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Students as Satirists: Encouraging Critique and Comic Release

Carol Reeves

In a recent essay on writing instruction, Alan France (1993) defined writing as "an active means to transform the existing social inequities of commodity capitalism" (593). To view education as a means for social change and action is nothing new, of course. Though he didn't refer directly to commodity capitalism as a form of oppression or writing as a mechanism for critique, John Dewey believed in the active capacity of students to use their education to change their own worlds, arguing that if education actually liberated and guided students' critical capacities, they "would be kept busy in studying all indications of power, all obstacles and perversions . . ." (270).

Although we would all agree that critical awareness is one goal of education and that writing can serve our students' analytical capacities, we may not agree on the best ways to encourage that critique. We want to avoid overt, dogmatic indoctrination of a political agenda while teaching our students to view writing as a means for examining and transforming the inequities they encounter in their own lives. Unfortunately, we also know how difficult it is to discern whether students are writing out of a sincere personal desire or whether they are merely trying to get a good grade. To strive for a classroom environment that breeds conscious critique without indoctrination is to live in the grip of a paradox: the powerful rhetorical tools that we must teach students to use are also the devices of indoctrination. How do we ever know that students are engaged in their own critical pursuits and not just trying to please us and avoid upsetting social relations?

The problem is to find a vehicle for critique that liberates students to choose their own victims but also trains them in the forms of expression and rhetoric that they may employ for a variety of purposes inside and outside the academy. My solution is satire. The indirect, satirical jab provides students an intellectually challenging and enjoyable means of critique and potential transformation--a mediated engine of anger rather than pure, unmediated anger itself. The playful irony of satire grants the satirist what Soren Kierkegaard (1965) called "negative freedom," for ". . . it is by irony that the subject emancipates himself from the constraint imposed by the continuity of life" (273). Using irony, the satirist escapes accusations that she is being unfair because she is "only joking, after all. And surely, you can take a joke." Criticism combined with humor allows for an enjoyable release of frustration without the fear of retaliation from more direct attack.

Satire is often aimed at the hypocrisy, inflexibility, and corruption of religious, social, educational, or political institutions and their rituals. Yet, to be a satirist is to be relatively secure about one's position in and knowledge of the institution one is satirizing. Satirists often inhabit the ironic position of being intimately familiar with the very conventions they attack and often reasonably certain of their status within the institution. The Shakespearean fool, for example, always knows just how far he can go within the confines of his social position. The great satirists of the eighteenth century--Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Jonathan Swift--though certainly examining their society from a critical distance, were insiders, acutely knowledgeable about the ridiculous conventions that deserved parodying.

Even though our students come to us with insider knowledge of the conventions and habits of mind of their own worlds, they may lack familiarity with our conventions and ways of thinking. In his often-quoted essay, David Bartholomae (1985) argues that students must "learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (134, emphasis

mine). Bartholomae rightly places academic discourse at the center of the student's education, but he fails to question that discourse and fails to recognize that in taking on the academy's discourses and habits of mind, the student may very well feel like taking them off. That is, as they become insiders, our students may very well want to satirize the conventions they have learned, which are not at all playful and ironic.

Value of Form

Encouraging the indirect, satirical attack enables students to voice what is really bothering them without fear of retaliation, but more important, they may also discover how a form of discourse contributes to both the form and substance of what they want to say. In one freshman composition and literature course, I had students read e.e. cummings's "The Cambridge Ladies." I asked them if they could draw any analogies between the ladies and certain types of people on campus. The next day, Brian, who had been passive in class all semester, met me in the hall after class and shyly placed something in my hands, saying, "I know it wasn't assigned but this is something I feel strongly about. Please don't tell anyone I wrote it."

Brian's imitation of cummings's poem is a vitriolic attack on his fraternity:

The AAA Men, an Imitation of e.e. cummings
the men of AAA who live in furnished souls
are unhandsome and have empty minds
(also, with their fathers' blessings.
"Fulfill the legacy, my son.")
They believe in Christ and Kegs,
(Christ may be dead, but the Keg better not be!)
are invariable interested in so many things--
intramural sports, their roommate's girlfriend,
and at present writing, one still finds
them riding drunkenly on a giant teeter-totter,
raising money for the, is it (burp), Leukemia society?
perhaps. While the permanent faces lewdly describe
last night's conquest of the unconscious Miss D,
or the wonderful puddle of vomit deposited
on the hallway floor, by Brother L.
. . . . the men of AAA do not care above
their university, if sometimes in its box of sky lavender,
the moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy.
(Unless of course it messes the T.V. reception up
during the Super Bowl). --The Observer

The student's brilliant parody is not simply stylistic imitation but a salute to cummings and an attack on a social problem in Brian's world. Imitation, a pedagogical tool from classical rhetoric, is rarely encouraged in today's writing classes because of our contemporary emphasis on the individual, unique, and creative response. Yet imitation is an effective way to sensitize students to the effects of linguistic choices on meaning and voice. But more important, as Brian's parody demonstrates, an imitation actually encourages creative, critical thought by providing students a form into which they can place their own victims. Brian had recognized the hypocrisy, pretense, and sexism in institutional life as he experienced it, but until this parody, he had no vehicle for his anger.

In another freshman course, a seminar on humor, I asked students to imitate one of the assigned satires, but to plug in their own victims. Though they don't quite achieve the stylistic sophistication of the originals, students experimented with new styles. Suddenly they were producing highly convoluted prose, taking risks, and writing, as one student put it, "like those authors I sometimes don't understand very well." Imitating a text from another time forces students to grapple with the differences between the language in the text and their own contemporary usage. As we all know, younger students are too impatient to straggle through a heavy text, too often preferring contemporary texts simply because they can read them more easily. Asking them to imitate gives them more control over difficult texts.

For this imitation, many of the women chose a passage from *Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton, an early seventeenth-century writer whose playful derision is often aimed at women. Burton employed the heavy-handed technique of amassing great lists of adjectives and descriptive phrases. Here are the first few sentences of the original:

Every lover admires his mistress, though she be very deformed of herself, ill-favored, wrinkled, pimpled, pale, red, yellow, tanned, tallow-faced, have a swollen juggler's platter face, or a thin, lean, chitty face. . . . (1992:18)

This satire, along with Juvenal's diatribe against women, was denounced by both men and women students in the class, all of whom insisted that jokes placing women in the context of physical consumption are socially unacceptable.

However, the women felt no compunction about pointing out the physical flaws in men, an act that some feminists believe is a sign of power. As Eleanor Smeal said, "It's easy to laugh when you feel empowered enough that you can ridicule those who are keeping you in your place" (in Lacher 1994). Although all but one of the men in my class avoided imitating Burton, the women all imitated his satire, changing the gender. When we discussed the inherent double-standard in this situation, the women justified their attacks on men by arguing that, as one young woman said, "It's high time we got to do these things. They can just live with it for a while." Another woman said that her mother "has endured all those woman-driver jokes all her life. So I feel I have a right to pay them back for her." Here, Tiffany uses invective satire to catalogue the stereotypical macho qualities that she and her friends love to hate:

Every woman admires her man, in spite of his countless faults; his nose hair, his back hair, his finger in his nose, his vulgar mouth, his obscene, obese, and utterly disgusting, Friday night football friends, his card playing, his gambling, his lack of any money, his horny mind, his lack of mind, his stupid, idiotic, lazy frame of mind. . . . and if she loves him most, it is for his lying, cheating, and other errors she does not see, for she is blind. as is he, and the love they share.

Every woman in the class denied that she had ever been the victim of sexism; yet they all agreed they had been "dumped on" by men in both personal and work-related contexts. The women students simply had never connected the specific incidents of exploitation with the broader issue of sexism. The satirical mode allowed them negative freedom to express some anger in front of the men in the class without damaging social relations. The men took this playful ridicule in stride because they didn't see themselves in the satirical mirror.

Even though several of the women chose personal issues, such as relationship problems, to satirize, the men avoided such subjects, focusing their criticism on issues traditionally granted to males. Here is Brad's imitation of the same passage from Bums quoted above:

Every faithful fan loves his football team, though the team plays without enthusiasm or skill or common sense, fumble the ball, throw interceptions, get sacked, run the ball the wrong way, jump offside, forget the plays, get into fights, miss field goals, drop passes thrown right to them, fall down when running in the open field. . . .

Several students appropriated the traditional thesis-support essay to make ironic, indirect arguments. One used ironic praise in a veiled attack on his fraternity that moved from mockingly serious statements he had taken from his pledge meetings to negative examples:

Lastly, fraternities 'possess the top-rated social status on campuses nation-wide due in large part to their outstanding brotherhood.' . . . The animals will play music louder than a jack-hammer, spill their drinks on the newly cleaned carpet, create an atmospheric layer for the earth composed of tobacco smoke, and vomit wherever and whenever they feel moved.

This student's sophistication in using irony would likely have gone unnoticed if he had written conventional essays all semester. Even though irony is a master trope, signaling both cognitive and rhetorical astuteness when used well, it is also, as Lori Chamberlain (1989) has said, subversive, invoking "notions of hierarchy and subordination, judgment and perhaps even moral superiority" (29). As a result, we don't often encourage students to be ironic. We may want our students to critique "capitalist ideology," but we don't want them to be morally superior. Heaven forbid.

Another assignment in this class asked students to parody the kind of writing they had learned previously. These parodies reveal what students already knew about writing and what they thought ridiculous enough to satirize.

My students' first satiric victim was the introduction, and they pounced on the rules they had learned: (1) attract your reader's attention; (2) move from general principles to your specific point; (3) make your point relevant and important. Here, Jeff exaggerates the attention grabber, criticizing the way writers try to make their subject seem more momentous than it actually is:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was a time when they had no batteries. What was life when it was not what it is or was supposed to be? How could there have been the existence of man without He little coppertop? Batteries are the essence of life

In her introduction, Vicky exaggerates the importance of her subject as well as the old rule that forces the use of "one" rather than "I" or "you."

Reading this paper will enlighten one's mind. In society today, one must note the importance of learning to respect one's elders, and one must also gain that respect from his/her elders in return.

Power of Parody

In her "plea to the wielders of academic discourse," Cathy Popkin (1992) points out the "ubiquitous academic 'of course,'" a rhetorical posturing that "admits no uncertainty, invites no discussion; it invokes only to dismiss from debate or explanation; . . . it silences both forceful dissent and timid

questions" (173-74). No wonder our students are reluctant to admit uncertainty and ambivalence or to argue with us--those college professors who actually read, write, and speak such a language.

Another satirical jab used by all students made fun of non-sexist pronouns. Vicky exaggerates the he/she rule as well as the pretenses students maintain in order to appear knowledgeable in the classroom:

However, if one does raise his/her hand and the teacher does call upon him/her to answer, one must be prepared to explore his/her mind and invent a coherent answer to the question that he/she raised his/her hand to answer, even though he/she didn't know the answer in the first place.

The other parody assignment asked students to exaggerate the conventions of some type of academic writing they had been exposed to. The humor seminar's inherently interdisciplinary nature and readings ensured that students had a good introduction to several forms of argument in the humanities and social sciences. To prepare students, I gave them excerpts from Swift's burlesque of the academy in *Gulliver's Travels* and a burlesque of deconstruction.

As with the previous parody, what students chose to exaggerate indicated not only their growing knowledge but their awareness of the ridiculous. My students demonstrated sensitivity to the academic "of course" posture in textbook writing that tacitly reminds the reader: you should have learned this stuff by now. One pharmacy major chose writing in math textbooks as his satiric victim, explaining to me that although he felt comfortable with mathematics, he often noticed that textbook writing is both arrogant and patronizing. Below, in the introduction to David's burlesque, the phrases "everyone knows" and "it is obvious" and the omission of important information reveal his sensitivity to the "of course" posturing:

Everyone knows that when baking chocolate chip cookies, one must have something in which to bake them. Thus, after many computations which we will omit here but can be read at leisure in the Appendix 32b in the back of the cookbook, we find that the ideal area of the baking apparatus, commonly called a cookie sheet, is 82 inches squared. Therefore, it is obvious that the dimensions of the ideal sheet should be 9.055 inches by 9.055 inches in order to produce the maximum amount of cookies in one baking as is proved by Theorem 53c on page 236.

A similar "of course" posturing is found in certain forms of post-structuralist critique. Several students chose to burlesque what they saw as self-indulgent obscurity, pomposity, and triviality in social/cultural critique. Here is Tiffany's introduction:

The hegemonic status of the Flintstone dynasty lampoon is a jejune garble of the parsimony of that era. The concept of men of the *matta more* operating in a hacienda of endocarp slab is not only quixotic, but also quite exorbitant. Fred Flintstone encapsulates an avuncular chassis, who to the fatuous viewer, acerbates much puerile behavior. His frequent bellows of "Yabba Dabba DOOO!" are supernumerary and inane. In this manner, he vilifies the actual emporium of authentic antremen.

An advantage in this exercise that I didn't foresee is that students were finally free to plunder their thesauruses and flaunt the esoteric vocabulary that writing teachers often slaughter on the altar dedicated to the god of clarity.

Another student's burlesque demonstrates her growing understanding of the critical terminology and the rhetoric of interpretation. Focusing on the television series, *The Brady Bunch*, Laurel writes that "the juxtaposed family, an interesting blend of two different genetic lines, encounters

an array of situations and emotions . . . [such as] sibling rivalry, the coming of age, discovering one's niche in the great panel of human existence, . . . the dormant feelings of jealousy, bitterness and guilt," thus showing how academic discourse can sometimes artificially inflate the importance of trivial topics. Laurel also demonstrates her knowledge of gender issues while she ridicules the academic interpretation of gender relations in texts:

The parents, Mike and Carol, represent the widening acceptance of unique gender-related conditions in family formations once thought fallacious. . . . Mike, though open and perhaps vulnerable, still preserves the autonomous behavior that is capable of holding a family unit together. Carol, also, lies in perfect balance between the two poles of sagacity and unrelenting ambiguousness: a model for any female, yet not so flawless as to be thought intangible or unreachable.

Opposed to the "of course" posture is the seemingly neurotic referencing to other sources that writers use to justify their entrance into an academic conversation. The exaggerated documentation in these parodies allowed students both to practice the conventions and make fun of them, and their ability to do so indicates true student ownership of academic discourse. The concept of student ownership, which involves mastery as well as the ability and confidence to critique our practices, is something that we usually pay only lip service to. Here is Michelle's introduction to "Relations in the Place of Moil; Resultant Irrefutable Rejoinder on Comicality Constituted and Ascertained Through Incontrovertible Research Concluded by a Multitude of Research Scientists Over an Explicit Term":

Comicality is an eminently (Bredney, 1978) prevalent (Hall, 1983) element of articulation of purport in the confabulations between and among the hulking (Gollen, 1984) numbers of people in the capitalist system. Due to the number of diverse topics entailed, many divergent specimens (Darwin, 185) of humor are manifested (Marx, 493) by these speechifiers. An illustration (see Crawford, 1980; Simon, 1983; Rush, 1987) of these varying specimens is comicality occurring in the vicinity and locale of such moil (see, for example, Shaup, 1987).

Several students parodied the research report in the experimental as well as human sciences, exaggerating the esoteric titles, the passive voice, the organizational features. Most important, the burlesques indicated students' growing sense that a lot of what gets done in academic science is not as earth shattering as they had assumed. Here is the introduction to Jennifer's paper, "The Effects of Age and Size on Perceived Canine Humor":

This study was designed to determine the ability of canines to perceive, understand, and appreciate humor as humans define it. Four significant observations were identified: (1) young dogs lack an understanding of humor; (2) old dogs either do not recognize humor or find it offensive; (3) small dogs demonstrate a great understanding and appreciation of humor; and (4) large dogs demonstrate little understanding or appreciation of humor. There is strong evidence to suggest that age and size affect the sense of humor of canines.

As philosopher Henri Bergson (1990) said, the laughable element often "consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability" (11). Our academic discourses and our political agendas are very often inelastic and therefore obvious satirical targets. As I read these papers, I remembered all the unconscious parodies of academic writing I have graded over the years, the papers written by students trying to reach an intellectual plateau by assuming an academic style. What are the usual responses? "Don't try to sound like someone you're not." "Find your own voice." Because they are walking in our shoes, so to speak, they must take gigantic steps often into hazy, uncharted territory. Parody allows them to take

important steps, to stretch stylistically, and to inhabit that free, Kierkegaardian "negative" space where they will not be told that they must be serious and be told that they must be serious and clear.

My students enjoyed and benefited from making indirect attacks, exaggerating conventions, and distorting the very forms of discourse they had been reading all semester. They also felt satire gave them an escape from routine and the freedom to be critical. As Laurel said of the first parody assignment, "The well-developed essay can become really old and dull. These parodies probably include things that we students have been thinking about doing for years." Writing parody also enhanced their insider rhetorical knowledge; as Catherine said, "If you're going to parody something, you have to really understand what you're parodying; you have to know how to write that way for serious reasons."

Note

The author wishes to thank her friend and colleague, Marshall Gregory, for his criticism of a version of this essay.

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