

"ShE wHo lAuGhS laSt"

GeTTiNg fuNNy wIth

by Shoshana Magnet

Cet article décrit l'humour comme une stratégie employée par le Comité d'équité sexuelle pour gérer le « backlash » féministe et la propagande anti-féministe sur les campus.

How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb? Four. One to screw it in, and three to write about it. Groan you say. If this is what it means to be a funny feminist, you'd rather join the club for young conservatives. But no, wait, there's hope on the

horizon. In order to deal with feminist backlash on campus the Gender Equity Committee has developed a unique approach. Wondering what to do when confronted with anti-feminist propaganda on campus? Becoming disillusioned with albeit valuable strategies like protests, letter writing, and, most agonizing of all, meetings with the central administration? Well, we developed a unique approach. We decided to get funny.

Our new strategy has been working surprisingly well, and is known as our "She Who Laughs Last" campaign. Putting aside our slogans for the moment, we decided to be as funny as possible. Given that our core team consisted of Shanta, a self-defined introvert, Helen, who often spoke too softly to be heard, and myself, who has had her voice compared to mickey mouse on helium, the idea of busting up offensive discussions with raucous humour really did seem funny.

The Gender Equity Committee had developed buttons which had "I believe in womyn's rights" printed on them. We circulated them on campus, hoping to raise awareness about gender issues. Aside from the first mishap, in which the company decided the "y" in womyn must be a typo, we also had to deal with serious backlash. Ranging from such humorous *bon mots* as "Well, I don't believe in them," to "you forgot the "men" in "women," it was clear that

the campaign was going to be an uphill battle. We decided to start small. The next person to make a comment of a similar nature was going to be hit with a double whammy of (gasp!) feminist humour.

We were temporarily side-tracked in our plans by one of the more anxious members of our group, who kept telling us that farting was a winning strategy. "Men think farting's funny," she said, wringing her hands. "Men know how to laugh at farting," and desperately, "Maybe if we spell it 'fartyng'?" While we gave this some careful thought, we decided the political message in fartyng was, at best, unclear. Instead, taking the proverbial bull by the horns, we decided to give a smart answer back the next time someone hassled us about the spelling.

Sure enough, the next day at a meeting some guy made a remark: "Don't you girls know how to spell? Or is that gyrls with a y?" We stood stunned for a second, and then moved into action. Shanta farted (she'd forgotten). Helen said something that she said was really funny but that nobody could hear. I said something that was definitely funny but that nobody could understand. We decided to regroup.



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The next time we came under attack we got lucky. When one of the boys made a snide comment about the “y wannabes” in the corner, Shanta said “Just take your hand off your wyllie and relax! Haven’t you ever heard of an alternative spelling?” The beauty of the moment was that our friend had in fact been exploring his nether regions, as was confirmed by the alacrity with which he whipped his hand up to the table. While I can’t say that I would recommend this strategy for every boardroom situation, it does have definite advantages. But that lowered us to boys’ bathroom humour. No more ad lib, this time we would script our feminist funny lines in advance.

At the next meeting we were poised and ready. Still, when one of the boys said “Did you know that womyn spelled with a y has been exclusively used to denote whyners?” we froze. Then, from the far

end of the table, Helen said “No, of that I was unaware. But did you know that the *New York Times* recently defined ignoranus as someone who is both stupid and an asshole?”

Since then, we have found that we are gaining confidence. While it doesn’t always work—sometimes the boys don’t get it and you find that you’re the only one laughing (I still say that the joke about consulting the “y’s” womyn was a good one)—and sometimes the wittiest retort you can come up with is “Oh yeah? Well “y” not?”—having the campaign in mind has proven to be useful.

Picking up people and gathering strength along the way, one of the real advantages of the “She Who Laughs Last” anti-backlash campaign has been that it has helped to revive the feminist movement on campus. In part, it has done so by exploding the ridiculous stereotype of feminists as bitter women who wouldn’t recognize something funny even if they tripped over a rubber uterus. We have found that “She Who Laughs Last” has also helped to remind other women on campus that feminists are creative, dynamic people capable of doing a lot with a little. This has been fabulous for increasing the membership of the committee.

As a strategy on campus, to diffuse anti-feminist feeling, to rekindle interest in feminism at your university, and finally for the fun of it, I can now say that I highly recommend it. It’s our very own groan strategy. If somebody tries to tell you that it won’t work, because feminists don’t know how to laugh, or because it’s not funny, I recommend that you say the following: Feminists laugh: they just don’t laugh at what’s not funny.

Shoshana Magnet is a third year Arts and Science student at McMaster University. She is indebted to feminist friends and mentors, old and new, who hail from Ottawa to Toronto to Hamilton to Kars. Shoshana draws her inspiration from her mother (the most fabulous feminist of them all).

