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TRANSFORMING TRAUMA

The Joy of Student-Written Stand-Up Comedy

Eileen Kogl Camfield and Josiah Beharry

EILEEN:

After many long weeks of emergency remote instruction, teaching to a wall of blank screens, learning about the epidemic levels of post-pandemic student disconnection came as no surprise. On top of long-term illness and loss of life, COVID-19 left in its wake a staggering cohort of students who were depressed and disconnected (Flannery, 2023). What to do about it? Far from an abstract question, I was determined to deliver an antidote – to design a course where the core learning outcomes would be for students to emerge feeling more connected and courageous. If the pandemic had robbed them of agency (Ajjawi et al., 2022), I intended to provide empowerment.

I didn't have to look too far to start thinking about the source of my own succor during the many months of lockdown: stand-up comedy. Be it Jim Gaffigan's voicework, Anthony Jeselnik's deadpan humor, Michelle Wolfe's biting social commentary, Taylor Tomlinson's self-mockery, or Hannah Gadsby's boundary-pushing truth-telling, each had offered me a brief escape from gloom. Could they do the same for college students?

I have the good fortune of being a writing teacher. This means I have a fair amount of latitude in terms of course structure, just so long as students are writing. But, to get them to do the kind of *healing* writing I hoped for, I needed to do some radical work.

'Hacking' Teaching Traditions and a Genre

When many people think about rhetoric (if they think about rhetoric at all), they picture ancient Roman orators or maybe modern-day political spin doctors. In

either case, they are thinking about the art of persuasive speech. Why not ‘hack’ the genre and teach a rhetoric class about how to persuade people to laugh? My use of that verb was intentional: in computer parlance, ‘hacking’ refers to breaking a code so it can be rewritten. If I hijacked a traditional trope and made it an opportunity for students to tell their stories, I anticipated not just joyful learning experiences, but a space in which students could claim their agency. Once that seed was planted in my mind, it just kept growing. However, I also knew that standing up in front of a class not just to share their lived experiences but to also try to make them funny, would require opening themselves vulnerably. I needed to help them feel both brave and safe, and that required careful and radical restructuring, based on trust and compassion.

Students First: Not Theory

First, because I knew student bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017) was maxed out, they were already experiencing tremendous cognitive and affective loads, and that the course itself necessitated risk-taking that would add to their loads, I decided to *not* assign outside reading or excessive amounts of homework. It’s interesting to note that in conversation with various colleagues, in addition to getting names of comedians I ‘had to share’ with the class, I also got recommendations of lots of humor and performance theoreticians whose work could provide ‘essential’ foundations for students. While this was on par with the tendency of most professors to privilege academic scholarship, I rejected those suggestions in favor of focusing on the most relevant material likely to encourage student growth. Students were experts in their own lives, and that was enough. However, I did provide brief ‘mini lectures’ where I talked about the reasons behind my choices, some historical context of stand-up in the US, and the power of laughter to reduce the stress-hormone cortisol. The main work of the class would be watching recordings of stand-up comedians, analyzing the moves the professionals made, crafting their own scripts, and performing them for small groups and later to the whole class. I emphasize this as one of many instances where the Academy’s insistence on using theory to ground student learning can undercut student exploration, engagement, and agency (and joy).

Labor-Based Grading

Grades are often anti-motivational, instilling fear and promoting a competitive sense of ranking (Stommel, 2023). Moreover, in this stand-up class, students would be receiving immediate feedback on their writing: did they make the audience laugh or not? They didn’t need to worry about further layers of judgment and evaluation from me. So, they got credit for simply doing the work – of writing professional performance analyses, of composing their own comedic scripts, and

of writing metacognitive reflections about their own performances. In the end, they would receive evaluative grades based on final monologue performances and a final reflective paper. All of the ‘upstream’ work was intended to promote success on those final ‘downstream’ assignments.

From those who had never even watched stand-up before to those who had deep past experience in theater and performance, I also knew there would be tremendous variability in student abilities. Therefore, I explained on the first day of class that “everyone’s ‘A’ will look different.” I was deliberate in that phrasing, intending to signal the facts that I had no problem giving everyone an A and that I understood that there was a lot of invisible work that would be happening in the class. For the shy student, simply speaking in front of the group was a triumph. For the ham, crafting comedic gold was the challenge.

Also, on day one and in the course syllabus, I addressed the question that every student wants the answer to: Is this class hard? I was very clear:

This will be one of the hardest classes you have ever taken. Not because there are a lot of hard concepts or tons of mindless busywork, but because you will have to mine your life for the narrative you want to shape into comedy. That necessitates self-awareness and courage, but you will not have to do it alone.

Modeling Vulnerability

It would not be enough to simply take the sting out of judgment by dampening worry over grades. I needed to model the kind of vulnerability that is the precursor to agency (Brown, 2012). And so, at key moments throughout the class, I participated alongside my students. In explaining basic joke structure, I told a joke I wrote about bird poop. (Yes, intentionally humanizing myself through gross humor.) In making space for creativity and play, I joined in class improv games. In asking for truth-telling, I performed a brief humorous monologue about growing up as a psychiatrist’s daughter. In requesting them to provide feedback on classmates’ monologues, I modeled how to offer productive asset-focused advice. In short, I did not ask of my students anything I was not willing to do myself. In so doing, I not only had an abstract *idea* of the work I was asking them to do, but I also *embodied* and *felt* it. Additionally, this allowed joyful limbic resonance (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000) to develop for all of us – not to suggest that every topic was light and joyful, but rather that speaking our stories together, being ‘seen,’ and recognizing shared experiences, uplifted us even in the face of somber topics.

Another essential aspect of making space for vulnerability was refraining from judgment. Students initially worried about speaking freely about their lived experiences, especially those experiences about which they felt shame. I was transparent about discussing this worry, assuring them that in my 30 years

of teaching I've 'heard it all' (and then naming a few both true and extreme examples) and that my job is "not to judge their lives but to empower their voices." My hope was that helping them feel they had at least one grown-up in their corner might make a difference.

Creating Community

Harking back to the core course learning outcome of 'feeling connection,' I knew that laughing together was a good start. However, I also knew that to create community, I need to de-center myself as the authority around which the class revolved. Thus, students spent a great deal of time in writing groups where they workshopped their material, getting feedback that would inform revised monologues. I anticipated that performing for a small group of their peers would feel much less intimidating than performing for the entire class. It was additionally exciting to see how much more natural peer review felt in the context of writing stand-up. While most writing teachers incorporate peer review in their classes, sometimes this feels artificial for students, and teachers need to spend a long time explaining the concept of 'writing for an audience.' The performative nature of stand-up inherently builds in audience. Further, because my students were drawing on a shared set of professional comedians, they directly referenced those in their feedback: "Remember how Ben Bailey did all those pauses as he built his jokes? Why don't you try doing that?" The class also organically came up with terms for their suggestions: "I think you need to 'funny it up.' Why don't you try an 'absurd analogy?'"

Instructor Unlearning

Thus far, I have described aspects of my class design that were intended to dispel the gloomy legacy of the pandemic and to promote creativity and joy. Much of this design was a disruption of components traditionally found in college classrooms: teacher as expert, grades as the primary form of feedback students receive, content driving curriculum. And, as I have a tendency toward rebelliousness, I had no problem with that disruption ... until it came to one thing: student group work. There I ran into an internal pedagogical roadblock that I needed to dismantle. Because I knew students felt disconnected, I knew they needed to spend time together in writing groups. They needed me to step back. However, I initially experienced deep disquiet with relinquishing control.

I came to see that while I had always thought of myself as a student-centered teacher, I was actually an *entertaining* teacher. Students were engaged because I was charismatic, and that's a fairly surface-level form of engagement. Not unlike a carnival barker who invites folks to "step right up and ride the

merry-go-round,” I offered my students the classroom equivalent of bright lights and calliope music, but my courses had really revolved around learning experiences I had carefully crafted. True student-centered courses are more open-ended, more analogous to a joy-ride in a convertible: pedal to the metal, top-down, destination unknown.

Orchestrating a joy-ride meant I had to take the backseat. I had to address inherent biases engrained over years of teaching. Beliefs like “if I am not witnessing the learning, it’s not happening,” and “if I don’t monitor students in their groups, they’ll just goof off.” Unlearning these was a struggle. As an entertaining teacher, I had always received high ratings from students on course evaluations. In other words, I had been rewarded for *not* being as student-centered or deeply engaging as I could have been. To support my unlearning, I had to vigilantly adhere to my core course learning outcomes and remind myself that if students are going to develop courage and experience connection, I needed to let them be at the wheel.

Serendipity and Surprises

Teaching this class proved to be transformative *for me*, powerfully reshaping my ideas about pedagogy. I didn’t need to provide extrinsic motivators when students had stories they wanted to tell. Without my prompting, they took covert notes on their roommates’ bizarre behavior, rewrote their material (again and again), and watched other comedians (even arranging for a group trip to a local comedy club). I didn’t need to build in formal assessment mechanisms to learn whether my outcomes were being met. I just needed to notice that one-third of the class regularly showed up *30-minutes* before class started to just hang-out together: they valued connection with one another. I just needed to observe that every student came to my office hours at least once to workshop material one-on-one: they were committed to honing their writing for optimal effect. I just had to sit back and watch as they gave pep talks and cheered each other on before their performances: they were a community. I just had to witness how many volunteered to perform publicly at a campus-sponsored arts event: they were courageous. In fact, one student told me this class was the first time she had “not felt *discouraged* by failure:” that when a joke didn’t get a laugh, she just had to keep workshoping it until it landed. I thought her word choice was apt and was struck by her tenacity and resilience, a form of courage we don’t always acknowledge.

Perhaps some of the most unexpected and gratifying pieces of feedback I received came from a number of students who urged me to keep teaching the class: “I’m telling all my friends to sign up for this next year. Everyone should have this opportunity to process and heal.” I was touched by such deep capacity for empathy – not just for one another’s past experiences expressed during their routines but an empathy for abstract other future students.

All of this reveals the need for more joy in our classrooms and shows the way joy propagates other pro-social emotions. Learning does not have to hurt to be personally challenging and meaningfully rigorous. In addition to hard work, college students desperately need time to play well together.

However, along the way, there were some surprises. Despite the fact that I created the class as a space in which to process the months of lockdown and remote learning, very few students actually wrote about the pandemic. Instead, many of them shared *far more personal* experiences of trauma. They wrote jokes about experiencing sexual assault, bullying, parental expectations, racism, and homophobia. They riffed on self-harm, depression, hypocrisy, and drug use. So, what I thought might be a light class was actually a place where they both explored their darkest moments *and* came out on the other side controlling their own narratives. By opening the door to joy, their trauma did not have to define them.

In hindsight, it's easy to recognize some of the pedagogical theory woven into this course. These include the ideas that the best course outcomes should promote the 'right kind of rigor' (Gannon, 2020), should be loving, equitable, and humanistic as well as supported by artistic and creative inquiry (Rankine-Landers & Moreno, 2023). Further, learning should be playful (Mardell et al., 2023), feel good (brown, 2019), and promote beneficial pro-social emotions (Keltner, 2009). This course also aligns with work done on the role of relationships in deep learning (Bowen, 2021) and student success (Felton & Lambert, 2020). Not to mention supporting post-traumatic growth and healing (Siegel, 1999; Ginwright, 2018; Lee, 2019), finding joy in naming pain together (Gay, 2022).

However, theory is not really the point. The point is how the course affected students, and who better to share this perspective than a former student?

JOSIAH:

Stand-Up as Survival Tool

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the newfound intrinsic sense of success I discovered through this class, I need to delve into the foundational elements that underpin this achievement. All too frequently, we find ourselves celebrating only at the finish line, overlooking the countless sacrifices, unwavering dedication, and rigorous practice required just to step onto the starting blocks. While the stand-up class served as both a finish line and a pivotal starting point, my journey in comedy had already begun much earlier. In fact, I wholeheartedly dedicated myself to this craft at the tender age of 3.

During my childhood, I endured both physical and emotional abuse at the hands of my father. The emotional abuse was marked by constant degradation

and reminders of my supposed stupidity. However, the physical abuse also seemed to depend on his unpredictable triggers and moods, leaving me and others as bewildered victims in its wake. This tumultuous upbringing made for an incredibly challenging journey through life, leaving me with a persistent sense of dread, insecurity, and instability. The scars of abuse ran deep, as I grew up internalizing self-hatred, believing I was the cause of the abuse, and feeling undeserving of anything better. In an effort to cope with the unbearable environment, I played the role of my family's personal stand-up comic. When apprehension escalated during fights, I would resort to performing silly routines to break the tension. Amid my parents' strained interactions, I would assume various personas and act out scenes to diffuse the angry atmosphere. Even during conflicts between my sister and mom, I would instinctively interject jokes to lighten the mood. The laughter that followed brought a temporary relief, as it meant another bad day or beating was temporarily avoided.

However, comedy itself didn't bring *me* the happiness or peace I was looking for at the time, but it did bring me the reward of the sound of other people's laughter. Being a comedian became a way for me to navigate the complexities of boyhood. Through humor, I could maintain a sense of control, temporarily escape the weight of my troubled reality, and maintain the façade of strength. This was not joy. However, to hear other people laugh after I slipped in my jokes was incredible because if I couldn't be happy myself, at least I was able to make other people feel good for a moment.

As a result, my capacity for humor became my armor, an outward expression of resilience – the kind we are all familiar with, where the low-income brown kid with multiple intersecting identities stands tall as the poster child, adorned in shiny armor, bravely confronting adversity. (The type of skin-deep resilience that gave Sandra Bullock and Hilary Swank their last blockbuster paycheck.) As a comic, I could project an image of being carefree, even if my internal reality was quite the opposite.

Rewarded at home, I also wore my comic mask at school, because it allowed me to better assimilate with my peers, with whom I often felt disconnected. In a predominantly White heteronormative school, 'fitting in' didn't come effortlessly. Therefore, by the age of 12, humor served two valuable purposes for me: it alleviated tension at home, and it helped me navigate and assimilate within the school's culture. This adaptive use of humor became an essential tool for navigating the complexities of the world around me.

Having internalized a fixed mindset narrative about myself, as I transitioned into adulthood, turning 18, nothing I did was ever good enough. I often joked about being a Type-A Virgo, but deep down, I just knew I could never attain the success everyone wanted for me. In part this was because I was keenly aware of the many hidden identities I contained: I was queer, undocumented, and had an undiagnosed learning disability. To top it off, the most visible aspect

of my identity, my gender, brought its own host of problems. As mentioned, success was an ever-moving goalpost that I, and many boys like me, couldn't access. Beneath the weight of societal expectations, we bore the burden of perfection, sculpting ourselves into flawless statues of brute composure, chiseled by the unforgiving demands of a world that deemed emotional vulnerability incompatible with true masculinity. Instead, we felt the constant drag of failure. For us, boyhood was often conflated with stoic manhood, and there seemed to be little space for us to explore *any* of our emotions freely and unapologetically but especially feelings of fragility, uncertainty, and failure. We were expected to mature quickly, put on a brave face, and always strive to represent our families in the best possible light. The pressure to bring success and honor to our families became an ingrained part of our identity, leaving little room for carefree play and vulnerability. Consequently, we carried the burden of unrealistic expectations, striving to prove our worth through academic achievements, career success, or other external accomplishments. Asking for help, even in academic spaces, was not something I could freely do. W. E. B. DuBois (1903) described a racial double-consciousness, but for boys like me we are encouraged to maintain the opposite: a one-dimensional consciousness. *How do others perceive me?* Never inquiring how we feel inside.

Finding Pockets of Escape: Coping with Trauma

When we experience trauma, we often selectively focus on our external circumstances to obscure the reality we live in. This might involve excelling in school, surrounding ourselves with friends who make us feel safe, or fantasizing about a future free from trauma (filled with happiness and wealth). For me, all of these were true. We find pockets of the world to escape to in order to cope and remain stable. We think, "As long as we do well, as long as we reach this milestone, as long as we achieve this goal, we'll be fine." Yet, as we imagine overcoming trauma, it often feels like the goalpost keeps moving, making us realize that the marker has shifted further ahead just as we approach it. This realization struck me profoundly before I joined Dr. Camfield's class.

In the fall of 2021, when everyone was returning from the global COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself retreating. After leaving home for college in 2019 as a freshman, I believed I would finally have the space to work on myself and heal. However, the goalpost kept moving, and when the pandemic hit, I had to move back home – the very place I was trying to escape, the place that hindered my healing. Despite this setback, I kept my head down, achieving all A's, making the honor roll, securing internships, and continuing to dream.

Then, in the summer of 2021, when I had the opportunity to return to school, my world came crashing down. I experienced severe mental and physical health challenges that prevented me from continuing my studies in the fall of 2021.

It was then that I realized no form of escape could shield me from what was inevitably coming.

No amount of humor could fix this situation. What was funny about having to take a semester off? I felt like a failure to myself and my family. I was supposed to be the strong one who held everything together – the gorilla glue that kept our family intact.

In an attempt to cope, I tried to ignore the problem by focusing on external factors. I internalized the belief that I would never escape my circumstances and that I was a failure. What I needed was a place to find my voice – not the voice silenced by trauma, but one that acknowledged it as a part of my experience and positively informed how I operated. This meant a shift from an internal (emotional/psychological) operating system that led me to feel ashamed to an internal operating system where I felt ‘good enough.’ I needed to use my voice for me, to reclaim it and let it speak for my true self.

In a relentless quest for external escapism, approval, and acceptance, I had neglected my own emotional well-being. My mindless pursuit of academic success in the form of straight-A’s became both a driving force and a stumbling block, defining my sense of self-worth and impeding my ability to find true happiness. But, just like Professor Camfield had been rewarded by those stellar course evaluations, my studiousness was ultimately rewarded by college acceptance and a glowing academic record. However, I was still depressed. Fortunately, comedy class helped me challenge my fixed mindset about success and discover the joy of simply being my full self.

I realized that I had been performing comedy primarily for other people’s identities, conforming to their expectations, and diffusing their animosity. It made me wonder, what would it look like to use humor for *my own needs*? How could I find my authentic voice and use comedy to express my own experiences and emotions? What would ‘success’ in doing that truly mean?

Comedy for Me

These questions sparked a profound introspection, prompting me to seek a deeper connection with my comedic craft and explore the possibility of using humor as a means of personal expression and healing, leading me to taking Professor Camfield’s class (Writing 122). Although I was excited, I was also hesitant and wary. My tendency for overthinking and getting in my own head led me to an array of questions and imagined negative possible outcomes: *How can I be funny? What jokes should I tell? What if I am not funny? What does funny even look like?* I mean, I wasn’t Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy by any means; I was just some kid who told a couple of jokes that made a couple of people laugh. At that starting point, I thought comedy was simply entertainment and that no one would get my jokes.

Despite my worries, I entered class with an open mind, also with sweaty palms but definitely an open mind. Little did I know what was in store for me. They talk about ‘transformative teaching,’ but, as you will see, what happened over the course of the next five months really did completely change my life.

The Effect of Student Choice

This life-changing work started when we used joy-centered pedagogy as a form of social criticism to interrogate contemporary society, in particular with respect to perceived injustices and power relations in general. For me and my classmates (who were also predominantly first-gen, low-income, people of color), joy-centered pedagogy fostered an environment in which we could discuss social issues that were extremely important to us while also not being forced to relive the scariest and hardest aspects of these social issues. In other words, prior to this class, we simultaneously had too much experience with injustice and too little faith in ourselves to constructively discuss those experiences. In stand-up class, we developed a new kind of agency, as students were able to *choose* a ‘Goldilocks’ topic they personally gravitated toward, one that was not too triggering but also not empty, abstract, or meaningless.

Before this class, I had often been assigned specific topics to research, perhaps because my teachers wanted to make sure particular subjects got covered. And, while I suspect my teachers were trying to make their curriculum ‘relevant,’ I sometimes was given topics (like domestic abuse) that were too painful for me to objectively write a research paper on. Trauma-informed pedagogy might have prevented that kind of triggering, but in ‘protecting me,’ it might also have robbed me of agency.

Moreover, choosing our stand-up monologue topics still resulted in a beautiful compilation of different issues, topics, and stories. The teacher still got to assess how students analyzed issues, used different rhetorical approaches, expressed perspectives, demonstrated various writing devices, and modeled material from professional comics they took examples from.

Alternatively, some of my teachers just avoided hot-button issues. Perhaps they wanted to avoid controversy. However, it’s a form of infantilization on the part of teachers who think that students aren’t aware of (or care about) how they are being affected by real-world issues, like the climate crisis or health care access. Professor Camfield was the exception in that she both understood students are indeed being affected by social issues and that she was also not the authority who could tell us what was impacting our lives. All she did was ask us to somehow integrate something that mattered to us into our acts.

Professor Camfield could have taken the easy route, simply telling us to write some funny material and passing those who made her laugh. But she chose a different path, one that led to a powerful collective healing through joy-centered

pedagogy. We were given the freedom to choose the issues close to our hearts and share with the audience why these matters were vital to us, how they personally affected us. In this empowering twist of events, we became more than just students; we evolved into the teachers ourselves by the end of the year.

Modeling to Motivate

When I first stepped into that stand-up comedy class, I was a bundle of nerves and uncertainty, unsure of how to curate a compelling routine. Little did I know, crafting stand-up comedy was a lot more challenging than it seemed. In those early days, my initial routine involved sharing a mishap-filled first date experience. It had its entertaining moments, but it lacked a central theme and felt raunchy and crude without any real message or impact.

But as I continued to learn and grow in the world of comedy, I discovered that there was much more to it than just delivering jokes. Observing comedians like Hannah Gadsby, who bravely shared her experiences as a neurodivergent, queer individual, I realized that comedy could be a platform to share my own stories, too. It wasn't just about making people laugh; it was about crafting narratives, engaging with knowledge-production, and practicing introspection, just like any other good academic work. In other words, this class was incredibly intellectually challenging, but because the course was centered in joy, the rigor did not *hurt*.

With newfound inspiration, I delved into my own experiences as a queer person who had faced abuse, and slowly, a narrative began to take shape. As I crafted my story, jokes naturally found their place along the way. And something incredible happened – a message began to shine through, a powerful one about owning one's identity and being unapologetically true to oneself. This, more than any laughter, was joyful.

Comedy, I learned, was all about owning your persona and living in your truth, while also artfully shaping your stories to resonate with your audience. It became a space where I could share my journey, embrace my identity, and use humor to bring light to my struggles and triumphs. And people wanted to hear it! In the process, I had discovered the true power of comedy – not just as a means of laughter, but as a tool for connection, empathy, and understanding.

The Power of Positive Feedback

Professor Camfield's asset-focused feedback also helped alleviate anxiety and promote creativity. She always talked about what worked in a routine and pushed us to replicate our successes. Hers was also not the only opinion that mattered. Feedback from our writing groups and the classroom audience was equally valued. And yet, there, too, we were told to focus on the positive, even

if it was spotting a nascent joke and offering ideas for how to ‘funny it up.’ Further, we were actively encouraged to speak in our own authentic voices and languages – be they curse words or Spanglish. This had a liberating effect on me and illuminated the way grades can be paralyzing anti-motivators. By de-emphasizing grades and stating “everyone’s A is going to be different because you all are starting from different places,” Professor Camfield inspired us to gravitate toward topics we once felt too guilty or afraid to address. Many of us had no space at home to openly talk about ‘taboo’ topics like sexuality or drug use. Never before had we encountered an educator who fostered an environment where such discussions could authentically take place. Engaging in such vulnerable conversations allowed us to shed the weight of shame that had previously prevented us from openly addressing these topics.

Through this process, we practiced the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*, transforming our perceived brokenness into something beautiful, using humor as a healing force. In the practice of *Kintsugi*, something that is broken is not concealed or discarded. Instead, it is artfully repaired using gold, highlighting the very flaws and fractures that once marred it. The resulting piece becomes a testament to deep resilience, celebrating the beauty that arises from embracing imperfections. In this class, we learned that our experiences were not meant to be hidden away or forgotten, but rather to be acknowledged and cherished for the wisdom and strength they instilled within us. Like *Kintsugi*, we saw that our journey wasn’t about being broken to begin with, but about transforming our pain into something uniquely beautiful and powerful.

For me this came through in my final monologue where I talked about being made fun of in school for having a feminine voice:

Growing Up in elementary and middle school I was always bullied for my voice because people would say I talked like a girl, which honestly isn’t that insulting cause the opposite of that is a man, and who the hell wants to talk like man?

I talked about being closeted:

Before I was ready to come out, I would do all these things to prove I was straight. So, I had a 3-step plan of action. Gay people make really good P.R. people. “Like, of course we can help you cover your fifth baby Tristian Thompson, like, we’ve been hiding for years.” Rule number one is gain control of the narrative. When I was a freshman in high school, I started this rumor that I liked this girl Abby, notice that *I* started the rumor. But no one believed me. Step number 2 is always have a response. So, my go-to line if someone asked me if I was gay, I would say, “No I’m not gay, I am

Christian.” True story, I thought that me saying I was Christian meant that I somehow hated the gays and couldn’t be one myself. Step number 3: never let them see you cry or hurt. Because if you get overly defensive about it, then they say there’s smoke there’s fire.

Then I observed how all of this masking took my voice away. Taking a page out of Mike Birbiglia’s (2017) playbook, a comedian we had studied in class, I ended on a serious note that reclaimed the pejorative that had been hurled at me:

So, when people look at me now and say wow Josiah you are so open and proud of your identity and who you are and you’re unapologetically gay, feminine, and queer. Where does that come from? And I say to them I am who I am because the 8-year-old me spent too many long nights begging God to fix me, days changing who I was, how I dressed, and how I talked, long nights crying because I believed I was going to hell for who I am... I am who I am today because that kid wasn’t able to be the child he deserved to be – loved, accepted, and just fucking gay.

Community Matters

Many critics of Gen Z say we are selfish and narcissistically obsessed with our images. Others say we lack crucial 21st-century communication and creativity skills, a problem compounded by heightened social anxiety exacerbated during the pandemic and by the pervasive isolation stemming from our screen-dominated lives. This class revealed the opposite: how hungry we are for something different. By being asked to develop a heightened awareness of audience, we increased our capacity for empathy and collectively nurtured our emotional intelligence. As we critically analyzed comedic work, we found that laughter and joy were the unifying forces that bound us together as a community. In this environment of agency and empowerment, we were encouraged to embrace vulnerability, leading to authentic and meaningful engagement and participation. Together we fearlessly discussed the strategies employed by professional comedians to address issues that impacted them, drawing inspiration from their examples to craft our own narratives. Choosing writing groups that felt safe and comfortable for us, we navigated this creative journey with the support and camaraderie that truly made the process enriching and transformative.

Transformation and Legacy

A class this powerful does not just have a momentary impact. More than a year later, I am still in contact with members of my writing group and other peers

from stand-up class. As we all are now trying to navigate life after graduation, we continue to rave over this class. I recently shared with several of them that I was going to be writing this chapter and asked them to describe the legacy of joy-centered pedagogy. The dominant motif in everyone's comments: confidence. That particular brand of agency that allows for pro-social engagement with others in the world.

For me, in my professional journey, I have made it my mission to 'pay it forward' by promoting joy-centered pedagogy in every classroom setting I encounter. Having previously worked as a private tutor, I've witnessed firsthand how traditional teaching standards can hinder student development. Practices that were once considered 'normal' during my own schooling now stand out as highly problematic.

For instance, I've come to recognize how an emphasis on competition can be detrimental to deep learning, as it inherently creates division with only one winner prevailing. Alternatively, fostering collaboration allows for progress as a unified whole, where success is achieved only when the entire group crosses the finish line together.

The weight of grades has also become all too apparent to me. Students confide in me, expressing feelings of inadequacy or giving up because their grades seem to define them, disregarding the hard work they have invested just to reach the starting point. For some, merely showing up and trying is an accomplishment in itself. The one-size-fits-all approach to measuring success cultivates fear and shame, amplifying the challenges that students face.

Now, I firmly believe in the necessity of acknowledging the intersectionality of intelligence. Our identities are multifaceted, and so is our knowledge. It is crucial to make room for diverse wisdoms to flourish, embracing the unique strengths and perspectives that each student brings to the learning environment. By embracing joy-centered pedagogy, we can create spaces where all students can thrive and cultivate a genuine love for learning. Where everyone feels 'good enough' and capable of positively contributing to class.

Perhaps most importantly, I've come to know that operating from an awareness of trauma without an intersection with joy creates an echo chamber in which we can identify our source of suffering, but never start to heal and process it. We can create an armor around ourselves and seemingly appear resilient, but that means nothing if we do not heal from trauma and break the cycle and sources from which these toxic environments are created. We may appear to have 'snapped back' from adversity but what we've really learned to do is hide it. That is not true resilience because it rests on fear and shame. True healing requires self-assured authenticity, the capacity to say 'I deserve better.' This is a version of confidence that comes from 'doing the work,' wading through the trauma, embracing it as part of oneself, and not letting past circumstances define you.

Joy, Confidence, and Courage

As reflected in the comments from my classmates, a common theme that emerged from the stand-up class was a profound increase in confidence. This was not the false confidence of masculine bravado, the ‘firm handshake’ that hides internal doubts. By centering joy, eliminating the fear and shame surrounding our lived experiences, and reevaluating how success is measured, we learned to see our strengths and access them. This newfound self-assurance empowered many of us to tackle situations and opportunities we would have previously shied away from. At the end of this journey, the boy who once doubted his own ability to be academically successful has begun to blossom into a young man seeking healing and self-discovery. Through joyfully owning his identity and being unapologetically true to himself, he gradually came to realize that his worth and intelligence were not determined by others’ perceptions. He discovered a capacity to dream big and apply for graduate school and subsequently seek a position on the state board of regents. And so, with determination, confidence, and a newfound sense of purpose, I am now set to embark on an exciting new chapter in my life. In August 2023, I started a Ph.D. program in Interdisciplinary Humanities. Envisioning myself as Dr. Josiah Beharry is something I would never have had the courage to aspire to had I not allowed joy into my heart. Founder of the positive psychology movement, psychologist Martin Seligman (2002) contends we need not concern ourselves too much with ‘fixing’ what we perceive as broken inside ourselves. Instead, he argues we must draw on our ‘signature strengths’ to find authentic happiness. This same logic pertains to joy: when we dwell in more joyful narratives about ourselves, we find our version of ‘good enough.’

Thus, the true measure of success for the stand-up comedy class transcended mere grades and performances, although they were undeniably remarkable. Its profound success lay in the transformation of a group of college students into efficacious adults who embarked on a journey of healing, learning, and emotional growth within the safety of a support network. In this space, we discovered validation not only from our teacher and one another but, most importantly, from ourselves.

This pivotal experience illuminated a powerful truth: to create genuine success in our classrooms (and, in my case, to foster a diverse professoriate), we must harness the extraordinary force of joy to nurture student agency. By embracing joy-centered pedagogy, teachers empower students to interrogate their own narratives, discover their strengths, and unlock their potential to become architects of their own destinies. In this way we can pave the way for a generation of individuals, who might otherwise reside in the margins of society, to confidently navigate the complexities of life, and in doing so, become change agents for good.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- 1 What disciplinary course structures and ‘traditional’ content exist in your field that could be ‘hacked’ (reframed) to be more student-centered?
- 2 In what ways might success be measured differently in your course? (How might you design assignments, articulate expectations, and evaluate assignments to convey to students that they are ‘good enough?’ That the external performance of course outcomes is separate from their worth as human beings.)
- 3 How might you encourage the interplay between authentic resilience, confidence, and agency?
- 4 What do you need to unlearn or resist for these changes to happen? (Perhaps this might include interrogating your own sense of what it means to be a ‘good enough’ teacher.)
- 5 How might you create opportunities for open-ended/emergent outcomes and/or play in your classroom?

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