing that ever happened to me on stage is someone ran forward to tell me they loved me and projectile vomited all over the stage.”<sup>3</sup> That scenario would certainly make for an instruction session one would rather forget, but the lesson of perseverance in the face of unexpected obstacles speaks for itself.

In the classroom there will invariably be good and bad days, and as instructors it is essential to keep our daily work in perspective. Some sessions may indeed bomb, and when they do, the most productive reaction is to listen to audience expectations, adjust one’s approach, and try again the next day. As any comedian at his or her first open mic can tell you, doing untested material is an arduous undertaking. Remember that no act is perfect the first time. When testing, redesigning, and retesting new material in the classroom, persistence will eventually pay dividends.

### **Conclusion**

Comedians are experts in effectively reading an audience, diversifying their presentation methods, relating to people on a personal level, and tirelessly reworking their material. The next time you watch a comedian pay attention to more than the punch lines. You will find that the methods underpinning the performance apply directly to providing better library instruction and can be easily adopted. Whatever path you take to improve your teaching based on the tried and true methods of stand-ups, please do everyone a favor and refrain from beginning your next class with, “I just flew in from the third floor stacks, and boy are my arms tired!”

### **Notes**

1. *Eddie Murphy: Delirious*, directed by Bruce Gowers (1983; Los Angeles, CA: Entertainment Studio, 2007), DVD.
2. *Demetri Martin: Standup Comedian*, directed by Ryan Polito (New York, NY: Comedy Central Records, 2012), DVD.
3. Terry Gross, “Joan Rivers is a Real ‘Piece of Work,’” *NPR*, June 9, 2010, [www.npr.org/2010/06/09/127556307/comedian-joan-rivers-is-a-real-piece-of-work/](http://www.npr.org/2010/06/09/127556307/comedian-joan-rivers-is-a-real-piece-of-work/). 

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