[Scholarship-to-Practice Column]

DISCOMFORT, OFFENSE, TRIGGER: UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING STUDENT RESPONSES TO COMEDY

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COMEDY, LIKE HIGHER EDUCATION, is an institution forged from and heavily influenced by tradition. Performers readily recite their influences, drawing a clear line between their idols and the art they currently create onstage. However, because culture and norms surrounding comedy are considerably more malleable than those surrounding higher education, a previously symbiotic relationship has become harder to navigate with understanding.

In one Instagram post, Roy Wood, Jr. managed to encapsulate the current challenges these norms highlight between comedy and campus environments. The comedian, *Daily Show* correspondent and NACA Hall of Famer shared a series of texts to a comic playing his first college campus. Among the gems within the series are "material wise. [sic] always ask for what hte [sic] language parameters are (if you care about getting rebooked) otherwise be yourself," "don't go over your time. but DEFINITELY don't go under your time," and "read the campus paper when you get to the venue. Or read it online. It's a treasure trove of local material and things you can use as natural segues into stuff you already have jokes about."

The advice depicts someone who has, in the lexicon of performance, "paid his dues" and wanted to provide a strong performance. It also reflects generational differences that are being blamed for the dread many performers feel in this environment. For example,

> *this generation doesn't really f*** w/ standup comedy. they didn't grow up with it on tv so you have to connect with them on the things that interest them first if you really want to take them on a journey into your world [...] not their fault. Networks all took standup off TV. drove people to other places to get new comedy.* (Wood, 2018)

Once viewed as fertile ground for comedians to refine skills and build fan bases, campuses have become a symbolic battleground for the divisive use of language and identity politics. And yet as researchers steeped in this world, we are hopeful — for comedy in a larger sense and its future on campuses.

HOW WE GOT HERE

A public cloud formed over college comedy in 2014 when Jerry Seinfeld and Chris Rock voiced hesitance to take their acts to campuses. The latter did so on his press tour for *Top Five,* placing blame on students and their upbringing:

> *Kids raised on a culture of "We're not going to keep score in the game because we don't want anybody to lose."*

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Or just ignoring race to a fault. You can't say "the black kid over there." No, it's "the guy with the red shoes." You can't even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive (Rich, 2014).

Allegations from Rock, Seinfeld, Tim Allen, and Wanda Sykes provided a preview of a cultural crossroads to come. As with protest culture before it, intolerance for "offense en route to inoffense," once assumed to be the exclusive province of campuses, has permeated to a more general feeling nationwide. Audiences of all stripes are having trouble finding the funny. Marfo articulated this crucial point for Splitsider, defending the value of the college gig for comics:

[Students will] laugh or they won't, respond or stay silent. And the social media outrage we've attributed to young folks? That can happen anywhere, after any show, from practically anyone. Widespread reports of the humorless college student have been greatly exaggerated. The benefits of playing to this subset of audiences, especially for comedians looking to build a name for themselves, far outweigh the disadvantages — and it's worth noting that the most vocal opponents to college shows can literally and figuratively afford to take that stance. For the rest? It's worth the "risk" of a potentially less responsive audience (Marfo, 2017).

To the myth of the humorless college student, she elaborates:

In my experience, what students find funny and unfunny has changed relatively little. I talk often with students about what comedians they're enjoying, what shows or sketches they've liked, and what they find funny [...] What has changed significantly, however, is how they respond in mixed company. I've sat in countless shows where I'll feel eyes on me as an uncomfortable or potentially offensive punchline lands — the eyes of people who want to know, based on my reaction, if it's okay to laugh or not (Marfo, 2017).

As practitioners, a challenge with presenting any one-off programming is a lost opportunity to create dialogue around what was seen, done, or shared. We may never know the origin or purpose of the laughter (or non-laughter) in these rooms, Marfo mused following the release of Rock's interview:

[T]here are lots of reasons to laugh. We smile, make jokes, and show our senses of humor to those we know, respect and care about as a way to build commonality and community. We can even laugh, at times, to get through the difficult moments that inequality, hardship, and human suffering inevitably provide [...] Does [...] their refusal to laugh in our presence reflect actual understanding, or simply reflect their ability to enact a form of 'code-switching' wherein they recognize that they can laugh at these things, just not with us (Marfo, 2014)*?*

We're of the belief that norm-setting around these events makes students better audience members, and creates ripple effects that make better audiences for talented and insightful entertainers.

DISCOMFORT, OFFENSE, AND TRIGGER

In 2016, the University of Chicago took a firm stance when they sent an email to its incoming students about issues surrounding political correctness, offense and trigger warnings:

Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called trigger warnings, we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own (Pérez-Peña, Smith, and Saul, 2016).

In a heated reply published by the *New York Times,* University of Chicago senior Sophie Downes responded with a corrective explanation of trigger warnings and safe spaces:

A little heads-up can help students engage with uncomfortable and complex topics, and a little sensitivity to others, at the most basic level, isn't coddling. Civic discourse in this country has become pretty ugly, so maybe it's not surprising that students are trying to create ways to have compassionate, civil dialogue (Downes, 2016).

Conversations around comedy and its appropriateness inevitably invoke the term *trigger* or *trigger warning.* True trigger warnings "are a specific variety of content warning that attempts to forewarn audiences of content that may cause intense physiological and psychological symptoms for people with Post Traumatic Stress Disor-

der (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders"(A, n.d.). More importantly for this discussion, especially as it pertains to campuses, "[c]ontent warnings and trigger warnings are not intended to censure instructors nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them" (A., n.d.).

In our studies, we've classified potential objections to comedic content as follows:

- *Discomfort:* a comedic performance as unsettling or uncomfortable, but where the individual cannot clearly identify the source of said discomfort and/or the individual may not be personally affected.
- *Offense:* a comedic performance the individual finds personally unsettling or uncomfortable.
- *Trigger*: a comedic performance the individual finds not only unsettling or uncomfortable but aggravating to existing anxiety or prior trauma.

Our approach draws inspiration from researcher and co-author of The Humor Code, Dr. Peter McGraw (2015). In collaboration with Caleb Warren, McGraw coined a "benign violation" theory of humor:

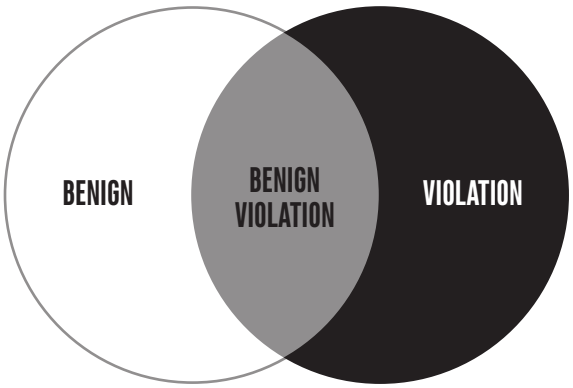

Fig 1. McGraw and Warren's graphical representation of benign violation theory.

Per McGraw and Warren, "people experience humor when: (i) something seems threatening, negative, or wrong [violation]; (ii) things seem safe, acceptable, or okay [benign]; and (iii) both interpretations occur at the same time. In other words, humor is triggered by benign violations" (McGraw and Warren, 2015). Of note: humor can exist in times of discomfort. Indeed, McGraw and Warren's work deems such discomfort a requirement; and perhaps can even be found in offensive material, but is nearly impossible to find in a trigger or legitimate trauma.

This distinction should matter — while likely not in theory, certainly in practice — to comedians and their agents alike. Understanding such distinction helps comics craft content people find relatable but are unlikely to find painful and helps agents to find talent who understands the distinction. Wood, Jr. shares an example of jokes about suicide on a campus that had recently seen a pair of student suicides, a scenario in which such jokes hardly seem "safe, acceptable, or okay." Over time, he learned to craft content unlikely to land in such an unwelcome fashion. This distinction should matter to campus activities professionals because it can inform conversations following a challenging performance. As we'll elaborate on later, the reaction to objections can and should vary based on the nature of the grievance presented. And finally, this distinction should matter to students; it presents an opportunity to interrogate discomfort, and to take the perspective of fellow students who might see content through a more pained lens.

In 2017, wishing to include the discomfort that we found our colleagues discounting, but that McGraw and Warren find essential to a joke's success, we created a diagram to merge McGraw and Warren's theoretical framework with our own (see Figure 2).

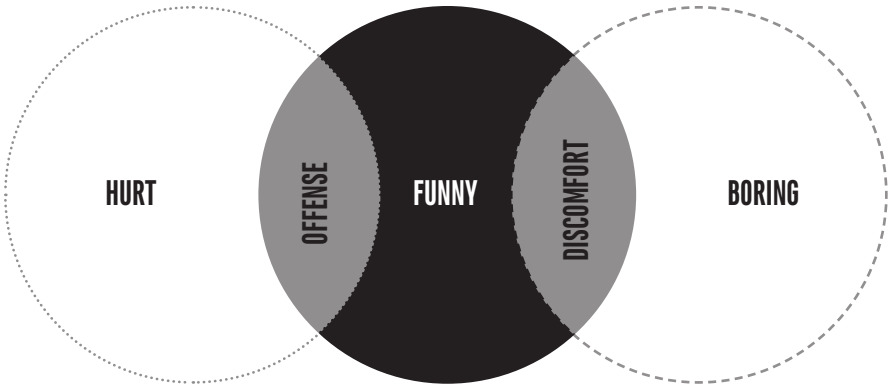

Fig 2. Marfo and Meier's revision to McGraw and Warren's Benign Violation diagram. (Boring is an adaption of "Benign," and hurt an adaption of "Violation").

Of note in this revision is a clear illustration that humor *can* be found in uncomfortable or even offensive content, but cannot be found in content that legitimately courts or inflicts trauma. Given this knowledge, it was incumbent upon us as researchers to create a representation of the awkward overlap in language recognizable to students, and incumbent upon staff members and educators to encourage the use and understanding of precise language. We believe this diagram can help. When a student expresses challenge with a joke, what is that challenge borne of? Can they articulate it? How can we temper reactions where possible, and offer support and coping mechanisms where tempering is impossible? And how does this echo a larger conversation in society today?

THE LARGER CONTEXT OF FREE SPEECH AND CIVILITY

As we examine the intersection of comedy and its reception, it was important for us to understand how comedians influence the larger conversations about the permissibility of speech.

First Amendment law and practice surrounding freedom of speech make it clear an institution of higher learning cannot limit protected speech; it also makes clear certain types of speech are not protected. Speech not protected by the First Amendment includes fighting words, obscenity, libel and slander, and threats. Current demarcations of protected speech versus punishable speech would not exist without comedians serving as cultural provocateurs.

Comics like Lenny Bruce and his protégé George Carlin used comedy to offer social critique and constructively challenge the sensibilities of audiences by pushing the boundaries of freedom of speech and obscenity. Until his death in 1966, Bruce interweaved satire and vulgarity within jokes concerning politics, religion, and sex. The seeds Bruce and Carlin planted by challenging form this way live on as new comics like Bo Burnham, Reggie Watts, and Demetri Martin play with traditional notions of form in the comedic space. Bruce and Carlin's efforts stand out because their experimentation often appeared to run afoul of common decency.

Bruce's first arrest for obscenity came in 1961. Although ultimately acquitted, the arrest placed Bruce on an obscenity watch list. Bruce was arrested three more times, including once for using the word "schmuck" and once after a secret recording revealed over 100 obscene words in a single performance. This performance led to a 1964 conviction under the charge of "words crimes" (Linder, 2007).

Carlin, once arrested with Bruce, was himself charged with obscenity in 1972 for his profanity-laced "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." Importantly, the case was dismissed later that year by stating Carlin's language was simply indecent, not obscene (Walston, 2012). Here again, a clear definition of language played a significant role in defining what was benign, and what constituted a violation. Continuing to push the envelope until his death in 2008, Carlin famously stated, "I think it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line

is drawn and cross it deliberately" (Sebra, 2013).

The line between, and evolving definitions of, indecency and obscenity in comedy is fine, but it can feel even finer on college campuses, where declining to honor the contract of an offending performer can appear to some as censorship or an affront to protected freedom of speech.

Governing documents released by the Council for Advancement of Standards and joint competencies developed by American College Personnel Association and NASPA – Student Affairs Adminstrators in Higher Education affirm that campus activities professionals are responsible for ensuring the safety and security of community members, providing spaces where community members feel safe from microaggressions, triggers, and aggravation of trauma. Student leaders are trained in inclusivity and social justice, prompting them to examine their own identities and how these identities are expressed. At the same time, many of these personal identities and experiences serve as punchlines for jokes — to be sure, commentary from campus guests (often untrained on these concepts) present a challenge to community building.

In 2018, comedian and ventriloquist Andy Gross performed at a student orientation program at Purdue University. After inviting a female student to the stage, Gross delivered a number of jokes about getting an erection and asked the student to rub his leg. Hundreds of students walked out of the performance, voicing anger on Twitter using #AndyGrossIsGross. After issuing an apology for causing offense or discomfort, Gross declared he would no longer perform on college campuses (Bauer-Wolf, 2018).

In an interview with *Inside Higher Ed* prompted by the incident, Jason defended the student response, questioning why a student would listen to a joke that is insulting or degrading:

> *Why would a student want to sit there and be insulted for an hour? Students recognize that comedy can provoke, can challenge,* ***but they also know that comics can tackle hot-button political subjects through an inclusive lens.*** *(emphasis added)* (Bauer-Wolf, 2018)

This tension between professional standards and a desire to entertain influences anyone overseeing programming on campus, including the students who coordinate such programming. When students control spending for their organizations, are they booking performers who challenge them — or performers who have a similar perspective? Are organization advisors challenging student leaders to find performers with a different viewpoint? And if these decisions backfire or spark controversy, what actions should be taken?

HOW CAN COLLEGES CONTRIBUTE TO THE LARGER CONVERSATION?

In addition to the above questions, a larger question exists: How can administrators honor individual identity and previous trauma, while creating space for difficult, needed, and sometimes challenging dialogue?

As professionals who have grappled with these questions in both theory and practice, we present to you several ideas for how college administrators can contribute to a larger conversation about comedy's role on campus.

First and foremost, engage in a dialogue with your student leaders on the goals, challenges, and risks of booking comedy on a college campus. What topics might this comedian address? How will community members respond to those jokes? If boundaries or prohibitions must be made, what considerations go into that decision? Is there a legitimate need for a trigger warning on all events? Is attendance optional or is the event a part of a mandated program? What might additional precautions be necessary for a mandatory program? When done well, this dialogue can be extended to address how analogous decisions could be made in professional scenarios. Where might workplace banter cross lines? How can these challenges inform future relationships and norm-setting at the office? In a societal moment where these ideas are not just germane, but essential, this natural bridge to such a conversation should not be wasted.

Once a booking decision has been made, encourage thorough research and understanding of the performers

you are bringing to campus. While organizations like the National Association for Campus Activities provide short previews of a performance, it's important to point out they're curated performances — curated expressly toward selection criteria for a highly discerning audience. A student can find a 15-minute comedy reel suitable for their community, but in-person material during a 60-minute set to be problematic. Once a comedian is selected, provide opportunities for prospective attendees, and not just programming board members, to learn more about the comedian. Can promotional efforts include clips or background of their work? How can audience members enter a performance as informed about the act as the student board?

Extend the dialogue to performers and their professional representatives. It is in the best interest of a comedian and their agent to have a successful show. Having an open conversation with all parties can create a successful environment for performer and audience alike. A critical volume of these frank and open conversations can influence conversations between agents and acts. As was evident in the text exchange between Wood, Jr. and the aspiring college comic in question, the norms we articulate will be passed down formally *and* informally. With that said, this should not be aimed to sterilize the scope of humor. Jokes, when composed thoughtfully by skilled individuals — as many of these comedians are — can be powerful educational and reflective tools for self-discovery. Social justice comedian and TED Fellow Negin Farsad put it eloquently: "when you're laughing, you enter into a state of openness. And in that moment of openness, a good [...] comedian can stick in a whole bunch of information" (Farsad, 2016). Further, these thoughtful and well-crafted jokes can uphold and embody values many institutions espouse. If we'd like them to continue to serve in this capacity, we have to inform the market (agents and their acts) accurately of what we need to see.

Frame missteps it as an opportunity to bridge a gap. It is important to identify a solution in the midst of a controversy that will alleviate hurt and prompt reflection and healing. Sometimes that may take the form of conversations, sometimes a public statement and apology, and sometimes through supplemental programming efforts.

We suggest the following as a place to begin with a misstep: In the case of a student identifying *discomfort,* a conversation can be a meaningful tool to help them begin to unpack their feelings. Address discomfort through structured one-on-one conversations. These meetings with students should affirm their discomfort while creating a safe and open space for them to interrogate it. Can they articulate its source? Who might have felt similarly? What might be the source of a disconnect between those who were uncomfortable, and those unaffected? All these questions, and more, can address the named objection without an outsized public reaction.

In the case of a student feeling *offended* by comedy, an apology may be necessary from the organization or advisors of a programming board. While they are not responsible for telling the joke, event organizers do need to take some level of responsibility for vetting all performers. If a joke is truly offensive and hurtful, it could prove necessary to issue a community apology identifying the specific harm, taking responsibility for the harm and sharing steps to ensure the harm will not be repeated.

Finally, in the case of *trigger,* more significant programming and education may be necessary. Of course, as with all challenging situations, there is no one size fits all solution. In this rare and highly specific case, it's worth examining several potential places of action. There may be a need for training of organization members to ensure this type of programming does not occur again. Policy review may be necessary to ensure performers are properly vetted and any program proposals are reviewed with these parameters in mind. There may be audience members who need supplemental programming to be able to share their experiences. There may be additional events that highlight points of view and experiences not shared in the initial event. Earlier, we wrote of the challenges of creating dialogue around events; in the case of trigger and trauma, this dialogue is essential to facilitate healing.

CONTINUE TO CHAMPION THE GOOD

Comedic success is contingent upon decades of hard work crafting and refining material. It can be helped along by appearances on TV and in movies, by televised specials and tours around the country. It is also helped by the

touring college circuit, creating a stable of fans eager to say they "saw them way back when." For your authors, acts like Kathy Griffin, Daniel Tosh, and Kevin Hart (all of whom are no strangers to controversy) are beneficiaries of this long-standing tradition. The same can be said of up-and-coming comedians who count these acts among their primary influences.

In the same way that the best comedians provide colleges effective and thought-provoking entertainment, these audiences, in turn, provide comedians with a learning ground in which to iterate their work. We encourage professionals and students to use comedy as a barometer for campus climate. What can the environment support, and how well do you know that? Where might it benefit from a push? And what line is too far to cross — and why?

It is not lost on us that one of Wood, Jr.'s first pieces of advice to his unnamed protégé was, "Be kind to the advisor. And be fun with the kids." The best performers working in this space understand the covenant they have with the college and its clientele. As custodians of an educational environment, we have a responsibility to help both our students and the comedians they want to hire succeed. Providing such help means being forthright and specific with performers and their agents, prompting our students to ask the right questions, and setting a standard for empathy and understanding that serves them well — on campus and beyond.

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