

Spenser Willden

Dr. Maria Szasz

Honors Senior Teaching

18 May 2022

### **Senior Teaching Reflection**

This semester, senior teaching *The Art of Stand-up Comedy* with Dr. Maria Szasz, was a highlight of my collegiate career. Here, I've reflected on my various presentations and roles within the senior teaching environment, as well as how I'd improve if I were to act in this position again.

*[Content ahead: discussion of mental health; sexuality and sexual abuse.]*

#### 1. Stand-up as Literature Presentation:

I think, having read *Legacy of the Wisecrack*, I was more immediately sold on the concept of stand-up as literature than some of the students, and reasonably so; if I were to teach in this course again, I might linger less on this specific conversation, or otherwise assign some of the book as reading to help challenge the students' mental models around literature from a more authoritative and well-researched source. Even in terms of the structure of the presentation, I believe that I approached it from too argumentative of a stand-point, just summarizing the arguments presented in the book rather than engaging with it deeply myself; while I still believe that stand-up is literature, and that the label is valuable (as, for better or for worse, in our current cultural moment we still afford canonical works greater respect), I do believe that some points students raised arguing against it are fair. In the presentation defining stand-up and literature, I spent a little too much time talking about literature and not enough

talking about stand-up, so by the time we got to that part of the presentation, we had to rush through and students were turned away by the inaccessibility of the initial literature portion. In my opinion, this class period and the continuance of this conversation was the weakest element of my performance as a senior teacher.

## 2. Discussion Questions

As part of my regular duties, I added additional slides and discussion questions to the presentations for class. Some examples of discussion questions added are as follows:

“In *Nannette*, Gadsby discusses the legacy of sexually abusive artists like Picasso, Roman Polanski, Woody Allen, and Bill Cosby. They use these names to discuss our misguided mythologies of genius, mental health, reputation, and tortured artists—a conversation we’ve encountered before this semester many times. After listening to Gadsby, where do you stand on the so-called “separation of the man from the art?”

“Many people consider comedians those who speak truth to power; who defines this truth? Is there a political nature to truth?”

“With Pryor, “comedy could hardly get any closer to the bone” (Zoglin 64)—we will meet intensely personal style again with both Hannah Gadsby and Jerrod Carmichael, whose landmark specials step outside of humor to discuss serious topics—when does stand-up cease to be stand-up *comedy*?”

The goal with these questions was to position the specific conversations regarding certain comedians within the larger framework of the course and student learning objectives. In the “separation of the man from the art” question, the goal was to call to mind the

controversies of the comedians we discussed earlier in the semester (such as Pryor) and to encourage students to understand our modern cultural perspective as something to be interrogated, not necessarily to take it down, but to help students understand where their beliefs fit into a broader continuum and why.

Many of these questions (in addition to repeatedly asking about charged comedy, theories of comedy, and literature) directly engage with the historical and sociological implications of the comedian and the material; in a way, the goal of these questions was to model a frame of thought for approaching stand-up comedy and the comedian as literature. Generally, I believe the students engaged well with our discussion questions, and the conversations we had around them reflected themselves elsewhere in the course.

In the earlier portion of the semester, I had added the discussion questions into one large slide, and as a result, many students were likely overwhelmed—later on, when we started preparing discussion slides with only a few questions at a time, the discussions around each question became richer and fuller, with more time available for nuance and full interrogation. If I were to senior teach this course again, I would thread the discussion questions through the presentations.

### 3. Stand-up structure presentation

This presentation, in addition to the literature presentation, was one of my weakest contributions to the class. I think this presentation would've been better suited as less of an authoritative look at a few styles of stand-up structure and more as a common definition of terms earlier in the semester—it's important for students to understand structure to an extent,

and much of that can be handled through discussion of the Freitag pyramid and the term *anticlimax*. If I were to present again on Judy Carter and Greg Dean's structures, I'd do so through a lens of structuralism in comparison to the work of later semi-poststructuralist comic Hannah Gadsby and frame the conversation as one of interrogation into the necessity of structure to humor as well as the reading of comedy through a specific literary lens (structuralism).

#### 4. Charged Comedy Presentation

Adding conversation on charged comedy brought an additional layer to the discussions of each comic, which, pedagogically, lent us a consistent stream of thought to return to structurally. As far as the specific presentation methods, it focused less on discussion, but provided examples of charged comedy, edgy comedy, safe comedy, and character comedy. Running this presentation again, I would've liked to add an additional few slides—one confirming the exact definition of charged comedy and one focusing on the integration of different styles of comedy within one set.

#### 5. Theories of Comedy

Part of the success of this presentation, in my opinion, came from its brevity; only six slides, going through the three primary theories of comedy first and then applying them to the examples was an effective way of introducing students to these ideas, though I wish I had reinforced these theories throughout the semester.

## 6. Stand-up Specials as Film and Jerrod Carmichael

This presentation, in my opinion, was my most effective contribution to the course. Discussing the stand-up special as a film, specifically through the careers of Jerrod Carmichael and Bo Burnham, seemed to have challenged students ideas of what a stand-up special looks like and has to be—my proudest moment of the semester was a student at the end of the presentation saying that, when the week started, they thought a special was a certain thing, but following the presentation, their definition had expanded and gotten more complicated. This was the goal of my contributions to the course. What made this effective, in my opinion, was the way the presentation built from the narrow comic to the broader idea of stand-up as film and the specifics of recording specials.

## 7. Pedagogical Reflection

This semester, I felt some class periods I performed effectively, and some I performed not as well. My pedagogical goal was to encourage students to question their inherent biases around stand-up comedy by positing it as an art form worthy of respect, not just an impressive trick subordinate to other forms of performance. There were several ways in which I believe I was successful, but also a number of ways in which I believe I fell short.

As far as strengths go, I think I built a strong educational relationship with many members of the class—though there were some I failed to connect to who didn't engage much with discussion, the ones that I effectively built relationships with seemed to express greater development of their ideas and engagement with the course materials. I believe these relationships were a double-edged sword, though—on one hand, class was a fun and

welcoming environment, and I'm happy with and proud of that, but on the other, near the end of the semester, it became more and more difficult to run discussion. As one of my main methods of connecting with others can be through self-deprecation, I negatively impacted my authority, and though I'm not a strong proponent of an educator having to be authoritative, I do believe that some level of ethos is helpful in grabbing and holding students' attention.

In addition to this, my general nervousness caused me to speak too much—I worry I overstepped my bounds both in terms of my role as student teacher and as a facilitator of discussion. Though I believe I aided in steering conversation in certain directions, if I were to senior teach for this course again, I would make more of a concerted effort to not over-speak.

## 8. Final Reflection

Broadly speaking, I think this semester was illustrative and educational to me both as an academic and as an educator. Watching Dr. Szasz teach was especially educational—her constant support pushed me to better engage with and reflect on the students, the course material, and myself. Though I wish I had been a little more on top of things and given myself time to comment on more student work, I think my work this semester was generally effective and added to the efficacy of the course.