

## Humour in cognitive and social development: Creative artists and class clowns

---

**Paul Jewell**

School of Education, Flinders University South Australia [paul.jewell@flinders.edu.au](mailto:paul.jewell@flinders.edu.au)

*There are a number of characteristics of gifted children reported by teachers and researchers. Such characteristics may include curiosity, advanced mathematical skills, large vocabulary, acute sense of humour. This paper examines the demands that humour, as a creative activity, makes on cognitive and social development. It is derived from research that includes interviews with renowned professional humorists and examination of their work. The production of humour requires a sophisticated cognitive ability in order to relate multilevel disparate concepts. Furthermore, to amuse an audience, a humorist needs a high level of empathy, the ability to see the world from another's point of view, and a sensitivity to people's feelings and beliefs. On the other hand, much humour is cruel, and class clowns are seriously disruptive. An understanding of humour in the context of social and cognitive development reconciles these contrasts and suggests appropriate responses.*

Humour, gifted, cognitive, creativity, empathy

There are a number of characteristics of gifted children reported by teachers. Such characteristics may include curiosity, advanced mathematical ability, large vocabulary, acute sense of humour.

It is the last of these that I wish to examine in this paper, in the hope of finding some explanation for the phenomenon. I hypothesise that humour involves cognitive processes, which are appreciated by children (and adults) who have advanced cognitive abilities, and I will explore some forms of humour in an attempt to identify cognitive strategies used in their construction.

A comedian has a rapport with the audience. The telling of a joke, for example, requires a scene to be established, a story to be told, a set of expectations to be developed in the minds of the audience. Then, at precisely the right moment, the expectations are overturned. This ability require a high level of cognitive development (Shultz, 1974, 1976).

The joke-telling of school-age children demands several skills not usually apparent in younger children: the ability to listen carefully; to know what someone else will think is funny; and, hardest of all, to remember the right way to tell a joke.

Berger (1983, p.301)

As we all know, some adults never manage to develop the art of comic delivery, whilst others develop their skills to a professional level, which provoke admiration and delight amongst the rest of us.

The comedian has a fine sense of empathy, can see the world from another's point of view, and is sensitive to people's feelings and beliefs. A poorly told joke has misplaced timing, or leaves out important information, or fails to engage the interests of the listener. In contrast, a well told joke is the result of highly developed social sensitivity.

The comedian, then, possesses sophisticated cognitive ability and exhibits virtues that are a basis for ethical behaviour.

Nonetheless, I will not attempt to substantiate the belief that an acute sense of humour can be validly considered a marker for giftedness. One might imagine developing an instrument that measured a sense of humour and seeking a correlation with IQ but the practical and theoretical difficulties are a deterrent. Measuring creativity is difficult enough, and the difficulties multiply with a measurement of humour. One would need to disentangle the factors of humour as a personality trait, a cognitive ability, the cultural context, the particular content, personal taste and the essentially ephemeral nature of humour. Typically a joke that is funny the first time one hears it is not funny on subsequent exposures, so how could its affect be measured? This is assuming that an agreement could even be reached that the joke was intrinsically funny. I say 'intrinsically' rather than 'objectively' because I suspect 'objectively funny' may be an oxymoron.

So, rather than examine gifted children and their purported sense of humour, I will explore humour itself to see if its constructions makes use of cognitive strategies in any way similar to mathematics, science, reasoning or the arts.

For the purposes of this paper I will begin with one manifestation of comedy, the common joke, and examine its form for evidence of cognitive strategies in its construction.

I do not choose the common joke because I think it the variety of humour most likely to exhibit cognitive strategies. Quite the reverse. *Prima facie*, a sketch constructed and performed by a professional comedian would provide a better example. The author of a common joke is unknown, its modifications over time uncontrolled and its performer an amateur who doubtless has never reflected upon comic techniques or strategies. Looking for cognitive strategies in a common joke is analogous to seeking musical forms in a child's nursery rhyme rather than an exquisitely constructed concerto. Still, one can find musical strategies in nursery rhymes which also occur in concertos and so finding strategies in common jokes which also occur in sophisticated performances would be encouraging.

In the medium I am using here, the written word, it is impractical to reproduce a performed comedy sketch, which is another reason for referring to common jokes which can or have been written down. Mind you, I contend that they should not be written down. Much of the humour in a joke is in the telling, the characterisation and, most importantly, the timing.

Typically we think of jokes as being about something. There are dirty jokes, lawyer jokes, racial jokes, toilet jokes and so on. Indeed, joke books classify jokes by their content and typically concentrate on only one form, such as the riddle, the one liner or the short conversation between two blokes in a bar (or the Englishman, the Irishman and the Scotsman) (Fechtner, 1986; Adams and Newell, 1997). Is it possible to examine the construction of a piece of comedy as distinct from its content?

Here is a joke whose content might be considered relevant to gifted education.

A bloke in the bar turns to the guy next to him and says, 'Can I buy you a beer?', and the other bloke replies, 'Look, I'll be perfectly frank with you so we won't waste any of our precious time. See, I'm a genius. And if you buy me a beer you'll want to talk, and what could you say that would interest me, a dead-set genius with an IQ of 196?' And the bloke says, 'An IQ of 196! This is incredible. I'm a genius too, with an IQ of 195 - we can talk! Bartender, two beers.' And so they settle down to discussing quantum physics and the great theories of the cosmos.

Down the bar a bit, a bloke nudges his neighbour and says, 'How about these two? I'm not stupid, in fact, I have an above average IQ of 127 but I wouldn't have a clue what

these geniuses are talking about. Quantum what? Theories of where? It's way over my head.' And his neighbour says, 'You have an IQ of 127! I'm above average, too. My IQ is 126 - we can talk! Bartender, two beers.' And so they settle clown to discussing feminism's impact on the Australian film industry and the safety features of Volvos.

Further down the bar, a bloke nudges his neighbour and says, 'Check this out, would you? Whatever those geniuses are talking about, it's complete gobbledegook to me, and I'm not ashamed to admit that all this stuff is way over my head. I've got an IQ of 80. You wanna make something of it?' And his neighbour says, 'This is great! I'm really dull, too. My IQ is 78 - we can talk! Bartender, two beers. So, the elections went pretty well. I hear you got returned to parliament with an increased majority.'

Adapted from Adams (1997, p.387)

This joke does not have a particularly interesting construction and its success depends entirely on how delighted its audience is by the insult delivered in the punch line, or rather, which particular group of people are insulted. So you can leave the form of the joke as it stands and change the content of the last line to indicate football supporters, fans of Brad Pitt, devotees of alternative medicine or any group you wish to denigrate. You can also change the genius conversation to subject matter you wish to glorify. Thus, while there is an interplay between the construction of a joke and its content, an analysis that concentrates on its construction rather than its content is possible.

Although I maintain that such an analysis is possible, it is rarely undertaken. Humour clearly involves a number of states and processes. It requires cognitive processing, has an impact on the psychological condition (such as a release in tension) and has physiological results (such as laughter) while much research has been undertaken on the psychological and physiological processes there has been very little analysis of comic constructions besides that of Beattie in 1776 and Koestler in 1964. (Dillon, 1985; Berk, 1989; Labott et al, 1990; Newman, 1996; Beattie, 1776; Koestler, 1964)

Indeed, analysis is explicitly discouraged. Adams and Newell maintain, "It's painfully obvious that scholars should be kept at arm's length from any manifestation of humour.... Because as soon as you start thinking about the construction and purpose of a joke the humour evaporates" (Adams and Newell, 1997, p.3).

It is easy to demonstrate the error in these thinkers' expectations by considering commentary of other art forms such as literature or music (Sagar, 1978; Kennedy, 1994). A critique of poetry does not scan, an analysis of music does not harmonise and a pathologist's report is not toxic. Adams and Newell simultaneously state the obvious and miss the point. The point of analysing humour is analysis rather than amusement.

I have now presented three propositions:

1. that there may be cognitive strategies evident in the construction of jokes,
2. that the construction of a joke may be distinguishable from its content,
3. that comedy is an art form and comparable to other art forms.

Allow me some further illustration of the last two points before I return to the primary proposition:

Consider the following joke as an example of the art of comedy.

The young prince was in excellent spirits. The kingdom was prosperous. His father, the king, was a popular and competent ruler, but was nearing the end of his reign and

the prince would soon assume the throne. As the prince rode on parade through the town, the peasants lined the streets cheering and waving. The prince noticed amongst them a young man who looked remarkably like himself “Father, you old philanderer!” thought the prince as he approached the young man in the crowd, “Tell me fellow, did your mother ever work at the palace?”

“No”, replied the peasant, “but my father did,” (trad)

This joke has a beginning, a middle and a climatic end. It has characters we can identify with, a commentary on the human condition and a critique of social mores. It is tightly constructed and works well as a performance piece.

Let us return to the proposition that it is worth examining jokes for cognitive processes. The simplest verbal joke is the pun (Aristotle in Janko 2002).

“How do you make a slow racehorse fast? Don’t feed him anything.”

Fetcher (1979, p.137)

The pun produces the collision of two incongruous cognitive frames of reference. The punch line of a joke provides a cognitive jolt, a demand that the listeners suddenly shift their frame of reference to a contrasting one. The comic cannot simply provide two frames of reference. The rules of the game, or, to put it another way, the aesthetic form, requires the comic to set up one frame of reference and then to provide a link to another which is unexpected but connected via the link. In a pun, of course, the connection is the pronunciation. As Beattie (somewhat pompously put it “sameness is the sound and diversity in the signification” (1975, p.599). The concept of quickly can be pronounced fast and the concept of abstinence from food can be pronounced fast.

Koestler (1964) calls this process ‘bisociation’. He maintains that bisociation is fundamental not only to humour, but to creativity itself. Understanding how comedy is constructed, he asserts, leads to an understanding the nature of wisdom and the nature of Art.

This is a bold claim, so let us pursue the notion of two frames of reference a little further. If we consider the relationship between form and content, we find that the pun is more amusing if the frames of reference are interesting or meaningful.

A wealthy and unusually idealistic merchant banker was pottering around the backyard of his mansion one day when an itinerant handyman came round and asked him for a bit of casual work. Feeling sorry for the fellow, the banker produced 0.5 litres of enamel paint and a brush and told the handyman he would like him to go and paint the front porch.

An hour later the handyman was around the back again to collect his earnings. The banker commended him on the speed of his work and handed him ten dollars. As he was leaving the handyman remarked, 'By the way, it's not a Porsche, it's a Mercedes.'

Adams and Newell (1997, p.290)

The humour here is not derived from the similar sound of porch and Porsche. It is the result of the sudden devaluation of the rich man’s Mercedes. Beattie would call this the incongruity between dignity and meanness. It is similar to the prince’s sudden realisation that he is illegitimate.

The prince had a stable concept of parentage and royal succession, but experienced a shift in the relationships of its elements. The concept remains stable despite the father’s infidelity but is radically upset by the mother’s.

It is this use of radical upset, which provides the humorist with opportunities for subversion. Political satire abounds. Newspaper cartoons, stage impressionists and television satirist’s

constantly ridicule powerful persons (for example, Clarke, 1998; Berner, 2002; Gillies, 2002; Leaky, 2002; Quantock, 2002). The flawed politician has been a stock character in comedy for centuries (Beattie, 1975). Indeed, the use of stock characters has been a satiric strategy for millennia. Compare the political comedies of Ancient Greece, the *Commedia del Arte*, Shakespeare's comedies, the Goon Show and the popular Australian comedy "Seachange". Consider, too, the classic duo arrangement (such as Laurel and Hardy, Moriarty and Gryppepipe-Thynne, Pete and Dud), which is categorised by Idle (1999) as the white faced (pompous) clown and the red faced (foolish) clown. The more powerful tries to crush the other, though both are continuously crushed by circumstances.

The task of the class clown is to adopt the role of the subversive red faced clown and to cast the teacher as the white faced clown, to play Dudley More to the teacher's Peter Cooke (Idle, 1999). A wise teacher will politely decline the role and divert the class clown's talents.

Understanding how comedy can be subversive prompts the replacement of the terms 'bisociative' and 'frames of reference' with 'paradigm shift'. Interestingly, this term is derived from the philosophy of science.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn (1996) analyses the history of science to demonstrate that rather than an accumulation of incremental steps in a linear fashion, scientific progress consists of radical changes in the way phenomena are viewed, related and explained. Thus, astronomy once held the view that the heavens spun around a stationary Earth. Replacing that view with the concept of a spinning and orbiting Earth was a paradigm shift.

Kuhn himself maintained that the notion of paradigm applied only to the history of scientific practice but other thinkers have brushed aside this caution, finding applications in other fields. Rather than 'paradigm' being merely a phenomenon in the sociology of scientific practice, the concept has been adapted by some to represent an essential part of any cognitive process (Jewell, 1991).

De Bono (1985) promotes lateral thinking as the key to creative intellectual endeavour. His concept is comparable to that of paradigm shifting. There is a striking similarity between joke punch lines and paradigm shifts. Consider the change in astronomy from a fixed Earth to an orbiting one. Compare this to the story of the prince. His stable relationships with his parents and the peasantry have been suddenly replaced by a new and disturbing set of relationships. The prince, or rather, the recipient of the joke, has been led by its author to accept a stable, predictable scenario that has suddenly and shockingly lurched into unexpected conclusion.

The creation of a joke requires the construction of a scenario or set of expectations or paradigm before the delivery of a punch line which demands an unsettling shift to a related but unexpected result. Indeed, if the result is predictable (say from prior exposure), the joke does not work.

The joke, then, models other important intellectual processes. It requires the manipulation of its elements into an authentic form, as do other arts. It requires the perception of disparate frames of reference and possible connections between them. This, according to Torrance (1988) and Koestler (1964), is the essence of creativity. It requires an understanding of how one might shift from one set of assumptions to another. This is what De Bono calls lateral thinking and what Kuhn calls scientific progress.

There is much more to humour than jokes and punch lines. Analysis could be made of its genre, its performance techniques and its history. It merits critiques as an ethical force, a social phenomenon and a psychological effect.

This initial exploration has been enlightening. We are not surprised when gifted young people develop an especial interest in one of the sciences or the arts. We encourage them to be creative

and to undertake intellectual activities. We should not be surprised then, at an appreciation of humour. The construction and appreciation of comedy is an intellectual, creative and ethical endeavour. As such, it should be lauded and nurtured.

### REFERENCES

- Adams P. and Newell P. (1997) *The Giant Penguin Book of Australian Jokes*. Penguin: Australia.
- Beattie, J. (1975) *Essays 1776*. New York: Georg Olms Hildesheim.
- Berger, K. (1983) *The Developing Person Through the Life Span*. New York: Worth Publishing.
- Berk, L.S., Tan, S.A., Fry, W.F. and Napier, B.J. (1989) Neuroendocrine and stress hormone changes during mirthful laughter. *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 298(6) 390-396.
- De Bono, E. (1985) *Masterthinkers' Handbook*. New York: International Center for Creative Thinking.
- Dillon, K.M., Minchoff, B, and Baker, K.H. (1985) Positive emotional states and enhancement of the immune system. *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*, 15, 13-17.
- Fechtner L. (1986) *5000 One + Two Line Jokes*. London: Thorsons.
- Idle, E. (1999) *The Road to Mars: A Post-Modem Novel*. Panthea: New York.
- Janko, R. (2002) *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*. London: Duckworth.
- Jewell, P.D. (1991) The hidden premise. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 23, 1.
- Kennedy, M. (1994) *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Koestler, A. (1964) *The Act of Creation*. London: Hutchinson.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1996) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Labott, S.M., Ahleman, S., Wolever, M.E. and Martin, R.B. (1990) The physiological and psychological effects of the expression and inhibition of emotion. *Behavioural Medicine* 16, 182-189.
- Newman, M.G. and Stone, A.A. (1996) Does humor moderate the effects of experimentally-induced stress? *Annals of Behavioural Medicine*, 18(2), 101-109.
- Sagar, K. (1978) *The Art of Ted Hughes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schultz, T.R. (1974) Development of the appreciation of riddles. *Child Development*, 1974, 45, 100-105.
- Schultz, T.R. (1976) A cognitive developmental analysis of humour. In A.J. Chapman and H.C. Foot, (eds) *Humour and Laughter Theory, Research and Applications* New York: Wiley and Sons.
- Torrance, E.P. (1988) The nature of creativity is in its testing. In R.J. Sternberg (ed) *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

### Comedy works and performances

- Berner, B. (2002) *Backberner*. Australia: Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Clarke, J. (1998) *A Dagg at My Table*. Australia: Text Publishing.
- Cook, P. and Moore, D. (1999) *Comedy Greats*. London: BBC.
- Cox, D. and Knight, A. (1998) *Seachange*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Gillies, M. and Rundle, G. (2002) *Your Dreaming*. Australia: Adelaide Festival.
- Leakey, B. (2002) Cartoon. *The Weekend Australian*, March 23-24 2002, 28.
- Quantock, R. (2002) *Scum Nation*. Australia: Adelaide Fringe.