

Null and Nuller? Laughing About Injustice, from Jon Stewart to John Oliver

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INTRODUCTION

The “null curriculum,” that which is outside of school education (beyond the “hidden” or implicit curriculum), has been explored by philosophers of education as an alternative place for education for democracy and social justice.¹ The artificiality of schooling in comparison with the diversity of society is one reason for this.² While most schools look roughly the same as they did a century ago, the informational environment outside them has changed significantly, from print news to television, the internet, podcasts, and more. Philosophers of education have also traced a connection between popular culture and identity development among young people, as media impacts “their idea of civic society, their duties and obligation, and ultimately their notion of citizenship.”³ Megan Boler has argued that televised political satire, particularly *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart (running from 1999-2015) and *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert (2005-2015), have had a significant educative role in developing political identities and democratic “counter-publics.”⁴ Rejecting the view of these shows as gallows humor, she contends that their fans have become better informed about politics, and have developed communities online that are engaged in effective civil action.⁵

Yet Boler has also observed some complexities around the moral complicity that accompanies laughing about social injustice, of herself, Jon Stewart, and others, of being part of the problem, while also part of the solution. This article reflects on the potential of humor and laughter in educating for social justice through the null curriculum. It examines recent writings on humor and laughter in education, before comparing the educational potential of *The Daily Show (TDS)* with the new *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver, which surpassed *TDS* in acclaim and ratings in its first season in 2014. Though *Last Week Tonight* has been regarded by both the mainstream and leftwing media as just as funny, and more critical and influential than *TDS*,⁶ I am less sure of its impact in facilitating democratic communities against structural injustice. Thus, this article assesses the educative potential of laughing about injustice from Jon Stewart to John Oliver.⁷ It concludes by considering how educators can teach about resistance and complicity in classroom settings.

THE NULL CURRICULUM OF HUMOR AND THE POLITICAL SATIRE OF STEWART AND COLBERT

The possibility for humor and satire to facilitate education for social justice has been elaborated by a number of philosophers of education in recent years.⁸ In modern history, humor related to incongruity in social contexts (for example, the workplace or public sphere) has been considered by comics and philosophers as a kind of “negative moral training for audiences.”⁹ Laughing about exaggerated comic portrayals of the shortcomings, mistakes, and inconsistencies of public figures, such

as politicians, can be cathartic and educational. Social problems are exposed by a court-jester figure, who seems to incidentally indicate political statements, while his or her apparent primary function is to get some laughs out of everyday absurdity. John Morreall argues that deriving humor from incongruity can lead audiences to think differently and more playfully, a goal of both comics and teachers.¹⁰

Explorations of affect in humor emphasize how it can enable one to laugh, rather than cry, in complex or disturbing circumstances. Some argue that the affective component of laughter has a democratizing influence, as it brings together diverse groups of people who literally cannot control their laughter.¹¹ Relatedly, Barbara Stengel writes that, as an affective alternative to “deep discomfort,” laughter provides a moment for breakthrough, an opportunity to identify and change one’s behavior or the status quo.¹² The quality of resulting change can vary, however; laughter can also be mean and cruel rather than democratizing, and can shut down others rather than open doors for community.¹³ Historically, then, laughter and humor have been seen as morally suspect, as reflections of superiority toward others, as shown in the work of philosophers from Plato to Hobbes.¹⁴

Cris Mayo has considered how humor within public, mediated spaces can serve as a kind of social justice education. Mayo notes that a humorous performance of antiracist nonformal pedagogy, such as on the website *Black People Love Us!*, “disrupts the passivity of the audience/class - spectators are not only taken to school but they are turned out in that world with a demand for compensation for their participation/spectatorship at the sites and in systems of oppression that motivate the sites.”¹⁵ Such humor can take one beyond passive appreciation for incongruence, and demand reconsideration of his or her relation to others in society. In contrast to the often “measured, reasonable tone of moral superiority” of the social justice educator, Mayo observes that such humor provokes critique and promotes means of engagement, through interruption of dominant discourses. Yet risk is inherent here. People may laugh at the wrong part of the joke, and upset others in doing so. Mayo thus suggests that a particular kind of listening capacity may be essential to “get” jokes related to social injustice, as they often rely on “double talk,” simultaneous references to contrasting visions of the world and power.¹⁶

Like traditional jesters, both Stewart and Colbert played with inconsistencies in the rhetoric of politicians, and journalists, in their shows and beyond. Stewart has been vocal outside the *TDS* studio regarding corporate media bias, relating it to injustice and the need for good media in a democracy.¹⁷ Colbert, a Stewart associate whose spin-off show became wildly popular, caricatured a right-wing FOX News-style journalist, suggesting inconsistencies in the rhetoric through exaggerated winking. The gig was up, however, when he spoke in harsh, mocking tones at the 2006 White House Press Correspondents’ Dinner about the then (Bush) administration. Both Stewart and Colbert were beloved in the 2000s by many young and left-liberal members of the public sphere for providing an alternative, funny view that countered the increasingly one-sided mainstream media, that is, for discussing news and issues in ways perceived as more balanced than the “real” news. Further, Boler suggests their humorous discourse also translated into audience political action. She writes:

We may not be able to trace an easy “cause and effect” ... But there can be little doubt that satirists, bloggers, citizen journalists, and ... viral video producers around the world are taking action daily and dissenting from mainstream media agendas. Whether one traces the effects of Stewart on Crossfire, Colbert ... roasting George W. Bush in front of the President and the world ... counterpublics created through digital media are far more than water cooler talk.¹⁸

Boler found that many politically active young people in the United States, both online and on the streets in protest in the 2000s, were Stewart and/or Colbert fans, and that fan clubs intersected with communities of political action and associated networks. Thus, she contends, the shows helped to create democratic counter-publics in nonalignment with corporate media values: an impersonal, collective series of gatherings that recognized and recirculated alternative public discourse.

Yet Boler has struggled with Stewart’s, Colbert’s, and indeed her own potential complicity in ongoing social injustice:

Do I think watching *TDS* will lead to social revolution? ... [C]an anything truly radical be broadcast on a channel owned by a major cable network? ... Why do I sometimes laugh even at sexist jokes levied at female politicians I loathe? In sum, isn’t it a pathetic, middle-class privilege to take such pleasure at 11pm when there is so much suffering in the world?¹⁹

In this context, Boler and Stephen Turpin both argue that the comedians’ “frank admission of complicity” enhanced their appeal. Because Stewart and Colbert conceded complicity (acknowledging their sponsors, and identifying as comedians rather than public thinkers), their admission of complicity could also be shared by audiences: “Because we recognize ... problems created through the structures of global capitalism and its attendant state institutions ... our reality is inevitably one of complicity.”²⁰ Relatedly, Mayo describes how humorous antiracist pedagogy “moves the audience out of passivity and into responsibility; they can be in on the joke, and still their attempts at understanding can itself be a joke.”²¹ Many educators find it challenging to teach young people to recognize their complicity in social injustice, given various possible strategies of resistance. Perhaps it is easier to face complicity in one’s living room than in a classroom. Yet aspects of the recent *Last Week Tonight* seem more evasive in relation to appreciating everyday complicity.

LAUGHING ABOUT INJUSTICE, *LAST WEEK TONIGHT*

In 2015 many liberal-left media consumers mourned the end of both Stewart’s run on *The Daily Show* and Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, and instead tuned in (on HBO or YouTube) to the second season of *Daily Show* associate John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight*. Each episode of *Last Week Tonight* focuses in part on small-scale investigative journalism. Alongside Stewart-like commentary on the mainstream media, Oliver juxtaposes information-gathering with apparent moral indignation and slap-stick humor: at one moment speaking truth to power on such issues as mandatory minimum prison sentences for minor drug offences, and in the next, labelling New Zealand “Australia’s Australia.” For this, Oliver has become a media hero. Liberal media organizations such as *Upworthy* and *Mother Jones* praise his “rants”; *Time* and *Huffington Post* correspondents laud the impact of his pressure on corporations to do and be better.²²

Yet while liberal media voices regularly compare Oliver’s performance favorably alongside the “sneer” and “ego” of Stewart,²³ when considered as a potential work of

alternative social justice pedagogy it may fall short of the mark. *Last Week Tonight's* favored comedic tools involve modeling behaviors that, according to philosophers of education, operate as strategies to *resist* acceptance of complicity in social injustice. These include: (1) claiming ignorance; (2) leaping to action; and (3) comparing oneself favorably against others. According to audience position and perspective, these could be read as satirical, disruptive, disingenuous modeling behaviors of the court-jester type, or as models for reaffirming one's goodness and evading charges of complicity. Let us explore in turn each trope as typically used by Oliver, and how they might be interpreted in relation to social justice pedagogy.

CLAIMING IGNORANCE

As Barbara Applebaum notes, privileged individuals benefit from maintaining ignorance about culpability by demonstrating a "positive interest," a kind of moral learning disability, about social injustice. By declaring ignorance, one puts the burden of proof on others to deny the authenticity of their ignorance and to explain structural injustice in simple terms.²⁴ Mayo similarly observes how the "quest for certainty is the desire to be seen as 'curious' or ignorant, a desire that also maintains privilege because it essentially demands of the one they are trying to know a patient explanation."²⁵

Last Week Tonight often suggests that ignorance is inherent to its audience. Often this ignorance is part of a joke: the trope of the ignorant American is a common, teasing feature (perhaps made more palatable via Oliver's British accent). A map of Paraguay is shown on screen while Oliver discusses Uruguay, before Oliver taunts that "you" in the audience did not notice, because "you" do not know geography. Such gags are less effective to the clued-in (academic?) consumer; they usually just confuse me: "What's going on? Oh, Oliver is calling me stupid, again." These gags actually work to identify culpability: he is shaming the audience for their ignorance (though the subject of ignorance is rarely a matter of dire importance in these jokes). However, in his investigative segments, he treats his audience (and himself) as innocently naive: "Perhaps you did not know, because we didn't know ourselves, before we did the research" Here Oliver appears as a "missionary" of social justice, as described by John Warren and Kathy Hytten, who has "'answers' and therefore should be out helping others to see the light," based on what may actually be a limited engagement with the problem.²⁶

That mainstream Americans are not at fault for ignorance and should be accepted as innocents seemed earnestly defended in Oliver's interview with Edward Snowden. Though some applauded Oliver for getting "Snowden to explain the NSA programs in plain English,"²⁷ Oliver shut down Snowden's description of U.S. foreign surveillance, continuously interrupting him with, "no one in America cares." When Snowden suggested that the public should have the opportunity to evaluate such programs, Oliver stated, in apparent seriousness, that he was unsure the public possessed the intellectual capacity to do so, "because it is too complicated." He then dramatically switched to comedy to compare Snowden to "the I.T. guy," exclaiming, "I don't want to learn, don't teach me!" Finally, Oliver shifted the topic to surveillance of "dick pics." An opportunity for a critical, educational conversation about

civil liberty was, thereby, shut down in favor of trivial examples, with the exception of the subtle but firm framing of the public as incurious about serious social issues. Unlike his predecessor, Oliver limited the opportunity for democratic understanding and pluralism here, choosing sexual humor over another perspective (or even *a* perspective). Lacking substantive engagement with Snowden's concerns, the take-home message seemed to be that complicity of the public in an international rights controversy was the result of reasonable ignorance.

LEAPING TO ACTION

As Sara Ahmed notes, reflexively "doing something" can reflect a "desire to evade" complicity, repositioning and reconstructing complicit actors as virtuous, good moral agents.²⁸ Such desire can "protect moral innocence and the social system upon which such innocence is based."²⁹ Yet the "fix it" mentality, as Hytten and Warren observe, also "functions in a disabling way, due in part to [its] simplicity and surface-level approach."³⁰ Taking some sort of action, without pause or uncertainty, is the normal conclusion to Oliver's investigations. The basic message to the audience is that there is always something you can do, which is either exemplified by Oliver, or shown through his pragmatic guidance. In response to U.S. cigarette companies advertising to children overseas, he created a lung cancer mascot. Because sex education is patchy and inadequate, he produced a star-studded alternative educational film. In light of tax exemptions for televangelists who exploit home viewers, he preached from his church, *Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption*, and invited viewers to donate. For weeks afterwards, viewers continued to donate humorous items.

No one would suggest that a hip sex-ed video or spoof church is going to fix larger social issues; these are clearly gags. And they echo stunts such as Colbert's Super PAC, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow," which meant not to endorse the emergence of political action committees (PACs) in politics, but to critique them through a kind of ironic modeling. Yet in contrast to Colbert, Oliver brings a more consistent, seemingly authentic, moral tone to his reporting. Oliver does not appear to be playing a character, and his reports are read in mainstream and leftwing media as legitimate journalism that has had an influence on big corporations, such as the Miss America Organization, McDonalds, and Budweiser. (Correlation is identified, but causation is unclear, in reports on the "Jon Oliver effect."³¹) There may be little Oliver can do to help the refugee crisis in Europe. But earning brownie points for having "made magic happen for a 16-year-old Syrian refugee" by recruiting soap opera actors to give her a "shout out" on his show seems morally pathetic, belittling tragedy to shine as an individual, or get a laugh, instead of a cry.³²

Perhaps such an absurd performance can be read as what Cris Mayo describes as political satire, "lampooning its own cultural incompetence at its most competent moments."³³ Yet such engagement risks providing moral relief, as larger issues of complicity (not to mention measurable impact) are obscured. If we consider media pundits' views as representative of, or intersecting with, public mainstream interpretations, Oliver is being upheld as a hero for these stunts; critical reactions to *Last Week Tonight* within my social network of academics (such as on Facebook, where

his videos regularly appear on my feed), and within the bounds of a Google Search, have been few and far between.³⁴

COMPARING ONESELF FAVORABLY

Another strategy used to resist complicity is to compare oneself favorably against others. As Applebaum notes, privileged members of society often treat discrimination and oppression as individual-level issues, unrelated to those who did not “do anything” harmful.³⁵ Particular individuals are identified as bad; they should stop doing bad things. Meanwhile, structural injustice remains unseen. Thus, “Sally” and “Johnny” from *blackpeopleloveus.com* observe that “lots of Black people don’t like lots of White people!” thus projecting that being better than others excuses ongoing injustice (which the site also suggests is taking place). Such appeals function to “get [people] ‘off the hook’ for their ignorance or racist tendencies.”³⁶

Oliver is hardly the first to claim being “better-than” for himself and his audience. News media is typically about (people doing) bad things. Nonetheless, careful viewers observe that *Last Week Tonight* provides “signaling that lets liberal viewers feel superior to their Republican relatives,”³⁷ as it uses unrelenting, often nasty, language and gags when discussing the South, Christian issues, or the Tea Party, for example. In one segment, the show overviews Cinco de Mayo media coverage full of Mexican stereotypes, before reviewing recent cases of blackface and related racist behavior. One particular part, “How Is This Still a Thing?,” intends to inspire disgust and shock by framing individual symptoms of injustice as abnormal and deviant. Oliver seems to align himself with good liberals (whites) by using a language of shock and moral clarity, and focusing on individual instances of aggression and oppression rather than taking a structural view. Unlike on *blackpeopleloveus.com*, there is no winking here - no whisper of one’s own complicity, given the shock at the moral crimes observed. In this frame, only some are at fault.

Last Week Tonight is not the antithesis of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*. All three problematize mainstream media and give an alternative perspective. To some extent all three comfort their target audience by mocking the other side (right-wing conservatives). Yet Oliver also tries to “do something” about everything. There is a sustained air of moral self-righteousness across episodes that blurs rather than clarifies the line between comedy and journalism that was rather well-tread by Stewart and Colbert. While Stewart and Colbert conceded complicity and stopped (somewhat) short of trying to save the world, while their fans rallied “against insanity,” for democratic media and related agendas, Oliver paints a picture wherein token gestures by himself and viewers are sufficient, along with indignant head-shaking at bad apples. As an alternative form of social justice pedagogy, his message is neither disruptive nor appreciative of the complicated nature of social injustice; rather, he seeks to spare poor commoners the need to learn from nerds like Snowden, when they can instead giggle about “dick pics.”

Alternative readings may be worth considering. Rather than blaming Oliver or his show, we might blame the audience, tracing the approach to social justice, education, and comedy here to television audience marketing choices. Given the public lauding

of Oliver's (indeterminate) impact, we might conceive a renewed desire among the public and/or next generation of young left-wing audience members to see people "do something," rather than "just" joke. In such a case, the counter-public attracted and facilitated by *Last Week Tonight* was already less likely to think critically before reacting, for example. The rise of Oliver may speak to an emerging counter-public that wants to feel especially morally good in relation to societal ills, and to be further reassured that there are only a few details to fix to ameliorate injustice.

Alternatively, maybe I did not get the jokes. My British colleagues bemoan the trend of British actors "selling out" to Hollywood, where they display an exaggerated emotional expression they regard as shamefully un-British.³⁸ In this case, Oliver may be playing an *overly* earnest, inappropriately morally zealous clown across the pond ... with less effectiveness on the United States' audience. Perhaps the strategies of resistance are all a ruse. But this reading is less persuasive, as it implies continuous mass misunderstanding of Oliver's jokes and stunts over time. However, the juxtaposition of multiple voices and perspectives within such alternative readings points to a pathway for using this null curriculum as an educational tool. As Mayo notes, appreciating humor can "train us all to be better listeners and, as a result, eventually through jokes and other kinds of lessons, better learners."³⁹ How might *Last Week Tonight* still be used productively for social justice education?

Hyttén and Warren observe how student discourse regarding social justice often dances around critical reflection and tends toward extremes - from self-absorbed shock and regret, to missionary action and intellectual rationalization, to cynicism, and back again - mirroring in some ways Oliver's zigzagging path, from smugness toward stupid Americans, to indignation toward the worst offenders.⁴⁰ What is sought instead is sustained consideration of structural injustice and one's own moral responsibility that resists a focus primarily on one's self, or on the overwhelming weight of social problems. However, it can be challenging to explore complicity within classrooms, because the right and wrong ways of expressing ignorance, analysis, and engagement cannot be identified through a prescriptive formula. Claiming authority over correct readings and interpretations is risky; no teacher should assume they can understand what all of their students *really mean* as they struggle to learn, meet expectations, etc., in the first week of classes, for example. As students learn how they are perceived in the world around them, some zigzagging may be inevitable, just as teachers may change their expectations of students over the course of a term.

In this context, examining the complexity of messages about ignorance and complicity in the null curriculum with students could indirectly invite nuanced reflections on personal tendencies of complicity and ignorance. As students will not necessarily share a single reading of various gags from Oliver or others, by questioning what is said and how in terms of whether it is authentic or double-speak, and also the feedback loop created by audience perception, students can consider how they too switch codes across circumstances, revealing dynamic and more nuanced visions of moral selfhood. Class discussion could explore audience complicity, how media consumption can impact self-perception, and the relation between audiences and media voices in interrupting or entrenching dominant discourses. When a humorous

null curriculum fails to interrupt dominant discourses, educators can still inspire social justice education by analyzing media stunts, asking what they achieve, how they please or disturb, and where viewers might go, theoretically and practically, after laughing. Using a null curriculum in this way may help to bridge the divide between big structures and individuals' roles, as students learn how they, as media consumers, take part in the ratings of today's Netflix and YouTube wannabes and stars.

BREAKING THROUGH

Humor and laughter can be educational and can help people break through distress they feel in response to injustice. To use humor effectively for social justice means taking students/viewers out of their comfort zone, to invite them to see things from new perspectives. Stewart and Colbert were effective in this sense because they did not claim innocence, exceptionality, or the ability to wipe away injustice through action. In contrast, Oliver is more problematic given the way that his show's strategies of humor resist big-picture thinking, dismiss complicity by focusing on the worst offenders, and sanction ignorance and token reaction.

Yet this article also raises questions about how we interpret messages in a humorous null curriculum. How can we identify *the right way* of playing with agency and complicity, not to relieve, but to implicate and complicate? We can ask similar questions of students. Can we judge their expressions and gestures, their degrees of engagement, based on particular situations that others could read differently? As none among us are perfect, there is a risk of tone-policing when we assess right from wrong degrees of ignorance and engagement in everyday life. Some tone-/code-switching according to audience is unavoidable, in life as in satire, but we can focus instead on inconsistencies in expressions of complicity, ignorance, and engagement as inherent risks for students and researchers of social justice. Critically reading humorous media can provide students with an appreciation for the multiple voices and perspectives each of us embodies from one context to another, as we grapple to avoid resistance and work toward appropriate engagement. While it may be better to laugh than cry, to break through one should reflect upon his or her role, and see one's self as interconnected to others and social issues in complex, not always obvious, ways. As we reflect on Oliver, we can also reflect upon ourselves and our students, with moral identities more complex and dynamic than single episodes and segments reveal.

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2. Alexander M. Sidorkin, "John Dewey: A Case of Educational Utopianism," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009); for contrast, Kurt Stenhagen, "Dewey as Utopian: Labor Versus Leisure, Mass Media as Democratic Education, and the Future of Public Schooling," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009).

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13. Barbara Houston, "Taking Laughing Seriously," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009).
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15. Cris Mayo, "Being in on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor," in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Barbara Stengel (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009).
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18. Boler, "The Daily Show and Political Activism."
19. Boler, "Mediated Publics."
20. Boler and Turpin, "The Daily Show and Crossfire," 387.
21. Mayo, "Being in on the Joke," 250.
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36. Hytten and Warren, "Engaging Whiteness," 73.
37. Lorenzo, "John Oliver Isn't Mad Max."
38. See Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behavior* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004).
39. Mayo, "Humorous Relations," 179.
40. Hytten and Warren, "Engaging Whiteness"; Warren and Hytten, "Faces of Whiteness."