

# Don't make me laugh – this is risky business

## Louise Stoll

Ten years ago, I signed up for a seven-week stand-up comedy course. Why would a professor of professional learning put herself through such torture? Good question. Well, it was really all about leading for creative thinking. I'd led two R&D projects with 23 schools where we supported school leadership teams as they explored their own creativity. They were also considering how they might create conditions for colleagues to be creative in order to prepare pupils for their future in a changing world. In carrying out over 350 interviews during these projects, we found that school leaders needed to model creativity and risk taking<sup>1</sup>. When it came to sharing my findings with leaders, I thought it would be a bit cheeky of me to tell them they needed to try things that pushed them out of their comfort zone if I wasn't actually willing to do the same. So there I was, learning stand-up comedy, and ultimately performing in a final showcase for an outside audience.

Reflecting back on it – and on short improvisation courses I did afterwards – I realise how important this was for me. Soon after completing the course, I also managed to interview nine fellow participants – a diverse group of characters – about their experience. So these reflections are influenced by their stories.

Learning to create comedy is hard work! It may sound like a conversation with a friend or a throwaway comment, but successful comedians put a huge amount of graft into their routines. Yes, improvisation can be spontaneous, but even that's often crafted over time as improvisers refine their responses and techniques, as they develop adaptive expertise<sup>2</sup>. The truth is, making your family and friends laugh is altogether different from making a group of strangers laugh. So what makes it so challenging?

Here are just some of the things going on when you're trying to find a good topic. Attuning yourself to and being curious about what's going on around you is a must – you really have to start to notice things more, then dig to find out more about these to come up with a funny angle, and look for links between normal life and the absurd. In coming up with innovative ideas, you also need to play with them, not always knowing where they'll go, broadening your own horizons, thinking about and trying something new even if it makes you feel very uncomfortable, which it often did. Coming up with material was frequently very difficult, although it seemed to get easier with time, the more you did of it.

Preparing for each week often meant sitting down each day, developing and refining ideas, writing and rewriting, testing things out on willing, or not so willing partners, siblings, friends and pets (I'm never sure why the cat kept wandering off) then refining ideas based

on their feedback. Sometimes you'd feel really blocked and frustrated, not knowing if you'd ever get there with the ideas and how you could turn them into something engaging for your audience. But if you stuck with it – and that often didn't feel too good – something would eventually turn up. In class, you'd then get more feedback from your fellow course participants. That didn't always make for easy listening but honest feedback was really helpful. You also knew that it was an important part of the process to listen to and consider other people's reactions, including those of the tutor who was a stand-up comedian. Then, you'd have to go back and think seriously about people's responses and what refinements were necessary to develop your material further. And you'd go through this process again and again as you gradually worked up the showcase – the culmination of the course and an opportunity to try out everything you'd learnt and practised on an external audience – in five 10-minute minutes. But you'd feel elated at the end that you'd managed to do it, especially when people came up to you and said "there was no way I could have done that" – but you had!

Of course, all powerful professional learning has a positive impact. Of all of the outcomes of learning stand-up comedy ten years ago, the most notable one for the majority of us was feeling more confident, sometimes about doing stand-up but, more often, just general confidence day-to-day and when faced with different challenges.

Leading creative thinking can feel risky and requires a dose of courage. Doing stand-up comedy courses also involves an element of risk. There's always a chance that you'll bomb, whether in front of an audience or just your peers. It requires at least a bit of courage – ok, for this person, it required quite a lot of courage – I even told several people I would be doing the course so it wasn't easy for me to back out. But it was a truly valuable learning experience for life. And no, I've still not given up the day job or even tried out open mic nights, although I occasionally do an improvisation class to remind myself of what it feels like.

Co-writing *Creative Thinking: A Leadership Playbook* has reminded me powerfully of that experience. I wonder what connections you're making between leading for creative thinking and my experience in learning stand-up comedy.

If you want to read more, here's another blog I wrote shortly afterwards:  
<https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2013/10/16/why-learning-stand-up-comedy-is-no-joke/>

<sup>1</sup> The findings from the first project are published in: Stoll, L. and Temperley, J. (2009) Creative leadership: a challenge of our times, *School Leadership and Management*, 29 (1): 63-76.

<sup>2</sup> I've found Deirdre Le Fevre and colleagues' recent work in New Zealand on adaptive expertise particularly helpful: Le Fevre, D., Timperley, H., Twyford, K. and Ell, F. (2020) *Leading Powerful Professional Learning: Responding to Complexity with Adaptive Expertise*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin press.