

Author – meets – critic: The Humor Hack

By Sophia Stone, Associate Professor, Lynn University

What could Michael K. Cundall Jr. teach you about humor that you didn't already know? Well, quite a lot, actually.

Now, I know we are all 'experts in the field' or we wouldn't be here on a Friday discussing Cundall's book *The Humor Hack* – using humor to feel better, increase resilience, and (yes) enjoy your work. But I discovered something about humor that I didn't know and that I didn't know that I didn't know before. I learned that using humor isn't just a skill that one develops over time – Cundall's book has many practical exercises to increase your funny prowess – nor is it about some innate ability – but there is a special art or *technē* to it too, as the Greeks would call it, that has to do with *mindfulness*. Cundall doesn't use that word – but there are six places in the book that he appeals in some way to mindfulness or a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is usually couched as 'nonjudgment awareness' or some sort of meta cognition without judgment: the thinking of one's actions, the thinking of others and the thinking about one's thinking but withholding evaluation and letting things happen. I'm going to discuss these two aspects in Cundall's book – the skill of humor through practical exercises and the mindfulness of being funny. After extolling its greatness, I'll offer some criticism so that Cundall can offer a rebuttal, and not just 'thanks for saying the book is good'.

The practical exercises in the book are best done in a group setting where you have accountability – if others are doing it and you must share what you have done – you are more likely to do the exercises in the book. This is why *The Humor Hack* is best read with a reading group. Consequently, I did none of the exercises alone and saved them for us to do now. Here's one on pg. 12:

*We share a lot more in common with one another than we might first think. We just have to look. ... in a public space ... look around at folks you see. Find ways in which you're similar. What are qualities that you share? What are the differences? Is there anything funny about those similarities and differences? The similarities don't have to be deep, like a love of a certain type of food. They can be rather surface level. Hey, they're wearing a shirt like me (I hope). But you'll see that if you start on the surface, you'll start to see more and more similarities. Once those are in place, the humor can grow.*

Okay – so take note of the similarities and the differences of the person next to you, behind you and in front of you. Then state the obvious, but make it funny. [Here I'd like to play with the audience and see if we could spontaneously generate some humor – if there is silence, then I'll move on, quickly]

Okay – to make something funny takes a little technique and a little practice. Let's take for example, the 'in itself'. Cundall doesn't talk about the 'in itself' but he does cite his own work to make a point (21, 66). "The research itself," we can call it. One technique Cundall uses is what I call the boomerang – when Cundall was talking to an operator over the phone about a payment, the operator said, "you can use any credit card to make a payment," then he replied, "can we use yours?" Cundall must have had this technique for a while, since I remember him using it on Facebook when the LPS was cancelled during a hurricane. When I posted that our place didn't get hit, Cundall replied, "we should have had the conference at your place." – which to me was funny because I was living in a two-bedroom apartment with four people. "We should have (done X) at your (y)" is a hilarious quip when said right in the right context, at the right time. Remember the boomerang.

I learned from Cundall what a 'call back' was. Cundall writes that "A callback is a joke or remark that references something that happened earlier in the same setting. For a comic, it's something they said earlier in their set," (37). I noticed my Rabbi doing this today in services, but she wasn't funny. But we should use call backs, especially in a class or a meeting with a student, because it shows we are paying attention. The call back assures the comedian that the audience is paying attention when they laugh, same with leading a meeting. There is something delightful about hearing a call back too. Cundall doesn't mention this, but Aristotle in his *Poetics* says that we delight in learning, especially when we learn by imitation. It is that regularity, the mimicry that the call-back signals to us, uniting the speaker and audience for that brief moment in time, recalling another prior moment in time. Speaking of going back in time, I learned about 'Rick Rolling' from reading Cundall's book. It's where you - click on this [link](#). As you figured out, rick rolling is an internet prank where the victim clicks on the link that redirects them to the 1980's Rick Astley's music video "Never gonna give you up." If I hadn't read Cundall's book, I'd have never known about Rick

Rolling. I don't know if I'll ever use it, but I feel like now I am in on a very inside joke. Now you know about it, too. Wikipedia has an extensive article on rickrolling to supplement your wisdom.

Cundall's book is full of humor and tips on how to be funny. What surprised me though was his attention to people's feelings. Usually humorists don't quite care about people's feelings – unless it will make someone else laugh. When Cundall creates handouts for his staff meetings, he leaves space for them to doodle. He writes, “Rather than fight these tendencies, I work with them. I give them space to be,” (36). When Cundall has just gone through security at the airport, he talks about this one time where he was having trouble putting on his belt. He felt bad, not for the few pounds he gained that made him find a new notch on his belt, but the people waiting in line after him. Then he looked ahead and saw a sign in white with black letters, “Recombobulation Area,” (62). That sign is a sign of using humor to cope with a sucky situation. He says in another chapter on Classrooms and Teaching Spaces that “learning is a process that requires us to be present,” (78). It seems an obvious truism, but this is where humor comes in. If you use humor in teaching, it brings the students out of their TikTok haze and calls them into the present moment. Again – just more evidence of Cundall's mindfulness approach to using humor. In a similar line of thought but different chapter, Cundall writes, “A crucial element to using and recognizing humor is you must be engaged as both a listener and a speaker,” (92). He's discussing digital spaces and the need to re-engage your audience more often than in real life. In one of his last exercises, in one of his last chapters, he self-consciously writes, as if commenting on the book-itself, “This was a pretty heavy chapter, so take a moment (or a bunch of moments) and relax a bit. Think about the things we covered, or don't. Just don't completely forget them...” (107) Cundall throughout his book is always thinking about his audience and the larger implications of his humor tactics teaching – it's this mindfulness that surprised me but delighted me the most.

However, be that as it may, there was at least one claim that Cundall makes in his Humor book that I disagreed with, and I have support from Victor Raskin's work on Humor to back me up. It's the chapter where Cundall applies the Kantian designation from the formula of humanity to treat oneself and others as an end in itself and not a mere means only. Within the context of treating people as human beings with agency and freedom, Cundall writes:

“As you work to develop these richer views of folks, you will find that humor flourishes in the spaces where things aren't overly regimented – where you see people strictly as means,” (35). This claim brought me back to grad school, sitting in on Victor Raskin's course on Humor, where

he pretty much said the opposite. Raskin was talking about the Soviet Union during the times the regime was most oppressive, the humor and jokes about the regime flourished and were most funny, though of course, the jokes were suppressed, and the people only told them in safe company. Yet that is because Raskin's theory of humor relies on opposing scripts. The more incongruous these scripts, the more opposing or oppositeness these linguistic scripts are, the funnier the humor is. In oppressed societies, especially in societies that don't work because of the lack of freedom, more humor is available. Salvatore Attardo in his book *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994) uses this example from Raskin (1985, 243): "Excuse me! Where did you get the toilet tissue?" "Oh, this is used, my won – I'm simply taking it home from the cleaners." (289) This example of humor conveys the inside information about the lack of toilet paper in the Soviet Union and the Russian people using humor to cope with the situation. There is a lack of toilet paper in the public beach bathrooms in Hawai'i too, but that lack is not due to economic failure but a supply issue from the pandemic. The point being that the more regimented, the more unjust treatment of workers, the more rigid our environments are, the more possibilities for humor – not the other way around. Freedom doesn't lead to joke telling and sharing, but oppression does. Why belong to the *Lighthearted Philosophers' Society*? Because philosophy as a professional discipline isn't all that welcoming, it is rather rigid in its expectations for writing and publishing, the job market is near impossible to penetrate, it has a history of being hostile to women and the infirm (especially to the blind) and can and has been used to support racist ideologies. Humor is the great coping mechanism to help with bad, unfortunate, or sad situations. It would have been interesting if Cundall took this turn in his book and suggested that leaders be crappy to their co-workers just so that they would have more to laugh at during closed doors when the boss is away. Yet, if Cundall had taken this turn in his book, there would be fewer copies sold and more joke telling at the boss's expense, which would lead to perhaps mutiny or non-cooperation in business and in classrooms, the kind of disunity Plato warns us about in the *Republic*, which necessarily leads to war – the kind of outcomes publishers and Deans want to shy away from. Cundall made the better choice – a noble lie all the same, but the better choice for positive outcomes.

Cundall's book *The Humor Hack* is well worth the time spent reading it. One comes away with a multitude of approaches to using humor in life and some mindfulness practices to follow as one adopts a more humorous approach to life. I did find 15 grammar mistakes, but aside from

those, the writing is excellent. Plus, the dog on the cover is super cute. If anything, it's a great coffee table book.

## References

- Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Humor Research, 1. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Cundall, Jr. Michael K. 2022. *Humor Hack*. Eugene: Resource Publications