

1-1-1993

Humor and the Serious Tutor

Steve Sherwood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Sherwood, Steve (1993) "Humor and the Serious Tutor," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2, Article 3.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1266>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Humor and the Serious Tutor

Steve Sherwood

Recent scholarship wrestles with the issue of creating a setting within writing centers that encourages genuine collaboration between those who seek advice (or input) and those who give it. Some scholarship suggests that too often the people who fund, administer, and use writing centers see the facilities as primarily remedial. Among other problems, this attitude promotes the “us-and-them mentality” that Richard Leahy cautions against (45). Lex Runciman, too, blames misconceptions about the meaning of *tutor* and *tutoring* for assumptions made by students, administrators, and tutors themselves that “writing centers serve only bad writers” (“Defining” 28) and are little more than emergency rooms for critically ill grammar. Both scholars urge us to create an environment “in which everyone is free to develop his or her own best writing processes” (Leahy 45), where good writers go “in order to make enlightened decisions about context, organization, idea development, tone, and the like” (Runciman, “Defining” 33). To create such a place, Leahy urges us to “foster a community of people who love writing and like to share their writing with each other” (45). As a logical first step, Runciman suggests we abandon terms that carry remedial connotations (e.g. *tutor* and *tutoring*) and adopt terms that more accurately describe who we are and what we do. Although I agree that we need to encourage an enlightened, collaborative environment in writing centers, I believe we can achieve this goal (whether or not we rename ourselves and our work) through the intelligent and humane use of humor.

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 1993

At first glance, laughter and the humor that inspires it may seem incompatible with the mission of the writing center. Helping people improve their writing is serious business, after all, and tutors who resort to humor risk much. Our attempts at wit, however well-intended, may fall flat or backfire resulting in confused, wounded, impatient, or angry student writers. Likewise, our colleagues may see us as lightweights who approach the job frivolously. They may be right, especially about those who misuse humor by ridiculing students to make themselves feel superior. But a writing center without laughter can be a grim, fearful place, and we must not disregard the role humor can play in facilitating interactive learning. John Morreall says,

All the features of humor . . . especially its connection with imagination and creativity, and the flexibility of perspective which it brings, are valuable not just in aesthetic education but in all education. Unfortunately, however, many teachers see no place for humor in education. (*Taking* 97)

Those willing to use this tutoring tool must do so cautiously, of course, putting the student's best interest before their own egos. Still they will find that humor can build a bridge between tutor and student, can distance students from their fears, soften any necessary criticism, and, as Morreall suggests, plant the seeds of flexibility and creativity which may, in some cases, free students to do their best work. In doing so, humor may also help us create in the writing center the kind of setting Leahy and Runciman call for in which collaboration can thrive.

Objections to humor in any academic setting, including the writing center, usually begin with the age-old perception that humor is essentially derisive. In other words, those in superior positions (i.e., tutors) laugh at the infirmities of those in inferior positions (i.e., students). As Plato says, "[P]owerless ignorance may be considered ridiculous" (Morreall *Philosophy* 12) making it a proper target of derision. Schopenhauer adds, "the laughter of others at what we do or say seriously offends us" because the "laugh of scorn announces . . . how incongruous were the conceptions [we] cherished with the reality which is now revealing itself" (61).

Students often bring to us their most cherished (or sometimes their most despised) conceptions—their writing projects. Part of our job is to reveal what we perceive of reality, as it applies to their writing, without doing undue harm to their egos. It's hard to conceive of a greater disaster for a writing center than for its tutors, from a position of superiority (real or imagined), to ridicule writers' weaknesses (real or imagined). As peer tutor coordinator

for Texas Christian University's writing center, I was appalled one day to see a tutor do this very thing. The tutor would read a passage from the student's paper, then chuckle and say, "I'm sorry, but this doesn't make any sense at all. What do you mean here?" The student's reaction, a blend of humiliation and rage, should have told the tutor his approach wasn't working. Instead, the student soon ended the session, and to my knowledge never returned to the center.

If an incident like this fails to alert us to the dangers of mixing humor and tutoring, we can easily find other reasons to beware. This is especially true for those among us who subscribe to a "hierarchical model of education, a model which places a knowledgeable teacher [or tutor] on a higher level than ignorant students" (Runciman, "Defining" 29). In Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, an old monk (appropriately blind) censures his brothers for laughing at humorous illustrations, saying, "Our Lord did not have to employ such foolish things to point out the straight and narrow path to us" (81). To hide the only copy of Aristotle's "lost" treatise on humor, fearing its discovery might legitimize humor as a scholastic subject, the old monk resorts to murder. Normally, our own colleagues will not act so drastically to maintain the sober atmosphere of the writing center. But like Eco's monk, some of them may view laughter as a fruitless, even dangerous, detour on the straight and narrow path to knowledge. Many academics "project a one-dimensional attitude which tells students that education, and life in general, is serious business . . . a series of lessons to be remembered and problems to be solved" (Morreall, *Taking* 98). Laughter undermines these goals, momentarily freeing those who laugh from the rules of proper conduct, even from rational thought (103). To authority figures (including some tutors), this temporary loss of control may be reason enough to fear laughter. More dangerous still is the chance that a student may briefly gain superiority by deriding a tutor's own cherished conceptions, especially since we all tend to "laugh more heartily when the victim is a person of dignity, that is, a person to whom we normally feel inferior" (Monro 103). Maybe we can understand then, why, faced with these concerns, an authoritative tutor may avoid humor or use it as a tool of repression with the "unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct" students (Boskin 255).

For writing teachers, especially those of us who teach one-on-one in writing centers, dominating students through humor, or any other means, runs counter to our mission. As benevolent advisors we seek to dominate (if anything) only a student's writing problems. We're far more interested—or at least we should be—in cultivating skills or talent, and we can do this only

with a student's help. To get that help, we seek to develop with the student a relationship of respect, trust, even friendship. So we feel dismayed at a tutor's clumsy or cruel use of humor when a relationship might have been built rather than a bridge burnt.

This isn't to say that in the interest of cementing relationships a tutor should begin every session, Jay Leno style, with an opening monologue. Some students are all business: grim, determined, and impatient with anything that resembles frivolity. And that's fine. But even in dealing with such students, we can maintain a humorous perspective that may rub off, without further antagonizing them, and help build the rapport necessary for successful collaboration. As Morreall says, "To laugh with another person for whatever reason, even if only at a piece of absurdity, is to get closer to that person" (*Taking* 115).

McCluskey and Walker write about classroom teachers in *The Doubtful Gift*, but their advice on relating to gifted children applies nearly as well to the tutor-student relationship. The gifted, they say, are

quick to appreciate the humorous aspects of a situation, to play on words, or to enjoy a clever joke or pun. . . . The teacher needs to be able to join in and laugh with the kids (and at herself upon occasion). If a teacher is lacking this ingredient, she might do well to go to some pains to try to develop a sense of humour—with the gifted, she will need it! (81-82)

Experience tells us that not every student who comes to a writing center for advice is gifted. The average tutor probably falls a bit short of the genius level, too. But if humor can ease relations with gifted students (predisposed to laughter) we ought to find it at least as helpful in easing relations with ordinary students (young or old), especially those who see us as adversaries. Recently, for example, a student began a tutorial by saying, "I hate this paper, I hate to write, and I hate my professor. I only came here because she made me."

"Wow!" I said, mostly to avoid reflecting his hostility. "That's a lot to deal with in one session. If we work hard, maybe we can help you overcome your feelings about the paper. But it could take weeks before you learn to enjoy writing, and for all I know, you may always hate your professor."

He responded with a harsh snort. "So you think you're going to teach me to like writing?"

"Not today," I reminded him (or ever, as it turned out). But by sharing a laugh, brief and bitter though it was, we moved far enough past his initial

resentment to work together. And as he left, he conceded he no longer hated his paper; he merely detested it.

As it so often does, fear probably lay at the heart of his anger; fortunately, the laughter that builds a bridge can also calm fears. When they write, students face a daunting array of threats to their self-esteem from such external forces as deadlines, grades, parental (or spousal) expectations, and tough professors, and from such internal forces as unrealistic goals, fear of failure, and what psychiatrists term “social fears.” Among the latter, Stewart Agras lists fear of criticism, fear of disapproval, fear of rejection, fear of meeting a stranger, and fear of authority figures (122), all of which students may confront at writing centers.

Clearly laughter can soothe these social fears. “When we are anxious about meeting someone,” Morreall says, “. . . the first laugh we share (if it occurs) will be important, for it will mark the other person’s acceptance of us” (*Taking* 115-16). Among other advantages, shared laughter usually occurs between people who, if only for a short time, find themselves relating as equals. Morreall suggests that humor has a more profound effect on fear by distancing us from our troubles (*Taking* 104) thus helping us rise above situations in which failure seems likely. William H. Martineau might as well be making a direct reference to fearful student writers when he says, “For the oppressed, [humor] operates to bolster morale and hope; the humor becomes a compensatory device, making the fear and tragedy of the moment seem perhaps only temporary” (104).

As tutors, we can help students make use of this compensatory device. Consider Christie, for instance, who came to see me at the writing center one day and said, in deadly earnest, “I have to get an ‘A’ on this paper.”

I nodded warily. “That’s what everyone hopes for.”

“You don’t understand,” she said. “Mom’s been grooming me for medical school since before I was born, but I have a ‘C’ in lit. If I don’t get an ‘A’ on this paper, there’s no way I’ll get a ‘B’ in the class, which means I won’t get into the pre-med program, which means I’ll never be a doctor, which means my mom will kill me.”

I smiled, and she looked outraged. “I’m serious!” she insisted. But when the absurdity of her own reasoning hit home, she laughed, which effectively shifted her focus from the terrifying prospect of failure to the more immediate task of improving her paper. As it turned out, this was a blessing because the paper’s many logical fallacies made it an unlikely candidate for the “A” that would save Christie’s life—unless she put aside her fears and got back to work.

At this crucial stage of the tutoring process, we may find a humorous outlook particularly useful. For once we've bridged the initial social barriers and temporarily calmed the students' fears, we must—whether acting as authority figures or collaborators—give a candid opinion of the strengths and weaknesses of their work. Most of us have felt the sting of brutal criticism. If we're honest, we'll admit we didn't much like the experience even if (or *especially* if) the critics were right, and, in hindsight, we see how much they helped us. In telling a student our version of the truth, we must make sure it hurts as little as possible. Occasionally weighing the stark truth against the fragile ego can be tricky.

Humor provides a point of balance. Hard lessons go down more easily and more palatably with a dose of it. In fact, Monro calls humor “the sugar round the pill” (169), and both Martineau (117) and Morreall (*Taking* 116) recognize its value as a method of subtly criticizing faults while leaving a person's ego intact. My own writing teacher, William Allen, softened the truth about my first novel by reading the worst passages aloud in a slow Texas drawl. I nearly suffocated, laughing out of the kind of embarrassment that hurts the soul as much as the belly. He made his point, though, in a way that left me bruised but unbroken and without jeopardizing our relationship.

Allen's comical reading of my work looks uncannily like my peer tutor's derision of a student's phrases. There are differences, though. I was in my late twenties and emotionally equipped to bounce back. And instead of laughing scornfully *at* me, Allen soon had me laughing at myself, giving me the necessary distance from my gaffs to deal with them constructively. In fact, he resisted laughing at all, except in sympathetic reaction to my laughter, and seemed to sense just how far to push before easing up.

Before applying this technique to the writing center, we must learn to gauge how each individual will respond and act accordingly. Reading a student to choose the right approach is a fine skill—one that my peer tutor lacked. Although a bit of well-aimed humor may energize bored students others might be too touchy or downtrodden to tolerate humor directed at their writing. In these cases, we're better off dispensing with humor or limiting ourselves to self-deprecation, recalling times when the challenges our students are facing baffled us. Once, a distraught student complained that when she read her essay aloud in class, the other students laughed in all the wrong places. I told her about the time I tried to sell a humor piece to a prestigious New York magazine whose editor actually took the trouble to jot a rejection note that said, “This is weird. And it isn't nearly as funny as you seem to think it is.”

“Ouch! So what did you do?”

“A few months later, when I understood what he meant, I rewrote the piece and sold it to another magazine whose editor said it was the funniest he’d read all year.”

“So you think I should rewrite my paper?” she asked.

“Only if you think there’s a chance the class was right,” I said.

Approached with care most students, even the grimly serious or down-trodden, can benefit from and appreciate humor-based tutoring. One student wrote in a graduate school application, for example, that her interest in psychology stemmed from childhood when her brother suffered from severe separation anxiety. “As I’m sure you understand,” she concluded, “I’m anxious to start a career in my chosen field of child psychology.”

“Good essay,” I said, then pointed to the last line, “but are sure you want to say *anxious* here?”

“What should I say? *Extremely anxious?*”

“No,” I said and smiled cautiously. “Considering your chosen field that might be an unfortunate choice of words.”

She stared at me for a while, then looked appalled.

“I’d say *eager*,” I suggested.

“Oh, I will,” she said with an embarrassed laugh. “My God, and with my brother suffering from separation anxiety. What would they think?”

As helpful as humor can be in overcoming fears and softening criticism, perhaps it plays its most vital role in liberating creative potential. Research shows a clear relationship between humor and creativity (Greenlaw and McIntosh 135). Indeed, Claudia Cornett believes humor “stimulates the kinds of thinking processes used frequently by highly creative people,” and engaging in it “can free up or increase the amount and quality of a person’s creative capacities” (11). The mind responds this way because, as L.W. Kline says, humor “not only creates [a] sense of freedom but also assures us that we may temporarily escape from the uniformities and mechanism of life” (qtd. in Monro 178). All of this makes humor especially useful in fostering collaboration. One afternoon, for instance, frustrated in the search for just the right term to use in a key sentence—a synonym for *unalterable*—a student and I began substituting words that were progressively more inappropriate until we were laughing out loud. By turning his diction upside down and introducing nonsense into the somber, straightforward world of his essay, the student eventually decided the tone and structure of his paper were as rigid as his language. He later opted for a softer, more flexible tone that opened the way for fresh ideas.

The connection of humor to creative thinking starts with the simple notion of freedom, but it runs deeper. Monroe says a joke often depends on “the linking of disparate: the importing into one sphere of ideas which belong in another” (238). Greenlaw and McIntosh advise teachers who wish to enhance creative thinking in students to, among other things, encourage a tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and analogy, all of which are in some way based upon forging connections between apparently unconnected elements (220). The random give and take of a truly collaborative tutorial often generates unexpected links between ideas (Arnold Schwarzenegger as radical feminist, for instance) that can strike students and tutors as absurd and, therefore, funny. This process of making connections, Monroe says, “is in itself a good formula for humour” (238).

Known as synthesis, it’s a fair formula for writing—and for creativity in general. Einstein once said that “combinatory play” with diverse mental elements “seems to be the essential feature of productive thought” (qtd. in Simonton 179). Walter Nash, as well, contends that the human virtue of creativeness “lies in perceiving relationships, making connections, designing an order, projecting a shape” (217). He adds that “as long as we present arguments, tell stories, write poems, make jokes . . . we shall be practising [sic] nothing other than a form of rhetoric” (217-18).

In writing centers, where we often see individuals only once, we may find it difficult to assess the ultimate impact of a humorous approach to tutoring. I *can* recall students who, having seen an idea in a new, humorous light, left the center ready to attempt a revision. One of them, Zoe, arrived already punchy from an assignment to analyze the sexual imagery of Whitman’s “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing.” At one point, with a despairing laugh, she offhandedly joked about the metaphoric possibilities of Whitman’s leaf-sprouting twig. Then, as if struck by a revelation, she muttered thanks and rushed off to finish the paper.

I may never know if Zoe’s inspiration bore fruit, but I take comfort from an essay by Runciman, titled “Fun?” In it, Runciman argues that a little fun goes a long way toward motivating writers. He cites a student, who, reflecting on his semester’s work, says, “I see a growing acceptance of the freedom to write as I please, which is allowing me to almost enjoy writing (I can’t believe it)” (160). Unfortunately, neither can many tutors, perhaps because, as Runciman laments,

One trouble with pleasure (even that resulting from a demanding and rigorous mental activity) is that it’s squishy, it’s difficult to predict, and talking about it seems vaguely unprofessional. It seems frivolous. (159)

In reality, the pleasure a tutor inspires through humor is anything but unprofessional or frivolous. It can build rapport, calm fears, sweeten criticism, and enhance creativity. Beyond the chance that an occasional one-liner may misfire, the risks of resorting to humor lie chiefly in treating those who come to writing centers not as supplicants for wisdom handed down from on high, but as free individuals, creative and unpredictable, who, in arriving at their own ideas, may challenge our most cherished conceptions. In the process, by encouraging this messy give and take between tutors (or whatever we choose to call them) and students, humor can help transform the tutorial into something that approaches true collaboration.

Works Cited

- Agras, Stewart. *Panic: Facing Fears, Phobias, and Anxiety*. New York: Freeman, 1985.
- Boskin, Joseph. "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. John Morreall. Albany: State U of New York P, 1987. 250-63.
- Cornett, Claudia E. *Learning Through Laughter: Humor in the Classroom*. Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa, 1986.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt, 1983. Trans. of *Il Nome Della Rosa*. 1980.
- Greenlaw, M. Jean, and Margaret E. McIntosh. *Educating the Gifted: A Sourcebook*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1988.
- Leahy, Richard. "Of Writing Centers, Centeredness, and Centrism." *The Writing Center Journal*. 13.1 (1992): 43-52.
- Martineau, William H. "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor." *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*. Eds. Jeffery H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee. New York: Academic P, 1972. 101-24.
- McCluskey, Ken W., and Keith D. Walker. *The Doubtful Gift: Strategies for Educating Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*. Kingston: Frye, 1986.
- Morreall, John, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1987.

- . *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1983.
- Monro, D.H. *Argument of Laughter*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1963.
- Nash, Walter. *Rhetoric: The Wit of Persuasion*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989.
- Runciman, Lex. “Defining Ourselves: Do We Really Want to Use the Word Tutor?” *The Writing Center Journal*. 11.1 (1990): 27-33.
- . “Fun?” *College English*. 53 (1991): 156-62.
- Simonton, Dean K. “Chance Configuration Theory of Scientific Creativity.” *Psychology of Science: Contributions to Metascience*. Eds. Barry Gholson et. al. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 170-213.

Steve Sherwood is an instructor of English at Texas Christian University and coordinator of the TCU writing center’s peer tutor program. He’s recently published in *New Texas ‘92* (a fiction anthology), *Writing Lab Newsletter*, and *English in Texas*, and has an essay forthcoming in *Weber Studies: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal*. Steve is also hard at work on a second novel (and hoping to sell the first).