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ABSTRACT

Satirical writing offers a means of encouraging students to criticize those forms of victimization and inequality that trouble them most without that overt, dogmatic indoctrination of a political agenda that many would consider an anathema to democratic teaching. The indirect, satirical jab provides students with an intellectually challenging and enjoyable means of critique. Nevertheless, academics do not often encourage young writers in freshman composition to be indirect, playful, and ironic because they must teach them the norms of institutional life. Asking students to take a few satirical jabs at "the discourse of our community" enables insider knowledge as well as healthy critique of the academic's peculiar language and habits of mind. Giving students the chance to satirize textbook language and attitudes or the rigidity of the thesis-driven essay heightens their awareness of rhetorical rules and strategies governing different forms of discourse. Assignments can be based on well-known works, using imitation, irony, parody or burlesque, and allowing students to stretch stylistically. Other assignments in satirical writing could ask students to choose one of several assigned satires (e.g., Robert Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy") and plug in their own subjects. (TB)

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Students as Satirists: Encouraging Critique and Comic Release

In a recent *College English* essay, Alan France 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. John Dewey argued that if education actually liberated and guided students' capacities, they "would be kept busy in studying all indications of power, all obstacles and perversions . . . ." (270). While we might all agree with France that writing is a means for social critique and change, we may not agree on the best ways to encourage that critique. While we may feel that overt, dogmatic indoctrination of a political agenda is anathema to democratic teaching, we all want to teach our students to view writing as means for critiquing and transforming the inequities they encounter in their own lives. I have discovered that asking students to write satire allows them to critique those forms of victimization that trouble them the most but that they are reluctant to attack directly for fear of upsetting delicate social relations. I also want to show how asking students to satirize the forms of academic writing they are learning to read and write allows both the growth of conscious rhetorical knowledge as well as informed critique.

The indirect, satirical jab provides students an intellectually challenging and enjoyable means of critique and transformation, an

engine of anger rather pure anger itself. The playful irony of satire grants the satirist what Soren Kierkegaard called "negative freedom," as he writes: ". . . 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 or hitting below the belt 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 that accompanies more direct attack.

Satire is often aimed at the hypocrisy, inflexibility, and corruption of institutions. Yet, to be a satirist is to be relatively secure about one's position and knowledge in that institution. Satirists are usually insiders, intimately familiar with the conventions they attack and reasonably sure of their status. In preparing our students to join the academic institution, we must give them insider knowledge of its forms of thinking and writing as we also encourage them to critique the academy's habits of mind and rhetoric. In that often-quoted essay, David Bartholomae 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.

We don't often encourage our young writers in Freshman composition to be indirect, playful, and ironic because we must teach them the norms of institutional life which are not indirect, playful, and ironic and are, more often than not, highly **peculiar**. Asking students to take a few satirical jabs at "the discourse of our community" enables insider knowledge as well as healthy critique of our peculiar language and habits of mind.

Allowing the indirect attack enables students to voice what is really bothering them without fear of retaliation. In one Freshman composition and literature course, I had read e.e. cumming's "The Cambridge Ladies," and had asked the class if there were any analogies they could draw between the ladies and certain types of people on campus. The next day, Brian, who had been a passive participant 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' 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

A pedagogical tool from classical rhetoric, imitation is an effective way to sensitize students to the effects of linguistic choices on meaning and voice. Imitating a text from another time period 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 struggle through a heavy going text, too often preferring contemporary texts simply because they can read them. Asking them to imitate gives them more control over difficult texts.

Brian's imitation of cummings' poem also taught me that imitating classic satires also provides students a form into which they can place their own victims. In this case, Brian is the good Marxist without knowing it, without being given a Marxist agenda. On his own, he recognizes the hypocrisy, pretense, and sexism in institutional life as he experiences it.

In another Freshman course, a seminar on humor, I asked students to imitate one of the assigned satires, but plugging in their own victims. Though they don't quite achieve the stylistic sophistication of the originals, students produced prose stylistically new for them. Many of the women chose to imitate a passage from *Anatomy of Melancholy*, by Robert Burton 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. . .

This satire, along with Juvenal's diatribe against women, was denounced by both male and female students in the class who all insisted that jokes placing women in the context of physical consumption are socially unacceptable. However, the females felt no compunction about pointing out the physical flaws in men, an act that some feminist 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). While all but one of the males in my class avoided imitating Burton, the women all imitated this satire, changing the gender. Here, Tiffany achieves invective satire that catalogues the stereotypical macho qualities that she and her female peers 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 female in the class denied that they had ever been the victim of sexism, yet they all agreed they had been "dumped on" by males in both personal and work-related contexts. They 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.

While several of the women chose personal issues, such as relationship problems, to satirize, the men never chose such subjects, focusing their criticism on issues traditionally granted to males. Here is Brad's imitation of Burns:

> 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 student 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 correctly, it is also, as Lori Chamberlain 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 provided me insight into what they already knew about writing and what they thought ridiculous enough to satirize. Their 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, demonstrating how to make your 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 the 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.

In her "plea to the wielders of academic discourse," Cathy Popkin 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 taken by all students made fun of the non-sexist use of pronouns. Vicky exaggerates the he/she rule as well as the pretenses students maintain in order to appear knowledgeable:

> 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 in this or other classes. 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 for the parody assignment, 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. One object of ridicule was the academic

"of course," Cathy Popkin's term for a certain form of arrogance that pretends to definitive claims. My students were sensitive to this posture and felt that the tacit reminder is: you should have learned this stuff by now. One pharmacy major chose math textbook writing 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 Flintsone dynasty lampoon is a jejune garble of the parsimony of that era. The concept of men of the mattamore operating in a hacienda of endocarp slab is not only quixotic, but also quite exorbitant. Fred Flintsone 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.

Another 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 rebuff for the sake of the god term clarity.

Another student's burlesque of culture critique 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." She 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 to practice the conventions and make fun of them at the same time. 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 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 that intellectual plateau by assuming a 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 gigantic steps, to consciously stretch stylistically, to inhabit that free, negative space where they won't 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 allowed a pleasant 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. It's nice to get the chance once in a while." 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."

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