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## **The Performance of Literate Practices: Rhetoric, Writing, and Stand-up Comedy**

**J. Michael Rifenburg**

Comedian John Crist and I are standing in the middle of the student center at the University of North Georgia's Gainesville campus. It's noon on a Tuesday in mid-April. Two weeks are left in the semester, and the campus activity board brought in John, a comedian for the past five years, for stress relief. Next week is ice cream and pet therapy.

All around, students, faculty, and staff sit at circle tables, eating, texting, talking, and gaming. Most are electronically plugged into something. The steady din of the ice machine, the cash register, and conversation fill the space. The food court is in one corner, opposite the welcome booth. Card services sits next to the cyber café. Flags from different nations line the ceiling, and white holiday lights are snaked through the rafters. A walkway is in the middle of the space. People move from one end of the student center to the other, balancing trays of pizza, nachos, ice cream, and drinks. "This space is a comic's nightmare," John says to me with a laugh. He runs his hand through his dark hair and rocks back on his heels. "A noon show in a food court."

John is tall, thin, and tan. His hair sticks straight up, and he grabs at it while on stage. He is wearing a red Atlanta Hawks t-shirt, dark blue jeans, and Adidas shoes. John points to a group of students decked out in soccer jerseys. The students are playing cards and talking animatedly. "These guys aren't going to stop playing," John sighs. He shrugs his shoulders and laughs again giving off the sound of one walking knowingly but insouciantly into a potential disaster. "What town can I make fun of?" he suddenly asks me.

We have known each other for over ten years. We went to a small, private high school together, and John was one grade-level behind me. He played on the tennis team with one of my close friends. John's parents and seven brothers and sisters lived in a large house a few miles from the school, which became a popular hang-out spot. John and I lost touch when we both went off to college. Several years ago, I was idly scrolling through Facebook and came across video clips of John's stand-up. I "liked" the video, connected with him via Twitter, and began following his career. Now we are standing in the food court shaking hands for the first time in a decade.

"Dawsonville," I reply hesitatingly. John grabs my blue pen from the table and writes DAWSONVILLE on the inside of his hand. The joke he will soon deliver is now inscribed on his skin. His eyes jump around the room and land on me. He crunches his shoulders and chuckles.

"Comedians have gotten away from performing at colleges," John states next as he drops my pen back on the table. "Too much group-think." He points to his head and explains that college students only laugh when those around them laugh. They aren't bold enough to laugh on their own because they so desperately want to fit in.

“Didn’t Tosh get his start at colleges?” I ask, referring to popular comedian Daniel Tosh who hosts his own show on Comedy Central.

“Yea,” John replies, “And Dane Cook.” But acts become too “college-y,” John explains. In a sense, the location of one’s act becomes one act. John continues talking quickly about how the location and the bit—a comedian’s term for his act—influence and give rise to each other. I want to reach for my digital recorder in my bag to capture his musings but worry that by the time I find it, the moment will be gone. John stops his explanation, pauses, and asks: “Are there Greeks here?” John wants to know more about the people in the space. The joke scripted on his body will drive his performance, so, too will his audience. I explain that where we are, the Gainesville campus, is a commuter campus. The Dahlonega campus for the University of North Georgia is a residential campus and has a Greek system but no official Greek housing. I can tell I lost John’s attention. His eyes bounce around the room. “College sports?” He asks. I start with a “not really” but am not able to finish because John heads toward the stage and then disappears behind a door. With one joke written on his hand, he is a rumble of kinetic energy ready to burst.

In a few minutes, John will walk on stage and for the next hour deliver pages and pages of written material he began as hastily composed notes on his iPhone and then fleshed out on Word for Mac. He will deliver jokes about McDonalds, American currency, policing, and trampolines. But John’s written material only exists to serve his physical performance. For readers interested in the recent work connecting extracurricular literate practices to curricular ones, a study of a comedian’s performative literate practices is of importance because John’s are grounded alphabetically but manifested kinesthetically through a marked attention to location and audience during his invention and delivery. Attending to John’s invention and delivery practices holds promise for how we conceptualize classroom writing instruction, specifically how we may teach revision strategies to student-writers.

My argument advances as follows: I begin by offering a review of literature interrogating how writing research build bridges between school and non-school literate practices with a specific responsiveness to what rhetorical studies of stand-up comedy may teach us about classroom writing instruction. I then attend to the participant in this study: stand-up comedian John Crist. I report on his noon show at the food court at the University of North Georgia and offer a description of how he writes for stand-up comedy based on an in-person, semi-structured interview and a study of his textual material: hurried notes on his iPhone, scripted jokes on his Word for Mac, hand-written outlines for his performance. At the close, I suggest two implications for teaching revision in classroom writing instruction derived from John’s performance. The first grounds the act of revision in location and the second in the audience’s visceral and visible reaction.

### **Inventing and Delivering the Performance of Literate Practices**

My thinking on the term *literate practices* follows the lead of scholars in New Literacy Studies. As Brian Street, David Barton, and Mary Hamilton persuasively argue, literate practices refer to specific ways a community uses literacy. Cultural, historical, and social conventions shape these literate practices. Paul Prior takes up this notion of

literate practices and broadens it by asking us to consider *literate activity*. He submits that literate activity refers to “cultural forms of life saturated with textuality that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts” (138). Kevin Roozen brings literate practices and literate activities together when he offers that the former are “situated in and mobilized across broader literate activities” (569). As Prior and Roozen nest literate practices within the larger literate activities of a community, in this article I listen to John’s invention and delivery as examples of literate practices within the larger literate activity of stand-up comedy.

Of specific interest to my focus is how writing studies research leverages extracurricular literate practices into curricular ones. In Kevin Roozen’s fine-grained study of Charles, an African American undergraduate enrolled in a basic writing class—who is also a published writer, stand-up comedian, and spoken word poet—Roozen—focuses on Charles’s opportunities to display publicly his literate development and how these opportunities informed his academic course work. Charles read his original poems during the African American Cultural Center’s weekly readings and performing jokes at his university’s open mic night. These performances of literate practices “enhanced [Charles’s] speeches” (“Journalism” 24) for Speech Communication 101, a course Charles was initially failing but managed a C in large part because he honed much needed rhetorical skills outside of the classroom and then brought these skills into the classroom. This connection between school and non-school spaces allows Roozen to argue that “extracurricular and curricular literate activities . . . are so profoundly interconnected that it becomes difficult to see where one ends and others begin” (“Journalism” 27).

For Roozen’s participant Charles, stand-up comedy was one performative arena in which he exercised his rhetorical muscles. Other writing studies scholars have turned to comedy as a gateway for gleaning a stronger understanding of the linked work of text, rhetor(s), and audience in performances of literacy. Amanda Morris analyzes a gig by Native American stand-up comedian Howie Miller at the Winnipeg Comedy Festival. Morris studies Miller’s “performances, words, gestures, and audience” (46) to develop larger claims about Native American comedy. Drawing on ancient western rhetorics forwarded by Aristotle, Morris projects Native American comedy as a form of “epideictic rhetoric . . . [that uses] generic conventions of stand-up comedy, traditional elements of Native humor, and Aristotelian strategies to challenge what audiences think they now about Native experiences in this land” (37). Like Morris, Andrea Greenbaum grounds her understanding of stand-up comedy in ancient western rhetorics by opening her argument with the claim that “Stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse” (33). Following her year-long ethnography of the comedy scene in Tampa, Florida, Greenbaum holds that comedians strive to develop a “comic authority,” which draws on the Aristotelian appeal of *ethos*, with their audiences. Once this comic authority is developed, a comedian is able to implement *kairotic* jokes that connect with the audience.

In this article, I echo Greenbaum’s and Morris’s case studies of the rhetorical dimensions of stand-up comedy and respond to rising interest in tailoring writing pedagogies that call upon a learner’s full-range of literate practices. Specifically, I draw from John’s stand-up comedy performance at UNG and my follow-up, semi-structured interview to sketch an argument for positioning performative, stand-up comedy as a literate practice

which offers writers and writing teachers productive methods for conceptualizing revision grounded in location and audience.

### A Food Court Comedy Show

John has performed stand-up comedy for five years. After graduating from Samford University, he moved to Colorado and now lives in Los Angeles. He got his break in 2009 when he appeared in Louie Anderson's comedy show in Las Vegas. He won comedy competitions in Colorado and performed at a USO comedy tour for troops in Kuwait. He opened for Seth Meyer's NBC show, shared the stage with Dave Chappelle, Adam Carolla, and Trevor Noah, and performed in front of over 7,000 people at Red Rocks Amphitheater, a popular outdoor amphitheater in Colorado.

John's fan base is largely Christian. He self-identifies as Christian and weaves in jokes about being the son of a pastor and reading his Bible daily. He performs at youth groups and church retreats while also honing his craft at Fortune 500 company events. John's comedy is clean and though he steps into cringe-worthy material at times, he doesn't curse or deliver crass jokes. He isn't a physical comedian like Chris Farley or John Cleese. He isn't going to fall on the floor, do a handstand, or work himself into a sweat through punctuated and rapid gesticulations like Steve Martin. And though John projects different voices—he has a few standard voices for generic characters he mimics—he doesn't do impressions like Robin Williams or Frank Caliendo. John has a smooth, conversational delivery. He talks with the audience, often asking the audience questions, and engaging with those who talk to him or even heckle him.

During the noon food court show, John starts by asking the sound technician to play a three-second clip of a popular song. He tells the audience to sing the rest of the lyrics once the clip ends. The first clip is from the catchy pop-song "All About that Bass." A few voices in the audience sing the chorus. It is a meager effort. John asks for the second clip: a Garth Brooks track. Again, a meager effort from the audience. Most are still absorbed in their pizzas and iPhones. The third track is the theme from *Sponge-Bob SquarePants*. This clip gets the largest reception. Multiple voices collectively rise and shout the remainder of the lyrics. John is amused and says this teaches him a lot about his audience. The sound tech tries playing the fourth track but is unable. John laughs it off and moves into his routine. About two minutes later, the song clip interrupts John's routine. He doesn't look perturbed but later tells me the song clips were an "unmitigated disaster." Holding the microphone stand with his right hand and the mic with his left, John starts into his routine. He immediately comes out throwing punches at Dawsonville based on my suggestion: "I swung by Dawsonville on my way up here to check on my sponsor child," he cracks to a few tentative chuckles. The joke doesn't hit like I think John expected. He moves into Lanier Tech, the technical college school which shares a campus with the Gainesville campus of UNG, and asks if his car is going to be stripped down when he finishes his show because he parked near the Lanier Tech campus. Two people in the audience are from Lanier Tech. They chuckle. As John anticipated, the location and time are already hurting his routine. People are walking across the middle of the food court. The girl at the table next to me rapidly thumbs the screen of her iPhone and complains that it is too loud to hear herself think. In the back

row, UNG's interim provost is eating a salad at a high-top table with two other people. I occasionally glance back at him to gauge his reaction, but he appears fixed on his salad and lunch-mates.

The card-playing group in the soccer jerseys are paying attention and turn out to be some of the best audience members. At one point, John points to them and cracks "I guess it's just going to be us today." After he has touched on trampolines, the Monopoly game at McDonalds, he suggests Bill Clinton should be on the dollar bill, Obama on the coins (or "change"), he comes to his edgiest joke, the one that elicits the loudest collective gasp from the audience. Observing the oddity of naming alcoholic drinks after natural disaster from other countries—like a *mudslide*—John mentions how inappropriate it would be to order a "Detroit's economy." Some student's laugh, but the joke is a bit-dated. Detroit and its struggling economy seem far in the past, and they don't resonate with most college students in northeast Georgia. He keeps pushing: "never happen. You had a tough day at work and you pull up to the bar: 'let me get a Ferguson police department.' Bartender's like 'what's that?' You're like, 'it's six shots in the back.'" When delivering the punch-line, John turned around and pointed to his back, looking over his shoulder at the audience.

I video-taped this joke on my iPhone and later re-watched it. The crowd gave John his biggest reaction by far, and this joke brought the audience into his act. Not all found the joke funny. But John delivered this joke during a time in the United States when passionate discussions of police militarization and brutality were driving the news-cycle of major media outlets. These issues forced our country to have painful but necessary discussions of race and racial inequities promulgated by disproportionate incarceration numbers and civilian deaths occurring during civilian/police interactions. Those discussions still animate our nation even as I revise this article in a 2016 post-presidential election America. John's joke got people's attention kept their attention for the last thirty minutes of his gig.

John worked into this joke slowly. In *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy*, Jay Sankey describes this process as "showing your neck" (111), as the neck is a vulnerable spot on a feral animal. Greenbaum, in her study of the comedy culture in Tampa, suggested that comedians develop what she terms "comic authority" (34). Despite the different terminology, Sankey and Greenbaum are describing the process of developing a relationship with the audience, a process critical to the delivery of stand-up comedy. As Chris Ritchie argues, "the [stand-up comedy] performer-audience relationship is symbiotic; the one cannot exist without the other" (164). To invite the audience into vulnerable territory (such as joke about police brutality), according to Sankey, a comedian must first display themselves as vulnerable to the audience. John showed his neck first; he provided biographical details during his performance and self-identified as Christian. He even talked about race, asking audience members about their ethnicity and talking about religion. He talked about names and suggested people name their kids "normal names" that aren't racially coded: "If you have only one spot on the basketball team and you got to pick between DeAndre and Caleb, well, Caleb ain't getting on the team." Once he felt like he had showed his neck enough, he asked the audience to show theirs. He invited them to laugh with him about a troublesome and incendiary issue.

Somehow, John moved from Ferguson to joking about the stupidity of little kids and then ending with a pun on Carrie Underwood's pop-song "Jesus, Take the Wheel." He received a strong applause from the audience and spent a few minutes chatting with the card-playing soccer jersey group before the campus entertainment board greeted him. I stood off to the side waiting to escort him to a conference room for our interview. I could overhear students and staff of the campus entertainment board express worry that the Multicultural Office might complain about the insensitivity of the Ferguson joke. John shrugged it off with a chuckle.

### **Inventing and Delivering Comedy: A Study of John's Literate Practices**

John's performance begins with the first canon of rhetoric, ends with the fifth, and maintains a focus on audience and location throughout. Though I mention the invention and delivery separately, an analysis of John's work shows how the two bleed into each other. Moments occur when John's invention occurs during delivery, such as when he improvises, and delivery occurs during invention, such as when he practices reading jokes aloud.

I first attend to John's inventive practices. As James Berlin succinctly states in the opening chapter of *Rhetoric and Reality*, rhetoric is concerned with the *production* of text (1; emphasis in original). I, therefore, turn not only to how John delivers his text but also how he produces it. Karen Burke LeFevre argues against dominate Platonic notions of the individual mind ruminating in isolation. She posits "thinking and inventing of any [writer] happens in large part because of the ways each has interacted with others and with society and culture" (139). LeFevre's argument expands the focus of invention from the individual to the larger ecology in which she invents and gives the first canon of rhetoric a sociocultural spin. Anis Bawarshi builds on LeFevre's push toward an ecological understanding of invention by arguing invention resides in "a larger sphere of agency that includes not only the writer as agent but also the social and rhetorical conditions . . . which participate in this agency and in which the writer and the writing take place" (51). Bawarshi ascribes a co-constitutive nature among rhetor, audience, and context during invention. As with the emphasis on performance with delivery, there is a performative element to invention, as well. John the comedian invents his material in an ecology of people and place.

Secondly, like Andrea Greenbaum and Amanda Morris, I look to delivery as I consider John's comedy. I am aware of the important work on digital delivery practices, which has even spun off into a new field of inquiry often termed circulation studies. However, I hold with more traditional ancient western conceptions of delivery, which link delivery with physical performance. Here we can think of Plato's *Phaedrus* where Phaedrus delivers to Socrates a sophistic speech by Lysias, which Socrates critiques—or we can consider Gorgias's flowery declamation, *Encomium of Helen*. Indeed, jumping from Athens to Rome, the Latin word for delivery, *pronuntiatio*, calls to mind our English verb "pronounce" or noun "pronunciation," and, as Edward Corbett and Robert Connors write, *pronuntiatio* emphasizes "modulations of the voice" and "proper stance and posture of the body" (22) during oral delivery (22). Continuing in the ancient west-

ern rhetorical tradition, Kathleen Welch defines the fifth canon of rhetoric as “the ability to perform in any medium,” again nesting performance and delivery (168)

John and I spoke for an hour in a conference room in a building adjacent to the student center. After he signed an informed consent form, I explained my interest in learning about his writing process and the role of invention and delivery in his process. I audio-recorded our interview; the transcription runs roughly five single-spaced pages.

Comedy is a thoroughly textual process. One finds no shortage of how-to books promising to reveal the hidden secrets to penning jokes. Though the audience hears the final oral product, comedy is grounded in written text. To reach this final oral product, John, like most writers, has a recursive writing process. His jokes begin on the Notes app on his iPhone where he composes just a few lines or phrases he has been turning over in his head. During our interview, he pulled out his phone and showed me. He leaned toward me and began scrolling through the Notes app rather quickly with his thumb. While scrolling, he kept reminding me that I was looking at ideas: “These are just ideas, just things I am thinking about, these are terrible, these are ideas.” I can understand John’s self-deprecation as revealing one’s messy first draft makes one vulnerable, especially for comedians who are often characterized and self-characterized as, in John’s words, “control-freaks.” One phrase John shows me on his phone: *75 cents*. “So this one,” John says pointing to 75 cents, “I’m thinking about that line ‘another day, another dollar.’ And a woman might say ‘another day, another 75 cents.’” “Just an idea,” he says again. I see one fragment that reads “Zero emissions Prius,” and a sentence that reads “I’m not outdoorsy. I don’t do anything beyond the range of cell phone service.” Both are phrases to jog his memory.

Every Monday, John sends the notes on his phone to his Mac book. On his desktop, John has a folder icon labeled “2015.” John opens the folder to reveal many files. One is labeled “Standup,” another is labeled “Finances.” John clicks on “Standup” and about ten Word documents appear. As a Christian comedian, John performs at youth camps and church functions. Some of the folders are labeled “Church jokes.” He assures me he would not deliver the Ferguson joke at youth camp. Opening one of the documents, I see pages and pages of text. Every paragraph is single-spaced, 11-point, American type writer font. John takes the rough ideas from his phone and then fleshes them out on Word for Mac. Every word John delivers is scripted. He points to one paragraph. “Delivered that joke almost exactly like that,” he states. “I said exactly those words.” John doesn’t seem to be saying this with pride but more matter-of-factly. The ultimate delivery of this joke hinges on written alphabetic text. He says, “the goal is to make it look like this [the writing] doesn’t exist.” One page of written comedy is roughly five minutes of standup material. Looking over a paragraph of his writing, John notices, “fifteen lines here. Fifteen punchlines. That’s good. Probably four minutes.” By this math, John runs through roughly twelve pages of single-spaced text during his hour long performances.

He even goes so far as to bold words and phrases that he believes will be the punch lines. As he writes, he anticipates where the audience might interject a laugh causing him to slow down, pause, or even repeat himself because the audience’s laughter might muffle his words. John is not a physical comedian and does not rely on a great deal of gesticulations, but he does insert periodic hand gestures into his routine. These, too, are scripted. At one point in this document, I see the phrase “Act out.” The jokes ready



for the stage are in green font, the ones that need more work are in red. The ones in-between are yellow. John tells me, as he is closing his Mac book, that he has over 400 pages of red material. The night before a performance, John will jot down his set list. He shows me one he wrote for the noon food court show. On Marriott hotel stationary and in black marker, John wrote fifteen words or phrases running from top to bottom. He doesn't consider the transitions between the jokes—transitioning, say, from his jokes about the suburbs into his Ferguson joke. When he walks onto stage with his water bottle, he presses “record” on his iPhone in his pocket and then relies on one sheet of paper to remember the roughly twelve pages of written material and gestures he will perform.

Like many stand-up comedians, John records all his performances with an app on his iPhone. When traveling from one gig to the next, John listens to his performance, taking notes on material needing refinement. He will return to his pages and pages of documents on his Mac book and tinker with the wording or add gestures to the text. In this sense, the audience's reaction to his delivery may cause John to reinvent his source material. Using the fifth canon of rhetoric to spur the first canon is not unique to the writing process. Writing researchers have long shown the recursivity of the composing process despite the proliferation of posters in secondary classrooms detailing the linear and sequential writing process. However, what prompts John's recursivity is audience reaction. Much like an anonymous reviewer's feedback may spur a writer to revise, so, too, does the reaction of the audience spur John to return to his text. Yet for John, this audience reaction is instantaneous; he need not wait six to eight weeks for the editor to follow-up with reviewer feedback. John even goes so far as to say the audience is central to his gig:

I need you guys [the audience] for the show . . . when you bill yourself as a stand-up comedian and you go 10 seconds without laughter, we got a problem. It's the only reason you came. I need you to make this work; I can't do this on my own. It's the most confident and the most vulnerable spot.

For John, the audience is one of the largest constraints in the invention and delivery of his written material. With the term *constraints*, I am nodding toward Lloyd Bitzer's understanding of the term as that which “influence the rhetor” by constraining a “decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (6, 8). Following Bitzer, Keith Grant-Davie positions constraints as aids—either positive or negative—in composing. With such a constraint, John's composing process illustrates what Erin L. Branch terms the “rhetoric of cultivation” (166). Branch offers a rhetorical analysis of the writing and publication of Julia Child's revolutionary 1961 cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* to illumine how Child cultivated an audience within a challenging matrix of material, historical, and cultural contexts. Written when publishers did not think readers would be receptive to a dense cookbook detailing the labor-intensive intricacies of a foreign cuisine, Child and her co-authors worked in this “apparently hostile rhetorical climate” (167) to not only connect with their audiences' interests but also create—or *cultivate*—these interests within their audience. The American audience didn't know it wanted to know the complexities of *Fricassée de Poulet à l'Estragon* until they saw it in print. Branch terms this rhetorical phenomenon “the rhetoric of cultivation,” which she defines as “a thorough understanding of current conditions, careful choosing of amendments and additions, and continued maintenance” (167). Additionally, this phenom-

enon invites “rhetorical responsiveness and flexibility . . . [since] a rhetor who cultivates an audience carefully *selects* to whom she directs her rhetorical efforts” (167; emphasis in original). To be sure, the agrarian metaphor within the term *rhetoric of cultivation* is more apt for cooking than comedy. However, I see striking similarities between what Child and her co-authors were attempting and what John is attempting. Both rhetors—Julia the cook and John the comedian—not only meet the audience’s initial needs, but also craft their words to meet needs of which the audience weren’t aware.

Projecting the audience as a constraint and cultivating an audience illustrates the dual effect the audience has in John’s writing. While John seeks to know his audience and connect with their life experiences when he crafts his jokes, he also wants to move the audience to where he wants them to be. He doesn’t want to, in his words, “completely conform to them.” Yet, as John expressed, “I can’t do this on my own.” He needs the audience for his performance. One of the first things John said to me at the noon food court show was if he could make fun of Lanier Tech, a technical school abutting UNG’s Gainesville campus. John wasn’t asking my permission; he was asking if the audience would be receptive to such a joke. He tells me “I know they [my audience] watch comedy, they are from Georgia, so from the South, so their parents were probably religious, and they are white, middle-class. I know these kids.” Knowing these kids is a constraint in John’s writing process, and he adjusts his jokes to the people in the audience. That said, he also wants to lead them into new areas. He told me, “the best comics say, ‘I don’t care about you guys; I’m going to take you to it.’ And [then] lead them to your place”:

You want to ‘do you.’ You don’t want to completely pander. You don’t want to completely conform to them, but you want to be knowledgeable about them. So when you say a joke about ‘if you got a bunch of cash, you are either a drug-dealer, bankrupt, or from Dawsonville,’ or ‘I think kids need to learn how to be mediocre so when they get older they can play football for [the University of Georgia]’ these are things that people [can recognize and say.] ‘he took the time. He’s not doing this everywhere. He took the time to care about us, to relate to us.’ Just so that you’re not a robot. I want to be at least personable.

John pulled the audience to where he wanted to go when he delivered the Ferguson joke. The joke occurred roughly midway through his performance, as if he needed to lead the audience there and then lead them out again. Racism, police brutality, and a fractured American society are heavy issues striking a chord in John. He wants to speak to these issues and use comedy to facilitate and not stymie conversation. John sought to, in Branch’s words, “alter audience behavior by capitalizing on existing (counter-) cultural currents” (182). Capitalizing on these currents required John to not only know his audience but to show the audience his neck by carefully cultivating a relationship with the audience and moving them into unexpected areas of laughter.

### **Bowing Out: Performing Comedic Notions of Invention and Delivery in a Writing Class**

Throughout his argument for including humor in a writing class, Steve Sherwood reminds us of how ancient western rhetors grappled with humor as they mapped out

their unique contributions to western rhetorical theory. He ultimately argues contemporary writing teachers can use humor and wit to “enhance their *ethos* as good persons speaking well, rise above embarrassing moments, soften criticism, stimulate creative thinking, and make their students feel less like prisoners and more like welcome guests in the classroom” (2; emphasis in original). By inviting humor into a writing classroom, Sherwood steps into a larger argument concerning how to incorporate bodily performative pedagogies into our writing classrooms. Within the pages of *JAEPL* alone, Christy Wenger, Donna Strickland, Sara K. Schnieder, and Carolina Mancuso offer such suggestions. As these teacher-scholars, I too, find great promise in looking toward theories of embodiment and performance—and stand-up comedy is the space into which I enter this current conversation.

Returning to Sherwood—though I appreciate the attention paid to the historical relationship between humor and rhetoric—I am a bit hesitant to embrace fully the positive spin Sherwood places on humor in the classroom. For one, humor and wit are multifaceted rhetorical performances that can sometimes include verbal tropes and social cues that might alienate students. I am particularly thinking of non-Native English speakers and neurodiverse students (or students who identify as neurodiverse). Additionally, as John’s performance illustrates, comedy is a co-venture between the audience, the location, and the comedian. When John took a blue pen to jot DAWSONVILLE onto his palm, he illustrated how stand-up comedy is a tightly scripted performance directed to a particular audience at a particular time in a particular location. The spatial and temporal boundaries placed on stand-up comedy shape the performance, and the ever-changing audience demands John continually revise and revisit jokes. With the textual and performative demand placed on the stand-up comedian, I am hesitant to ask the instructors I work with in my capacity as director of first-year composition to spend time writing and revising jokes to connect with their five different sections of first-year composition. But I do nod along with Sherwood when he reminds us that humor is grounded in ancient western rhetorics—rhetorics which additionally ground much of the work of our writing courses. I am optimistic about the theory of humor more than actual humor itself. In other words, instead of suggesting instructors drop in a well-timed knock-knock joke into their classes, I suggest instructors drop in well-timed comedic notions of delivery and invention into their classroom.

Operating from this understanding of delivery and invention allows me to consider John’s larger bodily performance and consider the question: What do the invention and delivery practices of a stand-up comedian teach us about how to work better with student-writers?

John’s performance offers two implications for teaching revision. The first grounds revision in location; the second grounds revision in the audience’s visceral and visible reaction. A note of caution, however: in the spirit of comedy, I do not offer a pedagogical dictum which an instructor can transport from one learning context to another. My reading of comedy backed by my study of John leads me to see comedy as a fluid, capricious performance wherein all elements of the rhetorical situation give rise to a unique comedic performance that could not be replicated in another place, at another time, with another audience. I can think of countless moments in my own life where I unsuccessfully tried to mimic the deadpan delivery of Chevy Chase’s Clark Griswold or the

neurotic desperation of John Cleese's Basil Fawlty to a befuddled listener. All comics, like all rhetors, develop their own voice and then allow the audience and the location to guide their performance. To the stage and in front of the microphone, John just takes with him a scrap of paper with the order of his jokes, a water bottle, and his iPhone. He does come prepared, but he also comes prepared to change. In this spirit of preparation coupled with adaptability, I offer modes of thinking—not concrete dictum—grounded in stand-up comedy that I believe could help student-writers see how their bodies and the bodies of others connect with text to construct a performative argument.

First, location is a primary component of John's rhetorical situation. Nedra Reynolds contends writing studies needs theories and practices which "engage with . . . the actual locations where writers write, learners learn, and workers work" (3). Drawing on literature from geography and postmodernism, Reynolds emphasizes the "*where of writing*," which she understands to be not only the "places where writing occurs, but the sense of place and space that readers and writers bring with them to intellectual work of writing, to navigating, arranging, remembering, and composing" (176, emphasis in original). Reynolds's focus on the actual and imagined location of writing dovetails with John's invention and delivery process. Stand-up comedians spend a great deal of time fretting over the location of their performance. When he practiced stand-up, Steve Martin confessed to worrying about "the sound system, ambient noise, hecklers, drunks, lighting, sudden clangs, latecomers, and loud talkers" (2). John told me people laugh easier in the dark. With the lights off, he explains, people feel more freedom to laugh when they want and are not concerned about who is seeing them laugh at something that may be off-color. "Everyone can laugh to themselves," he told me. Seats in rows are also a better physical position for eliciting laughter than circular seating where the audience may have to twist around to watch the show. When John walked into the food court, everything a comedian worries about was present. It was the afternoon and all the lights were on. People sat at circle tables, and the constant noise of the food court and people walking, literally, through the show, erected an unhelpful barrier between John and his audience. As Steve Martin writes, "comedy's enemy is distraction" (2), and the audience John played to were distracted. Some were even unaware he was in the space.

Returning to Reynolds, this is the place where John's writing occurred as he delivered his material. On stage, he revised his material to make use of the space. He talked directly to the group in soccer jerseys playing cards and to people walking through the middle of his performance. He also confessed to me later during our interview that he never felt comfortable in the space. Even though he has been performing stand-up for five years, he still admits he is insecure in his act, especially when the lighting and seating are not to his liking. During his performance, John rarely took the microphone off the stand and tended to hold it with his left hand and toy with the knob on the stand with his right. John told me the mic stand provides a sense of security for many comedians, a way of anchoring them. Even though John has hundreds of pages of jokes and has performed around the world over the past five years, the location of his performance at UNG influenced the oral delivery of his material. Location is a prominent role in the rhetorical situation for John. So, too, should it be for classroom writing activities. A view of revision grounded in comedic notions of location would invite student writers to see how the space and time in which they compose grounds and guides their arguments.

Moreover, this view of revision would invite students to see such grounding during all steps in the writing process—that their inventive work, their drafting and editing is grounded in the immediate context in which their cognitive action is taking place. Such a view of revision help student-writers see how where they are and when they are leads to what they say. It would also help them align their bodies in a time and space and feel the weight of themselves. It would help them adopt the *kairotic* notion that *Because I am here, because I am now, I argue this*.

Secondly, not only did John revise according to location but a study of John's invention and delivery illustrates the importance of revision based on bodily reception. Revising based on audience feedback is nothing new. Yet with stand-up comedy, a comedian adjusts material based on audience reaction. And that reaction is immediate. One of John's bits revolves around growing up in the peaceful suburbs instead of growing up in a rough urban area. His punchline juxtaposes Crips and Bloods (rival intercity gangs) with sharks and minnows (a popular swimming pool game). John delivered the joke on many occasions to mixed reviews from the audience. Then he added hand gestures. He would flash a Crips and Bloods gang sign and then juxtapose these gestures by mimicking a shark fin and a small swimming minnow with his hands. The hand gestures added visual depth to the joke, and John says is it now "much, much funnier." Instead of viewing writing as a solely internal, cognitive activity, John's recursive writing process is largely prompted by either his own bodily delivery or by the audience's bodily reaction. On stage, John can hear and sometimes see (if the lighting allows) his audience react. He can hear the hecklers or the silence after he delivers what he believes to be the punchline when he scripted the joke. He can see people leave their seats or remain seated. During his performance at UNG, John could see the people lost in their phones and those that kept their back to him. The audience's bodily reactions affect how John will think about his performance (reflection) and how he will better his performance (revision). For classroom writing instruction, instructors would do well to create a space where student-writers read their work aloud to each other: in pairs, in triads, before the whole class. As we read our work aloud to a present audience, we work hard to feel how are our words are received. We search for visible and oral feedback of any kind. We worry when someone yawns or reaches for a screen. We thrive on eye contact and get dispirited with a furry of the brow. We can feel when we have lost the audience and gain confidence with an attuned audience. Etymologically, *audience* comes from the Latin past participle of *audire* or *to hear* ("Audience"). Reading work aloud—a hallmark of writing center practice—highlights the etymological roots of *audience*, but more importantly allows writers to revise text according to how the audience physically responds. Doing so, leads writers to see how their words are birthed through others' bodies.

As John writes, he considers how he will bodily deliver the material, and through his delivery he returns to the words on the page and revises. Such a concomitant relationship is best understood through John's theory of comedy, with which I close. John believes the best comedians strike at the audience's hearts and not just their heads:

What works is when you speak from the heart . . . Basically all a comedian is doing is saying things you are not allowed to say. That is all our job is . . . Jokes that don't work like, 'My girlfriend was upset with me so I [said I would take] her to Jared's. She was

pretty upset when we pulled into Subway.’ There’s no depth under that joke. The joke is the joke and that’s it . . . . The best jokes are the jokes the kids are saying when everyone is walking out . . . . They are probably talking about the Ferguson joke . . . . if you can speak from there [points to heart], then you win. And those kids were laughing [when I delivered the Ferguson joke]. If you are doing joke-jokes and people aren’t laughing, you want to commit suicide. But if you are speaking from here [points to heart], then if people aren’t always laughing you don’t care because you are like ‘I need this.’ . . . If you can get from here [points to head] to here [points to heart], if you can get there, those are the best kind of comics.

When John moves from his notes on his phone to his Word document, when he scribbles a joke on his palm before heading on stage, he is trying to move from the head to the heart. Such a goal is admirable for a performing writer, anywhere at any time.



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