



## What I Learned about Teaching from Observing Stand-up Comedians

By Russell Greinke, Central Missouri State University  
greinke@cmsu1.cmsu.edu

Two recent articles in *The Teaching Professor* that compared coaching to teaching inspired me to write down one of my favorite comparisons. Teachers share a strong common ground with stand-up comics and can benefit by taking the similarities into consideration. Here's my reasoning:

**"A" material** — Comics have their best routines, as do teachers. There are some aspects of content or instructional approaches that teachers know from experience generate a strong student response. One piece of advice I was offered when I was a graduate teaching assistant was to never have two bad classes in a row. If you have enough "A" material, you can recover from a class that falls flat. A local comedian who appeared on Ed McMahon's old show "Star Search" explained that he lost in the semi-finals because he was saving his "A" material for the final round. At least that is better than running out of material completely, but it also highlights the importance of knowing when you most need to pull out your "A" material.

**Delivery** — As "Politically Incorrect" host Bill Maher has pointed out, some comics have ended up being great actors, but even when the best actors play stand-ups (e.g., Robert De Niro and Tom Hanks), something is missing. Part of the problem is the sense of delivery that comes from years of playing club dates, or in the case of teachers, years of classes that sometimes click and sometimes don't. That is why if someone else reads a Jerry Seinfeld routine to an audience, it won't get the same laughs. As a teacher, I have learned, for example, that if a student or a class does not offer an immediate answer to a question, there is value in waiting. A long silence no longer

feels awkward to me. One learns that sense of timing from trial and error.

**Audience considerations** — Why is it that what you do in one class can get the students engaged and involved, but the same plan in another class goes nowhere? Comics wrestle with the same dilemma. Comic Steven Wright says that when he writes a new joke, it must fail in front of three audiences before he gives up on it. That may point out the value of emphasizing disparate learning styles and never assuming that material does not have to be tailored to a specific group of students. Here are more questions that both comics and educators face: How do you get an audience to listen? How do you project yourself in order to "take control of a room?" How do you open? Close? Transition?

**Change with the times** — Some comedy bits wear well; some don't. Teachers also must avoid coasting for years with the same material. When I was teaching public school early in my career, a principal warned his faculty that "if you are teaching the same way you were 10 years ago, you're not an effective teacher." Neither students nor teachers (to say nothing of content) stay the same for 10 years; the way we teach should reflect those changes.

**High road or low road** — A character in a recent "Boondocks" comic strip said, "I like my comedy to expose the folly of the world we live in." As I tell student teachers, don't pander in order to be liked. You can walk into a class, ask "Who thinks abortion is murder?" and have a 50-minute free-for-all, but that doesn't mean anything educational happened. Neither entertainment nor arguing for the sake of arguing is a substitute for education. Lead, don't follow. It is a

worthwhile goal to present course work in an interesting manner, but that doesn't mean straying from class objectives.

**Improvisation** — Unless class is strictly lecture, with questions not allowed, teachers, like comics, end up in situations where they have to improvise. Sometimes the PowerPoint slides won't project, or the students didn't remember to bring the supplementary text to class, or the temperature in the classroom hovers around 50 degrees, and on and on. Thinking fast on your feet is one of the first rules teachers learn. Time partly solves this dilemma. Educators gain confidence. I suspect most teachers can relate to how quickly a teaching career goes from "How am I going to stretch this into 50 minutes?" to "How can I possibly fit all this into 50 minutes?"

There is enough pressure on teachers without having to feel every class must be "fun," yet stand-up comics face many of the same challenges as teachers, and a failure in both cases is very public. I have found it useful to capitalize on some of the hard-won wisdom that comedians can offer. ♥

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**Editor**

Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.

Berks Lehigh Valley College  
of Penn State

P.O. Box 7009, Reading, PA 19610-7009

Phone: 610-396-6170

E-mail: grg@psu.edu

**Magna Editor**

Rob Kelly

robkelly@magnapubs.com

**President**

William Haight

whaight@magnapubs.com

**Publisher**

David Burns

dburns@magnapubs.com

**Graphic Design/Production**

Debra Lovelien

**Customer Service**

Mark Beyer

**For subscription information, contact:**

Customer Service: 800-433-0499

E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com

Website: [www.magnapubs.com](http://www.magnapubs.com)

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- We are interested in innovative strategies, techniques, and approaches that facilitate learning and in reflective analyses of educational issues of concern.
- Write with the understanding that your audience includes faculty in a wide variety of disciplines and in a number of different institutional settings; i.e., what you describe must be relevant to a significant proportion of our audience.
- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

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## A Way to Learn Names

By David Howle, Wayland Baptist University, TX  
[dhowle@wbu.edu](mailto:dhowle@wbu.edu)

This article describes a technique for learning student names that I have used with success. It enables me to learn student names the first day of class, and the students hear every name in class and begin the course knowing at least a couple of their classmates.

Let me acknowledge from the outset that memory for details is not my forte; I am more of a universal-overarching-concept kind of thinker. While the following technique does require concentration, it does not require that you already excel at learning names.

Prepare for meeting the first class by drawing a box in front of the last name of each student. The box doesn't have to be large; it will only contain a dot when you have used it. Now you are ready to meet the students.

After introducing yourself to the class, quickly divide the students into groups of threes and ask them to introduce themselves to one another. Let the students know that they will be introducing one other person to the rest of the class, and tell them what information they need to solicit about that person.

After four or five minutes of cacophony, halt the process and ask a group in the back corner to start the introduction procedure. Student A introduces B, B introduces C, and C introduces A. I have students share the name, major, and one other detail about the student being introduced.

Now this is the critical part for you: you must have your roster and a pencil ready. As soon as the first student is introduced, find his or her name on the roster. If the student uses a nickname, write that down. Repeat silently the student's name several times while the student is being introduced, looking directly at that student.

When the introduction is over, address the newly introduced student by name and comment (or ask a question)

related to the introduction. Use the student's name again as you request that he or she introduce the next person in the triad.

In the box preceding the student's name, place a dot which represents where the student is sitting: top (back) left, top (back) right, center, bottom (front) left, or bottom (front) right. The students almost certainly will sit in the same location for the second class meeting and you can use this system of dots to jog your memory.

Continue this process for each student. Be sure to try to speak each person's name at least twice. If a second "Cindy" is introduced, comment on that fact. If a second physics major is introduced, ask, "Now who else was majoring in physics? Oh, yeah, Reagan."

Every time you repeat a student's name, look at the student, and notice that student's location in the classroom, you enhance the probability that you will remember the student's name.

During the rest of the period, make an effort to address every student by name, when you call on them or they voluntarily participate.

If you give an assignment such as "Write down what you expect to learn in this class," use the quiet time to review your roster, looking at the students and saying their names in your mind. See if you can name silently the entire class.

Once you get good at this, you will be able to finish off the first class meeting by naming every student aloud. The effect on the students is remarkable. They will think you have phenomenal powers, they will believe that you regard them as individuals, and best of all, they know there will be no hiding in your class. 🍀

# Effective Learning Begins With the Right Attitudes

by Robert W. Fisher, Lee University, TN  
rfisher@leeuniversity.edu

Like all teachers, I am saddened whenever I encounter students whose motivation to study is primarily focused on earning a grade rather than actually learning something. I have seen students toss their class notes in the garbage can after taking an exam; the knowledge had no value to them beyond the test. For too many students, the educational experience is not a wonderful adventure in learning but a tedious set of requirements they grudgingly fulfill with the least amount of effort. This approach is detrimental to their academic, professional, and personal fulfillment.

Effective studying starts with the right attitude. There are dozens of how-to-study books on the market that offer plenty of helpful tips. However, all the study techniques in the world will be meaningless if an individual does not have the commitment and determination to do well. Succeeding academically is more than just mechanics, it's a mindset. Every semester I have this discussion with my students. It goes something like this:

**Wrong Attitude #1:** *"If I have an interesting teacher I'll learn something, but if I have a boring teacher then I probably won't get much out of the course."*

Never forget that your educational experience depends on what you invest in it. Your success does not hinge on whether you have captivating teachers or engrossing textbooks, but on whether you choose to actively engage yourself in the learning process. Teaching is not something done to you. Your professors don't pour facts into your head.

There is an old saying that applies here: "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink." A good teacher tries to lead students to the "water" of knowledge, to make it so enticing and refreshing that they will want to lap it up. However, the final step — the drinking — is up to you. Your teachers cannot drink for you.

As far as your education is concerned, you are in the driver's seat. You should never

think of yourself as a passenger or — even worse — as a "victim" of poor instruction. If you take a subject and make it your own, you can always have a profitable experience, no matter how good or bad the teacher may be.

**Thus, the correct attitude is: "I must take responsibility for my own learning."**

**Wrong Attitude #2:** *"Is this going to be on the test?"*

If you ask this question, what you're really saying is, "If it's not going to be on the test, I don't want to learn it." What a self-defeating sentiment! This type of minimalist attitude toward learning misses the point and leads to a mechanical, only-do-what-I-have-to approach to studying. Such a narrow focus discourages exploration, risk-taking, creativity, and incidental learning.

Think about it: in what other area of your life would you deliberately take the least amount for your money? You always want the most for what you pay for, so why would you settle for, or even seek, the minimum amount of learning? Don't short-change yourself academically. Feast on all the learning you can. Don't be content with crumbs.

**Correct Attitude: "I will strive to get the maximum from my educational experience."**

**Wrong Attitude #3:** *"The grade is the most important thing."*

Throughout your school years, you were undoubtedly taught that getting good grades is crucial. Unfortunately, this causes grades to become the goal in and of themselves, and many students develop strategies and shortcuts to achieve them at the expense of actual learning. Ironically, they don't seem to realize that good grades will naturally follow if they invest themselves in their studies. Don't fall into that trap. A preoccupation with grades creates a breeding ground for anxiety and competition, and it diverts your focus from where it belongs — on learning.

One of the worst consequences of this obsession with grades is that it causes stu-

dents to cheat. Cheating is essentially an attempt to get a high grade without having to study for it. If you are genuinely interested in learning, you won't cheat because you realize that would be cheating yourself of the knowledge.

Good grades without learning are hollow. Would you want your personal physician to have cheated his or her way through medical school? Absolutely not! How about your auto mechanic? Your child's school teachers? You would expect these people to be competent and well trained. Why would you expect any less from yourself?

**Correct attitude: "Grades are not the holy grail; the most important thing is to learn all that I can."**

**Wrong Attitude #4:** *"Most of my classes are dull, and I'm only taking them because they're required."*

All human beings are born curious. Spend any time around young children and you quickly recognize this. But somewhere along the way this natural inquisitiveness can become hidden under layers of socially conditioned expectation of reinforcement, especially grades. Many students have come to view learning activities as undesirable chores rather than opportunities for enrichment. That innate curiosity of all human beings is never extinguished, but sometimes we may need to stir the ashes to reignite the flame.

Consider this: Learning is not boring; not learning is boring. When you are truly learning it's exciting—you're discovering new things and expanding your mind. Each course has meaningful information if you want to find it. Sometimes you may have to sift for the gold nuggets in the sand, but they are there if you look. Isn't that much better than wasting a class being bored and gaining nothing?

**Correct Attitude: "Learning itself is the reward, and every subject has something to offer me."**

## Book Review: New and Noteworthy

*Ed's nte:* It's been a while since a book review has appeared in the newsletter, so our policy on them bears repeating. We do reviews when a book is, as our title says, "noteworthy," something we can honestly recommend that you read. Readers are welcome to suggest books; they may be invited to write the review.

"Small Group Instruction in Higher Education: Lessons from the Past, Visions for the Future"

Edited by James L. Cooper, Pamela Robinson, and David Ball

If you've been reading the Teaching Professor for a very, very long time, you may recall that during the '90s one of our favorite sources on cooperative learning was a small but superbly edited newsletter compiled by Jim Cooper at Cal State Dominguez Hills. First funded by a FIPSE grant (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education), "Cooperative Learning and College Teaching," included articles by most of the well-known authorities on cooperative learning, summaries of theory and research, as well as an absolutely first-rate collection of cooperative learning strategies and sound advice for implementing them successfully. It was the

source this editor recommended when faculty were first considering group work and when they wished to refine and sophisticate their use of cooperative learning structures.

Regrettably newsletters lack the permanence of books, and once they stop being published, as this one did in 1999, their contents become increasingly difficult to locate. But in this case, that situation has been remedied with the publication of this book. The first section of "Small Group Instruction in Higher Education," contains 30 of the best articles published in the 26 issues of this newsletter.

Those articles are organized into five sections: group learning, focusing particularly on distinctions between cooperative and collaborative learning; the theoretical and research bases for using cooperative strategies; informal small-group learning mechanisms; formal cooperative learning strategies; and wonderfully sanguine advice on implementing group work in the classroom.

As Cooper writes in an opening section, "the book attempts to be more than a 'best of' memorial document. We have solicited eight new chapters from national leaders in the group- and active-learning movement." (viii) Among the authors

who contributed chapters in that section are David and Roger Johnson, Spencer Kagan and Barbara Millis, again all widely recognized experts in these fields.

This is not the only excellent book on cooperative learning (we have also reviewed and recommended a 1998 compendium of strategies assembled by Barbara Millis and Phillip Cottell, "Cooperative Learning for Higher Education Faculty"). Regrettably, many faculty are using group learning structures without having done much or any homework. Reading this new book cannot help but improve the way groups are used. The background will increase commitment to these approaches: the evidence of their positive impact on learning outcomes is compelling. The overview of various group learning strategies enlarges the repertoire of possible strategies. And the implementation advice will add to the effectiveness of individual efforts.

This 350 page book, published in 2003, is available from New Forums Press. It may be ordered online for \$24.95, plus shipping and handling, at [www.newforums.com](http://www.newforums.com)

See the article "Seven Deadly Assumptions" that appears elsewhere in this issue. 🍀

## Seven Deadly Assumptions About Students

*Ed's nte:* These seven assumptions appear in chapter 30 of "Small Group Instruction in Higher Education," reviewed elsewhere in this issue. They are proposed and described by Susan Johnston

These are assumptions that instructors make about students and learning. "They are deadly because they can sometimes have a lethal effect on students' achievement, motivation, and desire to stay in school." (p. 236)

**Students will apply the content on their own after class** — Learners won't do this

and not necessarily because they are lazy and immature. They won't do it, because they can't, as in, they don't know how. Teaching that emphasizes the expertise of the faculty member often does so at the expense of understanding for the learners.

**Students don't need instructor or tasks to be structured** — Students have the right to expect that learning environments are structured. That doesn't rule out open-ended tasks or spontaneous adjustments, but it does mean that at some point the expectations for and reasons behind what students are doing are made clear to them.

**Students learn best by hearing the expert version first** — This is a less effective way for students to learn because hearing the correct definition, being given the examples, receiving a list of reasons requires little thinking on the learner's part.

**Students can integrate new information by just listening** — Many students listen well, they take notes and remain attentive in class. However, it is a mistake to assume that they are making connections between and among ideas. Those may be

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## Children, Adults, or Adolescents?

By Vicki Garlock, Warren Wilson College, NC  
vgarlock@warren-wilson.edu

Effective teaching, advising, and mentoring at the college level depend on knowing our students. While demographic details and indicators of academic potential can be helpful, a broader sense of our students' lives seems to be essential for meaningful interactions with them. This article looks specifically at the developmental stages and maturational processes associated with the college/university years and the resulting implications for successful teaching.

Historically, the transition from childhood to adulthood has been rather abrupt and frequently marked by one of the various rite-of-passage rituals made famous by National Geographic. This custom has been widely replaced, particularly in more populous and industrialized societies, by a rather long transitional period known as "adolescence." Data suggest that the American adolescent experience now spans a 10-15 year period from puberty (around age 12) until the mid-20s.

Despite the absence of widely practiced, clearly demarcated rituals in our society, Americans do recognize the differences between children and adults. Young Americans are not allowed to enlist in the Armed Forces until the age of 17, they cannot vote until the age of 18, and they cannot legally drink alcohol until the age of 21. Nevertheless, Americans seem to be conflicted, or at least inconsistent, about when and how a child in our society becomes an adult. A young soldier can die for our country before being able to legally drink alcohol, driver's license eligibility requirements and marriage ages vary from state to state, and the legal system is rife with cases of 12- and 13-year-olds being "tried as adults" for particularly heinous crimes.

A recently published research center report based on in-person surveys of almost 1,400 people over the age of 18,

showed what many casual observers already know — becoming an official grown-up in America is a rather lengthy process involving several stages. Commonly mentioned milestones included "completing an education," "being employed full-time," "supporting a family," and "becoming financially independent." None of the milestones was expected to occur before the mean age of 20, and some mean ages were in the mid-20s.

Another time-honored indicator of adulthood is the encouragement of, or the expectation of, sexual activity. Unfortunately, this indicator is currently even more enigmatic than the others, despite the fact that many college/university students are spending lots of time thinking about it! Although it's difficult to obtain accurate figures, many studies indicate that slightly over one half of high school seniors have had sexual intercourse which, of course, means that slightly less than half have not when they start college. Moreover, women's sexual identity is frequently established later than men's.

More recently, developmental psychologists have turned to physiological measures to determine when development is complete. Imaging studies have indicated that certain brain areas, such as the frontal lobes (involved in planning behavior) and the amygdala (involved in emotional responsivity) are not fully developed until well after the onset of puberty. Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia — two mental illnesses widely believed to have some physiological underpinnings — also begin to take on adult-like forms during the college/university years.

The prolonged nature of adolescence means that traditional-aged college/university students are not near the end of the adolescent period; they're in the midst of it. Treating students like chil-

dren, or even young adolescents, is developmentally inappropriate. We should expect students to take responsibility for their actions, to express their viewpoints in a respectful manner, to handle deadlines appropriately, to manage their time effectively, and to accept the consequences of their choices. But assuming that students enter the classroom as competent professionals is also developmentally inappropriate and potentially frustrating.

Like it or not, the college/university has become a venue for learning important, adult-like life skills. Society and parents both expect us to address the developmental needs of young people, despite the fact that many of these skills are taught outside the classroom and most of us receive little or no explicit training in the mentoring process. Students need advice and wise counsel on aspects of their lives that affect their classroom performance. They also need daily examples of how mature, responsible adults function within an organization and society, even if the notion of serving as a role model is disquieting to many faculty.

A better understanding of maturational processes can only help in establishing more effective teaching, advising and mentoring strategies. Traditional college-aged students are not grown-ups, but we need to create environments that encourage their continued growth and development. Consistently maintaining professional expectations in and out of the classroom is one approach. We just shouldn't be surprised when our expectations are inconsistently met. 🍀

## Turning the Tables: Life as an Undergraduate

*Ed.'s nte: This is probably the third or fourth piece on this topic that we've published over the years—when we repeat topics, we try for new insights, information or understandings. We repeat because this is an experience that would benefit every faculty member.*

*By Sharon Hollander, Georgian Court University, NJ  
Hollander\_s@hotmail.com*

I am an assistant professor at a small, Catholic university. My sister and brother-in-law are adopting a 7-year-old, monolingual Spanish girl from Colombia, and our whole family has been scrambling to pick up Spanish as quickly as possible. I have never studied Spanish. Rather than go to a community school or try my luck with tapes and videos, I decided to take a

beginning-level Spanish course on my own campus. The students in the class had no idea who I was, and believe me, my facility with new language did not reveal my real identity.

My goals were to acquire basic vocabulary and functional language. However, my experience in this Spanish course readily translated into insights on my role as a professor. For the first time in a long while, I genuinely experienced the emotional undercurrents in the classroom. I listened to candid comments from fellow students. I noticed that despite the requisite complaints about the course, no one ever brought their concerns to the professor. I saw power struggles, subtle and otherwise, and watched the professor's efforts to set boundaries and build a community in the class.

As a student, my behavior and attitudes were those of a student. I shared in the near-

ly universal dread of being called on to answer questions in Spanish despite continuous exhortations to "just try." When faced with difficult material, I did my best to hide directly behind the student in front of me or bury my head in my notebook. I was also shocked by my own learning preferences! No, not the much-maligned drills and quizzes, but they encouraged me to practice and helped build my confidence. Worse than that, my pricey, commercial textbook was my new best friend.

The course is over now, and I can introduce myself, describe my classmates, and make some polite inquiries in Spanish. But I was also given an unusual opportunity to examine my assumptions about students, faculty, and the learning process. Clearly there's another world on the other side of the desk, and it's not a place most faculty have visited recently. 🍀

### EFFECTIVE LEARNING

FROM PAGE 3

**Wrong Attitude #5:** "My professors demand too much. They forget that I have other things to do besides study."

Students often lose sight of the fact that their primary task in college is to learn and receive training in their chosen field. Don't get caught up in the numerous distractions of campus life and put learning on the back burner. If you squander these

few years in college and don't come away with the necessary skills to be competent in your field, you have wasted your time and money.

Your professors are not sadistic ogres who like to pile on the work so you won't have time for fun. They are trying to help you achieve this important life training. Those "required" classes you take are designed to help you learn the foundational knowledge of your discipline. (I've never liked the term required courses. It

implies an unpleasant obligation. I prefer to call them important or necessary courses.)

Don't forget: You're not learning for your professors, you are learning for yourself.

Correct Attitude: "If I don't invest myself in my education, the one who loses is me."

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### SEVEN DEADLY ASSUMPTIONS

FROM PAGE 4

clear and obvious to the instructor, but they are less or not at all visible the first time you hear the information.

**Students should do their own work during class time** — When students are practicing with material, they should be allowed to work with and learn from classmates. Their mastery of material does

have to be evaluated individually, but that happens after an initial period of practice.

**Students don't need much guidance from the instructor** — Instructors cannot learn material for students. However, much evidence supports the powerful impact teachers can on students' learning. For example, teachers can build scaffolds for students, as in provide temporary supports that students use while they build their own understanding.

**Students can overcome complexity gaps between class work and tests** — Students need practice applying course content in new and more complex ways, if that is an objective in the course, but those skills are extremely hard to practice in an exam situation. "There needs to be congruence between the kind of thinking required during lessons and the level of thinking required during evaluative assessment." (p.244) 🍀