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Greg Dean

The NLP of Comedy: the structure of jokes

Introduction

“The NLP of comedy?” you say with a quizzical look. “There is no NLP of comedy.” You are right. Until now. In addition to such fields as therapy, health, sales, and business, NLP is now being applied to the art and craft of comedy.

Who am I to offer the NLP of comedy? Well, I have been teaching stand-up comedy in Hollywood, California, for fifteen years. It all started out innocently enough. Having been a clown for Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, then a street performer in San Francisco, and a comedian at the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, I began teaching a few classes in stand-up comedy to augment my income. Since then teaching comedy has become my full time occupation.

When I began teaching, I quickly discovered that comedy had no fundamental technique. There were only platitudes like, “Some people *have it* and some people don’t.” Information about what this mysterious “it” was and how it could be acquired was nowhere to be found. So at first my “teaching method” consisted of telling my students how to rewrite their jokes and how they should perform them. This led to several heated discussions (the technical term for which would be arguments) with those who did not want to do it my way. They had the audacity to want to explore *their own* sense of humor, having somehow failed to recognize that mine was superior. Fortunately, I am a quick learner and rapidly came to the realization that the sense of humor is actually just a personal opinion. One person’s sense of humor is not inherently better than anyone else’s; what you think is funny is what you think is funny.

So I had to find another approach to teaching comedy. As fate would have it, when John Grinder and Judith DeLozier returned to teaching NLP, I signed up for their training. NLP came easily to me because I had already recognized many of the NLP concepts as they apply to comedy.