Editorial:
Humour and Environmental Education

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Abstract

Feminists, according to Sara Ahmed (2010), "kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism" (p. 582) and their interventions are often "read as about the unhappiness of feminists rather than about what feminists are unhappy about" (p. 583). The same might be said about environmental educators who have a reputation in some quarters for being "killjoys" who peddle in doom-and-gloom (Verlie & CCR 15, 2018). While environmental educators often do raise discomforting issues in their efforts to disrupt and transform the unsustainable and inequitable status quo, are we the universally dour bunch such stereotyping suggests? The three of us would say not. Like Ahmed, we have found, "There can be joy in killing joy" (p. 592) and such joy can bubble up, for example, when we work with kindred spirits committed to a shared purpose or when we witness others having an "a ha" moment. Alongside the impassioned pleas and occasional harsh words, peals of laughter can be heard ringing through the conference halls, windowless rooms, Zoom meetings, and other sites where environmental educators gather together professionally.

While scholars have been increasingly attending to the emotional and affective dimensions of environmental education, including discussing grief, loss, solastalgia, anxiety, despair, hope, love, care, and empathy (see Ojala, 2022; Pikhala, 2020; Russell & Oakley, 2016), until this Special Issue, humour had received minimal research attention in environmental education research. At the time we were drafting the Call for Papers, we found a paper that discussed humour as a trigger for emotional engagement in outdoor education (Hoad et al., 2018) as well as brief mentions of humour in descriptions of pedagogical practices (e.g., Chandler et al., 2020; McKenzie et al., 2010; Publicover et al., 2018; Russell, 2019) and in writing on Indigenous approaches to environmental education (Cole, 2012; Korteweg et al., 2010; Lowan-Trudeau, 2019).

On one of the edges of environmental education, however, a flurry of research activity related to humour and climate change communication has been occurring (e.g., Anderson & Becker, 2018; Boykoff & Osnes, 2019; Chandler et al., 2020; Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020; Osnes et al., 2019; Skurka et al., 2019). In their review of English-language literature focused on

humour in climate change communication, Miriam Kaltenbacher and Stefan Drews (2020) noted that the results of the various studies differed, with some indicating humour distracted from serious messaging and dampened credibility while others revealed increased engagement, awareness, and actual or intended behaviour change. Kaltenbacher and Drews suggested, then, that "it is currently unclear whether using humor in environmental communication is doing more harm than good" (p. 718). Since that review, numerous papers have since been published that delve into diverse forms of climate change communication. For example, Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictoran (2022) analysed Swedish comics' messaging about climate justice and gender as a form of "comic activism." Other scholars attended to the humorous signs used by children and youth in student climate change strikes (e.g., Catanzaro & Collin, 2021; Hee et al., 2022), with Matthew Hee, Anna-Sophie Jürgens, Anastasiya Fiadotava, Karina Judd and Hannah Feldman (2022) observing how students' use of wordplay like "fossil fools" (p. 7) and pop cultural references such as "Leonardo DiCapro's [sic] girlfriend deserves a future" (p. 9) enabled students to not only engage in political discourse by critiquing politicians' positions and inaction, but to reach their peers using "humor styles that appeal to their particular age group, such as satire and nihilism" (p. 16) and "build communication skills that effectively capture and move audiences" (p. 19).

Of course, it is not only climate change that has tweaked researchers' interest in humour and environmental communication. As just one example, Caty Borum Chattoo and Lindsay Green-Barber (2021) reported on a project in which investigative journalists worked with stand-up comics to develop a show about toxic environmental contamination. In post-show question-and-answer sessions, "audience members asked for additional information and endeavored to more deeply understand the complicated toxic contamination issues explored through the comedy" (p. 210) and later reported in post-show surveys that the show helped them feel better informed.

There is much potential in such "eco-comedy," Geo Takach (2022) argues, when comedy and environmentalism share two imperatives: "(a) to critique business-as-usual and (b) to set the stage for positive change" (p. 372). Those two imperatives also are predominant in scholarship on the uses of humour in other social change movements. Humour has been part of political protests in diverse political contexts, "from open democratic societies to harsh repressive regimes" (Hart, 2007, p. 1) because of how it can help speak truth to power (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Obadare, 2009; Sørensen, 2013). According to Anna Frey (2021), "Defiant humour and laughter are dangers to the dominant order" (p. 8). No wonder, then, that humour has "long been used to confront privilege, weaken the power of oppressors and empower resistance" (Branagan, 2007, p. 470). Feminist activists, for example, "have long recognized and taken up laughter as political action" (Frey, 2021, p. 7), including the Raging Grannies using "satirical song and creative performance to draw the attention of public and authorities to peace, social justice, and environmental issues" (Roy, 2006, p. 141), the Missile Dick Chicks

using humour in their anti-war "performance activism" (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007), and the Knitting Nannas using "craftivism" to add "a creative, joyful, and calming influence" to anti-fracking protests (Larri et al., p. 40). Humour has also been helpful for building solidarity in social justice movements and alleviating the stresses of activism that can lead to burnout (Bore et al., 2017; Branagan, 2007; Curnow et al., 2021). Joe Curnow, Tresanne Fernandes, Sinéad Dunphy and Lila Asher (2021), for example, investigated how youth climate activists used "snark," which they describe as humour "that relies on sarcasm, biting wit, irony, self-deprecation, and, often, anger" (p. 949), to express righteous anger, trouble problematic group dynamics, playfully enhance group cohesion, and engage in collective care-work. They also observed how "snarky humour played a key role in politicizing young women climate activists [and] facilitated uptake of feminist politics by affirming and opening space for critique" (p. 950). Humour, they argue, can enable rich social learning, a process Curnow et al. dubbed "pedagogies of snark" (p. 949).

Other scholars working in educational fields that have close ties to social movements have also pondered humour's potential, typically building on more general inquiries into the pedagogical potential and pitfalls of using humour (e.g., Banas et al., 2011; Garner, 2006; Gordon & Mayo, 2014; Morreall, 2014). For example, Anita Bright (2015) and Raúl Alberto Mora, Simon Weaver and Laura Mae Lindo (2015) have written about humour in social justice education generally, while Angel Hinzo and Lynn Schofield Clark (2019), Garry Jones and Colleen Gloin (2016) and Shannon Leddy (2018) have focused on Indigenous education, Cris Mayo (2018), Mairi McDermott and Kim Lenters (2021) and Jonathan Rossing (2016) on anti-racist education, Michalinos Zemblyas (2018) on Holocaust education, Eleni Loizou and Simoni Symeonidou (2019) on critical disability education, and Majken Sørensen (2016) on activist education. Using humour to tackle thorny topics is tricky, of course. Jones and Gloin (2016), for example, have observed how Indigenous anti-colonial humour can reveal White settler students' "collusion in colonial violence. Discomfort, embarrassment, shame and guilt can often ensue, and these responses are complex for teachers and learners to negotiate" (p. 538). They argue, however, that using humour in this way is worth the risks. So too does Leddy (2018) who asserts that humour "has a soothing effect, especially in the face of grappling with difficult concepts and situations, and can ease the tensions that often arise in Indigenous education classrooms. Used judiciously, humour is a powerful tool for decolonization" (p. 10).

As the papers in this Special Issue will illustrate, humour also may be a powerful tool for diverse forms of environmental education. The eleven papers in this Special Issue offer a variety of perspectives on the ways humour features, or could feature, in environmental education, and their inquiries are situated in both formal and informal sites of learning and focus on different comedic forms. The papers adopt a range of methodological approaches and theoretical frames, drawing not only on environmental education research and humour studies, but also scholarship in affect theory, anti-racist and Indigenous education, climate change

communication, critical pedagogy, ecocriticism and language arts education, feminist theory, human-animal relations, media studies, new materialisms, philosophy, psychology, public pedagogy, science education, and social movement studies.

The Funny Papers

When the three of us were young, the "funny papers'' referred to a section of a newspaper that contained cartoons. That cultural reference is growing increasingly meaningless with the decline of print newspapers, but cartoons still persist even if they are now more likely to be found on websites and circulated on social media. The first paper in our Special Issue, "The Generativity of Feminist and Environmental Cartoons for Environmental Education Research and Teaching" traces one such history, following the career of renowned Australian cartoonist Judy Horacek and the ways in which academics, particularly environmental education scholar Annette Gough, have used her cartoons in their teaching and research. Taking a duoethnographical approach informed by critical and feminist theory, Gough and Horacek discuss how and why her cartoons can offer potent fodder for environmental educators.

Eve Mayes and Evan Center also draw on feminist theory as well as affect theory, critical literacies, climate communication, and social movement studies in their paper, "Learning with Student Climate Strikers' Humour: Towards Critical Affective Climate Justice Literacies." Using photographs to illustrate their points, they explore the pedagogical potential of student strikers' use of humour, noting how teachers could build on such these student-created artefacts as starting points, which would allow them to attend to and examine students' affective responses to climate texts and have students mobilise humour in making their own creative contributions to climate justice.

Two other papers also investigate the possibilities associated with students moving beyond being recipients of humour to actively producing it themselves. In the first, "'It Was Funny at First'": Exploring Tensions in Human-Animal Relations through Internet Memes with University Students," Tuure Tammi and Pauliina Rautio explore how students creating, sharing, and discussing memes enabled them to question anthropocentrism and human supremacy. Noting the students' complex emotional responses to the memes they generated, they argue that memes are not merely "innocent entertainment" but instead can offer incisive social commentary that enables students to create space to consider human-animal relations in nuanced and sometimes unexpected ways.

In the second, Angelo Spörk, André Martinuzzi, Florian Finder, and Heike Vogel-Pöschl assessed the impacts of having business management graduate students write and perform humour sketches in a sustainable development course. In their paper, "When Students Write Comedy Scripts: Humor as an Experiential Learning Method in Environmental Education," they describe how they helped students develop comedy-writing skills so that they could effectively

convey their knowledge of various environmental issues in engaging ways. The authors found that using humour in this way not only enhanced students' critical thinking and creativity but also helped them cope with the fear and anxiety that can come from delving into difficult topics.

Shifting from the sketch comedy used by Spörk and colleagues, Emma Carroll-Monteil probed the educative potential of a similar form, stand-up comedy, in her paper, "Is Climate Change Education a Laughing Matter?" In an online survey of 62 people of diverse ages from around the world who had watched a 30-minute clip from environmental economist and stand-up comedian Matt Winning's *Climate Strange* act. She found that participants not only enjoyed watching the show but found it informative, and also that they felt less fearful about climate change and somewhat more hopeful after doing so.

Stand-up comedy is a staple of television these days as are scripted comedies. In the next paper, "From *The Fresh Prince* to *The Politician*: Climate Change Frames in American Scripted Television Comedy 1990-2020," Katherine Carter uses frame analysis to trace how climate change has been depicted over this 30-year period. While not often featured in scripted comedies in the United States, when climate change did appear, the depictions were rarely positive. Poking fun at "obnoxious environmentalist" characters have persisted over the 30 years, while earlier in the time period, jokes about the benefits of a warming climate were common although these appear to have given way to more nihilistic joking about the futility of climate action.

Another example of a media form that sometimes contains humorous elements is interactive games. One such game and the ways in which it has been used pedagogically is the focus of John Cook, Ullrich Ecker, Melanie Trecek-King, Gunnar Schade, Karen Jeffers-Tracy, Jasper Fessmann, Sojung Claire Kim, David Kinkead, Margaret Orr, Emily Vraga, Kurt Roberts and Jay McDowell's paper, "The Cranky Uncle Game: Combining Humor and Gamification to Build Student Resilience Against Climate Misinformation." Adapted from Cook's *Cranky Uncle vs. Climate Change* cartoon book, the game is designed to provide "active inoculation" against misinformation about climate change. In this exploratory study of three settings where the game was used (an undergraduate biology course for non-majors, an undergraduate climate-science course, and a town sustainability committee contest), the authors identified ways in which the game worked very and challenges that could be addressed in future versions to maximise the game's inoculation potential.

As noted in the Cranky Uncle paper, game developers often update their creations in response to feedback, just as educators seek to improve their practices. In the next paper, "Humor and Humility for Inclusive Nature Education," Juan Miguel Arias describes how a group of mostly white educators working for a non-profit residential outdoor education program that serves mostly low-income students of colour reflected on and honed their uses of humour over the course of a year-long ethnographic case study. Arias found that the educators used humour

in a variety of ways to create provisional safe learning spaces, for students and themselves, to enable engagement with novelty and discomfort.

Also concerned with creating inclusive learning spaces, Shannon Leddy reflects on her own pedagogical uses of humour in her essay, "I Am Not a Camper: Confessions of an Indigenous Urban Environmental Educator." As a Métis person who has taught in both university and school settings, she takes inspiration from Indigenous scholars and uses storytelling to highlight the importance of relational approaches in education. Sharing vignettes from her experiences using community mapping, art-making, and video creation with students, she sheds insight into the potential of humour for facilitating learning on and with the land and for delving into difficult knowledge.

The final two papers in the Special Issue take a different tack to think about humour and environmental education, one focused on absurdism and the other on irony. In "A Good Hell": Absurdist Insights for Environmental Education and Research," Greg Lowan-Trudeau discusses how absurdism has provided him with some personal solace while dealing with the challenges of living and working in the petro-province of Alberta, Canada. Noting that absurdism is not only about being silly and satirical but also about grappling with existential questions, he uses examples of absurdist literature, theatre, and activism focused on sociopolitical and environmental dynamics to identify opportunities absurdism could open up for environmental education.

Stefan Bengtsson and Jonas Lysgaard pursue a similar line of inquiry in their paper, "Irony and Environmental Education: On the Ultimate Question of Environmental Education, the Universe and Everything." They discuss how irony need not be merely a humorous way of pointing out the absurdities of contemporary times, but also can help tease out and trouble the field's ontological and epistemological assumptions about knowledge, teaching, and learning. Drawing on an array of Western pop culture artefacts such as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, films like *Pink Panther*, *2001: A Space Odyssey,* and *Arrival*, a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic, an Alanis Morrisette song, and a meme about the potato/non-potato binary, Bengtsson and Lysgaard playfully explore what an ironic approach could offer environmental education.

Funny Futures?

As editors, the three of us are pleased that this Special Issue contains a good variety of papers, reflecting a range of theoretical and methodological influences. The papers also focused on a number of different sites of learning, both formal and informal, and there was some geographic diversity as well, with authors hailing from eight different countries (Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Aside from Leddy's paper that was deeply grounded in Indigenous traditions, however, this Special Issue has a very Western feel. Further, with no papers from Africa, Asia, or Central and South America, we recognize that we are offering a limited perspective on humour and environmental

education. And that matters, especially since what is found funny is historically, culturally, and contextually specific (Jiang, Li, & Hou, 2019; Schermer et al., 2019). As one example, in a recent literature review Tonglin Jiang, Hao Li and Yubou Hou (2019) argue that "Westerners and Easterners' views toward humor fundamentally differ from each other. Westerners regard humor as a desirable trait of an ideal self, associate humor with positivity, and stress the importance of humor in their daily life. On the contrary, Easterners' attitudes toward humor are not that positive" (p. 2); they also suggest "that Easterners tend to use less aggressive but more affiliative humor than Westerners" (p. 3). Humour research in general has been dominated by studies conducted on convenience samples of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic) post-secondary students from the global North, which has been highly problematic for the field given many researchers have generalised these findings, "resulting in many misconceptions regarding cultural universals and variation" (Bryant & Bainbridge, 2022, p. 8).

We also need to attend to which environmental educators have the luxury of being found funny. Since we know that course evaluations by university students are often influenced by gender, racial, and other biases (see Heffernan, 2022), it does not take much of a leap to imagine that particular environmental educators may find it riskier to use humour in some contexts. Thus we concur with Cory Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman (2020) who suggest, "Interrogating comedy's power dynamics and understanding who is telling the story – from what vantage point and identity and experience" (p. 191) is vital. There is ample evidence of how sexism, racism, and other biases influence how funny comedians are perceived to be (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020), and that dynamic might also be at play in environmental education. Who is more likely to be seen as funny and who is more likely to be seen as a killjoy?

These are important questions to ask, especially with the rise of "edutainment" in environmental education (Lloro, 2021; Topp et al., 2019), where capitalist pursuits of profit can result in the oppression of humans and non-humans and thus offer a disturbing hidden curriculum (Lloro, 2021). Still, as many of the papers in this Special Issue illustrate, humour does have the potential to support social, environmental, and climate justice. It is not a magic bullet, of course, since, as Chattoo and Feldman (2020) note, it "cannot, on its own, produce sweeping change at the society level. But it *can* galvanize attention, spark conversation, change how some people think and feel about social issues and groups, and foment activism" (p. 38). Humour also can help people cope with stress and trauma, which Hee et al. (2022) argue "can help not only to deal with feelings of despair and pessimism in the face of environmental crisis and urgency, but also to regulate these negative emotions so as not to become overwhelmed or rendered inactive" (p. 4). While Lowan-Trudeau mentioned how absurdism provided him with some personal solace, no papers in the Special Issue really delved deeply into the ways in which humour might be used by environmental educators as a form of self-care. Teresa Lloro-Bidart and Keri Semenko (2017) note that environmental education scholarship has paid little attention to self-care, including how it can be a political act especially when it accounts for

wider systemic factors that impinge on our work. We would like to know more, for example, about whether and how environmental educators use humour to cope with environmental and climate grief, address compassion fatigue, or relieve the pressures that come from the emotionally fraught labour in which we engage.

This section lists just a few of the questions we continue to have about humour and environmental education, and the authors of the papers in this Special Issue also identify a number of future research needs. We do hope that this Special Issue sparks further research and conversations. Not least because we concur with Takach (2022) who writes, "eco-comedy is not an end in itself, merely a means to one. It does not blunt our planetary blitzkrieg. And it certainly doesn't sugarcoat it. But it does offer new ways of seeing—new possibilities—as alternatives to the discursive fog polluting the public sphere. It both plays on and calls on our collective creativity, irreverence, mutuality, and perhaps the most primal quality demanded by our pivotal, cognitively dissonant, environmental moment: hope" (p. 373).

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