



In a Good Way: Reflecting on Humour in Indigenous Education

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Abstract:

Humour is ubiquitous in Indigenous communities, and often provides some of the most memorable moments in our relationships with one another. In this article, I explore an instance of such humour backfiring in an educational situation, and reflect on whether humour was an appropriate response. After surveying some academic research in the area of humour in the classroom, as well as some of the works of several prominent Indigenous writers and comedians, I reflect on the importance of humour in Indigenous pedagogy. Drawing on this research, and moments from my own practice, I theorize that humour has three core pedagogical impacts. First, it has a humanizing affect, helping us to see one another more clearly, and to appreciate that we all have foibles, and areas of ourselves that require improvement. It is also a culturally relevant pedagogy, having been used for millennia as a mechanism of social order and of upholding community values in Indigenous communities. Finally, humour also has a soothing effect, especially in the face of grappling with difficult concepts and situations, and can ease the tensions that often arise in Indigenous education classrooms. Used judiciously, humour is a powerful tool for decolonization. While I do not presume to offer a prescription for the use of humour in the classroom, in reflecting on my own practice, I am increasingly convinced of its importance in Indigenous pedagogy, and I offer my reflections for the reader's consideration.

Keywords: Indigenous pedagogy; humour; decolonization; teacher education

D'une bonne manière : Réflexions sur l'humour en éducation autochtone

Résumé :

Omniprésent dans les communautés autochtones, l'humour est source des moments les plus mémorables de nos rapports humains. Cet article explore une situation pédagogique dans laquelle cet humour n'a pas eu les effets escomptés et je questionne sa pertinence dans cette instance. Suivant une recension partielle des écrits sur le sujet de l'humour dans la salle de classe, de plusieurs œuvres d'auteurs autochtones notables et de comédiens autochtones, je propose une réflexion sur l'importance de l'humour pour une pédagogie autochtone. Tirant de cette recherche et de ma pratique enseignante, je propose que l'humour a trois valeurs pédagogiques profondes. La première est son effet humanisant qui nous amène à se voir mutuellement de manière plus claire et à apprécier que chacun, chacune, a ses caprices et ses besoins d'amélioration personnelle. La deuxième est sa pertinence culturelle : l'humour est depuis toujours un mécanisme pour le maintien de l'ordre social et de valeurs communes au sein des communautés autochtones. Finalement, l'humour a un effet apaisant lorsque l'on est aux prises avec des concepts ou des situations difficiles, et peut amoindrir les tensions qui font souvent surface dans les classes d'éducation autochtone. Utilisé avec jugement, l'humour est un outil de décolonisation puissant. Alors que je n'aie pas la présomption d'offrir une prescription pour l'utilisation de l'humour dans la classe, ma conviction de l'importance de l'humour pour une pédagogie autochtone est grandissante et j'offre, pour la considération des lecteurs et lectrices, mes réflexions sur ma pratique.

Mots clés : pédagogie autochtone; humour; décolonisation; formation à l'enseignement

A Note to the Reader

Dear Reader, you will probably notice that there is an occasional spasm of humour throughout this paper, which is not a typical find in an academic journal. But it seems to me wholly unreasonable to write a paper on humour without using any, so I hope you will forgive my indulgence. It is not without purpose. Ahem.

In the Beginning, There Was—A Problem

Several years ago, I was facilitating a workshop on Indigenous education for a group of pre-service teachers and the Faculty Associates who were teaching and supporting them. We, all 30 or so of us, were sitting in a sharing circle, and I had asked the question I normally do at the beginning of such work: what do you remember learning about Indigenous people in your own K-12 experience, and where else have you learned about Indigenous peoples? Often, this question elicits a lot of acknowledgment that folks have had very little education about Indigenous peoples, and what they do remember is connected to the pre-contact and early colonial past (there are always a few outliers who have had very rich experiences, bless them, but those people generally constitute the choir in such discussions, so to speak). Those who are very brave also connect their learning from informal environments, such as conversations with family and friends, media representations, and warnings about Indigenous urban ghettos, such as 20th Street in Saskatoon and the Downtown East Side in Vancouver. Taken together, most of their informal learning about Indigenous peoples is even more unflattering than what was offered in school curriculum, and it is usually at this point that we can begin to deal with the fear that many non-Indigenous teachers have about including Indigenous content in their lessons and work.

On this particular day, however, the woman sitting next to me in the sharing circle, who happened to be one of the Faculty Associates working with the cohort, shared with the group her recent shock at having noticed a poster for an Indigenous comedian from Haida Gwaii who would be performing in her community. As she told the story, she mentioned being surprised by the fact that she had never thought of Indigenous people as having a sense of humour. Since I was sitting next to her and she was the last person to speak, I offered a reply, delivered with a wry wink, that she must not have met many Indigenous people then, because we can be funny as hell. To my consternation her expression quickly turned to one of dismay, and it was clear that she was somewhat taken aback by my comment. I immediately realized that she had expected to find understanding and support for her struggle, rather than the wee dose of Indigenous humour she got.

So that backfired. But the moment has stuck in my mind. The work of decolonizing education is delicate and often arduous. It requires a lot of study, patience and empathy—largely, because moments such as this are as ubiquitous as snagging attempts at a powwow (if you're not part of the powwow crowd, snagging translates roughly to "trying to get a date"). The assumption that all Indigenous people should be completely without humour is a fundamentally dehumanizing one—everybody is funny at some point or another to someone. Why didn't she realize that Indigenous

people are just as funny as anyone else? Why did my attempt at humour seem to cause her further angst? Worse, was it inappropriate or even hurtful?

Literature Reviewed

My research in this area was nothing to complain about. I spent hours reading essays by Drew Hayden Taylor (2005), Thomas King (2005, 2012), Tomson Highway (2005), Don Kelly (2005), Janice Acoose and Tasha Beeds (2005) and Karen Froman (2005). (Frankly, it is the dearth of women writing about humour in this regard that drives me forward as well—some of my Indigenous sisters are hysterically funny!). I watched bits on Youtube by standup comedians Charlie Hill (2010), Don Burnstick (2018), Don Kelly (1998), Candy Palmater (2012) and Ryan McMahon (2018). I watched Hayden Taylor's 2000 documentary, *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, where I was introduced to the work of Sarah and Susie (aka Sharon Shorty and Jackie Bear). It was hilarious.

Being the conscientious academic that I am, though, I also looked for scholarly articles about Indigenous humour, coming across the work of Garry Jones and Colleen McGloin (2016) who wrote about Indigenous humour in Australian Aboriginal education, the work of Bill Zuk and Robert Dalton (1999) with a more anthropological take on types of Indigenous humour. In addition, I read catalogue essays on humour in Indigenous art by Peter Morin (2012), as well as Martine Reid (2012), anthropologist and wife of the late Bill Reid. There were a few other notables in my research too, but I don't want to brag about how much I read. Let's just say I did my homework.

During the course of all of that study, I found some answers to my questions about that encounter with the Faculty Associate, and I asked and had answered a few more too. In the following sections I suggest that my response to her self-reflection was appropriate for three distinct reasons. First, the use of humour was a pedagogically sound strategy in that it revealed a colonial stereotype about Indigenous peoples and helped to both humanize Indigenous peoples in the Faculty Associate's mind, and invited her to examine her own sense of humanity (and humility) as well. It was pedagogically sound also because humour is legitimately culturally relevant, as it is commonly used intra-culturally as a mechanism of maintaining social order and harmony. Finally, humour is ultimately helpful in decolonizing education in that it serves to take some of the sting out of such tense or difficult moments—in as much as humour can sometimes sting, it can also be a balm to soothe the colonial scourge—for *everyone*.

Humour as Humanizing

The Faculty Associate who was the unwitting foil for this research and reflection gave me a lot of information in that one little moment. She was telling me that she was having new thoughts and new realizations, which is great. It's the goal of education, really. But she was also telling me that she still had some decolonizing work to do, perhaps more than she realized. She was exhibiting what Susan Dion (2008) has aptly called "perfect stranger" positioning (p. 179). This is the idea that when it comes to whomever we might construct as our "others" (whether it is Indigenous people, African Americans, LGBTQ folks, or vegans) we remain in a state of deliberate ignorance about them that

allows us to protect the status quo that suits us and avoid the kind of introspection that might lead to enlightenment. Because enlightenment might lead to admitting we may have thought about things in self-limiting ways (such as through an unexamined colonial lens), which then might lead to giving up something we feel entitled to (such as the right to build a ski lodge on sacred land, or a golf course on a burial ground). Enlightenment is sometimes a slippery slope, and a scary one too. As Dion puts it, in her discussion of perfect stranger positioning, with regards to education: “It is informed by what teachers know, what they do not know, and what they refuse to know” (p. 331). It is the last part that particularly interests me here—what we refuse to know, and how we can justify our refusal to know as well.

I suppose if you grew up with Canadian social studies curriculum as your main formal learning about Indigenous peoples, having a perspective that is rooted in the past, wrapped in buckskin and beaver pelts and sold in collectible form at the HBC¹ is understandable. Canadian curriculum about Indigenous peoples, at least until recently, was intentionally designed that way (Battiste, 2013; Dion, 2008). And if your impressions of Indigenous people were supplemented by episodes of *Gunsmoke*, *Little Big Man*, or *Dances with Wolves*, you could easily be forgiven for developing the impression that Indigenous people are indeed a humourless bunch. In fact, there is a scene in Chris Eyre’s 2000 film, *Smoke Signals*, in which the ultra-cool Victor teaches Thomas that in order to be a “good Indian” you have to “get stoic”, eliminating all outward signs that a sense of humour might be present. Of course, on a sub-textual level, this is a stark irony, indicating the degree to which Victor’s own sense of Indigeneity has been colonized. But by the time the characters break into a powwow song about John Wayne’s teeth, it is pretty clear that all that stoicism is just a front. Nonetheless, the colonial wisdom that posits Indigenous peoples as both humourless and potentially volatile remains prevalent.

The two “Dons” of Indigenous Canadian comedy (Don Burnstick and Don Kelly), both acknowledge their rarity as stand-up comics and the reactions of non-Indigenous audiences to their presence and their humour. But Burnstick, in a 2017 interview with the CBC, points out that laughter is one of the four components to the healing process (the others being sharing, praying and crying), and he is determined to continue sharing his good humour to help in his own way with reconciliation in Canada (I highly recommend viewing the clip on his website about the five ways Native woman laugh—you’ll definitely recognize someone you know in his caricatures!). Don Kelly pushes the envelope in a different way, challenging audiences with his mixed identity, and often coming up against their collective angst about Indigeneity in the process. “Clenching” was the word Don Kelly used to describe the reactions of his audience when he reveals that he is Indigenous, which really paints a pretty clear picture of the tension some Settler folks might feel when Indigeneity is on the table—or the stage. But Kelly challenges his own sense of identity, as well, in his Aboriginal People’s Television Network (APTN) program *Fish Out of Water*, in which Kelly attempts to master some of the traditional survival skills of Indigenous peoples from all across Turtle Island, often to hilarious effect.

¹ i.e., The Hudson’s Bay Company, once the largest fur-trade company in the world, and still the oldest merchandising company in the English-speaking world.

His recognition of the interplay between Indigenous identities, modernity and historical realities, is very instructive in helping peel back the layers of assumptions we may carry about what it means to be Indigenous in this day and age.

If you know any Indigenous people, then you probably know how funny they can be, and how important humour is to getting along, fitting in and coping. And, as Vine Deloria Jr. (1969), has suggested, “irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group’s collective psyche and values than do years of research” (p. 146). Why, even the fact that Deloria included a chapter on “Indian Humour” smack dab in the middle of his manifesto on Indigeneity, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, is pretty telling in itself. Rather than discuss Indigenous humour from an academic standpoint, Deloria just lays out the jokes for us before resuming his manifesto with a chapter on Black and Indigenous relationships in the colonial state, which is not anywhere near as funny. But that comic relief in the middle serves an important purpose. It gives us time to relax a little bit and to nurture our humanity in the face of an otherwise nearly constantly enraging and disappointing existential experience. At least for Indigenous peoples. It also gives us a way of introducing ourselves to others, inviting them in until they can share the joke too.

Humour as Culturally Relevant

Another aspect of humour that surfaced repeatedly in my research, is that it is actually a culturally relevant pedagogy (which, if you study in this area, probably has you drooling). Both academic studies and contemporary anecdotes assert that humour plays a huge role in maintaining social order in Indigenous communities: it is how people keep each other humble; how they remind themselves not to take life too seriously; and often how they coax misbehavers back into line with community standards (Deloria, 1969; Fagan, 2005). Humour can also indicate affection and acceptance, as teasing is a big part of life in Indigenous circles. And the older one gets, the better one’s sense of humour usually is, giving its application a broad intergenerational spread.

Humour is also a great teacher in and of itself. Part of my research involved looking at several Trickster stories and some academic writing on Tricksters (Archibald, 2008; Highway, 2005; Hyde, 1998). Trickster characters are often teachers (if only accidentally) and can be found in the tales of Indigenous peoples around the world. Chronicles of their bumbling, bawdiness, arrogance and foolishness often delight audiences, but also offer opportunities for thought and reflection—a little check in with one’s conscience on topics such as greed, selfishness, lasciviousness and so on. You know—the fun stuff. I cackled away in my office as I read story after story, from a variety of Indigenous sources, about various Trickster characters, such as Coyote, for example, who engages in folly after folly, always sure he has the upper hand, and always falling on his (or her) face. On this level, humour is present as a metaphor. In the case of “Coyote’s Eyes”, as retold in Archibald (2008), such a story might be offered to remind listeners of taking cautions seriously, and that the grass is not always greener on the other side. (And that bubbles, berries, mouse eyes and buffalo eyes do not make suitable replacements for Coyote eyes.) It’s up to the listener to interpret the narrative, determine the moral and apply it to their own lives. Trickster stories, then, form the first category of

humour as culturally relevant pedagogy.

Another common form of humour as pedagogy is satire (Zuk and Dalton, 1999). This mode is prevalent in literature and theatrical productions, including storytelling, ceremony and stage productions. One of my favorite examples is the 1986 Australian Broadcasting Corporation production *Babikueria*. In this parody of documentary reporting, an inversion of the troubling colonial history of Australia is explored through the eyes of a black television reporter and her white and clearly oppressed informants. By reversing the roles of the Indigenous peoples and Settlers in Australia, the producers were able to ask some very pointed questions about the status quo, its origins, and the colonial mindset that reifies it. And somehow, it is all terribly funny. The point of satire is to help us question ourselves, to hold our assumptions about ourselves and one another up to the light to check for holes in our understanding, gaps in our knowledge. Satire really helps us find them—in fact, it intentionally pokes some of those holes. (Sadly, satire does not do repairs. Any holes detected are the sole responsibility of the owner.) Satire takes a lot of thought, a lot of planning, and a lot of courage however, so it's not easy to deploy in, say, the course of a one-and-a-half hour lecture. So thank goodness there are tech savvy people busily uploading comedy gold to the Internet, and thank goodness for Youtube for making it so much more accessible—go ahead and search up Don Burnstick or Candy Palmeter and settle in for a good afternoon giggle.

I mentioned that teasing is a big component of Indigenous humour. As I read, it occurred to me that this type of humour as pedagogy might also be considered emergent, situational, or observational. It capitalizes on the present to make immediate fun out of situations and one another. If trickster stories are the deeply respected elders of humour as pedagogy, and satire is the cigarette-smoking-cooler-than-thou rebellious teen of it all, then emergent humour is the adored baby of the bunch. It's the type of humour that really shows us who we are, and who we are with, in the moment. It's getting a nickname that you maybe didn't want, like Flippy the Snorting Blanket Stealer, or Flippy for short (ask my son about that one sometime, if you ever meet him). It's being called out (loudly and publically) by an aunty for trying to sneak over to the dessert table before finishing dinner. It's the moment that transforms one's forty-something-year-old self into a recalcitrant version of one's five-year-old self, glumly shoveling in the remains of dinner, one eye fixed balefully on the policing aunty, and the other on the dessert table. Or being reminded constantly of a moment you'd rather forget, but was a source of great hilarity to everyone else (you can insert your own example here, as I am sure you have one). It is relational, sometimes marking the difference between insiders and outsiders. That's also what makes emergent humour a bit slippery.

Drew Hayden Taylor (2005), for example, writes about the complexity of humour, within his essays, novels, stories and plays, in dealing with loaded issues, and the uneven impact such humour can have. Plays such as *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth* and *Someday*, and books such as *Fearless Warriors* and *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass*, wring both laughter and tears from his audiences, often at the very same time. Many of the themes he addresses are raw social issues, such as intergenerational trauma, residential school abuse and alcoholism. Yet, somehow, Taylor often gets us to laugh in the face of the tragedies he describes. Now, you can really tell those who are

comfortable with laughing in these circumstances from those who are not, in the audiences of his plays, based on who needs adult diapers and who needs muscle relaxants upon the delivery of such dark comedy. Taylor (2005) himself is conscious of this, writing of a joke made in his play *The Bootlegger Blues*: “Native people roared with laughter at that joke, but white people were reluctant” (p. 78). I have personally experienced this moment at several of Taylor’s plays, and noting who needs which antidote makes it all even funnier (I definitely fall into the adult diaper category in these circumstances).

The observation above reminds me that Taylor (2005) cautions us about using such humour as well, offering a “Ladder of Status” model to explain the ins and outs of positionality when it comes to culturally sensitive or politically incorrect humour (p. 71). Essentially, there are some jokes that work well intra-culturally, but not inter-culturally, and vice versa. Perhaps this is where some of the stinging aspect of humour comes in as well; some jokes can throw our outsider status up in our faces. We can feel excluded from some types of humour, and excluded from some language used to make intra-cultural jokes. But even trying to define and stay within those categories is instructive; again, humour is pedagogical in this way. Grappling with our own discomfort in the face of some humour, determining our own positionality, and its implications, provides a lot of fodder for self-reflection, which is at the heart of learning.

Humour as Soothing

Teaching in Indigenous education is not easy. Asking earnest, young pre-service teachers to come face to face with the impact of colonization and their tacit complicity in it is really not a lot of fun. And it’s even less fun for the students who really don’t want to engage in Indigenous education in the first place. As one of my mentors said wryly to me years ago, this isn’t glamorous work. So here is where I think humour is most important. In order to withstand the despair and hardship that colonial policies and education have caused, sometimes we just have to laugh, or we’ll cry over it all forever. And because we Indigenous educators are also by and large a very earnest bunch, I think it’s important for us to remember that laughter is medicine too.

Humour can sooth pain by distracting us, taking us out of ourselves a bit and airing out our insides. It helps us cope with the hard times. Just think of how often you have tried to jolly a crying child out of their state with a little joke, a dance, or some other silly apery? Or your spouse? A crabby server? A vegan at a community barbeque? The answer is probably at least once. For some folks it’s a good mechanism for coping with mild to moderate crises. Heck, it’s a pretty good one for coping with major crises too, but you have to be more careful about timing there. Humour relieves tension and encourages the release of the right chemicals, endorphins and such (Savage, Lujan, Thipparthi, & DiCarlo, 2017), into our bodies so we are able to go on *in a good way* (as we say in my community).

Humour also has a way of softening the blow. If you haven’t already done so, think about reading Thomas King’s celebrated 2012 book, *The Inconvenient Indian* (which I highly recommend). If you don’t, or didn’t, chuckle at least once during your reading of it, maybe have a nap and a little tea

and try again—you may be more tense than you realize. In that book, King delivered a litany of instances of social injustice, of land usurpation and genocide, meted out by colonial powers and authority figures to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. It is a grueling and disturbing set of stories he relates, but, as with Deloria (1969), he offers enough levity along the way to make it bearable, to remind us that if we are reading his book, we are probably okay. And so we learn from him through the grace of humour.

In my own practice, I am conscious that the mandatory course in Indigenous education I teach can be perceived as onerous, as a doom-and-gloom course, and as an inconvenience by my students. I want them to look forward to coming to class, not to dread it, so I look for as many opportunities as I reasonably can, at each class, to exercise my funny, to make them laugh a little. For example, I usually get a good laugh when I explain some of the less predictable nuances of Indigenous life. I share with students that my grandmother was one of ten children in her family and my grandfather was one of eleven. Given that my father was also the oldest of eleven children, and that each one of those aunts and uncles, and great aunts and uncles, also had fairly large litters of kids, can you imagine how many cousins I have spread out all over western Canada? It sure made dating difficult! Even when my students don't find those particular circumstances relatable, they can at least see the humour, and that connects us all and reminds us that we are in this together.

And in Conclusion . . .

I have thought a lot about why I made the remark I did to the Faculty Associate; why I chose to deliver it with humour. I was operating on instinct, letting the moment guide me, and the Coyote Grandmothers (as my cousin calls them), inspire me with their own desires to set the world to rights. I was offering her a mirror, an observation, an opening for relief, and a way forward. It was a teachable moment, and I did my best to capitalize on it. Did it pay off? Well, perhaps not right then, but as Wagamese (1994) points out,

See, the important thing about our stories isn't so much the listening, it's the time you spend thinking about them. There's lots of traditional thinking buried deep within each story and the longer you spend thinking about it the more you learn about yourself, your people and the Indian way. (p. 145)

Jokes work the same way.

In my research, I was particularly encouraged by the work of Jones and McGloin (2016), who consciously use humour as a pedagogical tool in their work in Australian Indigenous studies. In their conclusion, they suggest that for “non-Indigenous people generally, Indigenous humour brings to the fore their own collusion in colonial violence,” and that “perhaps discomfort is warranted as part of learning/unlearning, and that such emotions can be positive and productive if theorized in ways that inform a deeper understanding of the history of colonialism” (p. 538). Their logic seems sound to me, and it gets to the heart of why I so often use humour in my work with students. I know it carries power.

As I often begin my classes, let me end, dear Reader, by assuring you that I know I cannot

teach anyone anything, and I didn't necessarily hope to do so here. But I do know that when I can deliver a lecture on residential schools, and manage to have most of my 150 students smile at least once, then I feel like I am doing something important in a good way. I offer that for your consideration. All my relations.

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