



"NOT A LOT NEEDS TO CHANGE STRUCTURALLY IN THE WAY PEOPLE LEARN, BUT TEACHERS NEED MORE HELP."

—David Siminoff

SHMOOP

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COMEDIC RELIEF AS THE REMEDY TO REVIVING FATIGUED STUDENTS

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Humor is an extrovert. Isolate him to his own company, confine him to stand-up comedy acts and a stage, and you quash his versatility. But if allowed to socialize and mingle with a crowd of other topics and fields, he will flourish.

Education is one field that often finds itself quarantined from humor. Who among us departed adolescence unscathed by the dreaded textbook? The monotone voice, the many pages with large word counts, the incessant barrage of fact after fact after fact—is it any wonder that students feel beaten down? David Siminoff, chief creative officer and founder of teaching website Shmoop, sees comedic relief as the remedy to reviving fatigued students. As he sees it, “learning shouldn’t feel like a root canal.”

When asked about Shmoop’s unusual name, Siminoff responds, “It was my grandmother’s catch phrase for pushing something forward a little bit. She would say, ‘Shmoop me my chocolates.’” Siminoff views the education system in a similar manner. “Not a lot needs to change structurally in the way people learn, but teachers need more help. You need a little more intimacy, a little more student engagement and motivation.” Evolution rather than revolution, he summarizes.

Like CliffsNotes and SparkNotes, Shmoop offers countless resources (many of them free) in school subjects such as math, science, literature, and social studies. However, unlike its predecessors, Shmoop’s mission is to “speak student” in order to act as an “academic WD40 to take away friction from learning.” The online

courses and learning guides are infused with imagination, word-play, pop culture references, and wacky humor in the vein of Monty Python, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *The Simpsons*.

Siminoff is responsible for penning all the original learning guides and continues contributing creatively, but he has his business-savvy wife, Ellen, to thank for the boost in revenue. It was Ellen who expanded Shmoop’s website, and it was Ellen who made the learning guides accessible to iPhones, Kindles, and NOOKs. She is now the company’s CEO. Even their two children, Sophie and Ben, have influenced the site. In fact, they are to thank for a special set of literary guides—the outcome of a persuasive argument favoring the literary merit of the Harry Potter series.

As Shmoop gained popularity, it advanced to new territory. One added section for test prep combats foreboding acronyms like SAT and ACT. “Because if we can make something that’s ‘ohmigod awful’ simply ‘bad,’ we’ve really achieved a lot, believe it or not,” Siminoff chuckles. Other sections look beyond high school and address College Readiness Prep, College 101, and a careers page. And in order to accommodate visual and auditory learners, almost all of Shmoop’s pages are now accompanied by short, animated videos for further explanation. There are over five thousand of them—and they’re all narrated by Siminoff and his comedian’s drawl. “I’ll go in the studio for five or six hours at a time,” he says of the recording process.

Another constant staple throughout the Shmoop learning guides is concepts explained with the help of quirky metaphors. Polynomials are described as aliens that must be studied to understand their strange customs. Chemical bonding is romantic elements seeking stable relationships. And F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* is a “concoction of *Real Housewives*, a never-ending Academy Awards after-party, and HBO’s *Sopranos*. Shake over ice, add a twist of jazz, a spritz of adultery, and a little pink umbrella.”

Though the work is gratifying, the job comes with its share of challenges. “It’s one thing to make jokes about politicians,” Siminoff says, “but it’s very hard to make jokes about question #87 on the Chemistry AP exam.” Fortunately, Siminoff has a strong team backing him. As Shmoop’s LinkedIn page explains, they hire “only the finest writers from the world’s finest long-haired learning institutions (read: PhD students from Stanford, Berkeley, and Harvard).” The Shmoop team regularly rallies around shared Google Docs docs to brainstorm, generating ideas by writing in the margins.

“The jokes talk to everyone,” Siminoff says. “Shmoop is used equally by the poorest kid in South Philadelphia and the richest kid in some East Coast prep school.” The numbers speak for themselves—thousands of schools use Shmoop in their curriculum and over fifteen million students and teachers flock to the site each month. As Siminoff concludes, “Humor is wonderfully universal.”

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