

Title: Compering and Comparing: stand up comedy and the seminar room

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Abstract:

With reference to one of the sub-themes of the conference 'the relationship between creativity, innovation, standards and frameworks', I want to advocate a studied carelessness to teaching, at least some of the time. This paper will suggest that various strategies I have learned over the seven years I have spent performing as a stand-up comedian around Britain and Europe can be usefully applied to any teaching scenario. I deliberately exclude comedy itself here. Lecturers routinely describe themselves as 'performers', and I wish to assess the implications of this self-perception. In addition, I suggest repositioning contemporary students as an 'audience', people who are paying to be taught, and are increasingly aware that they are paying. Additionally, I am interested in querying the widely held belief in our profession that smaller classes are 'better' than larger ones, that seminars should be 'friendly', that lecturers should know their students' names, and several other related beliefs. Conversely, I argue that a slightly adversarial atmosphere (such as is often found in comedy clubs) assisted by the anonymity created by a large group is highly productive in terms of teaching. I further suggest that Humanities teachers, particularly, are often relentlessly, oppressively too well-prepared for seminars, and this makes it difficult for students to engage – by preparing less (like the compere in a comedy club) we can encourage them to do more. Overall, the three key issues this paper will address, connected to stand-up comedy, are: Preparation, Atmosphere and Performance.

Session Learning Outcomes

Those in this session will be able to evaluate my critiques of a number of beliefs generally held to be self evident in our profession. Colleagues will be asked to question some of the most cherished beliefs of our profession, including, in particular, the importance of learning students' names, the desirability of small groups, and the importance of the teacher's preparation.

Session Outline

As above, but overall, the three key issues this paper will address, connected to stand-up comedy, are: Preparation, Atmosphere and Performance.

Session Activities

The paper will offer ample opportunities for response from those colleagues who attend the session,

References

Teaching Large Classes in Higher Education (1992), eds. Gibbs and Jenkins
Performance Theory (1997), Richard Schechner
Learning Without Limits (2004), Susan Hart and Annabelle Dixon
Performance Analysis (2001), Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf