

2013

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Recommended Citation

Cassity, Kathleen J. (2013) "Fear Not the Trunchbull: How Teaching from a Humorous Outlook Supports Transformative Learning," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 19 , Article 10.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl19d1oq>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol19/iss1/10>

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Fear Not the Trunchbull: How Teaching from a Humorous Outlook Supports Transformative Learning

Kathleen J. Cassity

“Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.”

(Gradgrind in Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*)

In 1996 the film version of Roald Dahl’s novel *Matilda*, the compassionate, creative, (and thus, necessarily renegade) teacher Miss Honey violates the precepts of her rule-bound school, Crunchem Hall, by lining the classroom walls with her students’ artwork. Viewers know this move will surely enrage Crunchem Hall’s sadistic and pedophobic principal, dubbed “The Trunchbull.” Fortunately, Miss Honey and her co-conspiring students, all on perpetual lookout, have developed an emergency plan to be deployed in the event of unannounced administrator visits. Whenever the Trunchbull is headed their way, Miss Honey and the children pull down an elaborate system of wall screens that covers all evidence of creativity, morphing the previously joyous and colorful classroom into the dull and dreary space deemed “appropriate” for learning. To add a final touch, Miss Honey erects a sign that declares, “If you are having fun—YOU ARE NOT LEARNING!”

Unfortunately, in many educational quarters this scene is only slightly satirical. This “No Child Left Behind” era emphasizes standardization, “academic rigor,” and high-stakes testing. Dickens’ Gradgrind—the fictional 19th-century headmaster who values only facts and sees no pleasure in learning—has escaped the 19th century, morphing into Roald Dahl’s Trunchbull. Yet he is anything but a fictional force. Take, for instance, this nonfictional critique by Zuhair Okan: “One unforeseen danger of adapting . . . technology into education so enthusiastically is that learning [might be] seen as fun” (Okan 258).

Even those of us value creative expression and what feminist philosopher Nel Noddings calls “happiness in education” can fall prey to apparently prevalent beliefs: learning must be uncomfortable; intellectual development and leisure are distinct opposites. Even in a modestly enjoyable classroom, the time comes when we must get down to business—and of course, those who are getting down to business (or busy-ness) are not usually laughing. Indeed, as philosopher John Morreall points out, all too often we all were taught—whether explicitly or simply by example—that humor was “frivolous,” something “that pulled us away from what is important. We were in school . . . to ‘do our work,’ and doing one’s schoolwork was part of the larger scheme in which we were to later ‘do our work’ in the factory, office, home, or wherever we found ourselves”; consequently, we learned that “life is fundamentally a serious business” (88-89).

In contrast with this “serious outlook,” Morreall describes the “humorous outlook”—a world view based on “mental flexibility [that] brings an openness to experience,” along with a sense of one’s own place in the relative scheme of things that keeps one “more humble in moments of success, less defeated in times of trouble, and in general, more

accepting” (128). Teachers, says Morreall, never teach from a neutral viewpoint but are always conveying their own world view—whether serious or humorous—to their students, whether or not they consciously intend to do so: “A teacher is not someone who merely transmits a certain body of facts to a group of students. Like it or not, a teacher projects . . . a good deal of his or her view of the world” (97).

To teach from the humorous outlook does not necessarily mean we must become classroom stand-up comics, display endless streams of funny You Tube videos and Google images, or continually pepper our lectures with good jokes (though all of those might be valid ways to introduce humor into the classroom). Nor is this article intended to be a “how-to” guide for how to make lesson plans funnier. Instead, I argue here for teaching from Morreall’s “humorous outlook”—that is to say, from a standpoint in which humor is welcome, in an environment characterized by mental flexibility, openness, and what Morreall refers to as an awareness and delight in incongruity (97). This means treating students not as “mere receivers of prepackaged information, but as curious, playful, creative human beings. . . . Such a teacher will no longer be able to present his or her material as neat chunks of knowledge which can be understood in only one way” (98). Morrell acknowledges that to teach in this manner may require “more effort on the part of the teacher; exercising control in such a multidimensional relationship . . . is more difficult than in a one-dimensional relationship” (98). Yet, insists Morreall, “The rewards of this kind of teaching, for both student and teacher, are incomparably greater” (98).

For those of us who identify as critical educators, Morreall’s concept may not sound like news since it evokes many of the same principles of dialogical education set forth by, among others, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, bell hooks, and others. If we believe education should go beyond “teaching to the test,” helping learners live more meaningful and civically engaged lives, and working toward Giroux’s vision of a “radical democracy,” we should consider the potential resonances between the humorous outlook and critical pedagogy, as well as the concept of *transformative learning*—well articulated by Jack Mezirow, Professor Emeritus of Adult Education at Teachers College of Columbia University. In this essay, I will explore Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, discussing the psychological/cognitive shifts that such learning requires. I will then touch briefly on the work of neurobiological psychologists Edward Taylor and Joseph LeDoux regarding how positive emotions support cognitive development, before turning to Morreall’s taxonomy of laughter. Considering these theories together does much to illuminate what happens when we learn in a transformative way, and why teaching from a “humorous outlook” supports this kind of learning.

In an often-quoted passage, Paulo Freire claims,

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (14)

Though I generally agree, I would suggest that Freire presents something of a false dichotomy by positing education as *either* facilitating conformity *or* “becom[ing] the

practice of freedom.” Mezirow—though he likewise posits the need for critical education that leads the learner to question current hegemonies—suggests that it is possible to engage both dimensions simultaneously. What Mezirow calls “transformative learning” does not *preclude* approaches that prioritize skill development, such as memorizing facts and applying formulas—what Freire calls “banking methods” of education. Instead, says Mezirow, one may develop skills *and* at the same time move beyond factual acquisition to develop an increased critical consciousness. The learner who does so transforms not only his or her own understanding of the world, but is now moving toward the possibility of making meaningful changes in our society as well. This deeper form of learning, however, does not come about automatically or easily, as it often requires the learner to shift her “frame of reference”—a process that is often difficult.

Before discussing in detail what it means to shift one’s “frame of reference,” it is important to discuss how Mezirow conceptualizes the purpose of education such that “education as the practice of freedom” can co-exist with factual acquisition and even “knowledge of the logic of the present system.” Mezirow draws offers a four-part taxonomy of learning modes based on Habermas: instrumental, impressionistic, normative, and communicative. Instrumental learning is, as its name suggests, learning that “enhance[s] efficacy in improving performance” (6). The impressionistic mode involves learning how to “enhance one’s impression on others”—what we might think of as social adjustment in lay terms—while normative learning is “oriented to common values,” or the cultural transmission of beliefs from one generation to the next (6). The fourth mode, communicative learning, is the mode that fosters critical thinking. Here Mezirow departs from Freire to point out that without the prior three modes in place, critical thinking is unlikely to develop. In short, before transformative learning can become possible, learners first need to understand what it is that needs to be transformed, *and* they need to have developed the necessary instrumental, impressionistic, and normative skills to do so.

While transformative learning does not necessarily need to conflict with the first three modes, it *requires* the communicative mode which is, first, collaborative—requiring “at least two persons striving to reach an understanding of the meaning of an interpretation” (6). Second, it is “critically reflective,” requiring participants to question “assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings” (6). The goal, according to Mezirow, is to

. . . foster critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse [that] is learner-centered, participatory, and interactive . . . Instructional materials reflect the real-life experiences of the learners. . . . Learning takes place through discovery and the imaginative use of metaphors The educator functions as a facilitator and provocateur . . . [who] encourages learners to . . . help each other learn. (11)

Here Mezirow echoes both Freirean critical pedagogy and the process-writing pedagogy of such well-known figures in composition studies as Peter Elbow, the late Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and others—an approach that, despite two decades of critique, many of us who teach writing still know to be effective.

Central to my argument is the belief that meaningful education should do more than merely train learners in basic skills in order to prepare them for the work force. Clearly,

helping learners to develop marketable skills and preparing the next generation for an economically self-responsible adulthood is one of the most crucial purposes of education. Yet a true education can—and should—do so much more than simply train people to perform jobs. As Giroux puts it, a critical education should empower learners “to locate themselves and others in histories that mobilize rather than destroy their hopes for the future” (161).

Yet too often, discussions of educational issues imply that practical and transformative learning are opposites—as if someone well-grounded in the supposedly “useless” humanities will actually *fail* to become skilled and employable. Once again Mezirow’s framework is useful, as he points out that transformative learning does not preclude the development of skills such as memorizing facts and applying formulas. A learner may do all that *and* simultaneously move beyond factual acquisition, to develop attributes that not only serve economic production, but also enable the learner to experience a rich, fully human, socially engaged life. The key to such transformative learning, says Mezirow, lies in shifting the learner’s “frame of reference”—not necessarily an easy process, as we shall soon see.

Mezirow conceptualizes our frames of references as comprised of two components: *habits of mind*, the “broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes,” and *points of view*, which are the concrete articulations of those underlying assumptions in daily life (6). To illustrate this distinction, Mezirow uses the example of ethnocentrism. The assumption that one’s own culture is superior to others’ is an abstract orientation influenced by multiple factors—“cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological”—stemming from a set of extremely durable underlying beliefs that enable such individuals to hold negative “points of view” regarding those they perceive as different from themselves (6). To change these more deeply seated “habits of mind,” one must engage in “critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs . . . or points of view are based”—an uncomfortable and often traumatic process, rarely taken up by choice (7). Changing one’s deeply seated habits of mind rarely occurs in the absence of triggering events, especially for those who subscribe to what Sharon Crowley calls a “densely articulated belief system” whose disarticulation “might require abandonment of an entire ideology . . . such a sweeping change entails emotional upheaval and changes in identities” (79).

“Points of view,” meanwhile, exist at the surface level and may actually *appear* to alter in response to a particular experience. For example, an ethnocentric person may have a pleasant encounter with someone normally deemed “other” and decide she likes that individual anyway. Yet if the ethnocentric person fails to reflect critically on her deeper underlying assumptions—those “habits of mind”—she may simply make selective allowances for liking that specific individual while still clinging to the general underlying belief that members of this “Other” group are undesirable. In other words, while the “point of view” may have changed, the “habits of mind”—and, thus, the frame of reference—have not. According to Mezirow, to change one’s “habits of mind” requires a more significant “epochal transformation” that is “less common and more difficult,” often occurring only in response to trauma—if at all (7). This does not mean that shifting a frame of reference is impossible. After all, the genre of memoir is replete with conversion narratives. But for the critical educator, it is vital to remember that students may sometimes be faced with

the possibility of undergoing an “epochal transformation” that feels disconcerting and may generate a range of negative emotions—and, as we shall now see, neurobiological psychologists LeDoux and Taylor have demonstrated that in the presence of negative emotions, learning is diminished (233). Inversely, then, it would stand to reason that in the presence of positive emotions, learning is enhanced.

Edward M. Taylor, expanding on Mezirow’s work, has written extensively about the relationship between affect and cognition in learning; according to Taylor, Mezirow pays insufficient attention to the role of the affective dimension in transformative learning. Learning, Taylor says, is “not just rationally and consciously driven but incorporates a variety of extrarational and nonconscious ways of knowing for revising meaning structures” (221). He points out that neurobiology has historically understood the relationship between cognition and emotion, with emotions relegated to the “lower-order” limbic system, and “higher-order” operational systems (e.g., rational thought) located in the neocortex. More recent neurobiological research—such as the work of Joseph LeDoux—“reveals a more integrated relationship between the physiological processes of cognition and emotion” (222). While the frontal lobes are essential for higher-order mental processes and the amygdala plays a key role in regulating emotional states, LeDoux’s work demonstrates that emotions and cognition are intertwined rather than separated in our physical brains. Thus, asserts Taylor, they cannot be separated in a learning situation either—which explains why it is the case that “without emotions, rationality cannot work” (223).

Taylor then cites brain imaging studies using positron emission technology to demonstrate that blood flow to the frontal lobes decreases when negative emotions are aroused and increases in the presence of positive emotions (33). Thus, instructors who attend to learners’ emotional states are neither minimizing rationality nor short-circuiting critical thinking. As Taylor states, “In the practice of fostering transformative learning, rational discourse has to include the discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making” (233). In order to maximize learning—particularly when potential shifts in frames of reference may be unsettling to the learner—Taylor asserts: “It is essential to establish a positive classroom environment” (233). Then, as Taylor elaborates,

Promoting emotional intelligence in the practice of fostering transformative learning includes continuing some of the same methods that Mezirow has outlined but, in addition, focuses more attention on developing emotional self-awareness . . . and the building of trusting relationships. These outcomes rely on metacognitive activities that promote emotional expression and exploration through collaborative learning, conflict management, developing multiple perspectives, role-playing and peer networks In the practice of fostering transformative learning, rational discourse has to include the discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making. (233)

Often, those instructors who argue for the importance of attending to learners’ emotions are accused of being “touchy-feely,” excessively individualistic, anti-intellectual, or even “evangelical” (see, as one example, Hashimoto’s critique of composition’s evangelical attitude toward the concept of voice). But such critiques are misguided, since neurobiological research clearly demonstrates that both attention to learners’ emotional responses and the maintenance of a positive classroom environment are crucial for supporting transformative learning.

Though a positive classroom environment would presumably include humor, the suspicion of “fun” that Miss Honey feels obligated to display conspicuously whenever Trunchbull visits the classroom still pervades much contemporary discourse regarding education. We assume that “fun” (associated with laughter), must be the opposite of “learning.” Morreall points out that this cultural bias against pleasure is hardly limited to educational settings, and that this bias has multiple rather than singular roots. One easily identifiable “culprit” might be the fact that higher education in western cultures traces its origins to the model of the medieval monastery with pleasure forgone in favor of asceticism.

But the association of learning and meaning-making with “suffering” was hardly eradicated by the Protestant Reformation. Max Weber points out that “The earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture” (353). Nor are dour interpretations of Christianity solely to blame; a longstanding cultural suspicion of enjoyment and laughter can also be traced through the classical tradition. Aristotle, for instance, claimed that “Most people delight jesting more than they should”—and “those who carry humor to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons” (para. 8). In Plato’s *Republic*, one of the dialogues addresses whether or not it is appropriate for “persons of worth, even if only mortal men,” to be “represented as overcome by laughter,” let alone “such a representation of the gods be allowed.” The longstanding binary between tragedy/ comedy has always privileged the tragic as more culturally valuable and morally instructive. That bias continues today, with critical suspicion of “happy endings.” Comic films rarely win Oscars, for instance. Critical assumptions persist that comic literature is necessarily “lesser” than “serious” literature, and notions of academic “rigor” imply that purposeful activity such as learning necessitates suffering.

Morreall further points out that some of this cultural discomfort with humor may result from the longstanding assumption—in philosophy as well as other disciplines—that all laughter “is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people” (4). Morreall calls this the “superiority theory,” which once again stretches back to Aristotle (5-6).

These assumptions remained viable throughout multiple epochs of western intellectual history. Thomas Hobbes believed that humor results from “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others” (46). Even in the twentieth century, classics professor Albert Rapp claimed *all* laughter develops from “the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel” (22), while biologist Konrad Lorenz concluded that laughter is a “controlled form of aggression” (293).

Certainly much humor does derive from a sense of superiority. Such forms of humor are ethically problematic in unequal power situations, especially when the entity with more power is ridiculing the entity with less. Given the power differentials that characterize the teaching situation as well as diversity among the learners themselves, then, humor based on an in-group’s sense of superiority over an out-group should have no place in a classroom—though as numerous writers have pointed out, such humor may be ethically defensible when the power differential is reversed. As Molly Ivins put it so well, “Satire is traditionally the weapon of the powerless against the powerful. . . . When satire is aimed

at the powerless, it is not only cruel—it's vulgar" (see Green, "Mouth of Texas").

But as Morreall goes on to point out, the superiority theory of humor turns out to be only one among many paradigms for understanding humor, and a limited one at that. Enlightenment thinkers, for instance, challenged the longstanding assumption that humor always derives from superiority. Morreall recounts Voltaire's claim that "Laughter *always* arises from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation" (8). He credits Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea* with the "incongruity theory," which posits that "[t]he cause of laughter *in every case* is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation" (95). Pascal held a similar conception, stating, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees" (72). Meanwhile, evolutionary scientists such as Herbert Spencer favored a physiological explanation: ". . . passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action" (1)—and Freud famously claimed that jokes release repressed sexual and/or hostile feelings in a psychological mechanism similar to dreaming (*Jokes*).

While each of these theories may seem applicable in certain situations, Morreall points out that none of them can provide an over-arching theory of all humor. While I am less convinced than Morreall that such a totalizing theory is even necessary, I can nevertheless appreciate the definition he provides: "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift" (39). One source of laughter, for instance, is the laughter of identification—laughing at a situation because "I've been there" or "I can relate to that." In this case, the "pleasant shift" would be the discovery that one is not alone in an experience or viewpoint after all. This use of humor can be especially helpful in classroom situations.¹

Morreall's recognition of the "pleasant psychological shift" is intriguing to ponder in light of Mezirow's assertion that transformative learning requires a "shifted frame of reference" which learners often resist because it feels anything but pleasant. Consider Taylor's point next—supported by LeDoux's research—that learning is enhanced in the presence of positive emotions. When changing one's underlying habits of mind often feels traumatic, might that shift be rendered less difficult in the presence of humor?

Clearly, key principles must be in place to distinguish "learning with humor" from light entertainment without educational purpose. And humor in educational settings needs to be approached with care, since most laughter based on superiority is clearly inappropriate (though students can often appreciate teacher self-deprecation, if not overdone—noting that this represents a reversal of the power differential). Given these caveats, however, I would posit that humor—especially when it gives the message to learners that "you are

¹ As one example, when I teach Shakespeare in a sophomore-level introductory literature class, students often begin groaning even on the first day of class when they see Shakespeare on the syllabus. A clip from the British comedy series *Blackadder*, available on YouTube, features Rowan Atkinson as the time-traveling butler Blackadder and Colin Firth playing Shakespeare. After accepting Shakespeare's autograph, Blackadder delivers Shakespeare a punch, announcing, "THAT is for every schoolboy and schoolgirl for the next four hundred years; do you have any idea how much suffering you are going to cause?" Though I can only provide anecdotal rather than statistical evidence, I have clearly found that students engage in less observable resistance after we realize, in a humorous way, that many or most readers struggle with Shakespeare. They are not struggling because they are "stupid"—most important, they are not alone in the struggle.

not alone”—may assist transformative learning by making the necessary cognitive shifts less threatening.

Yet another point of resistance to teaching from the “humorous outlook” is the frequent call for more “rigor” in academia. Here I agree with some of what is intended by the call. I do not believe that curriculum should be “dumbed down” or that educators should blandly accept mediocre performance from students. But from the perspective of the humorous outlook, it is problematic to use the term “rigor” to define the pursuit of excellence and the mastery of difficult material. Consider what “rigor” means; it derives from the Latin “*rig(ēre)*,” meaning “to be stiff” (an association which brings to mind the term *rigor mortis*). Definitions include:

1. strictness, severity, or harshness, as in dealing with people;
2. the full or extreme severity of laws, rules, etc.;
3. severity of living conditions; hardship; austerity;
4. a severe or harsh act, circumstance, etc.”; “obsolete rigidity” . . . “*the inertia assumed by some plants in conditions unfavorable to growth*”; “*rigidity or torpor of organs or tissue that prevents response to stimuli*”
(WED; emphasis mine)

By examining this cluster of definitions, it would appear that encouraging “rigor” in a classroom might be the worst possible idea. If we make the “organs or tissue” in living organisms so “stiff” that they are incapable of responding to stimuli, and if we encourage conditions that are “unfavorable to growth,” just how is learning supposed to happen?

To argue against “rigor” as a term, however, is hardly an argument against holding high standards and expectations. On the contrary, Mezirow’s framework suggests that in order for transformative learning to take place, we need to set our standards higher than ever. We need to help learners reach *beyond* the expectations inherent in instrumental/ impressionistic/ normative learning, stretch *beyond* the predictable, and include the less easily measurable elements of communicative learning as well.

However, I would argue that we need to call “high standards” by another name. Here the term “vigor” comes to mind as a possible alternative: “an active strength or force; healthy physical or mental energy or power; vitality; energetic activity; intensity; force of healthy growth in any living matter or organism” (WED).² I would suggest that learning which emphasizes energy, vitality and intensity is far more likely to become transformative than learning under “conditions unfavorable to growth,” or “rigidity that prevents response to stimuli.”

“If we are genuinely interested not just in the transmission of facts and skills, but in the education of full human beings,” says Morreall, “we have no choice but to integrate humor into the learning experience” (98). This assertion resonates with Taylor’s findings that fostering an enjoyable learning environment characterized by positive emotions does *not* muffle critical thought but actually helps to create the conditions in which critical thinking—and, by extension, transformative learning—are likely to flourish.

² While some may point out that the term “vigor” has typically been used to describe qualities associated with maleness, that association is socially constructed, and we need not necessarily understand the term “vigor” in an androcentric way.

As critical educators, we want those we teach to be able to do more than one thing: to succeed in the world as it is, and to stretch beyond “what is”—to critique where necessary, *and* to envision and work toward “what might be.” Mezirow reminds us that achieving all this requires an often-painful shift in frames of reference. But perhaps these shifts can be less painful if we follow Morreall’s suggestion and teach from the humorous viewpoint—metaphorically tearing down Miss Honey’s sign and encouraging learners to have fun, and even laugh, while they are learning.

But what might happen if we set the Trunchbull on her head and realize that “having fun” may actually mean we *are* learning—perhaps in a deeper, more transformative sense than before? Could the transformative potential of humor be one reason why humor has historically been viewed with suspicion by entrenched power (including academic tradition)? Is cultural disdain for the comic a way of dismissing that which appeals to “the masses,” thereby perpetuating elitism? Do we perpetuate an insidious neo-monasticism and/or puritanism when we assume that enjoyment must be separated from purposeful activity such as work or learning? By doing so, what else do we perpetuate? If we create in “real life” the harsh fictional worlds evoked by Roald Dahl’s “Trunchbull” or Charles Dickens’ “Gradgrind,” whose interests are ultimately being served?



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