Research Article

Decrowning the Classroom King: Anatomy and Physiology and the Dangers of the Contact Zone

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According to Mary Louise Pratt (1991), contact zones are "social spaces"—including classrooms—"where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" in which the worldview of the most powerful is taken to be universal (p. 34). Pratt gave two examples of salient contact zones: her son's elementary education and a lengthy manuscript letter written by a colonized indigenous Andean to the Spanish monarch. While the stakes in these two zones are incredibly different—one a matter of cultural preservation in the face of genocide, the other what we might see as the "normal" socialization of a curious child—Pratt argued that both are situations in which the party of greater power assumes that "all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players," ignoring the differences between the ruler and the ruled (p. 38). Pratt's call for the recognition of the classroom as a contact zone could be transformative by decentering the dominant voice—in her example, the Eurocentric version of history, science and literature, as well as (more locally) the professor's voice.

Other scholars expanded on Pratt's initial ideas. For example, Patricia Bizzell (1994) pointed out that, even in the most student-centered classroom, power ultimately lies with the professor: "For teachers cannot voluntarily give up all their power in the classroom: the institution surrounding the classroom establishes their power even as they try to relinquish it" (p. 851). She recommended transparency and dialectical authority as a means of making the most of the classroom as contact zone. Similarly, Katherine K. Gottschalk (2002) suggested that "it is wise to find or create spaces which all can occupy much more symmetrically and much more by choice than is often the case. And, of course, it is assuredly wise to recognize and take advantage of clashes between differing cultures, values and disciplines, rather than pretending they do not exist" (p. 63). Thus, and in contrast to studies maintaining that the power granted by the student to the professor is the most salient factor (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Schrodt, Witt, & Turman, 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2006), the college classroom is a contact zone in which power is imbued in a professor who expects students to master, incorporate, and transmit the materials and beliefs of the discipline and institution. At the same time, recognizing and bringing to light these power imbalances can empower students within that hierarchical space.

In regard to Pratt's "contact zone" and other, essentializing discourses, Kay Hasalek (1999) suggested that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia can break down "the academic/home discourse binary" (p. 175) by opening up a "pedagogy of possibilities . . . that recognizes a need for both proficiency and productivity" (p. 178). This is especially important in collaborative learning environments because of the potential tyranny of consensus. Hasalek pointed out the irony "that a student who gains admission to the

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academy must lose, deny, or neglect her home knowledge in order to acquire power to defend and argue [for it]. She must, to return to a Bakhtinian terminology, become adept at producing centripetal discourse while simultaneously seeking to create centrifugal discourse" (pp. 36–37). An awareness of the heteroglossic nature of discourse can allow for the construction of a pedagogy that makes use of centripetal proficiencies in discourses and ways of knowing as well as the centrifugal possibilities of producing work that "struggl[es] against boundaries and conventions" (p. 178).

Frank Farmer (2001) also sought to open up pedagogical possibilities using Bakhtinian perspectives. Farmer argued that Bakhtinian dialogism can be fruitfully applied not only to teaching voice and imitation in composition courses, but also to escape the pedagogical dilemma of "making a liberatory agenda comport with a distinctive, seemingly privileged way of knowing" (p. 125). Moreover, Farmer suggested that Bakhtin's "superaddressee"—a presupposed third addressee who would have a complete understanding of the intentions of the speaker—could be incorporated into classrooms by serving as a heuristic allowing teachers to escape cultural critiques focused on "contradictions and unmasking" by opening up "the possible in the actual" (p. 145). In other words, instead of focus being only on the way cultural productions mask oppressive power relations, the concept of the superaddressee could also allow for classroom discussions that consider cultural productions as "answer[s] to certain oppressive conditions" (p. 146). Additionally, this Bakhtinian concept could be a useful tool for "exploring . . . the constraints upon dialogue in our classroom" that can help us "posit a better context for learning . . . than the one we currently inhabit together" (p. 146).

Investigations into teaching and learning such as these have fueled efforts to make higher education a more student-centered endeavor. By providing students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning, student-centered approaches can be seen as an opportunity to both reduce the power held by the professor and increase that of the student. These student-centered approaches to learning have been shown to provide larger gains in retention of knowledge, self-reflectivity, self-regulation and motivation to learn (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Freeman et al. , 2014). Student-centered, active learning environments are highly associated with promotion of critical thinking skills: the ability to use higher order cognitive skills such as synthesis and evaluation (Derting & Ebert-May, 2010). Moreover, these high-impact practices provide an opportunity for students to develop stronger bonds with their faculty, which in turn also promotes higher-order thinking (Cornelius-White, 2007). Furthermore, Walker (2004) asserted that "students need to be exposed to diverse teaching methods that promote [critical thinking] in order to nurture the [critical thinking] process" (p. 264). Incorporating varied activities and diverse methods provides "the opportunity for students to decide for themselves what information is important" (Walker, 2004, p. 264).

With these practices in mind, the Anatomy and Physiology two-semester series at the University of Minnesota Rochester has been designed to be student-centered, with a partially flipped classroom and hands-on approach to learning. Anatomy and Physiology II begins with a curricular review of the material learned during the previous Anatomy and Physiology course in an abbreviated "module" to ensure that students will be able to build upon the previously gained knowledge. To that end, students are given two days of instructor-led review before undertaking a creative writing review activity. In groups of three to four, students are instructed to choose one of the prompts listed below to begin a story in which

they are to review seven/eight physiological systems. Every 10–15 minutes, groups are instructed to pass their stories to the right and continue the previous groups' story; thus, they read other students' physiological descriptions in order to include ones that had not already been included. In the hope that students would utilize their knowledge in new and interesting ways, the assignment in question was designed to be a fun, creative way to review all of the systems covered in the fall semester of Anatomy and Physiology I. Specifically, students are encouraged to provide their own, self-directed mechanisms for reaching a conceptual milestone rather than having that information given to them by an outside source. Additionally, students edit their own stories for continuity, clarity and physiological content, further promoting critical thinking practices of synthesis and evaluation in order to increase the mastery of original content and enhance understanding of novel problems (Cortright, Collins, & DiCarlo, 2005). As noted by Cortright, Collins and DiCarlo (2005), peer instruction activities, such as editing the stories, can be directly tied to these critical thinking skills because "[l]earning with understanding and transfer requires the student to actively choose and evaluate strategies, consider resources, and receive feedback" (p. 111).

A traditional anatomy and physiology course does not employ creative writing (Osbourn, 2006), and although this technique may be considered unique for STEM classrooms as a whole, it has great pedagogical potential because it compels students to develop novel ways of using content knowledge. To do this, students must employ critical thinking from the upper divisions of Bloom's taxonomy (synthesis and evaluation) to demonstrate mastery of content knowledge within a style unfamiliar to an anatomy and physiology classroom (Paul, 1985). Because students are working in a round-robin situation, writing about various physiological systems as well as reading what other students have written, content knowledge is continually reinforced (Cortright, Collins, & DiCarlo, 2005) as the narrative progresses. Thus, on the one hand, groups are expected to form consensus, yet each group dialogically encounters every other group. On the other hand, the nature of the assignment tries to maximize the heteroglossic potential by blending in concert all student voices as well as both academic and home discourses. As a knowledge review, this assignment is an effective technique, based on data gathered over the past seven years on pre-post testing that estimates the loss of content knowledge between semesters (Petzold, Nichols, & Dunbar, 2016).

Moreover, the assignment was designed not only to review class material but also, with the contact zone in mind, to temporarily cede power to the students. To get students started, the assignment provided the following writing prompts and encouraged using one of the instructors as the protagonist of the stories:

(a) paddling a canoe unsuspectingly into approaching rapids
(b) running to his/her gate from the airport bar
(c) swimming after enjoying a picnic of hot dogs and watermelon with his/her family
(d) dancing at his/her cousin's wedding after eating a huge piece of wedding cake
(e) touring a fine art museum while on vacation in an exotic locale
(f) enjoying a hike in the mountains after a large dinner with wine

The invitation to use an instructor as the protagonist provided students a chance to playfully "lash out" at the instructors as a form of resistance. The hilarity and shared communal activity of reading and writing stories that featured the instructor in humiliating and/or painful situations could release any tensions and/or negative emotions lingering from the first semester of Anatomy and Physiology. It was assumed that students who chose to use instructors as characters would do so in ways that would likely humiliate or, at least, disempower their instructors. Moreover, the implied invitation to discursively disempower the instructors could also function as a sort of catharsis or an "affirmative purgative" to break down the divide between the teacher as authority and the student as novice as a potentially celebratory or liberatory pedagogic act (Davis, 2000 p. 242). Breaking down the boundaries and conventions of the classroom invites centrifugal possibilities for other ways of knowing that could validate students' home knowledge that they are otherwise being asked to abandon. Abjectifying the academy in the person of the professors turns the tables, at least for a moment, casting the privileged knowledge and discourse of academia as bathic while championing the slangy home language and knowledge students are most comfortable with. Because of the round-robin technique, even students who had not initially chosen to feature an instructor as a protagonist would engage in crafting stories in which they could do anything to their instructors, thus participating in the potentially cathartic act.

Students exceeded the initial expectations, frequently seeming to relish heaping humiliation upon humiliation upon at least some of their instructors. The "zone of contact" created by the assignment changed into a carnivalesque public square in which students often reveled in raising and decrowning an instructor as a sort of classroom king. According to Bakhtin, in carnival "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, this is noncarnival, life are suspended . . . what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)" (Bakhtin, 1997, p. 251). The situation—writing in the classroom with fellow students, with the invitation to "decrown" the instructors—created a ritualized, communal environment in which hierarchies were reversed. Like traditional Boxing Day celebrations, the "subalterns"—the students—were, at least discursively, temporarily in charge in an anything-goes environment. All the normal classroom etiquette and deference could be suspended on paper. However, "a new crowning already glimmers" (Bakhtin, 1997 p. 252)—students realize that class business will begin again as normal at the next period. While the exercise definitely empowered students, it also showed the dangers of the contact zone (Miller, 2002), with stories that instructors sometimes felt went beyond the pale of civility.

On the one hand, the stories were clearly meant to be playful—humorous, harmless slapstick romps in which students could "get back" at their instructors for a rigorous first semester. On the other hand, many of the narratives veered into misogynist and homophobic joking that could be harmful to instructors and students alike. Research has not been done to gauge if these microaggressions posed actual harm to students, but it seems safe to assume that they would contribute to a generally more hostile learning environment. As Farmer (2001) cautioned, "Subversive laughter . . . may not be all that subversive. . . . [C]arnival's primary function is to insure that the authentically transformative moment is missed or forgotten, that the emancipatory possibility is siphoned off by a thoroughly orchestrated laughter" (p. 135). Additionally, the round-robin technique, while creating a communal

atmosphere, could also create a coercive one, pressuring students to participate in discursively humiliating those in positions of power—and possibly in misogynistic, homophobic, or other bigoted joking. It is a prime example of the tyranny of consensus, in which marginalized voices are disempowered to speak out against the oppressive ideologies of the overculture.

This assignment highlights both the freedoms and the dangers of contact zones. The open invitation of this contact zone resulted in a degree of raunchiness and off-color joking for which the instructors were often unprepared. Although the instructors in question took the joking in stride so as not to violate the trust created and necessary to maintain the assignment as a contact zone, their ability to do so was more than a marker of their institutional power. It was also a marker of the power of their privileged identities. This assignment reveals that the freedoms and dangers of the contact zone are not equal for all. Social privileges conferred by race, gender and other identities are inescapable and make the zone of contact more dangerous for some. So while an assignment like this fosters trust and student empowerment, it can also place an undue emotional burden on instructional staff and students with marginalized identities.

Creative Writing in Anatomy and Physiology

The creative writing activity was employed during the first few weeks of Anatomy and Physiology II, a continuation of a course from the first semester. The students were mostly traditional-aged college students coming from within 50 miles of campus. Approximately 70% identify as female and 17% identify as persons of color.[1] While students are not required to take the second semester of the series, over 80% of students do. Stories from this activity were collected over seven years of teaching, resulting in a total of 177 submissions with an average of 1.3 main characters (protagonists, antagonists or supporting human characters) included per story. Present in some stories every year, instructors were featured at varying rates, from a high of nearly 85% (81.4%) to a low of less that 25% (20.5%), reflecting both instructor carry-over from the previous semester as well as instructor personality and dynamic (see Figure 1). Gender seems to have played a significant role in how the students treated the professors in this assignment. In general, the male professors were subjected to a wide range of humiliating, emasculating, and effeminizing happenings, whereas the female professors were almost always cast either in maternal, nurturing roles or infantilized as young girls.

The two-course Anatomy and Physiology series has always been taught by at least two instructors. All four instructors of the course during the time these stories were collected are white and cisgendered. Professor A, male, is in his mid forties; Professor B, also male, in his early-mid thirties; Lecturer C, female, is in her late 30s and Lecturer D, also female, is in her late 20s. Professor A led the course for four years—two with Professor B and two with Lecturer D. Following this, Lecturers C and D taught the course for two years. Most recently, Professor B rejoined the course and taught with Lecturers C and D for one year. Professor B and Lecturer D are part of a team that teaches the first course in the two-course series and has for the entire time mentioned. Professor A no longer teaches in the Anatomy and Physiology series but is still a figure at the institution.

It would seem that having the same instructors both semesters made students feel more confident about discursively disempowering them. This suggests that their experience in the first semester made them trust that their professors would not punish or penalize

them for their creative writing shenanigans. When instructional staff changed from semester to semester, fewer students were willing to take that chance, although several still did, and the nature of the round-robin meant that all students participated in the discursive disempowerment. For a specific breakdown of the inclusion of differing characters, see Figure 1.

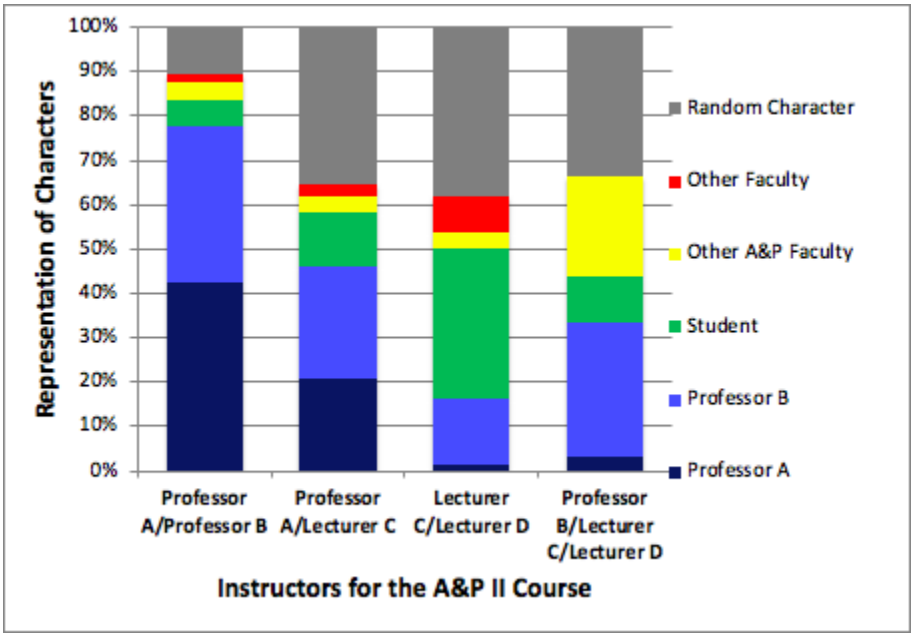

Figure 1. A breakdown of the individuals who were involved in the course during each year represented within the activity and the distribution of characters in the stories. Random characters included celebrities and unknown characters.

In each of the stories, students were encouraged, but not required, to use the professors as characters (shown in the prompt above). With the changing instructors associated with the class, a change in the representation of the instructors as characters within the story can be discerned. At the onset of the activity, more than 75% of all stories included either Professor A, Professor B or both. When Professors A and B left the course, the inclusion of these instructors as characters diminished as well. This change was most apparent in the years when Lecturers C and D were leading the course. When Professor B rejoined the course, not only did his inclusion increase, but the inclusion of instructors as a whole increased to nearly 50%. The continual use of Professor B as a character in years that he was not included as an instructor of the course seems to point to a need for discursive disempowerment as a form of purging the previous semester's frustrations. Despite Professor B's inclusion in these stories, Lecturer C and other faculty associated with the first semester course are not included, most likely due to the perceived power of Professor B in the initial course.

In some cases, students put extra effort into their stories, producing illustrations by editing the instructors' headshots from their faculty bio pages onto other images. These photo manipulations not only provide additional instances of the described reductions in power but also demonstrate the effort that students devoted to the assignment—going

beyond the requirements of the story to reduce the perceived power of the instructor. Additionally, these images indicate the trust the students had with the professors in question, considering the professor in the images is often the one grading the assignment. It should be noted that students were more apt to include an image with a professor during years in which either Professor A or Professor B was the lead instructor in the Anatomy and Physiology II class.

Round-Robin Writing as the Public Square

Inherently heteroglossic, the round-robin technique created the "public" or "carnival square" that Bakhtin identified as necessary for the carnivalesque. With students reading and contributing to all stories, including the ones that playfully disempowered or humiliated the instructors, the stories become communal acts in which "*everyone* must participate" (Bakhtin, 1997, p. 255). This communality allows the assignment to act as catharsis, cleansing the classroom of the tensions remaining from the previous semester. Because the assignment creates a carnivalesque atmosphere, the humorous stories evoke "carnivalesque laughter." According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque laughter, always "directed toward something higher," is a means of dealing "with *crisis* itself" (Bakhtin, 1997, p. 254)—the crisis of beginning a new semester of rigorous coursework.

All three of the traditional theories of laughter can explain this catharsis. The activity allows the students to feel superior (superiority theory); the activity trucks on the incongruity of professors behaving in outlandish ways (incongruity theory); the activity allows for the release of pent-up energy (relief theory). More recent work often seeks to reconcile these theories. For example, Nick Butler (2015) contended that laughter and humor "play a socially normative role in organizations through processes of ridicule and embarrassment" (p. 43). Humor in organizations, like a university course, can subvert the power structure while also acting as "a kind of 'safety valve' for the expression of discontent, offering light relief from the pressures of work" (Butler, 2015, p. 44). However, humor encouraged or instigated by managerial persons can actually act in a repressive way upon subordinates (Butler, 2015; Plester, 2015). In contrast, Brian Boyd (2004) argued play is often the foundation of humor and laughter. Play is often marked by mock aggression and surprise. What keeps the mock aggression from becoming real aggression or violence is that "both sides [recognize the activity] *as* play" (p. 10). Moreover, that recognition acts as a social binder uniting those engaged in humor or play. Boyd continued, "playing socially with our expectations reinforces a sense of solidarity, a recognition of the huge body of expectations we share; it trains us to cope with and even seek out the unexpected that surrounds and can extend those expectations . . ." (p. 16).

On the one hand, the round-robin situation makes the assignment socially binding. The students collectively engage in the toppling of the professors from the hierarchy, even when they had not chosen to begin their story in such a way. They all can collectively engage in laughter at the expense of their instructors, and they can do this because they trust that the instructors will recognize the stories as play, as mock-aggressive, instead of as true aggression. This is possible because "no one was safe" (Pratt, 1991, p. 39; see also Davis, 2000), including the professors. By allowing themselves to be featured in the student stories without limits, the professors positioned themselves as vulnerable, fostering trust in the classroom. Vulnerability and trust are key components to play and to teaching within a contact zone. On the other hand, the collective laughter also reinstates the status quo of the

normal, workaday classroom. Thus, although the laughter is directed *at* the instructors, it is done so in some ways *at the behest* of them, and could therefore actually be coercive. Students might feel compelled to use their instructors in the stories in order to meet instructor expectations. Moreover, because students are required to continue the stories begun by other students, students who might not be comfortable roasting their instructors were, to an extent, coerced into doing so. Thus, the round-robin technique is also socially binding as a coercive activity that reinforces both the hierarchical power of the instructor as well as oppressive sociocultural ideologies at large.

Decrowning the Classroom King

During the medieval Carnival, a mock king, either a chosen individual or an effigy, was crowned, only to be decrowned and debased. The caricatures of the instructors, especially those of the male instructors, function as "effigies" of the "king" that could then be toppled and "burned." The stories delight in the variety of ways that the "symbols of authority" could be "taken away" (Bakhtin, 1997, p. 253). In fact, the stories abound in ways that the instructors get discursively "ridiculed and beaten"—and subjected to various other humiliating occurrences in the stories. This section will examine two frequent toppling techniques, physical violence and scatalogical humor. (See Figure 2 for proportion of these reductions and other categories included in story submissions.)

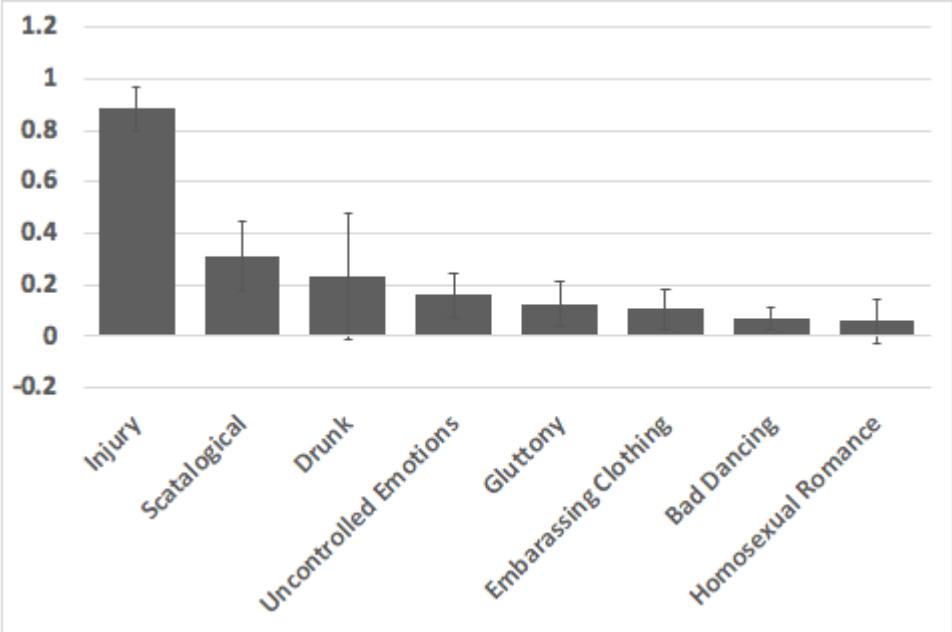

Figure 2. Average proportion of story submissions that include the specific types of reduction in power of the characters within the story across all years (n=177 total submissions; error bars represent standard deviation). For further descriptions of these categories and exemplary quotations, see text.

> Twirling about and trying to throw the squirrel off, Professor B tripped and rolled off a cliff, breaking his femur and scapula, into a toxic waste dump site.

> After some brief motivating and reassuring autocrine interaction, Professor A clenched his fists and guarded his facial bones from fracture. About to throw the first punch, Professor A recognizes the glint in the caveman's cornea. It was that of his old colleague, Professor B. Professor A recalled how much he despised his old colleague, re-clenched his fist, wound up and punched the caveman in the zygomatic bone.

Physical violence was one of the most frequent humiliations to which the instructors were subjected, resulting in an injury to the subject in nearly 90% of all stories (88.4% with a range from 76.4%–100% of all stories in a given year). Whether caused by clumsiness (the first example) or through aggression (the second example), the violence was always cartoonish and slapstick. The bodily humor of slapstick is the grand leveler, allowing the audience to laugh at the mishaps of the protagonist from a place of relative safety, and, typically, the more audacious the violence, the greater the laughs (Casper, 2015). Thus, in the first example, the instructor not only breaks bones, but does so by being attacked by a squirrel—a tiny rodent literally topples the towering instructor into "toxic waste." By subjecting the instructors to slapstick violence, the stories highlight the frail, physical bodies of the persons who represent the mind, intellect, and knowledge in the classroom. In fact, in the second example, Professor B is a "caveman," primitive and abject. Both examples reduce the "mind" to frail human—or subhuman—bodies, with the added irony that knowledge of that body literally cannot save these anatomy and physiology instructors.

In terms of traditional theories of humor, subjecting the instructors to a slapstick comeuppance could allow students to feel superior as well as to vent frustrations. However, slapstick is funny because the audience knows it is fake (Casper, 2015). The students might write physical doom upon their instructors, but a glance up from the screen shows the instructors physically sound and still really in charge. Thus, a "new crowning glimmers" and the humor acts as a safety valve that allows the status quo to continue.

> Professor A realized he had just peed his pants! He was horrified! The Girl Scouts pointed and laughed.
>
> However, before [Professor A] could reach the restroom, he tripped over a little blonde toddler sitting in the middle of the terminal. Professor B, confused by his partner's erratic behavior, saw the mishap and fell to his knees in uncontrollable laughter, causing him to lose control of his own bladder.
>
> Professor A wanted nothing to do with it as he rushed to the bathroom with Professor B tailing him in a hot pursuit. That buffet went right through them.

Perhaps it is unsuprising that many stories featured scatalogical humor, since the urinary and excretory systems were some of the systems the students were expected to review (30.8% included on average, ranging from 14.3%–52.9% in a given year). However, scatalogical humor almost always worked to "decrown the king" by inflicting public humiliation on the male instructors through loss of bowel or bladder control. The scatalogical humor in the stories functions as "carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringing down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities . . ." (Bakhtin,

1997, p. 251). Contemporary American culture has deemed excretory functions private, taboo, so the revelation of them in public—at least in a fictional setting—tends to elicit laughter, whether it is uncomfortable tittering or loud guffaws. Both examples above set up classic slapstick scenes—two grown men engaged in rough-and-tumble activity that veers into absurdity. The self-soiling further disempowers the male professors by depriving them of bodily self-control, essentially infantilizing them. The "publicness" of their excretory mishaps subjects them to the derision of the fictive audience of which, vicariously, the students are a part.

Troubling Gender

> The mother of the group, [Lecturer C], warned everyone to put on sunscreen, but only [Lecturer D] listened. . . . Unfortunately, [Professor A] and [Professor B] felt the rays burn deep into their skin . . . resulting in a trip to the hospital due to the severity of the burns. Upon arriving at the hospital, [Professor A] and [Professor B] were scolded again by [Lecturer C].

Gender is one of the most salient and potentially troubling aspects of the creative writing assignment. Only the male professors were subjected to blatant humiliations. The female lecturers, when they appear, are either infantilized or cast in maternal roles, which is unsurprising. Research shows that students *expect* female faculty to be nurturing (Dion, 2008; El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, & Ceynar, 2018; Tindal & Waters, 2017;). Additionally, since the female lecturers are ranked lower than the tenured/tenure-track male professors, perhaps the students felt like it was less fair to attack them, that it was the higher-ranked male professors who needed to be brought down. It would seem that, in this Anatomy and Physiology classroom, the male professors embodied hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2008). Indeed, being able to "take a joke" is considered a desirable masculine trait (Plester, 2015). Thus, the stories work to remove the male professors' hegemonic status, yet, at the same time, by focusing on the power of the male professors, the stories also reaffirm their hegemony—an apparent case of the king is dead, long live the king.

In American culture, masculinity is generally associated with power, control, and authority, whereas femininity is more associated with nurturance and passivity. These associations are evident in studies on student evaluations of instructors, as young, female instructional staff are generally rated lower than their male counterparts (Bartlett, 2005; Mitchell & Martin, 2018; Uttl, White, & Gonzalez, 2017). Because femininity is already definitionally disempowered, by amping up the instructors' femininity, the students are effectively further distancing the female instructors from power. At first glance, in the example above, the apparent hierarchy is reversed, with Lecturer C being imbued with the greatest amount of authority and the other three instructors being cast as children. However, this casting also taps into gender stereotypes—Lecturer C maternally "warns" and "scolds," while Lecturer D is cast as the stereotypically obedient girl-child. The disobedience and seeming punishment of Professors A and B are actually manifestations of male privilege/power, because as male children, they are culturally authorized to disobey the scolding mother figure. So while the mock aggression disempowers the male professors by casting them as childlike and subject to the lower-ranked female professor, at the same time, the hyper-feminization of the female professors also functions as a form of disempowerment.

The hyperfeminization of the female lecturers is a comparatively benign instance of the inherent misogyny (and concomitant homophobia) that runs throughout the stories. Tapping into the cultural beliefs that disassociate femininity from power and authority, many stories tended to emasculate the male professors—to take away the trappings of masculinity, like dominance and control—and/or to effeminize them—to make them "woman-like" and/or gay in order to disempower them.

> After glutinously stuffing his face with hotdogs [sic] and watermelon [Professor A] decided to take a dip in the nearby watering hole. With crumbs stuck in his beard he slowly submerged his bloated body into the murky water.
>
> While mourning the loss of the firm crunch of his snack foods, suddenly, a wild rabid beaver (who had a remarkable resemblance to [Professor B]—potentially due to the beard factor) appeared! "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh, this rabid beaver is fear inducing!" thought [Professor A], as he recoiled at the sight of the foamy faced fiend.

Masculinity in American culture is associated with control—especially control over the body. Taking away bodily control decrowns the classroom king. (The scatalogical examples explored earlier are one means of depriving the male professors of hegemonic masculinity.) Both examples above feature Professor A being deprived of self-control—either through gluttony or fear. Fear is an obvious inversion of masculinity—men are supposed to exhibit "no fear" as the old ad campaign used to urge. Further, Professor A is terrified of a "beaver" that looks like Professor B. This emasculates Professor B by reducing him not only to a small animal but to one that is also a common slang for female genitalia.

The effeminization of the male professors as a means of disempowerment is perhaps the most troubling aspect of this assignment because it highlights how deeply embedded gender stereotypes and misogyny are in American culture. The students likely found it "natural" to effeminize the male professors in order to disempower them—it's still an insult to do anything "like a girl" or to be a "bitch" or a "pussy." Thus, students frequently effeminized the classroom hegemonic men by making them "like women" or like gay men. Sometimes this was obvious. For instance, in one manipulated image, Professor A's face was pasted upon a noticeably female torso that was seated next to a child's body, upon which Professor B's face was affixed. More typically, however, the trappings of femininity were slightly more subtle.

> The minute amount of ethanol contained in [Professor B]'s basically virgin flirtini drastically inhibited the release of the antidiuretic hormone from his posterior pituitary gland. He was quite the light-weight.

Professor B is effemized as a "lightweight" drinking a beverage coded as feminine—a "virgin flirtini." The ability to drink excessively, especially among the college-aged population, is coded as essential masculine behavior in American culture. Numerous stories feature the male professors over-imbibing, usually on some version of a "flirtini" or other similarly feminine-coded drink. Other stories more explicitly portray the male instructors in homoerotic situations.

> As Professor B and Professor A paddled along the romantic Mississippi River, because nothing says romance like the great Mississippi, Professor A whispered softly, "Professor B, I'm getting hungry.". . . Professor A slowly leaned over and whispered softly in Professor B's ear "This was the best day ever."

Despite the growing acceptance of homosexuality in American culture, gay masculinity is still a subordinated masculinity, and gay men are still often portrayed as not "real men"—as too feminine, lacking in self-control and power. Thus implying someone is "gay" is often a way to disempower or discredit them. (For a recent example, look at many of the Putin-Trump jokes floating around. Many, if not most, are homophobic in their results if not their intentions.[2]) In the example above, the implication of homosexual romance evinces discomfort with male intimacy—physical closeness needs a feminized buffer. Without one, the specter of homosexuality rears its head. Two men in a canoe—or two men together in the front of the classroom—is a discomfiting spectacle. Additionally, the "I'm getting hungry" seems to tap into stereotypes of gay men as sexually voracious and lacking self-control.

Just as it likely seemed "natural" to tap into the misogyny deeply embedded in American culture, students also, likely unthinkingly, utilized homophobic discourse to disempower the male professors. Undoubtedly, if asked, most of the students involved would probably say they think it's okay to be gay and would be appalled at being accused of gay bashing. In fact, one story did feature another department faculty member who is openly gay, and he was not subjected to obvious ridicule or humiliation. However, he was cast in a maternal role, playing up his perceived "femininity" and further distancing him from the hegemonic masculinity represented by Professors A and B. As Bakhtin (1981) cautioned, "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated with the intentions of others" (p. 294). The heteroglossic nature of language means that student intentions to simply "be funny" cannot escape from the inherent misogyny and homophobia in contemporary American discourse. In fact, it means that they end up tapping into that in order to "be funny." Moreover, students who might recognize the inherent misogyny and homophobia of the effeminizing elements of these stories have little recourse but to participate. They can try to steer the stories in other ways, but the coercion of peer pressure is hard to resist. In much group work, the tyranny of consensus shuts down dissenting voices in order to maintain the hegemony of dominant ideologies.

Clearly, this creative writing review assignment, while meant to empower students, has its dangers. It is easy to imagine that the humor of the stories might be more vicious and/or malignant for instructors who are not white, cisgendered, and/or able-bodied. As it was, the instructors involved found themselves often taken aback by the "humorous" vitriol leveled at them. Additionally, the round-robin, "public square" aspect of the assignment could create a coercive situation in which students are required to read and pressured to write stories that engage in off-color joking with which they might be uncomfortable or could even interpret as microaggressions against their own identities. This assignment has the potential to further marginalize LGBTQ, differently abled, and woman-identified students by tapping into the negative stereotypes that abound in popular discourse and fusing them further with an academic discourse that is already overburdened with similarly oppressive

ideologies. Instead of being liberatory, the humor that emerges from this assignment works to intensify what might already be a hostile learning environment for marginalized students.

However, at the same time, the creative writing review assignment does work well pedagogically, as students synthesized and evaluated material from the previous semester in a classroom that possibly facilitated this work through an experience that can be cathartic and empowering for many students. The collective, carnivalesque atmosphere turns work into play and allows students to invert the normal, workaday hierarchies of the classroom. This collective provides a semi-anonymous venting of these frustrations while still providing an opportunity for self-empowerment. The slapstick humor of the assignment allows students to engage in a playful form of "decrowning" the "classroom king"—setting up caricatures of the course instructors and them subjecting them to ridicule and humiliation. The carnivalesque provides a cathartic release of pent-up frustrations, which, in the second semester, would primarily be frustrations about the work and relationships of the previous semester and the trepidations for the upcoming workload. As this project moves forward, it is crucial to revise the assignment so that the liberatory possibilities are maintained, yet marginalized students might not only be protected, but also invited to participate. Rather than putting constraints on discursive choices at the beginning, perhaps this could be done by holding a feedback session in which students are asked to metacognitively reflect on the implied power relations and ideologies of their story choices. Not restricting discursive choices at the outset is important for reassuring students that faculty won't punish them for the imminent decrowning. However, the opportunity for metacognitive reflection after the assignment could provide a chance to create what Pratt (1991) calls a "safe house" (p. 40)—a space where students can reflect and heal.

In fact, a key factor for this assignment to function as intended is trust—students must trust that their instructors will not punish them for daring to "decrown" them by subjecting them to the humiliations of the carnival king. A high-impact, practice-driven, student-centered pedagogical atmosphere would be necessary to build such relationships between faculty and students. The anonymity of the large lecture hall would perhaps increase the inherent dangers of the assignment by bringing out the worst in disaffected students. Even in the smaller classroom setting such as the one in which this assignment has been used, instructors might be unwilling to engage in such a potentially deprecating activity. The social standing of the two male professors—cisgendered, straight, able-bodied, white men—ultimately protected them from whatever discursive humiliations the students might hurl. Nothing the students might write could actually remove them from their places on the social hierarchy. Instructors with less privileged identities might not feel safe putting themselves at the mercy of students. Thus, while this assignment may indeed work pedagogically, it is also susceptible to the "perils of the contact zone" (Pratt, 1991, p. 37). In the contact zone created by this creative writing review assignment, "No one was excluded, and no one was safe" (Pratt, 1991, p. 40). While such inclusion and such freedom can be exhilarating, it can also be coercive and dangerous.

Notes

[1]Student data were collected with approval from the Institutional Review Board protocols 1008E87333 and 0908S71602 (2008–2017; 2017–ongoing).

[2]Some examples include shirtless photos of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump riding a horse. See #TrumpOlympics (2018).

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