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Sitting in my office at a theatre in La Jolla, California in early 2006, I took some time to consider what type of interdisciplinary course I could propose for my new venture. I had accepted a job of assistant professor in the theatre department of my undergraduate alma mater, University of Denver, and was being urged/instructed to submit a Core course proposal. I wanted to teach something that reflected my intellectual interests as well as my fascination with popular culture and comedy. Something that would inspire students to think analytically and creatively, and in turn, inspire them to view the world through different eyes. I glanced out the window and saw my friend Chris, a burly carpenter-type in his mid-twenties, making his way into one of the nearby theatres carrying technical gear for a set and wearing his traditional Friday t-shirt, a black shirt with a yellow logo that he designed. I was wearing the same shirt. In fact, most of the administrative staff—generally women—were wearing the same shirt.

You see, Chris and his brethren in the scene shop—all men—had felt disconnected from the administrative and artistic departments of the theatre for years. Firstly, there was the shop's deep resentment toward the managing director of the theatre, a dark and mysterious man who knew none of them by name but held the purse strings. Then, there was the shop's total hatred of my boss, the mercurial artistic director of the theatre, whose demands of last-minute major overhauls to scenery regularly broke the spirit (and budget) of the managing director and bred the need for our scenic crews to work overnight shifts. Feeling powerless and trapped, the rebellious scene shop began calling it quits for several hours each Thursday night—no matter what—to imbibe in Thirsty Thursday, a new tradition of drinking and nacho-eating at a nearby Tex-Mex hangout.

Following Thirsty Thursday, their dream was to initiate Fist Fight Friday, another new tradition at the Playhouse which involved an elected official from the scene shop walking into the administrative offices and decking the first admin staffer he saw, because the innocent victim was “one of them.”

A couple of years passed with no such incident and the downtrodden populations of the administrative/artistic offices and scene shops came together in the tradition of Thirsty Thursday, finding a common ground in cheap margaritas and shared contempt for their powerful higher-ups. Chris, one of the heads of the scene shop, then established the tradition for which he may best be known: designing t-shirts that expressed the staff's resentment toward the reigning regime through dark satire and esoteric commentary. Chris came out with one or two a year, but my favorite was always the simple black “F-cubed” t-shirt which featured the letter “F” with a tiny “3” to its right, and one yellow stick figure punching another, under which was written in sweet cursive, “We do it because we care.”

Through his subversive and lucrative t-shirt business, Chris was subconsciously engaging in an age-old process of observation, analysis and synthesis to empower himself and his those like him by creating pieces of satire directed at authority figures. His creative product was brilliantly attuned to his audience and the times. As writers and scholars, don't many of us dream of achieving this level of efficaciousness in our work? And isn't that ability to perceive the world and respond to it with a unique contribution a skill we want for our students? I proposed a class that I felt would best invite this type of process: a satire class in which students would study the best satire in the world and its context and audience, along with creating their own work.

I am now in the middle of my fourth year of teaching at University of Denver, and will present the fourth incarnation of my Core class, Satire in the Arts and Media, in the spring quarter as a writing intensive course. In my first year of teaching the class, I required students to analyze historical pieces of satire and the biographies of satirists, in addition to writing their own shorter piece at the end of the quarter and discussing its origins. In general, I found the analytical writing stale and uninspired while the satirical/creative writing seemed to open a little window for the students that had never been opened, inviting them to share some considered views on the world. A new part of their brains seemed to open up as a result of engaging in a highly analytical process cunningly shrouded in creativity and I began to realize that this writing component needed to become a central focus of the course. In my admittedly limited experience, students can be analytical without being particularly creative, but it's tough to be creative without being the least bit analytical where humor is concerned. The study of satire effectively marries creativity and analysis.

Once my students are introduced to satire as a coherent genre instead of just another subset of comedy, they begin to see the intentionality behind favorite shows like *The Family Guy*, *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* that they previously considered pure entertainment. We discuss what aspects of society are being targeted by these shows, and illuminate the critical mechanisms at work behind these shows. Through the writing component of the course—analyzing existing materials as well as generating their own—students find an outlet for their sometimes undirected revolutionary impulses through an academic medium because they spend the entire quarter immersed in a genre that continually espouses the power of the pen over the sword.

After attending the Writing Center's training for the Core Writing Intensive courses, I have expanded the repertoire of available styles of writing I might employ in the class. Whereas in the past, I employed analytical (typical essay) and creative writing,

this year I will introduce a few more assignments in the form of student-written discussion, exploratory writing at home and in the classroom, and group projects that demand critical and creative writing through collaboration. I have utilized student-written discussion questions before in my class as a method of assessing student comprehension of assigned materials in advance of class meetings, but those questions have always been for my use in guiding class discussion. This year, each student will be assigned a day before which he or she must craft a mandatory set of discussion questions and submit them to his or her classmates via Blackboard. The rest of the class will be required to respond to a question of their choosing with a few sentences of exploratory writing. The students can see one another's responses online and come to class prepared to continue the discussion in person. This will help students better prepare for class, having considered their opinions beforehand through critical writing and thinking. Additionally, it will give each student the sense of responsibility toward his or her classmates.

A challenge I've often faced in recent years is that of some students talking more than others, and quiet students not stepping forward to offer their analysis. The discussion question model will allow those quiet students an opportunity to challenge their classmates through writing online and voicing their opinions, in addition to having ready responses when an opportunity to speak arises in class. With similar goals in mind, I will utilize the end of some classes to invite students to jot additional comments on that day's discussion so that we might continue or finish the conversation on the next class day. This further solidifies the course material as being part of a continuum, as opposed to isolated topics of discussion that disappear after their day in class.

Brief, assigned exploratory writings at home will encourage students to reflect on the current reading and arrive in class prepared for discussion. The following are sample prompts for shorter exploratory writings in and out of class:

- a) “Satire has to be offensive to be effective.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
- b) In your opinion, who is the more effective satirist, and why: Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert?
- c) If you were to compose an updated adaptation of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” what groups of people would you depict in place of the English and Irish and why? Please limit your response to two paragraphs.
- d) Which 3 or 4 sections of Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life* feel the most satirically “true” about human nature or modern life?
- e) Who or what are Pope’s intended satirical targets in the *The Rape of the Lock*, in addition to the young man and woman at the center of the controversy?
- e) the origin of this holiday (this can be a fictionalized “creation” story if necessary about its founder, patron saint, precipitating event, etc.)
- f) the song most often associated with this holiday – write out all of the song lyrics and describe the style of the song, whether it’s normally sung in chorus, by carolers, by stars on the radio, etc.
- g) the group of people who regularly protest against the public celebration of this holiday and why they find this holiday offensive or problematic
- h) The reasoning behind your choice of holiday. Did you create this one as a commentary on a holiday that already exists (if so, which one) or as a commentary on something within the culture that is not talked about (if so, what)? What did this assignment permit/force you to consider that you haven’t considered before?

An example of an individual, formal, writing assignment that I’ve given in the past with the purpose of enticing the students into critical territory with American society and its customs involves the following question, which requires several types of analysis on the students’ part:

Create a fake, satirical, American national holiday and describe and/or design each of the following for your new holiday:

- a) the name of the holiday and the regular spoken salutation associated with that holiday (like “Merry Christmas!” or “Happy New Year!”)
- b) the population or faction which mainly celebrates it
- c) a greeting card associated with this holiday, including type of image and greeting/message; this could vary by demographic, and if so, you can describe which one
- d) the decorations placed in front lawns or in homes and the material goods/foods sold in stores to support celebration of this holiday

Note: Because your holiday needs to be satirical in nature, make sure that it holds within it an inherent sense of criticism or commentary of American society, custom, or holidays. In other words, you can’t create “Me Day” with decorations of cardboard cutouts of your personage unless there is an obvious commentary in there somewhere that your professor will get. Also, you cannot satirize this class or your professor in this exercise.

A seemingly fun and innocuous assignment like this requires considerable social analysis, cultural analysis, and historical analysis, and provides students with a productive venue for expressing their beliefs and synthesizing them into something new and original.

Some group projects with which I’ve experimented in the past and which I plan to replicate this year in a different form involve creating new satirical work, and analyzing student-written work. In the past, I never required students to share their new work with one another in a draft form, but this year I will require the students to bring in a draft of their first creative work—a piece of

satire directed at their chosen major at DU and intended for an audience of general university faculty and students—and distribute it to a small group of their peers in class. I plan to require students to first respond to one another by asking some of the questions I encourage them to ask about each piece of satire we read in the course:

- Would you characterize this piece as Horatian or Juvenalian in tone? Does the tone shift or remain consistent throughout?
- Does the tone feel appropriate to the content of the piece?
- Does the writer/creator take a meandering approach to his/her subject or is the commentary constant throughout? Is this a strength or a weakness of the piece?
- Who is the intended audience of this piece?
- Is the writer/creator of this piece a member of the same community he or she is satirizing? How does this knowledge affect your interpretation of the piece?

After this initial discussion opens the doors for talking about the student-written work in the same manner we've talked about published pieces, I will ask students to identify inconsistencies within the pieces, places in which the writer/creator's satirical focus or intention is unclear, particular moments of strength within the piece, etc. Each student would be required to write a reflection on their group's reaction to his or her satire and ruminates, in writing, on the options for revision. When the satire is due, the students will be required to submit a short formal paper discussing their process of revision and describing their decision-making process. The purpose of the creative component of this assignment is to push students to observe their major disciplines as objective but educated viewers. They must analyze their own observations, and in many cases, consider the details of a situation they may have previously taken for granted. They must then process this information and synthesize it into a unique contribution to

their community that reflects their beliefs of how things are, and how things should be. By analyzing his or her own process and describing options for revision, the student will hopefully grow to see the many available avenues to creation and that all creative choices are made for a reason as opposed to sheer arbitrary entertainment.

I intend to assign group creative projects so that students may experience the type of negotiation that must occur in collaborating on a creative venture. One successful prompt I've used in the past is:

After studying how your assigned musical genre (country/western, rock/pop, heavy metal, rap/hip-hop) deals with sex and pregnancy through language, underlying message, imagery, etc., please write the lyrics to and describe the action of a 30-second public service birth control announcement music video directed at your genre's primary audience. Please time your lyrics to fit perfectly in a 30-second slot, and use 1-2 pages to describe the action of your commercial (scenery, costuming, actors, plot, etc.). You will present your work to the class and invite feedback from other groups.

This assignment proved popular and successful last year with students reporting to that they had never analyzed aspects of popular culture like music or advertising, and that this assignment opened their eyes to so much of the world around them. The impact of this assignment caught me off-guard and alerted me to the impact my class may have in encouraging students to view popular culture as something that reflects and can provoke thought. I want my students to leave the satire class not only with a sense of how broad and impactful the genre can be in provoking change to the world, but with a heightened awareness that critical thinking should not be relegated to "school" or the classroom but integrated into daily life. The writing component of the course bolsters this awareness.

Every year I have students who experience a kind of paralysis when facing an open creative assignment like the major satire

or the final assignment, which invites students to satirize any phenomenon they want (outside of me, the class, their classmates, or the ore curriculum). The writing intensive workshop gave me a number of tools I plan to employ for supporting student writing in the form of guiding the class through a series of “problem questions” that they might use to spark inspiration for the original pieces of satire, such as: Is there something that makes you angry every day? Traffic? TV? A relationship? An ad? A political figure? Is this thing a person, an idea, a phenomenon, an image? What is it about this thing that bothers you? Is this thing unique to you and your life or is it something that occurs with some frequency in society? Can you create a parody of this person/idea/phenomenon/image and use it as satirical commentary on the thing itself? To model a creative process for the students, I plan to generate my own piece of satire at the same rate as they, and discuss each step of the process with them, including my own answering the above questions, my options for a medium in which to present my satire, and my analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the piece I create.

In terms of my challenges in integrating the writing component, it is always a primary concern of mine that I effectively balance the provision of historical context with the invitation to students to bring in their own knowledge and context to bear in analyzing the course material. Students need to understand the context of the more distant historical pieces we cover (*The Rape of the Lock*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Animal Farm*, etc.) in order to get humor of these pieces and understand why they were effective. Such context isn’t as necessary as often with contemporary issues, but where do I draw the line between providing too much information and not enough? Should I eliminate a text from class study because it seems to require too much historical background? Or do I limit texts that require none for fear the students are not “learning” enough because I am merely shining a light on that with which they’re already familiar? These are the challenges I will face in putting together a good mixture of readings, and similarly in focusing students’

writing assignments to require advanced analysis without dulling the wonderful edge of the material. Nothing kills humor more quickly than over-analysis, but I do want students to recognize the forethought and labor required to execute an effective piece of writing for publication.

At the end of the spring quarter, I hope to have many excellent examples of knowledge spoken to power through humor. Though I have had satires submitted in all forms, for the record, I haven’t received a t-shirt. I imagine it’s only a matter of time.

