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## Amy Carrell<sup>1</sup>: Humor Studies Education. Connecting Speakers with Research<sup>2</sup>

While people have talked about and written about humor, laughter, comedy, wit, and the like at least since Aristotle, only recently has humor research come into its own right as a legitimate and very serious field of inquiry. Humor research is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary, drawing from such areas as medicine, psychology, biology, computer science, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and more. The subject matter is, obviously, humor, and humor is drawing attention from almost every corner. Medical professionals are interested in the connection between humor and health. Business executives contemplate using humor as a means to better communication in their companies. Advertisers splash it across billboards and cereal boxes. The entertainment industry supplies a steady diet of humor for all media, in both audio and video forms.

Humor researchers are exploring and recording what actually is happening when, for instance, someone gets a joke or when someone laughs. Some humor researchers look at the differences between real, or felt, smiles and faked ones or at the humor in the works of a particular author, like Mark Twain.

Others look at the effects, measured empirically, of using humor, usually to elicit laughter, in particular settings or situations. Serious, aca-

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<sup>2</sup> Auszug aus: Humor-Magazin. Oktober 2/1997, S. 4.

dem courses in humor and laughter are even being offered on university campuses around the world.

One of the more prevailing areas of inquiry in humor research today is in the effects of humor on the human body and/or the human mind. Ever since Norman Cousins published "Anatomy of an Illness" in 1979, much attention has been devoted to the connection between humor and health. Most of the early information and discussions were anecdotal and unverified by empirical research. In the last decade, however, a number of very serious researchers around the world have turned their attention to the claims made in folk psychology and folk medicine about the connection between humor and health.

One of the unfortunate results of this attention to humor, especially to humor and health, however, is that today, many people around the globe are billing themselves as "humor consultants" or, worse, "humor experts" and selling their services – in essence themselves – to businesses and corporations, hospitals and schools, civic organizations and churches. Many of them even have their own newsletter, web sites, and catalogues from which they peddle their wares, including and especially themselves. Yet many of these "experts" have little or no background in or even knowledge of humor studies or research into humor and laughter. In many cases, in fact, their primary – and perhaps only – credential is that someone once told them they were funny.



*Amy Carrell und Patch Adams beim 4. Kongress 1999  
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Thus, there must be a means by which to educate and at least endorse speakers as a way to weed out the unqualified, the shamans and charlatans, from the fertile field of humor research and to produce responsible speakers, speakers who know the research, speakers who can support their claims about humor and laughter. As part of this education, the public, too, needs to become aware that, at least for now, there are the charlatans who promise far more than anyone – even the finest humor researchers – can deliver.

Note: It was in response to the concerns articulated above that the author developed the International Humor Studies Seminar in 1996 at the University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma, U.S.A. The Seminar, an annual event endorsed by the International Society for Humor Studies, provides participants with intensive humor studies education. Seminar faculty and speakers have included Jessica Milner Davies, Christie Davies, William F. Fry, Rod A. Martin, Alleen P. Nilsen, Don L. F. Nilsen, Elliott Oring, Victor Raskin, Willibald Ruch, and Michael Titze.