MODEL PROPOSAL FOR ENGL 5339 (DIRECTED STUDY)*

ROBERT UREN

STAND-UP COMEDY: THEORY & TEXT
SUPERVISING FACULTY: DR. ROBERT DONAHOO
FALL 2010

RATIONALE FOR DIRECTED STUDY:

The purpose of this directed study is to create a structured, academic space in which I may pursue a familiarity with and participation in current trends in humor scholarship, with a specific focus on theoretical analyses of stand-up comedy texts. Pragmatically, the course will culminate in my producing an academic writing sample that will demonstrate my ability to function at a high level within the arena of graduate and professional-level critical studies; this demonstration is intended to facilitate my admittance into and success within a PhD program in the field of American Studies, Communications, or English. Less pragmatically, though perhaps more importantly, the course is designed to intensify and formalize my efforts to understand and critique intelligently—to read and respond insightfully to—popular comedic texts, an ambition that informs my scholarly, creative, and personal pursuits.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Increase understanding of academic literature concerning humor
- Enhance knowledge of literary criticism
- Develop ability to analyze texts theoretically within critical frameworks
- Produce original academic writings that contribute to the burgeoning field of stand-up comedy research

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The proposed directed study joins literary criticism, humor studies, and existing stand-up scholarship for the purposes of analyzing stand-up comedy as text. Literary theory and criticism are crucial to the critical evaluation and theorization of any text. Humor studies provide theoretical frameworks invaluable to the analysis of comedy. Recent studies of stand-up comedy utilize both literary criticism and humor scholarship to read stand-up comedy as text. The course features not only a comprehensive survey of stand-up comedy scholarship but also introductions to relevant literary criticism and humor studies.

Despite its popularity, stand-up comedy is among the less theorized, less analyzed media that, to some degree, identify, articulate, and assess cultural meaning for popular audiences. On television, the cable network Comedy Central features stand-up comedy daily, the premium cable channels Showtime and HBO have a long and ongoing history of airing stand-up

* In your proposal, please follow the general format of this model, adapting as necessary to your own topic.
“specials,” and the broadcast networks regularly feature performances. Finally, although we have seen the end of the stand-up “boom” of the eighties and early nineties, comedy clubs across the United States continue to host thousands of hours of stand-up acts each week. A broader conceptualization of what performances qualify as “stand-up” would increase the presence of the form exponentially, as it would comfortably include sketch comedy troupes and their “televisual” and film projects, late night talk show hosts, and even material converted from traditional stand-up acts for situation comedies and films. Stand-up comedy is a cultural phenomenon in need of deep readings and thoughtful discourse. My work for this directed study will be done in the spirit of meeting that need, however partially it is able to accomplish the broader aims.

**Evaluation:**

**Reading Responses Essays (20% Collectively)**

To organize my experience with the readings, I will present Dr. Donahoo weekly with informal one to three-page arguments in response to that week’s books, articles, and/or chapters. These papers will ensure some degree of comprehension and will, in some cases, grow into more substantial portions of the longer, more formal writings. These will not require formal evaluation beyond assessing their completion.

**Preliminary Writings (30% Collectively)**

I will write two five-page essays in preparation for designing the longer, more rigorous final paper. Each preliminary writing assignment will utilize a theoretical apparatus to read a stand-up performance, performer, or performer’s career.

**Final Paper (50%):**

The course readings and discussions will ultimately inform a publishable paper of twenty to twenty-five pages. The project will use critical works and original readings of primary texts to defend a clear thesis designed to enhance the existing theorization of stand-up comedy as a cultural artifact of consequence.

**Semester Grading Rubric:**

- Reading Response Papers ........................................... 20% Collectively
- Preliminary Writings ........................................... 30% Collectively
- Final Paper ...................................................... 50%
**WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

Dr. Donahoo and I will meet weekly to discuss readings and thoughts, according to the following schedule.

**WEEK 1 – HISTORY, HUMOR & STAND-UP:**

Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge.*  
Knoedelseder, William. *I’m Dying Up Here.*  

**WEEK 2 – PHILOSOPHY:**


**WEEK 3 – LINGUISTICS:**

Morreall, John. “Verbal Humor without Switching Scripts.”

**WEEKS 4 – RHETORIC & DISCOURSE:**

Wilson, Nathan Andrew. *Was That Supposed To Be Funny?*  
Greenbaum, Andrea. “Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument.”  
Pearson, Kyra. “Words Should Do the Work of Bombs.”

**WEEK 5 – CULTURE & FOLKLORE:**

---. “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation.”  
---. “Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster.”  
Dundes, Alan. Selections from *Cracking Jokes.*

**WEEK 6 – THE POSTMODERN:**

**Preliminary Essay 1 Due**  
Auslander, Philip. “Comedy about the Failure of Comedy.”  
Baudrillard, Jean. From *The Precession of Simulacra.* Leitch 1732-1741.  
Jameson, Frederic. “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.”  
Wuster, Tracy. “Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy.”
**WEEK 7 – PARODY, SATIRE, & IRONY:**

Colletta, Lisa. “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony.”
Ritchie, David. “Frame-Shifting in Humor and Irony.”
Shugart, Helene A. “Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy.”

**WEEK 8 – SOCIOLOGY:**

Shouse, Eric. “Role of Affect in the Performance.”

**WEEK 9 – BLACKNESS:**

**Preliminary Essay 2 Due**
Schulman, Norma. “The House that Black Built”

**WEEK 10 – GENDER:**

Auslander, Philip. “Brought to You by Fem-rage.”

**WEEK 11 – PSYCHOLOGY:**

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

**WEEK 12 – PSYCHOLOGY:**


**WEEK 13 – ABJECTION:**

Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. 
WEEK 14 – OVER-ORTHODOXY:

Final Essay Due
Keller, Florian. *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream*.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**BOOKS:**


**DISSERTATION:**


**THESIS:**


**ARTICLES AND CHAPTERS:**


**SELECTED STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCES**