

2015

# THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMOUR IN EDUCATIONAL STAFFROOMS

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/4187>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/1424>

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMOUR IN EDUCATIONAL STAFFROOMS**

**by**

**MARIA KMITA**

**A thesis submitted to Plymouth University  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**August 2015**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Staffroom humour constitutes an integral part of teachers' workplace culture and contributes to the quality of workplace relationships, yet it remains under-researched in the field of educational research. This thesis explores the importance of humour in relationships between teachers and its meaning for the overall workplace culture.

This research has two foci; one intended and one acquired. Originally this research was set up to investigate staffroom humour in three educational settings. However, humour between participants and I became another focus of the research. Therefore, apart from exploring how staff use humour in the staffroom and what influences staffroom humour, this research also explores how and why humour was used in interactions between participants and myself.

Research was undertaken in three post-16 educational settings in England. This takes the form of a case study and uses a mixture of qualitative methods: group and individual semi-structured interviews, unstructured participant observations and the collection of funny artefacts.

Findings show that humour at each workplace is distinctive and makes a unique contribution to workplace culture. Workplace humour is spatially and temporally conditioned. Space and time are crucial conditions determining the use of humour, more important than work politics. Different humour functions are located within workplace relationships and not outside of them. Workplace humour serves to construct, nurture or contest relationships. Contesting and the constructing/nurturing of relationships do not need to be mutually exclusive. Degrees of familiarity between staff, just like type of humour, serve as indicators of the type of work relationship. Familiarity is crucial in deciding who uses humour and how within the workplace. Humour used between participants and researcher reveals a number of expectations and complexities that humour research entails. It also shows how interconnected participants' and researcher's behaviours are.

What needs to be recognised is the value and role of humour in both relationships between teachers and the participant–researcher relationship. Humour research represents specific challenges and opportunities for rapport, data collection and access negotiation that should be explored further.

## **Contents**

ABSTRACT.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	10
AUTHOR'S DECLARATION.....	11
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	12
Rationale.....	12
Context of the Research .....	13
Justification for the Research .....	14
Research focus and methods .....	17
Researcher's positioning .....	18
The significance of the study .....	19
The thesis overview.....	19
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	21
Humour.....	21
Workplace culture .....	29
Workplace humour.....	30
Humour and workplace culture .....	35
Humour and relationships in the workplace.....	40
The theoretical perspective.....	47
Goffman, space and space related behaviour .....	48
Goffman on humour and relationships .....	52
Limitations of Goffman's theory .....	56
Hybrid spaces .....	60
The School staffroom .....	63
Humour in the School Staffroom .....	68
Conclusion.....	73
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	76
Symbolic interactionism .....	76
Paradigm.....	79

Qualitative methodology .....	80
Case study approach .....	81
Sample .....	85
Justification for the sample .....	85
Albatros .....	87
Lingua .....	88
Devon College .....	90
Work politics at the three settings .....	91
Workplace humour .....	99
Importance of humour .....	101
Types of humour .....	104
Humour topics .....	107
Workplace jokers .....	109
Humour boundaries .....	113
Research timeline and procedures .....	116
Research methods used in the first phase of the study .....	117
Group interviews .....	117
Unstructured participant observations .....	119
Authentic humour .....	119
The role of observations and the observer .....	120
Funny artefacts .....	122
Research methods used in the second phase of the study .....	124
Individual interviews .....	125
Funny artefacts beyond staffrooms .....	128
Data analysis .....	129
Analysis steps .....	131
Transcription .....	131
Analysis in the field .....	132
Transfer of the data to Nvivo .....	132
Coding .....	133
Development of a coding tree .....	135
Definitions .....	137
The themes .....	138

Final analysis steps .....	139
Ethical considerations.....	140
Study limitations.....	141
Summary.....	152
CHAPTER 4: HUMOUR RESEARCH ISSUES .....	153
Expectations.....	155
Complexities of the humour phenomenon.....	160
Method limitations.....	164
Researcher's behaviours .....	170
Rapport .....	171
Joining in .....	173
Purposefully ignored humour .....	176
Flattering.....	178
Chit-chat .....	179
Friendly teasing .....	183
Humorous comments.....	186
Self-deprecating humour .....	187
Facilitating data collection.....	197
Negotiating access .....	200
Participants' behaviours .....	203
Participants' provocations .....	203
Non-provocative humour.....	209
Summary.....	211
CHAPTER 5: HUMOUR AND RELATIONSHIPS .....	215
Humour and familiarity .....	215
Familiarity and formality of work relationships.....	215
Informal relationships.....	222
Humour and unfamiliarity .....	225
Humour and power .....	227
Humour functions.....	234
Constructing relationships .....	234
Nurturing relationships.....	241
Social lubricant.....	241

By the way humour.....	243
Survival and contest-to-nurture humour.....	249
Contest- to-nurture.....	253
Contesting relationships .....	258
CHAPTER 6: HUMOUR, SPACE AND TIME.....	267
Formal/Informal.....	267
Verbal humour.....	268
Classroom versus other spaces .....	268
Non-verbal humour.....	275
Space exclusion/inclusion .....	282
Social/individual spaces .....	298
Summary.....	302
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION .....	305
Key findings .....	305
Contribution.....	307
Limitations.....	309
Future research .....	310
Bibliography:.....	314
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>328</b>
Appendix 1a .....	329
Appendix 1b.....	330
Appendix 1c .....	331
Appendix 2a .....	332
Appendix 2b.....	334
Appendix 2c .....	337
Appendix 2d.....	339
Appendix 2e .....	341
Appendix 2f.....	342
Appendix 3 .....	345
Appendix 3a .....	347
Appendix 4a .....	348
Appendix 4b.....	351
Appendix 5.....	354



Appendix 5a .....	355
Appendix 5b .....	356
Appendix 6a .....	357
Appendix 6b .....	371

*This thesis is dedicated to my family. Thank you for my humour genes.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and prayers.

I am grateful for the support and advice I received from my supervisors Dr Ulrike Hohmann and Dr Liz McKenzie. I really appreciate the feedback I received from my examiners Professor Jocey Quinn and Dr Stephanie Schnurr. They created such a friendly atmosphere during the viva that I found defending my thesis a pleasure.

## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

I received a 3 years Graduate School Research Scholarship.

Publications (or presentation of other forms of creative and performing work):

Kmita M. and Mawhinney L. (in press). A Requirement and Challenge of Joke-ability in Humor Researcher: A Fusion Autoethnographic Analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*

Presentation and Conferences Attended:

Kmita M. (2013). Humour and work relationships. Unpublished poster presented at 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference of Pedagogic Research Institute and Observatory (PedRIO), Plymouth University, Plymouth.

Kmita M. (2012). 'Joke-ability' of humour researcher – a requirement and a challenge. The 24th Conference of the International Society of Humour Studies Conference, 24-29 June 2012 Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków.

Kmita M. (2011). Humour and its place in Teacher Training. International Conference 'Models and Tendencies in Education' 7 / 8 April 2011 Kraków – Dobczyce, Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny, Kraków.

Kmita M. (2011). The role of humour in training of resocialization pedagogues. National Seminar 'Contemporary challenges for theory and practice in resocialization', 13-14 October 2011, Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa, Wrocław.

External Contacts: n/a

Word count of main body of thesis: 94701

**Signed**        **Maria Kmita**

**Date**    **06/08/2015**

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research concerns the issues around the well-being of teaching staff, educational setting, workplace culture and workplace relationships that are all reflected in teachers' use of humour. Since the use of humour among teachers is most conveniently captured during lunch breaks in staffrooms (as this is one of few places where the staff meet), this research focused on staffroom humour, treating it as a mirror of workplace dynamics.

### Rationale

I have always been fascinated with humour, especially spontaneous humour and its unplanned, unprepared nature. To me spontaneous humour is one of the beauties of life. People's sudden bursts of laughter, quick sharp ripostes and the magically healing effect of humour on atmosphere in even the most serious and official situations have always roused my curiosity.

My interest in staffroom humour is linked to my experience of working as a Teaching Assistant in two secondary schools in England. I spent every single lunch break in the staffroom and participated in teachers' conversations and humour. I quickly realised how meaningful not just this space, but also the opportunity for interaction and joking with colleagues, was for teachers. I saw how humour helped teachers to reactivate, to regain strength, energy and motivation to go back to students and survive the next lesson. Staffroom humour acted as reviving elixir. These observations led me to focus on staffroom humour in my Master's thesis. My findings relied on data from questionnaires distributed among teachers and interviews with them. I felt that without examples of authentic staffroom humour my study was deprived of the essence of staffroom humour. I wanted to explore this phenomenon further and decided to write a PhD research proposal regarding staffroom humour. The PhD scholarship Plymouth University granted me allowed me to investigate staffroom humour in more depth using several research methods including observations. Observations allowed me to collect examples of authentic staffroom humour and so to experience and study its spontaneous nature.

## **Context of the Research**

The existing workplace literature shows a strong connection between humour and organisational culture (Westwood and Rhodes 2007; Miller 1996; Holmes and Marra 2002; Whiteley and Hessian 1997; Plester 2009; Stromberg and Karlsson 2009; Parker 2007) and humour and staff's relationships (Vitug and Kleiner 2007; Holmes and Marra 2002; Hughes and Avey 2009; Marra 2007; Holmes 2000; McIlheran 2006; Holmes 2007; Miller 1996; Poon Teng Fatt 2002) which justifies the focus on humour as a mirror reflecting workplace life in my research.

This research aims to show the importance of humour among teachers in an under-researched area: post-16 education in England. This PhD research explores the phenomenon of humour in educational staffrooms and therefore is situated within the field of workplace research that deals amongst others with workplace culture and workplace relationships. My research, like that of Kainan (1994) and McGregor (2004), offers to view educational settings not just as places where students learn but also workplaces for teachers and other staff. Looking at the educational settings from this perspective allows us to seek analogies between educational settings and other workplaces. 'In every educational setting there are multiple embedded contexts that define educational setting as a workplace' according to Kainan (1994, p.viii). Educational establishments have similar opening hours to many organisations and have structures, targets and staff meetings characteristic of many different workplaces. Teachers' work is assessed, controlled and subject to criticism as in most organisations. What is special about teachers' work is that teachers leave the staffroom (finish their break) and go to their classrooms where they are 'knowledgeable', and 'responsible', 'the only adult among many children' (Dreeban 1970, 1973, in Kainan 1994). Milanowski (2008) perceives

teaching as a multidimensional occupation. Teacher occupations are rated higher than average in terms of skills like learning strategies, monitoring, speaking, active listening and operations analysis and higher in activities like thinking creatively, coaching and developing others, assisting others, constructing and nurturing relationships, developing objectives and strategies, and judging qualities of things, services and people (Milanowski 2008). This, according to Milanowski (2008), suggests the analytic dimension of the teaching profession, which may often be overlooked, within and outside the educational policy community. This implies that the teaching profession entails a huge intellectual effort on a daily basis. What is more, and this is a distinctive feature of teaching, teaching is not seen as just an occupation. For teachers themselves it may be a mission as, according to Ted Wragg, there is no higher calling – without teachers society would slide back into primitive squalor (Wragg 2006).

### **Justification for the Research**

Having discussed the uniqueness of teaching as an occupation, I will now provide justification for my research on staffroom humour and then on conducting the study within the FE sector.

Mawhinney (2007; 2008) shows possibly the greatest difference between teaching and other occupations – namely very limited opportunities for interactions between adults. This explains why my research into workplace humour is conducted in the staffroom. Kainan (1994) notes, and this is particularly important to my research, that when teachers leave the classrooms and walk to the staffroom they turn into a team, a group of colleagues, spending this time unit together.

The gap in the research on the educational setting of the staffroom, and the need for further research into the importance of humour in staffroom life, was noted by Richards

(1996) who conducted his research in a staffroom within a language educational setting almost two decades ago. There have been very few studies on humour in teachers' professional lives since then and only two within the last few years (Mawhinney 2007; Miller 2008). They were both conducted in the United States and only the former used staffroom observations.

Overviews of humour research in education conducted by Martin (2007), Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez and Shr-Jie (2011) and Frymier and Houser (2012) show concentration on classroom humour thus leaving out teacher–teacher humour and staffroom humour. This indicates a certain disproportion within the area of studied population in humour research in education. There is a need for further research into workplace humour expressed in the contemporary workplace literature (Hughes and Avey 2009; Mawhinney 2008; Smith, Harrington and Neck 2000; Miller 2008; Wood, Beckmann and Pavlakis 2007; Cooper and Sosik 2011).

The need for humour research on staffrooms in an educational setting, and other congregational spaces, is emphasised by Mawhinney (2008) who says that teachers' workplace culture patterns are very often formed within congregational spaces and there is a limited understanding of such spaces as places serving social interaction to combat teacher isolation. Staffrooms fulfil an important role in teachers' work lives as they are one of the very few places within educational settings where teachers can have adult–adult interaction that provides social support by means of the use of humour (Mawhinney 2008). Humour may also fulfil other functions in teachers' conversations in the staffroom: the great intellectual effort and multi-tasking that characterise teaching may be revealed in various uses of humour. Thus this research aims to explore different humour uses in interactions between teachers. Since teachers represent a large and diverse occupational group, this research focuses on teachers of further education.



Situating this research in further education area contributes to filling a gap in the literature by focusing on teachers' relationships, workplace culture and staffroom humour in the understudied post-compulsory education area. Many studies into school staffrooms and teachers' humour have been conducted in the compulsory education sector (primary and secondary schools) leaving the post-compulsory sector under-investigated. My study concentrates on teachers in the FE sector not only because of its under-investigated nature but also the fact that the post-compulsory sector represents a various and fragmented area (Lucas 2013) and so interactions between teachers in the post-compulsory sector are worth looking into as they may reflect specific challenges of that sector. Teachers in the FE sector now have multiple roles (Robson 1998, in Spenceley 2006), have poor working conditions and experience burnout and low morale (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). The FE sector has experienced hard times in terms of funding cuts (Lucas 2013), policy changes (Lucas and Nasta 2010), increased bureaucracy (Edward, Coffield, Steer and Gregson 2007), marketisation (Lucas 2013; Bathmaker and Avis 2005), managerialism (Bathmaker and Avis 2006; Worrall, Mather and Seifert 2009) and work intensification (Worrall et al 2009). What is more, the competitiveness present in the FE sector has taken its toll on teachers and communities of practice in FE with teachers' communities becoming more based upon corporate culture (Ball 2003, in Spenceley 2006).

The problems of the FE sector are often problems of teachers in general who have less and less time and more and more responsibilities (Hargreaves 1994). What is more, becoming a teacher is often underpinned by an idealistic perception of what can be done through teaching, but the reality of today's teaching may be far from ideal (Bullough 2012). Bullough (2012) argues that 'under hostile conditions, teachers will find it progressively more difficult to teach as they know they can and should and more difficult to find pleasure in their work and in their relationships. Rather than to teach out of their deepest passions that

speak to the desire of connectedness and the need to care for and nurture the young, there is threat of a loss of intimacy, potentially of empathy, a flattening and fragmenting of knowledge, a rise in competitiveness, a diminished generosity and, as noted, a temptation to withdrawal' (p.290-291). In such circumstances, Bullough (2012) argues, it is difficult for teachers to be playful, optimistic and in good humour. At the same time he highlights the need for humour to be practised at schools to improve the wellbeing of both teachers and students.

My study focuses on three different post-compulsory settings, contributing to understanding of the diversity of post-compulsory provision in terms of funding, control, size, type and number of courses offered, number of teachers and their specialities, social opportunities for staff, staffroom set ups and lunch break arrangements. It also aims to respond to Bullough's (2012) call for taking into consideration the importance of humour for teachers in their daily lives.

### **Research focus and methods**

The original research focus was to explore the use of humour between teachers in a staffroom context at three FE settings and addressed the following research questions:

1. How do teaching staff use humour in the staffroom?
2. What influences staff's use of humour in the staffroom?

However, humour between participants and researcher became another focus of the research. The issues of the relationship between the participants and myself, and the use of humour between us, emerged during the fieldwork and became a crucial part of the study. Thus my

study explores both participants' use of humour among themselves and my use of humour with participants.

My study uses qualitative methodology to address the research questions.

Combination of different qualitative methods allowed me to explore the complex phenomenon of workplace humour from different angles. Interpretation of research data, on the other hand, was facilitated by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical version of symbolic interactionism complemented by the idea of hybrid spaces (Solomon, Boud and Rooney 2006). Using these theories as an analytical framework enabled me to explore interconnections between space, relationships and humour in the workplace.

### **Researcher's positioning**

Like any other qualitative researcher, I brought to my research my own subjective experience shaped by my culture and my views on reality and need to state my position explicitly to set a scene for understanding (Stanley and Nayar 2015).

I believe there are several ways in which I positioned my study.

Firstly, my culture — and, more precisely, Polish humour — had an influence on how I approached my research. I come from a culture where lack of political correctness is pervasive and generally cherished. This means that I was brought up in a culture where anything and everything could be a humour topic. Therefore, I have got used to people joking freely about anything without feeling judged or fear of being reported.

Secondly, my upbringing and family shaped my humour which in consequence shaped how I perceived and researched humour. I was brought up on comedies and cabarets we watched and analysed together as a family. My Dad provided us (me and my siblings) with an innovative training. He arranged a series of spontaneous humour sessions for us where we competed with each other to find the best ripostes and punchlines (see Kmita and Mawhinney in press). We all enjoyed this 'out-joking' each other. Humour runs in my family and is an important part of my character.

Therefore, both culture and my upbringing created a certain openness and tolerance for any humour types in me and allowed me to be 'joke-proof' (and not to get easily offended).

Finally, what positioned me as a researcher were the expectations both participants and I had with regard to humour research. Participants expected both the research and I to be funny and I believe that use of humour on the part of the researcher brings many benefits to humour research e.g. negotiating access, building rapport and authenticating/validating oneself as capable of doing humour research.

What is more, I genuinely believed that serious and pompous behaviour on my part could have been intimidating and made participants reluctant to express some humour in my presence. Therefore, to me, the potential effects of not using humour with participants seemed more risky than using humour with participants.

To sum up, my culture, upbringing and character were all evident in how I behaved in the field. My use of humour with participants encouraged participants to behave freely without inhibitions and made the research situation less formal and more comfortable. Thanks to my personal qualities participants dared to joke about things that could be seen as offensive /taboo.

### **The significance of the study**

As it has two different foci, my study may contribute to both the understanding of workplace humour in the context of FE, and understanding the complexities and challenges of researching humour. Exploring FE teachers' use of humour provides an insight into their workplace relationships and workplace culture. Those insights enrich our knowledge of the complex role of humour in FE teachers' professional lives that remains under-investigated.

Exploring and reflecting upon the challenges of humour research on the other hand contributes to rethinking approaches used to study spontaneous humour in the workplace. It also invites a discussion on the role of the researcher and their relationship with participants in the context of humour research.

### **The thesis overview**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the thesis.

**Chapter 2** explores literature on workplace humour and provides a theoretical perspective for the research. It firstly discusses humour in general: its definition, construction, types, forms, theories and functions. Then it moves to discussing workplace culture and workplace

humour. Literature about workplace humour is divided into two main streams: the functionalist view and a stream which moves away from the functionalist view on workplace humour. Subsequently, it presents how humour contributes to workplace culture. Humour and relationships in the workplace are explored next, emphasising the various effects humour may have on different work relationships. Theoretical perspective follows and comprises the presentation of Goffman's version of symbolic interactionism (1959) and Solomon et al's (2006) idea of hybrid spaces. The discussion of the limitations of Goffman's (1959) theory sets the ground for introducing the concept of hybrid spaces. Finally, the literature representing the very focus of the research (i.e. staffrooms and staffroom humour) is discussed. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the most influential literature, an identification of gaps in current research and a justification of my research focus.

**Chapter 3** covers details of the methodology and methods used in my research. The theoretical assumptions are explored and subsequently the choice of qualitative methodology and case study design are discussed. The three research settings are introduced and research process is explained step by step from the design through data collection to analysis. The advantages and limitations of the methods used in my study are debated and alternative methods are discussed.

**Chapter 4** represents a second methodology chapter as it provides reflection on the challenges and requirements of humour research by focusing on my use of humour with participants. It explores issues of expectations humour research entails, as well as expectations participants and researcher have to one another. The examples of participant-researcher use of humour expose the complexity and challenges of the studied subject.

**Chapter 5** contains research findings on staff's humour and work relationships. The 'Humour and familiarity' section offers insights into how humour is perceived and responded

to depending on how well work colleagues know each other. This provides an introduction to the 'Humour functions' section where the place of humour within workplace relationships is explored. The links between different humour functions are presented and the opposing functions of humour are emphasised.

**Chapter 6** contains research findings on humour, space and time. This chapter provides a spatial and temporal context for workplace humour. It firstly discusses formal and informal aspects of space/time. Secondly, it shows space as serving staff's inclusion or exclusion. Finally, it analyses the individual and social dimensions of space.

**Chapter 7** provides a conclusion of the thesis presenting key findings and indicating the ways in which this thesis has contributed to humour and workplace research. The conclusion ends with recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss existing workplace humour literature as well as theoretical perspectives relevant to my study. What is more, it serves to identify the gaps and challenges the existing studies on humour pose in order to present my research in relation to a wider humour research field. The literature review will start broadly with a definition of humour and its characteristics and will be followed by an overview of literature related to workplace culture. Subsequently, I will discuss literature on workplace humour, humour and workplace culture and humour and workplace relationships. Before narrowing the review down to school staffrooms and humour in school staffrooms, I will present an overview of theoretical perspectives used in my study.

### **Humour**

What is humour? Humour can be best described as an act of communication. As McIlheran (2006) put it:

Humour, when boiled down to its essence, is simply an attempt to communicate with others and have the message interpreted as being funny (p.267).

What is communication? Communication can be briefly defined as an activity between at least two people (sender and receiver). The essential elements of the basic communication model are: sender, message, channel, receiver, effects and feedback (Narula 2006).

Like communication, humour is a relational activity manifested by relationship between parties (Rancer and Graham 2012). Thus, as Rancer and Graham (2012) argue, humour communication has been analysed from two perspectives – production (focusing on humour sender) and appreciation (focusing on humour receiver). Humour production is an ability to produce humour and humour appreciation is an ability to enjoy humour (Miczo 2012). When talking about humour production and appreciation (two elements that make humour relational), it is important to discuss the role of humour sender and humour receiver (people involved in humour production and appreciation).

My thesis uses terms ‘humour initiator’ and ‘humour recipient’ to indicate respectively the person who directs humour towards another and the person who the humorous remark is directed to. In literature on humour there are various terms, on the surface synonymous with humour initiator and humour recipient. However, some of them convey slightly different meanings or have negative connotations. ‘Butt of a joke’ or ‘target’ for instance victimise the person humour is directed towards and at the same time make the person who directs humour look like an attacker. Besides, butt of the joke/ target and humour recipient may be two different people (butt/target being only the person at whose expense others are laughing; behind their back). ‘Humour creator’ and ‘Humour user’ on the other hand imply different relationships between a person and their humour. There is a difference

between creating humour and using it. A person using humour may not necessarily be the creator of the joke/humorous remark or anecdote. Besides, both the initiator and the recipient of humour may be described as humour users. Thus, the term 'humour initiator' seems optimal as it means starting humorous conversations/exchanges. 'Humourist', 'Humour performer' and 'Humour audience' are terms that, in the context of the workplace, may suggest staged or pre-prepared humour. Moreover, 'Humour audience' implies one-directional humour i.e. humour that is created for the audience but not by the audience.

The communication of humour can be active or passive depending on whether people construct it jointly (respond to/expand on each other's humour) or just react to it by means of laughter/smile without contributing to humour. Constraining the role of people to merely laughing at a humour performance does not reflect the dynamics of spontaneous workplace humour where the humour recipient may turn into the humour initiator and vice versa. However, there might be situations where work hierarchies position people as audiences.

Production of humour requires the humour initiator to channel humour messages to humour recipients. There are different channels whereby humour can be communicated. Humour can be verbal (spoken) but can also be communicated non-verbally by means of text, graphics, image (or a combination of thereof) or by body language. Humour is communicated via mass media such as television, books, cinema and the internet (Shifman 2007). Verbal humour can be communicated face-to-face but also by means of telephones or social communicators (e.g. Skype). Non-verbal humour can be communicated by means of letters, email, text messages and social communicators (Facebook, Skype, Twitter). Humour can be targeted at someone (at someone's expense) or not directed at a specific person - thus untargeted (Neuliep 1991).

Humour can also take up different forms such as anecdote, stand-up comedy and satire. Humour can concern many different topics such as: politics, sex, work issues, family



relations or fashion. Humour has many types such as irony, sarcasm, play on words, slapstick or fantasy humour (absurd humour). Humour can happen spontaneously or be reproduced (Hatch and Ehrlich 1993). Spontaneous humour does not require preparation and is an immediate reaction to a current situation, unlike reproduced humour that is rehearsed and retold.

Humour can be both intentional and unintentional as Martin (2007) shows. While intentional humour is a message intended to be funny, unintentional humour arises from linguistic misspellings, mispronunciations or errors in logic or physical mishaps or pratfalls (Martin 2007). Martin (2007) associates only intentional humour with spontaneous humour. However, unintentional humour can be created in spontaneous speech (Ross 1999) where a person does not want to produce humour but their message is received as humour. What is more, being unprepared fits the definition of spontaneous humour as proposed by Hatch and Ehrlich (1993). Thus it is assumed in my study that humour is either spontaneous (in my study both intentional and unintentional), or prepared or indeterminable (Bryant, Comisky and Zillmann 1979, in Richmond and Wrench 2012).

Regardless of whether it is spontaneous or prepared, humour has many functions with an overriding and most basic function of serving to amuse (Ladegaard 2009; Martin 2007; Holmes and Hay 1997). Many other humour functions are identified in humour theories: relief, incongruity and superiority theory. Relief theory concentrates on humour as a coping /survival mechanism as Raskin (1985) argues, providing relief from struggle, tension and strain.

There is general agreement that humour defuses tension and reduces stress (Vitug and Kleiner 2007; Lee and Kleiner 2005; Scott 2009; Mawhinney 2008; Skevington and White 1996; Shami and Stuss 1999; Smith, Harrington and Neck 2000; Morreall 1991). Incongruity theory is about humour as an entertainment device. It treats humour as play and emphasises

the importance of surprise in a joke (Raskin 1985). Incongruity in itself, as Rancer and Graham (2012) argue, is a violation of expectation. What is ‘originally perceived as one (often serious) sense is suddenly viewed from a totally different perspective (usually implausible or ludicrous) and the original expectation bursts like a bubble causing a pleasurable experience accompanied by laughter’. (Martin 1998, p. 25). According to incongruity theory, ‘humour involves bringing together two normally separate ideas, concepts, or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner.’ (Martin 1998, p. 25)

Superiority theory, in contrast to incongruity and relief theory, is based on hostility, malice, aggression, derision or disparagement (Raskin 1985). In light of this theory, humour serves to undermine, subvert, resist, criticise or ridicule something or someone. Such humour represents risks for the relationship between humour initiator and humour target or/and humour recipient because it is often used at someone’s expense. The consequences of using humour to ridicule or subvert someone can range from taking offence or provoking confrontation to loss of trust. At the same time, such humour can bring closer those who take part in ridiculing someone or something.

Raskin (1985) notes crucial differences between those three theories; incongruity theory is about stimulus (i.e. what makes humour funny), superiority theory characterises the relations or attitudes between the speaker and hearer (henceforth humour initiator and humour recipient) and relief theory comments on the feelings and psychology of the humour recipient only. Certain types of humour are associated with, although not exclusive to, specific humour theories. Pun is linked to incongruity theory (Attardo 2008), sarcasm or ridicule to superiority theory and abstract/nonsense humour to relief theory (Raskin 1985). Raskin (1985) and Lynch (2002) suggest that these three humour theories are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary to each other. Thus my study assumes multi-functionality of humour across humour forms, types, intentions and channels of communication. Humour

can fulfil many different functions regardless of how it is presented, constructed and communicated. It can also fulfil contrasting functions simultaneously, due to its paradoxical and dualistic nature, such as identifying and differentiating, controlling and resisting (Lynch 2002).

‘As humour functions to create one aspect in organisational culture, it is assumed to simultaneously create its opposite’ (Lynch 2002, p. 433). Humour can be used as a control by the in-group for establishing norms by means of resisting (laughing at) those who do not belong to the group (Lynch 2002). Lynch (2002) distinguishes safety valve resistance humour that resists without threatening or changing the status quo, thus representing resistance under control.

Certain types of humour such as banter (Plester 2007) /jocular abuse (Plester and Sayers 2007) and subversive humour (Warren and Fineman 2007) represent contrasting and complex functions. For instance banter/jocular abuse lie in friendly teasing whereby humour seems aggressive but builds solidarity amongst those involved in it, and at the same time excludes those who are not taking part in humour (Plester 2007; Plester and Sayers 2007). Subversive humour, on the other hand, subverts something or someone and at the same time acts as survival humour (Warren and Fineman 2007). Having discussed some characteristics of humour, it is time to consider the conditions for humour to actually work.

What makes humour funny? This, as Professor Robert Provine argues (Cockroft 2009), is precisely what makes humour so difficult to recall, and at the same time what makes it such a unique and unusual act of communication. What is needed for humour to work? Humour is funny when people are amused by it and successful when the message initiated as humour is recognised, understood as humorous and appreciated (Hay 2001). The dissonance between the intention and reception of humour leads to humour being misunderstood or ignored, thus failed /unsuccessful (Hay 2001). Thus humour, as well as being an act of

communication, can be also an act of miscommunication. My study assumes humour is a subjective phenomenon and its subjectivity is the very reason for humour being occasionally unsuccessful. The variety of ways in which humour is received is an obstacle to identifying humour as humour. Hay (2001) shows that reception of humour is complex for two reasons. Firstly, she argues that the process of establishing what should be counted as humour is rarely entirely objective. Secondly, there are different ways of reacting to humour. Hay (2001) shows that laughter is just one of many humour support strategies used by the receiver to signal recognition. There are, however, occasions where humour can be recognised as humour but not appreciated. There is thus a difference between humour being funny and humour being successful. What can be funny for the humour initiator may not be seen as funny by the humour recipient. However, this does not prove the humour unfunny but rather unsuccessful in reception.

This creates challenges for researching such a complex phenomenon as humour. Rancer and Graham (2012) state that, since the scope and significance of humour research reflect its interdisciplinary nature and cover a variety of fields, attempts to define humour have been as elusive as reaching consensus on the most fruitful theory of humour. Defining a phenomenon to be studied is a preliminary step that leads to establishing ways of investigating/approaching the subject. According to Schnurr (2010) humour research poses challenges in terms of defining, identifying, measuring and collecting. All those challenges relate to the fact that humour is a contextualised phenomenon and so is the research process. Spontaneous humour, in contrast to reproduced humour (ready jokes), is more vulnerable to its context than ready jokes, frequently making it impossible to communicate to others outside the situation in which it originated (Hatch and Ehrlich 1993). Workplace humour is inherently context bound (Holmes 2000). Lynch (2012) argues that recognition of workplace humour requires understanding the context and social processes of the studied group and not

just intentions and reactions. His definition (Lynch 2002; 2007, in Lynch 2012) of how to identify humour draws on challenges such as unintended humour, inaccessibility of humour to an outsider, not showing amusement in front of the observer, exclusivity of humour (humour is specific to a group). However, in researching humour, timing is also important. Critcheley (2002) explains that jokes have a temporal dimension, he states that time in a joke is being stretched like an elastic band, a band that will snap — but no one knows when. In spontaneous humour ‘being there’ means ‘getting it’, understanding the joke (Boxer and Cortes-Conde 1997, in Kotthoff 1999). Just physically being there at the right time is not enough to understand a joke, what is needed is to recognise, for example, social stylistics, prosody, sighs, repetition, laughter (Kotthoff 1999). Recognising such clues may help avoid missing spontaneously occurring humour.

When discussing the context of humour, it may be useful also to look at cultural aspects of humour. Humour is such an obvious part of English language and culture (Chiaro 1992; Alexander 1997; Tebbe 2011; Fox 2004 ) that some of it goes unnoticed (Alexander 1997) or is identified as just a part of the general conversation. Fox (2004) shows that what characterises English people is the importance they attach to humour, their ban on earnestness and taking oneself too seriously. What is more, within Western society, humour is valued and it is seen as offensive to accuse somebody of a lack of humour (Chiaro, 1992; Ross, 1999; Shami and Stuss, 1999). This does not mean, however, that all Western countries use identical humour. Humour is culture-bound and thus not always appreciated and understood in the same way across different cultures (Lewis 1996). The differences in humour across different cultures can be really significant. For instance, Lewis (2005) shows that Polish humour is ninety percent political. Being Polish means coming from a culture where humour is an uncompromising representation of the essence of things (Lewis 2005) and goes against political correctness.

I conducted my study on humour in English culture, where humour is noted for its subtlety rather than earthiness and characterised by a gentle approach to issues of illness, hypochondria or senility (Lewis 2005). In addition to the culture of a particular country, there is also the culture of a particular workplace. Workplace culture can reflect some of the wider cultural aspects of humour but each workplace may have its own culture or cultures.

### **Workplace culture**

The term ‘workplace culture’ in my research can be explained using several definitions.

Workplace culture first of all is ‘the glue that holds together an organisation through a shared pattern of meaning’ (Siehl and Martin 1984, p. 227, in Inceoglu 2002) as it is a common feature in informal interactions among teachers that bring them closer.

Workplace culture is also something that is ‘constantly being instantiated in on-going talk and action; it develops and is gradually modified by large and small acts in regular social interaction with on-going exchanges’ (Holmes and Marra 2002, p.1685). This definition treats workplace culture as a process and an ever-developing phenomenon as opposed to a static and stable part of human interaction. The ‘social interaction’ and ‘ongoing exchanges’ as sources of workplace culture correspond with perceiving humour as an act of communication (as discussed earlier). Workplace culture is also a direction, a framework allowing us to interpret events, an inspiration, a unifying factor and an opportunity to transcend the routine of people’s work lives (Bryman 1986). Here workplace culture is defined as a point of reference serving as an explanation of organisational dynamics. Workplace culture consists of things shared /in-common. However, shared values and beliefs are elements of workplace culture definition that highlight the unifying character of the phenomenon whereas there are other definitions that show workplace culture as an outcome of conflicting elements or as fragmented (Mills and Mills 2006). Thus confining the

workplace culture definition to shared values may be an oversimplification. This is in line with the study by Plester (2007) that shows the fragmentation of workplace culture, despite the existing dominant features of workplace culture at each of the researched settings. What seems common at a workplace may be simply dominant (forced and performed e.g. by a group of the most influential employees) and not necessarily widespread across the workplace and practiced by every employee.

Having discussed both humour and workplace culture, I shall now focus on workplace humour as a part of workplace culture.

### **Workplace humour**

Workplace humour literature is very diverse, with some researchers supporting the 'functionalist' view. The term 'functionalist' is taken from Westwood and Rhodes (2007) according to whom the functionalist perspective lies in treating humour merely as a tool for management, ignoring many complexities and ambiguities embedded in the notion of humour. Westwood and Rhodes (2007) move away from a functionalist perspective to shed a new light on different aspects of humour. They aspire to 'contribute to a more open perspective of humour' (p.12). By peppering their analysis with numerous examples of the subversive use of humour, Parker (2007), Marra (2007) and Warren and Fineman (2007) protest against a functionalist approach to humour. The editors Westwood and Rhodes (2007), as well as the contributing authors, propose to see humour as a complex phenomenon that cannot be easily tamed. Without denying some strategic functions of humour, Westwood and Rhodes argue that the fallacy of such theories lies in the perception of humour as something learnable and manageable. I would go even further than them, arguing that in the light of a functionalist view of humour, humour is objectified and treated as yet another product, like a washing machine or a Hoover, where knowledge of the attached manual

enables everyone to use it correctly. What is more, the sheer notion of the 'effectiveness' of humour (that is inherent in the functionalist perspective) must horrify and alarm all those who see humour as poetry (Chiaro 1992).

Lynch (2012) notes how tactical use of humour has gained an academic and business interest recently and warns that the fact that humour can help improve organisational culture and processes does not mean it can be easily deployed or always have the intended effect.

Lee and Kleiner (2005) perceive humour mainly as a tool or recipe for dealing with work stress. They provide the reader with very detailed instructions/tips on how to use humour for stress management (the tips are grouped into physiological, psychological and organisational categories). Humour in the workplace is deemed to be profitable for a company as it makes workers productive. The instruction-orientated style adopted by Lee and Kleiner (2005) reduces the notion of humour to a product and thus shows either some ignorance of the complex nature of humour or is an ambitious but incomplete attempt to tame the notion of humour. Tschohl (1999) concentrates on how to be successful at work by exploring the notions of inspiration, satisfaction and joy at work. The author lists the mental, emotional and physical benefits of humour (among others: clarification of meaning and promotion of understanding, concentration improvement). He sees developing a sense of humour as a way to make work more satisfying and increase a person's chances of success at work.

Romero and Cruthirds (2006) recommend careful thought and preparation as a way to be successful at using humour appropriately in the workplace. What is more, they see a link between using appropriate humour and realising organisational outcomes. The functionalist perspective presents humour as one of many controllable and predictable techniques/strategies used at work. The functionalist perspective ignores spontaneity inherent



in humour. After all, humour is often an immediate reaction to a situation and cannot always be planned and thought through.

Sometimes it is difficult to establish a degree of functionalist view on humour. Maybe this is the reason why Westwood and Rhodes (2007), Parker (2007), Marra (2007) and Warren and Fineman (2007) do not propose a term in opposition to the functionalist view such as anti-functionalist. Some workplace humour strategies may be designed purely to increase work effectiveness but still have other effects such as better staff integration. It could be the other way round; employees' humour, although directed against the work and intended to improve staff solidarity, can also contribute to work effectiveness. It is possible that by avoiding terms such as 'work effectiveness' some authors camouflage the functionalist approach to humour. Miller (1996) highlights the importance of, and work-related benefits of, rediscovering the inner child in adults by means of humour. The benefits of promoting humour in the workplace among employees are numerous, including having a sense of personal freedom, creativity, purpose and mission that the company supports. However, Miller also notes the benefits of hiring professionals (facilitators, comedians) to provide humorous and playful programmes helping team members develop a better work culture (which represents the functionalist view) and improve relationships in the workplace (which moves away from the functionalist view).

The examples of a party room and a play shop for employees are portrayed with great enthusiasm by Miller. The originality of Miller's perception of humour lies in seeing humour as an integral factor in the age of continuous drive for quality improvement and team effectiveness. Humour is thus a value in itself apart from serving company goals. Treating humour as a value per se helps to disguise or play down the functionalist view.

Morreall (1991), on the other hand, sees a triple value of workplace humour; promotion of workers' physical and mental health, fostering mental flexibility and humour as

a social lubricant allowing people to work together more effectively. Although Morreall (1991) mentions work effectiveness, he sees it as a result of social closeness achieved through humour. Therefore, here, work effectiveness is not a goal of humour but a positive side effect of humorous social interaction in the workplace. Poon Teng Fatt (2002) presents and praises the examples of companies who try to make their employees happy by introducing fun days, flexible work hours, dress-down days, paid leave for community service, rewards for positive contribution to the workplace, fun rooms, fun committees, funny reports/ newsletters and monthly in-house luncheons. Socialising during lunch hours or tea breaks, even if designed to contribute to work effectiveness, can bring benefits to employees themselves and their relationships. Poon Teng Fatt (2002) does not ignore the functionalist perspective on humour since he presents a fascinating list of tips on how to use humour in training. He skilfully combines different approaches to humour, by giving tips and at the same time presenting an idea of turning employees into children by giving them a chance to play. He mentions the liberating effect of playing with toys. Even though it sounds refreshing and innovative, such initiatives imposed by companies are criticised and portrayed as patronising by Warren and Fineman (2007). Whiteley and Hessian (1997) perceive humour as difficult to impose in a business setting. Whiteley and Hessian (1997) focus on functions and the importance of humour in business, seeing them as a key to achieving high productivity, high profitability and high-quality customer service. The biggest advantage of their approach seems to lie in outlining the inner nature of a company's culture; the spontaneity whereby workplace culture is created. By mentioning that, the authors move beyond the functionalist perspective on humour and go deeper into highlighting the importance of self-initiated, bottom-up types of humour at the workplace ('top' being represented by management). The prerequisites to the successful implementation of improvised comedy in the workplace are discussed, making the idea a not easily implementable one since quick-thinking and a

funny and clever approach to comedy is required from all team members. It is therefore clear that this article shows/admits some uneasiness in confining humour to a simple company goal achievement tool/facilitator.

For examples of moving away from the functionalist perspective of humour in the school workplace, it is useful to discuss work by Bullough (2012) and Miller (2008). Bullough (2012) argues that the benefits of humour go far beyond the coping mechanism of laughter or the value of a welcomed diversion. He points out that teachers' humour is important both to the school's and children's well-being. His ideas are closely linked to my research goals as he too concentrates on teachers' well-being and the role of humour in this occupation. Bullough notes that teachers' use of dark humour functions as a method of self-defence and is born out of the fear and anger teachers experience at work. He further argues that it is wrong to perceive teachers' instances of dark humour as superficial as they may be responses to real dangers. A different study on humour in educational setting conducted by Miller (2008) shows how humour helps to create relationships among work colleagues. What is more, Miller shows that teachers' perception of the effect of humour on their work and work environment is positive. 'In the case of 75% of the staff who reported witnessing the use of humour among the staff as either frequent or very frequent, results showed humour being used to reduce tension and provide relief' (Miller 2008, p. 51). Miller's focus group discussions revealed that humour gave teachers energy, helped to lift spirits and release tension. The most frequent types of humour identified in Miller's study were those used as a stress relief. The superiority humour (humour that assumes one person is superior over other) 'was represented in responses related to the use of humour across hierarchical roles and in the use of sarcasm' (Miller 2008, p.52).

Miller (2008) claims that since teaching in an elementary school may be a lonely occupation with very few occasions for interactions with peers, having a 'culture of humour'

may promote teacher workplace satisfaction. She goes further and states that ‘the school climate has a profound effect on teacher retention’ (p. 63). Miller thus concentrates on effects of humour that go beyond the work effectiveness and functionalist perspective but without ignoring the power humour has for teachers to stay on the job.

To sum up, workplace humour literature represents more and less functionalist approaches to humour or more open perspectives on humour. In the above review the emphasis has been placed on differences between those approaches, whereas there is one important link between them; they both aim to improve the workplace reality (regardless of whether it is on an effectiveness or well-being level). The difference, however, lies in whom the workplace reality is mainly improved for: employers or employees. I think it is not always easy to separate the benefits for employers from benefits for employees. It may be that sometimes what is designed to serve one of them actually serves both of them. The very fact of nominating humour as a means of work life enhancement indicates that a workplace has accepted the challenge of attempting to introduce some changes. Those authors who use a functionalist perspective on humour are more inclined to provide the reader with tips/instructions on how to use humour in the workplace. Authors moving away from a functionalist perspective on humour try to avoid giving any unequivocal advice about how workplace humour should be used. My research proposes seeing workplace humour as moving beyond the functionalist view on humour without ignoring the strategic use of humour in the workplace.

Having discussed the main perspectives on workplace humour, I would like to move on to exploring the ways humour contributes to workplace culture.

## **Humour and workplace culture**

Humour contributes to workplace culture in a number of ways. Although there is a stereotypical view that humour and work are antithetical terms (Arfeen 2009 ; Martin 2007; Romero and Curthirids 2006), many authors challenge it, highlighting the positive influence of humour on workplace culture or showing the complex and equivocal influence of humour on workplace culture. Miller (1996) perceives humour as a positive contribution to organisational culture when talking about organisations who hire professionals (facilitators, comedians) to provide humorous and playful programmes, helping team members develop a better work culture and improve relationships at the workplace. Holmes and Marra (2002,p. 1686) add that humour shapes workplace culture, although cultures differ in their attitudes towards and tolerance of humour, reoccurring sources and topics of humour, regular verbal humour routines, humour styles and ways of ‘doing collegiality at work’. The aforementioned factors all play a role in creating workplace culture.

According to Holmes and Marra (2002) humour is perceived as one aspect of the distinctive culture of particular workplaces. For example, the school staffroom might act as a centre of workplace culture as this is a place of shared values, attitudes and experiences as well as having its own rules of behaviour, customs and traditions, jargon and stories. This corresponds with Whiteley’s and Hessian’s (1997) belief in the inner nature of a company’s culture; the spontaneity whereby workplace culture is created. A non-imposed nature of workplace culture may be a key to understanding workplace relationships and workplace atmosphere.

Plester and Orams (2008) shed light on a different aspect of humour and workplace culture. They noted the importance of workplace jokers in developing workplace culture. They noticed that ‘by being heavily involved, sharing themselves and their humour, the jokers appeared to have the biggest impact on humour in their companies’ (p.274). The jokers in the study appeared to be key individuals involved in creating and sustaining distinctive

organisational cultures. Although valued by management and their colleagues, the jokers took risks such as compromising promotion or management opportunities due to their ‘clown’ status. The terms ‘workplace joker’ or ‘jokers’ in my thesis are used to indicate people who lead and provoke humour more than others, which is in line with definitions proposed by Plester (2007) and Plester and Orams (2008).

Plester (2007; 2009) shows humour in relation to the formality and informality of organisations. She sees humour as an important element of workplace fun (workplace fun is thus a broader concept than workplace humour). Having adopted Beetham’s and Morand’s models (in Plester 2009 p.588), Plester (2007; 2009) explored the following formality aspects: job continuity, impersonality, expertise, industry environment and structural components.

Formality can be best defined as something that is imposed, coming from outside or above (management) and therefore it would be worth perceiving some workplace cultures as created against formality not just in line with it, as Plester’s study (2009; 2007) shows. It is illuminating to look at humour as not just contributing to workplace culture but also as contradicting workplace culture and representing an alternative culture. For instance, Parker’s (2007) analysis of humorous work artefacts yields insights into how people cope with and rebel against their jobs and how the ‘counter-culture’ of an organisation is created. Anti-work humour and anti-work culture is further discussed, and the meaning and importance of subversive humour in helping to create an oppositional identity at work are both highlighted.

Survival humour is about work; put briefly its purpose is to survive the work, separating a tolerable job from an intolerable one (Warren and Fineman 2007). Stromberg’s and Karlsson’s (2009) study deals with employees’ own culture and reveals that workers’ fun culture is hard for management to control or limit so there is little chance of it being replaced by ‘official’ fun (whose humour is a vital component). Stromberg and Karlsson

highlight the importance and even superiority of organic/spontaneous fun over organised/imposed /‘official’ fun from the perspective of workers. Stromberg and Karlsson see links between particular uses of humour and the creation of workplace culture. Nicknames, for instance, were used by workers as an entertainment tool and also as a way to express both workers’ attitudes to management and their sense of solidarity. This type of humour serves both differentiation (builds distance between workers and managers) and integration (it emphasises norms and values of workers’ culture that improves group identity). As for the use of satire, it was also used for creating distance from management, at the same time being a means for improving group solidarity and protection of group norms and values from intrusion.

Plester and Sayers (2007) discuss how banter influences workplace culture and note that banter both helps to forge culture and is the manifestation of that culture. Culture is perceived as a key to understanding the use of banter in the investigated IT companies. Apart from displaying culture, banter in the workplace has other functions: making a point, boredom busting, socialisation, celebrating differences, and highlighting and defining status. Plester and Sayers (2007) found that banter, rather than being governed by official policy, was ruled by group norms. The lack of the censorship reflected the autonomy of the companies’ cultures and the slogan ‘work hard – play hard’ (used by staff in all three companies) indicated employees’ independence and indulgence in extravagant banter. Jocular abuse (humorous ways of insulting co-workers) was a part of each of the three workplace cultures. Such banter can be determined by managerial styles, workplace independence and employees’ autonomy. Although the participants took pride in their fun cultures and perceived it as positive and healthy, their banter served the function of excluding those who did not approve of it. Thus banter defined both in and out groups within the organisations.

Humour can be a form of resistance and counter-culture in schools as well as in any other workplace. Woods (1984, in Davies 1990) shows that laughter in the staffroom is a means of neutralising excessive bureaucracy, of subverting or compromising senior personnel. However, as Bullough (2012) notes, within the body of research into the role humour plays in forming and maintaining organisational cultures, there are surprisingly no such studies within schools.

When discussing humour's contribution to workplace culture, it is also worth noting the cultural context of workplace humour research. Although my study participants were mainly English and English was their first language, England is a country where different cultures meet on daily basis, including in the workplace. Especially in multi-cultural societies, cultural factors play an important role in both the construction and (mis)understanding of humour, and thus foster a more cautious use of humour. In the workplace, cultural factors may result in both integration and exclusion among employees and, most importantly, may be confusing (as to the meanings and intentions). Many people who write about humour do not reveal any information about their own humour preferences and yet their subjective humour tastes become more and more obvious in the course of reading. Discussing one's own humour preferences, as well as cultural background, is important as it allows the reader to see how a researcher's views on humour have an impact on their way of analysing and interpreting data and finally writing about their research.

To sum up, the links between humour and workplace culture made by the majority of aforementioned authors prove the important role of humour in creating workplace culture. Due to the complex contribution workplace humour makes to workplace culture, my study draws on three definitions of workplace humour. Workplace humour in my research is portrayed as an 'off-record feature' of workplace talk (Marra 2007), 'one aspect of the



distinctive culture of particular workplaces' (Holmes and Marra 2002) and 'the defining characteristic' of the staffroom (Richards 1996).

Workplace jokers, on the other hand, are those who fulfil particular roles in contributing to and maintaining the humour ingredient of workplace culture (Plester and Orams 2008). Since workplace culture is inherently linked with workplace relationships, I would like to discuss this topic in the following section.

### **Humour and relationships in the workplace**

Workplace relationships are an essential part of any workplace. As Sias (2009) argues, all organisational activities happen in the context of work relationships. The term 'workplace relationships' covers all interpersonal relationships in which individuals engage as they perform their job including power/hierarchical relationships, equal co-workers relationships, friendships, romantic relationships and customer relationships (Sias 2009). In my thesis, however, I will confine 'workplace relationships' to any relationships between people working together for the same organisation and thus excluding relationships with customers. The very fact that people work with each other means that they have some relationships with each other. The relationships vary as they can be neutral, positive or negative. They can evolve, change over time. Humour, as Holmes (2007) argues, is used to construct and enact many different types of relationships in the workplace. Humour can thus, in Holmes's (2007) terms, help construct, nurture and contest work relationships.

According to Haugh (2011) humour is one of the means of constructing relationships with strangers. The study by Pullin (2011) shows that the new staff and longer serving staff have professional knowledge in common and can use it as a starting point for humour. Both new employees joining with laughter or humorous remarks and longer-serving staff using humour with new members contribute to the integration of the team (Pullin 2011).

Risqué banter can be ‘a way of displaying aspects of the culture to the new employee and gauging his subsequent reaction’ (Plester and Sayers 2007, p.178). Lynch (2009), who conducted a humour study of the kitchen workplace, shows the functions of, among others, nicknaming, pranks and humour directed at new members of the kitchen staff. For some newcomers this could be read as a sign of acceptance (Plester and Sayers 2007) for others who do not enjoy it, it may act as selection.

Plester and Sayers’s (2007) study showed that an employee who declined to participate in and did not enjoy the workplace humour, left the company. Constructing relationships does not determine the quality of relationships (one can construct a relationship that is a negative relationship e.g. between bully and a victim). Thus, constructing relationships by means of humour may have different consequences for the people involved. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) point out that familiarity with a person’s humorous practices and conversational key/prior occurrence are two factors that affect intended humour being understood as humour. Morreall (1991) claims that humour is a good indicator of how close people are with each other. What friends take as a sign of closeness, non-friends can take as an insult (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). People also use different techniques to minimise the risk of misunderstanding when using risky humour with their friends (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). However, humour can be influenced by the humour initiator’s sense of sameness and difference with others (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). For instance, the study by Terrion and Ashfort (2002) shows that teasing and self-deprecating humour can help to bring together people who are strangers to each other and so may not be able build their relationships on ‘sameness’.

Humour, apart from facilitating new relationships, can serve to nurture existing work relationships. According to Graham, Papa and Brooks (1992) humour can serve as a social lubricant to avoid potentially hostile situations; it can be used to reduce anxiety among

employees, to alleviate boredom, and to facilitate friendship patterns. What is more, humour may serve the social functions of defining and re-defining the group, clarifying status relationships among members, and easing the tension brought by new or novel stimuli. The aforementioned functions relate to the positive side of humour in workplace relationships. Some researchers, however, concentrate on the uneasiness of humour and its not-always positive impact on relationships with others. Vitug and Kleiner (2007) for instance explain potential problems of applying humour in a business setting and mention the possibility of humour being able to both make and break relationships. Tips on how to be funny are preceded by a warning of the effects of offensive humour and cultural misunderstandings. Although it is clear how many potential benefits implementation of humour can bring to a business, for it not to be detrimental to the work relationships humour has to be well-adjusted to fit the audience. Hughes and Avey (2009), on the other hand, claim that humour has an ambivalent contribution to workplace outcomes, therefore they criticise the application of humour as a cure for workplace problems. According to Hughes and Avey (2009) humour, being an elusive and pervasive phenomenon, cannot be easily translated into a magic elixir for desired workplace outcomes. However, they argue that appropriately used humour (humour used for the benefit of an employee) by managers can enhance the process of personal identification and therefore the application of humour is beneficial in terms of distal outcomes.

What Holmes and Marra (2002) found is that different types of humour create different work relationships; some types of humour contribute to workplace harmony and solidarity (supportive humour), others convey subversion or aggression (contestive humour). Holmes and Schnurr (2005) develop the binary divide of supportive versus contestive humour into broadly supportive and broadly contestive categories. They note that any kind of humour categorisation can be criticised as forcing complex colourful data into black and white boxes.

Lynch (2002) notes that humour can simultaneously fulfil opposing functions and that opposing humour functions do not need to be mutually exclusive. Humour can serve as an identification tool within a group and a differentiation tool that excludes those who do not belong to the group. He also notes that humour can act both as control and resistance, again reflecting the dualistic nature of humour. Humour fulfils different functions in different types of work relationships (unequal power relationships and equal relationships).

Humour occurs both between people who are equals and those in hierarchies. As for humour among equals, Fine and De Soucey (2005) notice that humour has the power of smoothing relations and causing the flow of a discourse within the group to be more agreeable and acceptable. Smoothing types of joking and similar joking is found in other well-functioning workplaces, allowing for status to be established within the context of ostensibly equal status relations (Fine and De Soucey 2005). They also claim that joking culture regulates group life, shaping and organising interaction, softening what otherwise may be harsh and divisive relations.

The study by Plester and Sayers (2007) shows banter was enjoyed more by lower level workers than senior level managers. The higher the status meant more caution and less freedom with regard to humour. The type of humour used – less or more aggressive – may be a reflection of work type and status. More aggressive humour may be related to working class, low socio-economic status or physical type of work e.g. the meat factory in Stomberg and Karlsson's (2009) study, kitchen in Lynch's study (2009) or shop-floor in a lorry-making factory in Collinson's (1988) study. The physical type of job may imply rougher and tougher language and work (Holmes and Schnurr 2005). Lynch (2005) notices that people in blue-collar workplaces use harsh humour and pranks and do not take offence, as a rule, to harsh or cruel humour. In a sense such humour asserts power and sameness among the powerless (and at the same time equals) in organisations.

Marra (2007) concentrates on a specific aspect of work relationships; namely, power relationships. A particular emphasis is given to the subversive/resistant type of humour and its place in a workplace setting. Subversive humour conveys serious messages about power relationships, inequalities (Marra 2007), resentments, and disdain for bureaucracy (Parker 2007). Marra (2007) shows how people with less and more power in an organisation use humour to challenge organisational hierarchies. Holmes (2000) shows role of humour both in equal and unequal power relationships at work. She shows that, apart from creating and maintaining solidarity and collegiality, humour can also hedge/attenuate criticisms and insults. Humour is seen by Holmes (2000) as both a dynamic tool of expressing solidarity and an effective tactic for minimising potential offence. In a similar way to Westwood and Rhodes (2007) the author also notices the place and function of humour within the workplace hierarchy (among more and less powerful work positions). Humour can both reduce and emphasise power imbalances in the workplace between those of different hierarchical statuses. Humour is perceived as a socially acceptable form for criticising or questioning a superior's action; it is a safe way of conveying a critical message (Holmes 2000). Humour has the potential to downplay unequal relationships (Rogerson -Revel 2011) and is a way of reducing distance between different power positions (Richards 2008; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, Petridou 2011).

McIlheran (2006) notices a link between humour and cohesion, highlighting that nurturing relationships (in general) at the workplace helps to improve organisational cohesion. Holmes (2007) focuses on two categories of humour, i.e. workplace humour and relationships and workplace humour and creativity, to present the relationship between humour and creativity at work, noting that they do not need to be mutually exclusive. Holmes identifies two types of creativity related to humour in the workplace: the first being 'the skilful use of humour to foster workplace relationships' and the second about using humour

for 'creative work-relevant ideas' (Holmes 2007, p.523). Humour that is used creatively to construct, nurture and contest workplace relationships contributes to relational goals. Fertile contexts for creative humour are created by means of workplaces that are supportive, good-humouredly competitive, show a positive attitude to having fun at work and nurture and value team spirit. The study yields evidence for the creative use of relational humour contributing to the construction of effective workplace relationships and humour used to foster workplace creativity being an intellectual stimulant of direct relevance to workplace objectives.

The study conducted by Plester and Sayers (2007) shows banter as the dominant form of humorous expression in the workplaces under analysis, it is essentially the 'oil' through which workplace relationships are constructed and nurtured. However, the use of joking insults is linked to familiarity. Knowing each other well and being a part of the team was a prerequisite for being humorously insulted. For newcomers, being insulted meant being accepted in the group. The observed humorous competition between different work groups in the three IT companies serve to strengthen the inner-group bonds. The study also reveals that workplace jokers were more often included in the banter and were more often the target of joking insults and banter. Although some studies note how humour and fun cultures are created among people of the same work-status or having similar work tasks, job titles (e.g. Stromberg and Karlsson 2009, Collinson 1988, Lynch 2005, Richards 1996, Mawhinney 2008), it may be difficult to prove that workplace peers have more fun than higher-status colleagues (Lundberg 1969, in Plester 2007).

Humour affects different people in different ways since people's personal humour preferences and individual appreciation of and approach towards humour at work differ. Fine and De Soucey (2005) refer in particular to joking that can be purposefully or unintentionally insulting for people. Holmes and Marra (2004) as well as Plester and Sayers (2007) discuss incidents of people leaving their workplace as a result of not fitting its humorous profile. This

clearly shows the power and influence humour might have in the workplace. However, there may be a greater number of people who stay in their job even if they do not fit the humour profile of their workplace. The fragility of humour lies in the fact that humour, according to Goodson and Walker (1991, p.33), ‘hinges on rapid calculations that need to be made about the extent of control in the situation at particular moments of time’. Plester and Sayers (2007) reveal that the fact that demographic differences<sup>1</sup> were the subject of banter in the workplaces they researched appeared a sign of acceptance of those differences. They go further, saying that ethnic banter at the IT companies seemed to have the function of highlighting and celebrating diversity in the workplace. However, they also note that teasing, which synthesises elements of aggression, humour and ambiguity, will represent a danger for the target of humour (Plester and Sayers 2007). The study by Plester and Sayers (2007) shows that familiarity plays an important role in establishing humour boundaries. The boundaries in their study were governed by individuals’ knowledge of each other and this defined how such humour was used with different people (Plester and Sayers 2007).

Richards (2008) on the other hand places humour among other organisational types of misbehaviour. He presents humour as a means of resistance against the organisation but does not confine it to merely misconduct repertoire, as humour can preserve unfair organisational power hierarchies and not just be a way of expressing resistance or contention.

Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) find that teasing and self-directed joking are the most risky and most vulnerable types of humour as they can have undesirable effects. Plester (2009) talks about the influence of formality on the organisations and notices that in more formal companies the boundaries of humour were narrow and humour was restricted and careful. In contrast, the more informal company represented wider boundaries; humour and

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<sup>1</sup> Age, gender, geographic origins and ethnicity.

fun were more widespread there. In all cases the boundaries are subject to a 'continuous dynamic process' (Plester 2009, p.597).

The formality assessment that resulted in describing companies as more or less formal involved exploring hierarchical levels, job continuity, impersonality, expertise, industry environment and structural components. Plester notices that boundaries both enable and constrain humour at the workplace so it is not surprising that companies may prefer restricting humour to preventing its dangerous effects. The time and context factor are said to be influential in the creation of humour and fun boundaries. In the formal companies boundaries on using unacceptable humour were kept by shared cultural understanding rather than formal policies (although such regulations existed too). In contrast, in the informal company humour was aggressively encouraged by the boss and the humour used in this company was perceived as an identity-building tool. The more informal company demonstrated disdain for political correctness which resulted in excluding those who did not accept offensive humour. Those who joked together were a part of a group whereas those who did not join the joking became the outsiders. Plester highlights the subjectivity of fun and points out the inability of defining fun. What Plester shows is the discrepancy between the fact that employers have become more compelled to encourage fun at the workplace and at the same time they choose to prioritise the creation of humour and fun boundaries.

To sum up, humour can fulfil different functions within workplace relationships - sometimes simultaneously. There is a thin line between humour serving to construct/nurture relationships and humour that contests relationships.

The following section will provide details of the theoretical perspective used in my thesis.

### **The theoretical perspective**



My research is guided by the work of Goffman (1959) and Solomon et al (2006). Goffman's ideas of front and back regions and behaviours complemented by Solomon et al's (2006) idea of hybrid times and spaces create an optimal theoretical framework for my study.

Goffman (1959) applied theatrical lenses to understand the world of social settings. He portrays people as performers or audience, place as a stage and activities as performances in a quest to explain the lives of organisations and workplaces. Since my study concerns the educational setting as a workplace it seems justified to use Goffman's as a theoretical framework. Also, it is intuitive to use this framework since Goffman himself referred to school as an example of social setting and talked about the staffroom as 'backstage'. Also, other authors investigating school staffrooms have used Goffman's ideas, as pointed out by Richards (1996). The key concepts introduced by Goffman (1959) and found relevant to my study are: 'back region', 'back behaviour', 'performance', 'audience', 'cliques' and 'teams'. Those six key concepts are discussed below in more detail.

#### Goffman, space and space related behaviour

Goffman's main point of reference is 'performance' that can be best described as an activity performed by actors for the audience. Performance is thus a communication between at least two people. People perform in a variety of social settings including their workplaces.

Performance does not happen in a void, each performance happens in a spatial context.

Performers cannot start acting out until they find themselves in an appropriate space. They must leave that scene after the performance. Frontstage or 'front region' is a place where a performance is given. Performance in a front region is a demonstration of adherence to the standards of a social setting and an endeavour to maintain a desired image of the social settings. During a performance the actor is in-character. The performer is influenced by different expectations and requirements that exist within the institution and outside of it.

There are moral and instrumental requirements in a work setting. The latter refer to, e.g., non-interference and non-molestation of others whereas the former refer to duties employer may demand of employee e.g. care of property or maintenance of work level. Different organisations have different standards, but they are not always official and can be taken for granted. Some conditions are outside of people's immediate control, being an integral part of the presentation made by those into whose presence they have come. The performer has their tools of expression that identify, and are expected of, them. There are a number of things that comprise each performer's 'personal front' such as gender, age, looks and status (relatively fixed characteristics that do not vary from one situation to another over time) and gestures, facial expressions (fluid characteristics). More mobile and transitory aspects of personal front, such as facial expression, can change during a performance. The personal front can be divided into appearance and manner. The former signals the performer's status and the latter signals the type of role the performer is about to play. Despite expectations of consistency between the two, they may contradict each other.

Impression management is an art of controlling one's own performance so that the audience gets what they expect of a performer. Impression management is a concept that I find particularly relevant to studying teachers' cultures, as teachers represent an occupational group that have to control and suppress their emotions (Mawhinney 2008). The teaching occupation requires impression management on several different levels – with parents, with pupils, with school management, with inspectors/controlling bodies. The idea of impression management in relation to teachers is especially relevant due to the number of roles and multiple tasks teachers have to perform on a daily basis (Milanowski 2008). What is more, impression management is important for another reason; teachers represent what Goffman calls a colleague grouping of a more corporate character. The members of such groupings are

so closely identified in the eyes of other people that the good reputation of one practitioner depends on the good conduct of others (Goffman 1959).

What helps performers to manage the right impression are three defensive techniques: dramaturgical loyalty, dramaturgical discipline and dramaturgical circumspection. There are also protective practices of saving the performance whereby audience help performers managed the desired impression by acting tactfully.

A performer performs on the stage. The type of region (stage) informs the type of behaviour, and the other way round. Frontstage is the space where the performance happens, this is an official place and an audience can subject this region to a continuous inspection with regard to expected standards. In the case of teachers there are a number of frontstage activities such as teaching, writing reports, marking, attending staff meetings and preparing lesson materials and thus frontstage is not confined to classroom space but different spaces where official, work-related tasks are performed. The 'back region' is a private/personal space that allows for stepping out of character and exposing suppressed behaviours. Goffman (1959) notices a parallel between pupils leaving the classroom to go outside for a 'recess of familiarity and misconduct' and teachers going to the staffroom to 'swear and smoke in a similar recess of backstage behaviour' (p.133). Thus the audience is kept away from the backstage and the backstage is commonly separated from the front region. The same space can have different functions, acting at different times as front or backstage. So neither frontstages nor backstages are fixed. A space that usually acts as a frontstage may be used as a backstage — it depends on the type of activity performed there and relationships between people who occupy that space at a particular time.

My study uses the term 'back region' to describe the staffroom and any other spaces that serve as staffrooms. It uses 'backstage behaviour' to illustrate informal behaviour of the staff such as the use of humour. Expanding Goffman's terminology I will refer to lunch time

and breaks in work in general as ‘back time’ and work time as ‘front time. My study also uses the term ‘teams’ to describe groups of colleagues and cliques to describe friendship groups among staff to distinguish formal from less formal relationships in the workplace. Thus, the terms ‘front’ and ‘back’ will serve as a starting point for interpretation of research findings and the term ‘hybrid’ will be a new entity encompassing the intersection of front and back. The concepts ‘back region’ and ‘back behaviour’ represent the exact focus of my study which is staffroom (back region) and staffroom humour (back region behaviour).

The concept of backstage is also helpful in analysing of the use of humour between myself and participants. Although the research can be viewed as frontstage activity in terms of its goals (data collection, data analysis, future publications etc.) it can also have its backstage. Research backstage can be represented by informal interactions between a researcher and participants that do not serve the purposes of the frontstage. This means that informal interactions with participants that serve the purpose of frontstage (using humour to access research setting or facilitate data collection) can be viewed as part of frontstage.

A spatial aspect of interactions, i.e. ‘setting based interaction’ (McCall 2003), is a distinctive feature of Goffman’s version of symbolic interactionism. By choosing the staffroom as a location for the research, I needed to consider the relationship between space and participants’ interactions within that space. Goffman’s ideas about space were helpful in situating and contextualising teachers’ interactions under study.

What has particularly often been ‘borrowed’ by other authors from Goffman is the idea of the staffroom as a back region. Goffman’s framework proved to be useful to depict school dynamics in the writings of Woods (1979), Richards (1996), and Kainan (1994) albeit to different extents (discussed in the section on school staffrooms). Discussing the back region is facilitated when one can refer to the front region. However, the pupils versus teachers point of reference (see Woods 1979) is particularly useful in studies that concentrate

on the school as an entity, treating it both as education provision for students and workplace for teachers. However, in the case of my study, which concentrates solely on staffroom (back region) and teachers, the use of front versus back region seems insufficient. Looking within the back region without making references to the front region requires deeper engagement with the dynamics and complexities of back region (see Kainan 1994). With that in mind it is easier to understand that when a staffroom is analysed on its own, putting aside the front regions, its back 'status' shifts to the centre. In other words, back region is 'back' when there is a front region to be contrasted with. This insight is important for my study as it fosters the understanding of the staffroom as a space of central attention (from the research and researcher's point of view). It also helps to see the staffroom as comprising front and back space and front and back behaviours. As Goffman (1959) argues, each backstage has its front.

Richards (1996) shows that some backstage behaviour is therefore possible even if the region is not fully physically separated from the audience. This argument is useful in thinking about going beyond the physical boundaries of space without ignoring what physical boundaries imply and indicate. This leads on to a deeper understanding of Goffman, whose front and backstages, as far as physical boundaries are considered, represent distinct meanings, uses and purposes. Those meanings, uses and purposes, however, are not fixed, as Goffman shows when discussing how people and relationships between them can shape the space. A single 'incident' as Goffman (1959) calls it, may change front behaviour to back behaviour and vice versa. The relationships between people entail the exceptions to 'back' and 'front' behaviours. This leads to how Goffman portrays relationships and humour in relationships.

#### Goffman on humour and relationships

Goffman (1959) sees humour as a way of communication which is in line with a definition my thesis adopts. Referring to the communication model, it can be seen that humour has its

performers (senders) and audience (receivers). However, Goffman considers humour as an example of unofficial communication and communication out of character in the work setting. Humour does not belong to performance in the frontstage and so both performers and audience of humour are team members. Humour happens within a team (that constitutes performers) and is directed to the team. There is a difference between performed/staged humour and unstaged humour. The former is a part of performance for the audience (such as today's stand-up comedy shows) and the latter is used when the audience are team members. Goffman (1959) mentions humour along with e.g. reciprocal first-naming, 'sloppy' sitting and whistling as a backstage language of behaviour organisations and contrasts it with frontstage where such potentially offensive behaviour is not allowed. Perceiving unofficial communication as a type of interaction happening when there is no audience to play to, he denies the possibility of humour being a part of in-character and official communication. It also shows that humour is unwelcome in the frontstage as it can spoil the formal image of the organisation. He further argues that using backstage style can transform any region into backstage, which seems to show that backstage behaviour is not just restricted to particular spaces such as staffrooms. Goffman distinguishes four types of out of character communication: treatment of the absent (derogating audience), staging talk (shoptalk, gossip), team collusion (affirming backstage solidarity while performing) and realigning actions (adjusted dropping of the front). All of those out of character practices serve one main purpose – they allow team members to move back from, distance themselves from, performance.

Regarding relationships, Goffman distinguishes two main pairs of relationships in social settings. The first pair is performers and audience which, in a work context, are often represented respectively by employees of organisations and their clients. People take on different roles in social settings; they may be the audience or a team. With performance as a

point of reference, those performing are the team and those observing are the audience. However, people may also have discrepant roles and belong to both the audience and the team or oscillate between different teams or take a role of neither performer nor audience. For instance, a 'go-between' person is a member of two teams and cannot decide to belong to just one of them. The other pair of relationships in the workplace is represented by cliques and teams.

Cliques and teams in a work context represent people working in the same organisation and often for the same audience. There is an important difference between 'teams' and 'cliques'. Teams imply formal relationships where people represent institutional values and views, 'maintaining a definition of the situation towards those above and below them'. Cliques are informal relationships, comprising small number of people who come together for 'informal amusements'. There is also a difference in the concept of familiarity between teams and cliques. Teams, in contrast to cliques, assume enforced familiarity lying in joint engagement in staging the performance. However, Goffman argues 'it should not be assumed that the pleasant interpersonal things of life—courtesy, warmth, generosity, and pleasure in the company of others—are always reserved for those backstage and that suspiciousness, snobbishness, and a show of authority are reserved for front region activity' (p. 132). 'Pleasant interpersonal things' (Goffman, p. 132) can be also part of the front whereas backstage can be used to 'lapse into an associable mood of sullen, silent irritability' (Goffman, 1959, p.132). Cliques represent closer work relationships which are formed out of choice, rather than being enforced, whereas teams may comprise individuals who might be dissimilar in important respects and yet must cooperate to maintain a performance. According to Goffman (1959) the familiarity in teams can be described as intimacy without warmth. Despite drawing distinctions between cliques and teams in work settings, Goffman notices

that humour happens within both types of relationships. However, how humour is used in cliques and teams varies.

Unofficial communication (like humour) within teams is more careful and serves as a way of testing the ground, checking whether masks can be fully dropped or not. It thus serves to discover whether it is safe or not to forgo with the current definition of a situation.

Goffman also notes the double nature of unofficial communication in teams, which shapes social distance and formality by either decreasing or increasing them. The safety of using humour within cliques as opposed to within teams seems to be related to the fact that the latter are primarily focused on performance and maintaining impressions. The social aspect of relationships, including use of humour within teams, may be exercised after or before the performance or sometimes discreetly woven into the performance. Goffman notes that teams' desire for companionship and social contact takes two forms: a need for an audience on which to try out one's vaunted selves and a need for team members with whom to enter backstage relaxation and collusive intimacies. Goffman portrays humour in work relationships as a mainly social and relaxation activity, allowing for detachment from performing. However, he also notes other functions of humour in work relationships. For instance, he mentions 'double talk'<sup>2</sup> (whose humour is a feature) as a safe means of making and refusing requests and commands that could not be openly made or openly refused without changing the relationship. 'Double talk' can provide a temporary break in official relationships between subordinates and superordinates (representatives of different teams and statuses) without jeopardising the status differences. With regard to relationships with new employees, teasing is an informal initiation device employed by a team to train and test the capacity of its new members to 'take a joke' which means sustaining a friendly manner while

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<sup>2</sup> Double talk is, for example, a when superordinate speaks a language of a group of employees and his subordinate does not.



perhaps not feeling it. To sum up, Goffman both shows the complex nature of humour and work relationships and portrays humour as shaping work relationships in different ways.

Having presented Goffman's key concepts and their relevance to my study it is important to present the limitations of Goffman's ideas.

### Limitations of Goffman's theory

In relation to my research, the greatest challenge that Goffman's work presents is portraying organisations and people's behaviour using binary terms such as front and back (Meyrowitz 1990). Back region and back behaviour are contrasted with front region and front behaviours. The front region represents a 'place where the performance is given' (Goffman 1959, p. 109-110) and back region/backstage is where that which is suppressed in front makes an appearance (Goffman 1959). Whenever Goffman tries to explain his ideas further, he uses new sets of binary terms or contrasting examples, and so to exemplify front and back he uses classroom and staffroom; hotel and hotel kitchen. With regards to activities and people he also uses binaries. For instance, when talking about performance and audience he mentions teachers and students, salesmen and customers. When talking about activities and behaviour in front and back regions he uses: formal–informal, professional–private. He also uses the terms formal–informal to describe the difference between teams and cliques.

Meyrowitz (1990) expands Goffman's idea of categorising an individual's behaviour by means of two broad categories — back and frontstage behaviour — and proposes a middle region. The middle region helps to describe the merger of two situations, when permanent changes lead to new behaviour patterns (Meyrowitz 1990).<sup>3</sup> The middle region represents the long-term combinations of situations whereas Goffman focuses on temporary changes that

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<sup>3</sup> As an example of a new merged situation, Meyrowitz refers to an employer marrying his employee. A new relationship emerges as they are both husband and wife and employer and employee.

are quickly repaired (Meyrowitz 1990). Although they do not refer to the work of Goffman, Solomon et al (2006) argue that binary terms (e.g. 'formal/informal', 'working/playing', 'on-the-job/off-the-job') in general are no longer useful for thinking about learning in the workplace and that it is hybrid spaces where interesting things happen. Learning at work is not just confined to spaces that are designed for work purposes. Informal learning can happen in spaces where people are not productive in the sense that they are performing the roles of normal work, yet the presence of significant learning means that they are not un-productive either (Solomon et al 2006).

Solomon et al (2006) attach importance to hybrid spaces as possibly neglected or unnoticed spaces for workplace learning. Goffman's work, and thus the binary terms he uses, do not concern learning but more general interaction/communication between people in social settings. Nevertheless, researching workplaces and, in particular, studying spaces that are neither back nor frontstages requires more terms. Solomon et al's (2006) idea of informal learning resonates with Goffman's idea of unofficial /informal communication in the workplace.

Informal learning, just like unofficial communication, is primarily about communicating with each other, sharing ideas, knowledge and exchanging information. In Goffmanian terms, Solomon et al (2006) do not consider hybrid spaces as backstages with complete out-of-character behaviour. They rather see hybrid spaces as spaces where frontstage and in-character behaviours are temporarily suspended yet can still have an impact on what happens there.

Moving away from binary terms can also help to see individuals as active rather than passive. Meyrowitz (1990) argues that individuals make decisions that modify the patterns of situational segregation and integration. Thus, he portrays individuals as active beings capable of making choices. This is in contrast to Goffman who portrays people as passive and

obedient (Ransome 2010). Engagement with the critique of Goffman was an important step towards revisiting Goffman (1959) and making the decision of to use Solomon et al's (2006) 'hybrid' space idea in my research.

Meyrowitz (1990) introduces the concepts of middle region, deep back and forefront region behaviours to highlight the process through which new public and private style evolve (p.79) and by doing so he expands Goffman's theory into a three-stage continuum. He argues that middle region behaviour contains elements of both back and front behaviours but lacks their extremes. He finds that the binary of back and front is incompatible with both permanent social changes affecting people and communication via different media. As for social changes, the 1960s 'brought demands to break down old segregations of behaviours and audiences and to treat people of different sexes, ages, races and professions more alike' (Meyrowitz 1990, p.72). Goffman does not discuss permanent changes in roles and rules but focuses on temporary disruptions, whereas permanent changes should be considered as they lead to new behavioural patterns (Meyrowitz 1990). As Meyrowitz (1990) shows, Goffman's theory is confined to face-to-face communication and so convenient to locate within space boundaries. Back and front division seems to be static and do not take into account new communication media such as phones, radio, TV and computers that override the boundaries of physical locations (Meyrowitz 1990). However, at the time Goffman wrote, these issues were not so prominent. Meyrowitz proposes to see the relationship between space and people as a complex process where people influence settings and settings influence people. Both place-situations and broader social-information systems are ways of expressing our humanness, Meyrowitz (1990) argues. However, Meyrowitz (1990) at one point questions the understanding of Goffman's regions as physical spaces. He poses a question of whether Goffman's literal place is not confused with something else and these deliberations are followed by a tentative answer:

Goffman himself provides a possible answer. For there is another key factor, besides place, that is mentioned in his definition of behavioural regions: ‘barriers to perception’. I suggest that a close examination of the dynamics of situations and behaviour as described by Goffman indicates that place itself is a subcategory of the more inclusive notion of a perceptual field. For while situations are usually defined in terms of who is in what location, the implicit issue is actually the types of behaviours that are available for other people’s scrutiny.

Meyrowitz (1990, p.88)

It may be that back versus front is the most conspicuous concept coming from Goffman’s (1959) writing but it is worth noting the extent to and frequency with which these concepts are accompanied with exceptions and caveats. Goffman introduces several layers of understanding, although he uses binary terms, alongside which he discusses exceptions.

While ‘back’ and ‘front’ may seem simple concepts, he complicates them by adding other concepts such as audience, performance, actors, teams, cliques. Therefore it is worth looking at the binary terms as a collection and not loosely dispersed and disconnected from the rest of the terms. For instance, I believe he introduces two concepts in one when talking about regions; he both means physical and symbolic spaces. Symbolic spaces are the spaces that transgress physical boundaries and are the spaces constructed by relationships between people unallocated to a particular spatial dimension. Symbolic spaces embody the exceptions drawn by Goffman, whereas physical spaces have clearly marked boundaries (Richards 1996) and represent existing and tangible locations of what Goffman considers ‘typical’ or ‘expected’ behaviours (Meyrowitz 1990). Goffman himself argues that there should be a third region:

It would seem reasonable to add a third region, a residual one, namely, all places other than the two already identified. Such a region could be called ‘the outside.’ The notion of an outside region that is neither front nor back with respect to a particular performance conforms to our common-sense notion of social establishments, for when we look at most buildings we find within them rooms that are regularly or temporarily used as back regions and front regions, and we find that the outer walls of

the building cut both types of rooms off from the outside world. Those individuals who are on the outside of the establishment we may call outsiders.

Goffman (1959, p. 135)

The excerpt above expresses a need to describe spaces used both as front and back. This and the number of exceptions to the concepts of back and front regions noted by Goffman shows that he is aware of the complexities of usage and meaning of space.

Having discussed spaces that develop a back /front region binary, it is important to justify the choice of ‘hybrid spaces’ as complementing Goffman’s theory.

### Hybrid spaces

The term ‘hybrid space’ (Solomon et al. 2006) is most relevant to my study as, in contrast to Meyrowitz’s middle region, it is developed to describe temporary reversible situations.

‘Middle region’, on the other hand, concerns changes that lead to the creation of new permanent and non-reversible situations. What also distinguishes middle region from hybrid space is that hybrid spaces are specific spaces, such as workplace staffrooms, and times such as lunch breaks (the focus of my study). Solomon et al (2006, p. 7) list the following as examples of hybrid learning spaces in the workplace:

- overlap periods (such as refreshment breaks) where workers are not ‘entirely’ workers
- actual spaces in work-places that are typically labelled as productive or non-productive, such as workrooms or tearooms
- talking spaces where people have conversations within or between work times (e.g. in a car driving home from work).

Solomon et al (2006) show that both lunchroom and lunchtime represent a space in between on-the-job and off-the-job and although they notice lessening of workplace hierarchies in such spaces they do not portray them as fully private or strictly social. This space and time synergy in defining hybrid spaces is particularly useful for my research, which focuses on one space (staffroom) within a defined time (lunch break).

The interconnection of space and time in the above examples is useful for studying educational contexts where a timetable acts as distributor of bodies, resources and curriculum time (McGregor 2004). Another interconnection evident in Solomon et al's (2006) definition of hybrid spaces is the interconnection of identities such as worker and social being. It expands the binary identities as seen by Goffman (1959) and adapted by Woods (1979) to distinguish teachers' private selves from public selves. Solomon et al (2006) on the contrary seem to show that complexity of identity is mirrored in complexity of space. This in line with Meyrowitz's (1990) argument that the multiplicity of a person's roles require more than just 'front' or 'back' to describe them.

Goffman's (1959) idea of the existence of discrepant roles in social settings, whereby people do not belong fully to either audience or team or oscillate between different teams, portrays relationships as complex. One example of such relationships is that of go-between – a person belonging to two teams and knowing the secrets of both teams (Goffman 1959). Goffman emphasise the complexity of the go-between's situation. When the go-between operates in the presence of two teams he is a member of he may then look like a man desperately trying to play tennis with himself (Goffman 1959). By discussing the existence of discrepant roles, Goffman indicates exceptions to the binary of front and back.

Thus, some work relationships draw on the complexity of people's roles described by both Goffman (1959) and Solomon et al (2006). In the context of my study where I, as a researcher, use humour with participants in all stages of data collection, the idea that the

researcher's presence adds to the complexity and hybrid nature of the space (Solomon et al 2006) is of particular importance. The frontstage and backstage of the research are sometimes difficult to separate, thus creating 'hybrid spaces'. When informal interactions between myself as a researcher and the participants cannot be viewed as just backstage behaviour because of their potential effect on the frontstage of the research, a 'hybrid space' emerges.

There is another reason why Solomon et al's (2006) ideas are useful to my study: the concept of hybrid space and time helps to understand the relational aspect of space (McGregor 2004) and shows that, although the actual physical space carries some meanings, what determines the nature of the space/time is its symbolic dimension resulting from continually negotiated relationships (Solomon et al 2006) – 'a person to person' space (Wellman 2001, in McCormick 2011).

A space therefore is created between people who engage in an interaction. This notion of space transgresses the physicality of spaces and embraces Goffman's symbolic dimension of space. However, although I recognise the need to move beyond simplistic binary terms when describing spaces and times at work (Solomon, Boud and Rooney 2006), the terms 'front' and 'back' are useful terms in describing the contrasts, the 'extremes', spatial 'segregation' and 'integration' (Meyrowitz 1990) and may serve to highlight the differences between spaces, times and people. This is in line with Ball (1987) who sees binary terms in sociology of education as both useful and insufficient to depict school organisation.

Although binaries such as 'separation of formal and informal arenas can serve as heuristic tools to present the material, the school dynamics can only sensibly be understood as interpenetration of professional and private' (Ball 1987, p.212 ). Any binaries are a good starting point for the discussion of findings and abandoning them altogether may be unfeasible. Besides, they can always be qualified in a number of ways (e.g. more informal, less formal) and extended into a continuum rather than juxtaposed. Even the term 'hybrid'

draws on binaries (formal–informal, see Solomon et al 2006) as it is logical that to explain the hybridity of something, one needs to name the different elements of which that hybrid space or time comprises.

To sum up, this section has provided a justification for applying Goffman's theory (1959) to my research. It also discussed the limitations of using Goffman's binaries for interpretation of study findings and offered Solomon et al's (2006) idea of hybrid spaces as a solution to those limitations. The following section will focus on an overview of literature on school staffrooms with references to Goffman's (1959) and Solomon et al's (2006) work.

### **The School staffroom**

The staffroom is typically a place where teachers have a physical base and are likely to spend varying amounts of time during their working day, engaged in a range of activities both social and work-related.

Avis et al (2010, p. 219)

This sounds very general and vague but Avis et al (2010) further argue that staffrooms are highly individual places with their own particular cultures. The complexity of those cultures, they argue, might be influenced by factors such as the individuals who populate these spaces, the curriculum areas or shared specialism of the staff and the physical size and layout of these spaces. Paechter (2004) notes that arranging a staffroom in a particular way can make it into a workspace, relaxation place or a waiting room where no-one stays for very long. Kainan (1994) also makes a point about staffrooms being neither meant for work nor for rest in terms of their layout. In the Learning how to Learn (LHTL) project participants mentioned both classrooms and staffrooms as formal areas (McCormick et al 2011) which may suggest that the staffroom is not a distinctive school space.



Richards (1996) successfully captures the specific nature of staffrooms noting the ambiguity of staffrooms being both inaccessible to outsiders and provoking curiosity. Kainan (1994) notes that observing the staffroom was seen by her prospective participants as a violation of teachers' privacy and the initial permission to conduct the research in the staffroom was withdrawn. As Kainan (1994) points out this was the first evidence of staffrooms being a meaningful place for teachers. This experience led Kainan to approach the entrance to the next school staffroom gradually.

Staffrooms, as research by Kainan (1994) and Mawhinney (2010) shows, are meaningful for teachers for number of reasons. Mawhinney's (2010) research findings portray the staffroom as positive space. Staffrooms in her research served, among other functions, as a space for professional knowledge sharing where teachers provide a constant professional development for their colleagues.

Kainan (1994) notes the multi-functionality of the staffroom – a place where, among other things; the management have a chance to present themselves as very busy individuals, teachers discuss students' problems and moan, teachers present themselves as 'busy' to their colleagues and thus gain higher status in the staffroom, the staffroom is a school's centre of information exchange. The staffroom is also the place facilitating the relationships between teachers and managers. The staffroom, however, is not necessarily free of conflict and competition as Kainan shows.

Kainan (1994) investigates different subgroups within the staffroom and shows how individual and group prestige is gained and lost in the staffroom. The staffroom is used as an arena for teachers to improve their status; the author notices that teachers compete for prestige in the staffroom. The position gained in the staffroom reflects a teacher's position in the school i.e. in the eyes of the management. She exemplifies the importance of teachers' status by teachers' avoidance of talking about their failures in the staffroom as it would

diminish their status there. Teachers used staffroom space to impress their colleagues by telling stories about them managing/coping with difficult situations in their classrooms. The author notices a conflict between teachers' competition and cooperation in the staffroom.

The staffroom has been often portrayed in opposition to the classroom. Kainan (1994) uses Goffman's idea of the staffroom as a back region/ backstage. The classroom and the staffroom are places of contradictory roles in this study: the former being a teacher's battlefield and the latter being a stage where teachers are both the actors and the audience. Kainan uses the term 'stage' instead of 'backstage' for staffroom, perhaps due to the centrality of the staffroom in her research in comparison to other spaces. The other explanation may be that, for Kainan, the staffroom is a stage like any other space in the school.

Calvert (1975), drawing on Goffman, notices that whereas teachers' backstage is the staffroom, the backstage behaviour of pupils is practised in the playground. The allocation of separate territories for teachers and pupils for some of the time prevents overlapping. Teachers are safe from pupils in the staffroom and pupils are relatively safe from teachers in the playground (Calvert 1975).

Woods (1979) seems to identify teachers' staffroom separation from students with separation from work (teaching in classroom). Solomon et al (2006) note that the staffroom and meal breaks in staffrooms at workplaces represent hybrid spaces that are simultaneously work and socialising spaces where people are both working and not working. This contrasts with an idea of teachers' 'private selves' (adopted from Goffman) in the staffroom space, as presented by Woods (1979).

Looking at staffroom space just as serving as backstage contrasts with the dynamic nature of school staffrooms (Paechter 2004). Staffrooms not only change over time but also may be manipulated by the judicious use of space by either senior managers or by individual

teachers (Paechter 2004). McCormick et al (2011), on the other hand, show that who is present, and when, and what interaction results are all related to the space, and Meyrowitz (1990) notes this relationship can be two-tier i.e. space influences people and vice versa.

Karlsson (2004) shows school sites and spatial practices are used politically to produce particular situations. McGregor (2003; 2004) notes not just the political but also the relational aspect of space. McGregor (2003) perceives staffrooms as distinctive spaces where professional culture and gendered power relations are played out. Teachers of two secondary schools in her study identified the staffroom as the most important place for discussing social and personal life, although the centre of teachers' interaction at both schools was the departmental office. The staffroom at one school was attended by a majority of the staff whereas the main staffroom at the other school was rarely used (McGregor 2003). The emptiness of the other staffroom was determined by the negative reverberations of the merger fifteen years previously that were regularly invoked by the older members of the staff (McGregor 2003). Returning to McGregor's (2000; 2003) research, it proves that a staffroom is not always as lively, populated centre of teachers' interaction as Kainan (1994), Woods (1979) and Richards (1996) argue. This exemplifies certain complexities embedded in the staffroom area and dissonance between a purpose and an actual use of the staffroom.

Mawhinney's (2012) research also reveals problems of staffroom usage. Since the merger of the teachers' staffroom with the Home and School office, teachers stopped using the staffroom as a restorative place. Mawhinney (2012) highlights the importance of teachers' restorative places (beyond staffrooms) as she shows how teachers deprived of their own place migrate, create and recreate their own restorative places within the school (e.g. in classrooms or the library). By restorative places Mawhinney (2012) means places that fulfil the following criteria: the place must be free from outsiders (non-teachers) and teachers using that place must be similar and have similar values. Mawhinney (2012) shows that there can be

alternatives to the staffroom space (e.g. library). Using pubs and cafes as meeting spaces enables interactions to happen in a non-hierarchical manner and breaks down the within-workplace barriers (McCormick et al 2011). However, there are always, as Solomon et al (2006) suggest, ‘traces of’ work even in non- work settings.

Mawhinney (2012) points out that the teachers’ willingness to adapt (‘ongoing adaptability’) in order to have their own restorative place underscores the value of such places. Situating her research in the context of statistics showing growing numbers of teachers leaving teaching, she suggests that restorative places could possibly stop teachers’ burnout and keep them longer in schools. Similarly to Mawhinney (2012), Bissel (2004) discusses staffrooms in connection with teachers’ well-being. She argues that a teacher’s work does not just happen in the classroom and there should be both work spaces and support spaces for teachers in the school. Such spaces within schools are unreflective and inconsiderate of the complexities of today’s teacher’s role and work (Bissel 2004; McNamara, Murray and Jones 2013) and reflect ‘lost opportunities to create spaces for teachers to build social and formal relationships with teacher colleagues based on trust and cooperation’ (Bissel 2004, p.32). Bissel (2004) mentions, amongst others, staff lunchrooms and staffrooms as located most conveniently for individuals who maintain them (e.g. cleaners) but least convenient for teachers which results in them rarely having time or opportunity to make full use of them.

When discussing staffroom usage it is important to mention time as a determinant of the use of space. McGregor (2004) shows that time fulfils a particular function in school space. The under-usage of the staffroom in McGregor’s (2000) study is explained by teachers’ small amounts of time and perceived large distances that reinforced and were expressions of both social and professional distance (McGregor 2000). What is more, the structure of the time-table was also a limiting factor e.g. at break and with a heavy burden of

cover falling on a staff in that school (McGregor 2000). McGregor (2003) notes that there are relatively limited times during the school day that staff may be in each other's company hence the importance of break time where social talk is practised in the staffroom.

Hargreaves (1994) points out that changes in the teaching profession made what used to be 'free time' a preparation time, group time, individual time or planning time (Hargreaves 1994). Teachers, however have flexibility and control over how they use space and time according to the necessities of the moment (Hargreaves 1994). Hargreaves (1994) also distinguishes the monochromic time perspective of admin staff and the polychromic time perspective of teachers. The polychromic perspective according to Hargreaves (1994) lies in putting emphasis on informal relationships rather than things and on flexible management of simultaneous demands of the densely packed world of the classroom rather than the one at a time fulfilment of linear objectives in case of administrators. This show that time can be differently perceived and managed within a school depending on one's role.

To sum up, the purpose and actual use of staffroom space may differ and the dynamics of both school life and the teaching profession contribute to this disharmony. Having discussed staffroom literature, I can now narrow the discussion down to exploring humour in the school staffroom.

### **Humour in the School Staffroom**

There is very little literature and research into humour in a school staffroom, making this area under-researched territory. To my knowledge, the only up to date study into staffroom humour is the one conducted by Mawhinney (2008) in a United States primary school. The data is analysed using Hochschild's (1983, Mawhinney 2008, p.197) perspective of emotional labour that adds freshness to the omnipresent child-centred approach in analysing school matters. By emotional labour Mawhinney (2008) considers a much-ignored problem of

teachers being required to mask their emotions, to silence their own feelings and to keep the 'professional face'. The successful suppression of emotions is an important part of teachers' job – a job that is monitored by school administrators. Mawhinney situates her research in a wider context of pressures and policies imposed on teachers. She also discusses the problem of distrust between teachers and administrators. The research results indicate the importance of teachers' physical space as this is an exclusive adult time and relationships/interactions within the congregational spaces give teachers support. Humour was noted to be often present during conversations between teachers, however in each congregational space humour was used differently.

Humour was used by teachers in staffrooms as a way to support each other in the 'emotional labour of teaching'. The emotional labour is temporarily stopped within a staffroom and among colleagues. It is assumed that teachers take off their masks in the staffroom, whereas I would argue it is quite possible that they just put different masks on and thus perform different, but still emotional, labour within the staffroom. The research results indicate three uses of humour: laughing at oneself and each other, dealing with irritations about students, and dealing with frustrations about the job. Mawhinney notices that for too long congregational spaces have had a reputation as spaces for complaining. Her study shows that a staffroom is not solely about complaining about the profession; on the contrary it is a place for colleague support and release of tension. It also provides an insight into teachers' professional lives. Mawhinney calls for more research into interaction between teachers and teachers' problems-orientated research that would take into consideration the pressures placed on today's teachers. Gaining access to a school staffroom and being able to observe teachers' private space for so many hours is a true challenge. Mawhinney perceives teachers' humour as positive and this may be to some extent influenced by her sympathy for the teaching profession. In contrast to Mawhinney's positive and sympathetic perspective on

staffroom life, Williams (1999) portrays staffrooms quite differently, namely as pessimistic teachers' bunkers ruled by cynicism and gallows humour. Cynicism is reported to be spreading outside staffroom space too. The article highlights the effects the gloomy and discouraging atmosphere of school staffrooms have on young teachers. Young teachers are presented in the article as people who, apart from other job-related challenges, are also challenged by staffroom cynicism.

The reason for presenting such views at length is that my research will not only address certain negative opinions about staffrooms and teachers' humour but will protest against such jaded visions. The aforementioned article certainly can be placed among all the other articles about never-good-enough-teachers which are a mouthpiece for a super-efficient and extraordinarily-effective always-smiling teachers' ideology that has been imposed on today's schooling. Why are cynicism or gallows humour considered evil? Bullough (2012) challenges the notion of dark humour as purely negative and considers sharing such humour as contributing to safe spaces at schools. He sees benefits in using dark humour in interactions both in teachers' environment and students' environment and also between teachers and students. Bullough, drawing on Mayo's (2010) work, highlights the need for safe spaces within schools not just for students but for educators – 'where humour of both a broadly contestive and broadly supportive kind – joining the serious and playful sides of humour – not only find place but are understood as essential to well-being and to teaching and learning' (p.291). He further explains that humour thrives in such places and relations are both playful and challenging and mostly honest. Applying 'the moral edge of some dark humour' (p.291-292) is seen by Bullough as a way of creating healthier teachers and healthier institutions. Dark humour is born out of anger, Bullough shows. An 'outward' eruption of anger is so much better and healthier than long-term absence or depression caused by 'suppressing' emotions which is characteristic of the teaching profession (Mawhinney 2007).

Interestingly, when calling for creating charged yet safe spaces for light and dark humour, Bullough does not mention staffrooms. It may be because he does not perceive humour as space bound but rather able to create symbolic spaces or because he concentrates on teachers' main task i.e. teaching. This contrasts with Woods (1979) who shows staffrooms as humour arenas and safe spaces for teachers. He argues real (private) 'selves' for both pupils and teachers are hard to find in the formal structure and programme of the school, but reveal themselves in private areas and moments. Laughter is the bridge between the two; public and private selves. Teachers and students alike use humour to recover their private selves; pupils have laughs with their friends and teachers joke with other teachers in the staffroom.

An example of a very positive perspective on the school staffroom emerges from Richards' (1996) study conducted in a small language school in England where the staffroom he observed was far from the stereotypical negative staffroom. The examples of staffroom jokes he provides not only enrich the discussion about staffroom humour but also make it authentic and non-abstract. Richards (1996) claims humour is probably the most distinctive feature of staffroom life, providing an accurate picture of staffroom life that no other description could deliver. He finds staffroom humour enriching and nourishing as well as being a defining feature of staffroom space. Laughter is said to present a 'healthy norm' in the staffroom. What is more, he exemplifies the fact that humour serves as critical distancing from the school's formal life. Humour is also proven to be a 'sanctioned key' in staffroom exchanges and is not always welcome – especially when serious business is being discussed. In his findings he distinguishes non-aggressive humour as dominant and aggressive humour as almost non-existent in the staffroom under research. The most frequent types of humour in the staffroom were witticism, banter and repartee (representing non aggressive types of humour). Richards points out the important role humour plays in collaborative culture and the fact that humour accounts for a core of teachers' interactions. Temporary teachers, external



inspections and weekly meetings help create appropriate ‘distancing mechanisms’. Staff show detachment by means of humour and thus influence the sense of balance. What Mawhinney (2008) notes is that the safe nature of the congregational space and the humour among teachers helped to reveal some of their ‘bottled emotions’.

Mawhinney (2008) talks about teachers’ work-related stress and the role of humour in dealing with it. She highlights the importance of practical jokes (e.g. teachers’ hijacking a walking stick belonging to the head teacher) as a way of providing relief from the everyday stresses related to the profession. Both practical jokes and storytelling are seen by her as a way to cope with ‘emotional labour of the profession’. As for the second use of humour, this humour was sometimes used as a way to release frustration. What could not be revealed in the classroom space could be said/expressed in the staffroom and converting frustration into humour was a coping method. The third use of humour challenged stresses and pressures teachers experienced. The congregational spaces were used as an arena to discuss frustrations and emotions that could not be understood by non-teachers at home or in the classroom due to lack of shared context. Since the emotional labour prevented teachers from expressing themselves in the classroom, they used congregational spaces to uncover their emotions and feelings and thus release tension. Laughter is noted to be a tool to soothe teachers’ wounds. Turning humour on oneself is a good method to discourage thinking about work stress. The light-hearted humour about the job itself and the students is a method of thinking through and dealing with a problem. Mawhinney’s findings and views on the congregational spaces in schools and the use of humour in those spaces are particularly important from the perspective of my own research.

The staffroom in school can be described as a relaxed world – full of jokes and laughter; a ‘backstage’ where masks can be to some extent dropped (Woods 1979). The fact that teachers use humour in staffrooms and laugh a lot during lunchtimes might be connected

with laughter being an antidote to schooling as well as laughter providing a means of escapism through transforming the reality of schooling (Woods 1976, in Kehily and Nayak 1997, p. 70). Laughter in the school staffroom promotes solidarity among staff and is an enormous aid to solidarity, that in the harshness of the conditions in which teachers work, is an important means of support (Woods 1984, in Davies 1990). However, confining humour between teachers to the staffroom and/or attributing humour solely to this school space may be a misrepresentation of existing interactions between teachers across and beyond school. Thus my study will try to locate humour between teachers also beyond spaces that 'externally labelled' (McCormick et al 2011) as staffrooms and take into consideration that there might be other spaces that act as staffrooms, as Mawhinney's (2007) study suggests.

## **Conclusion**

In the above literature review I have found both inspiration and justification for my own research. Studies by Kainan (1994), Mawhinney (2007; 2008), Richards (1996) or Miller (2008) clearly show that research into humour at schools is not just possible but necessary to comprehend the reality of school life. I find Mawhinney's work additionally encouraging as she proposes looking at teachers with sympathy and that is something I truly identify with.

The workplace humour literature represented by among others Plester (2007) on the other hand proves that humour is a recognised value in the life of both employees and employers which immediately poses the question of whether humour could be equally appreciated in educational settings. As for the approach to humour, my thesis will aim to show a 'more open perspective of humour' (Westwood and Rhodes 2007, p.12) and thus move away from a strictly functionalist approach towards workplace humour. This means that humour will not be presented just as a means of improving work-effectiveness but also as a complex multi-dimensional phenomenon.

The literature also introduces the theoretical perspective used in the study. The ideas of Goffman (1959) and Solomon et al (2006) shed a new light on workplace relationships, space and humour bringing out their complexity.

This literature review has identified the following gaps and areas worth expanding:

- The complexity and fragmented nature of workplace culture mirrored in staffroom humour
- Different ways of humour contributing both to workplace relationships and workplace culture
- The need to see humour as an integral part of workplace relationships and familiarity as an indicator of relationships and humour types
- The need to overcome the existing pairs of binary divisions of humour functions
- The complex relationships between space and humour

Those issues are addressed by the following research sub-questions that further define the focus of the study identified in Chapter 1:

1. What behaviours comprise staffroom humour?
  - 1a. What are the functions and purposes of humour?
  - 1b. What are staff experiences and perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of humour?
- 2a. How does humour form workplace culture within a staffroom?
- 2b. How does humour influence relationships between teachers?
- 2c. Does staffroom humour varies by structure/layout of the staffroom and its use?

2d. Are there differences across the three settings in the way that humour is used?

The following questions: **What behaviours comprise staff-room humour? What are the functions and purposes of humour? What are staff experiences and perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of humour?** are important to the research because they provide description of staffrooms and teachers' use of humour. As for the questions: **How does humour form workplace culture within a staffroom? How does humour influence relationships between teachers?** they are of an exploratory nature so they are designed to use teachers' humour as a mirror reflecting workplace culture and relationships between teachers. Regarding the questions: **Does staffroom humour vary by structure/layout of the staffroom and its use? Are there differences across the three settings in the way that humour is used?** their importance to the research lies in the fact that they treat staffroom humour as a complex phenomenon influenced by a number of different factors. They are exploratory as they investigate the particularities of staffroom humour. The answers to descriptive research questions will provide a basis, a context for the answers to exploratory research questions that will fill in 'this context' with details.

The following chapter will discuss methods and methodology used to address these research questions.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to explain the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of the research. The theoretical assumptions of the research will precede the methodology section as to understand the methods and approaches used in the research one needs to know the philosophy behind them. The methodology used in the research will be presented in the following order: Symbolic interactionism, Paradigm, Qualitative methodology, Case study approach, Sample, Research timeline, Procedures and methods, Ethical considerations and Study limitations.

### **Symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism belongs to middle-range theories (along with e.g. post-structuralism and critical theory) as it is concerned with attempts to understand and explain a selected aspect of social life (Bryman 2008). Symbolic interactionism 'emphasises the micro-level linkages between the subjective consciousness, interpersonal interaction and identity formation, as well as symbolic and socially constructed nature of the larger social world' (Johnson 2008, p.111). In symbolic interactionism the understanding of social phenomena is not undertaken by individuals in isolation from each other but it is something that happens in interaction with others (Bryman 2008). It lies in an individual continuously interpreting the symbolic meaning of their own environment and acting upon this meaning (Bryman 2008).

This study uses symbolic interactionism in line with Goffman's (1959) work. Goffman's assumptions provide useful analytical lenses for my study as they help interpret human behaviours within the work setting and discover the symbolic meanings of objects,

interactions, relationships, spaces and times and also workplace humour. As discussed in the literature review chapter, Goffman's ideas of back and frontstages in my research are complemented by the idea of hybrid space introduced by Solomon et al (2006) which helps to grasp the complexity of workplace humour.

Both the ontological and epistemological stands underpinning the study represent constructionism. Constructionist ontology assumes that:

- ‘social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors’
- ‘social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but they are in constant state of revision’
- ‘researcher’s own accounts of the social world are constructions’
- ‘the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive’

Bryman (2008, p. 19)

This ontology positions a researcher as a person willing to understand the studied world but also aware of seeing only a part of the puzzle and not the entire picture. Constructionism therefore assumes humility on the part of the researcher; they know the limits of what they can find out and understand; they perceive themselves as a learner of the world under analysis.

Constructionist epistemology rejects the views that: ‘objective truth waiting for us to discover it’; ‘truth or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world’, ‘meaning is constructed and not discovered’ (Crotty 1998, p 9-10). The researcher’s role therefore is complex as they are both a part of the audience and a co-performer in Goffmanian terms.

The researcher represents the audience as they observe the participants (although not in all types of research). They are also a co-performer as they interact with participants they observes and shape their performance.

The epistemological assumption underpinning the research is that of accessing the participants' world as well as their views and truths by requesting their self-exposure (in case of observations) and, in the case of other methods, self-reflection and self-analysis of personal experiences, feelings and opinions. Depending on the method it can assume the researcher's self-exposure, self-analysis and self-reflection as they co-construct the studied world. The researcher's knowing is based on co-construction of the studied phenomena. The researcher relies on both their own impressions about the researched world and gathering people's stories and opinions without making pre-assumptions as to the results of the study. Accessing and gathering knowledge about the researched setting can be a complex endeavour. Goffman (1959, p.16) points out, on several occasions, familiarity as a way of the researcher accessing and comprehending the research world:

Instead of having to maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different performer and performance, he can place the situation into a broad category around which it is easy for him to mobilize his past experience and stereo-typical thinking. Observers then need only be familiar with a small and hence manageable vocabulary of fronts and know how to respond to them to orient themselves in a wide variety of situations.

This shows that familiarity, although needed and helpful in finding out about the researched world, is limited for the researcher. As Goffman (1959) further notes it is, on the other hand, sufficient for the researcher to see some acts to understand and imagine the rest of the acts within social organisation. However, the researcher can be misled and manipulated by the participants as well as by the objects they need to rely on representations of (Goffman 1959). The knowing in the research is thus rooted in thinking of knowledge as something difficult to manage, categorise or group. Therefore the research concentrates on getting an insight into

teachers' lives and not on producing patterns, generalisations and recipes. The following section shows a connection between constructionism and the paradigm informing my research.

## **Paradigm**

The research is informed by an interpretive paradigm. The primary aim of the interpretive paradigm characterising my study is to familiarise oneself with and attempt to understand people's views on the subject under investigation. The interpretive researcher can never assume a value-neutral stance, and is always implicated in the phenomena being studied (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). Therefore, when approaching different views of the participants, the researcher needs to reflect on their own subjective views and meanings that they are producing and subsequently contributing to the research. My research attempted to fulfil the obligations of researcher as a witness of the researched world, explaining their position in the research and telling about their own experiences and perspectives while also listening to the interpretations of participants (Ropers-Huilman 1999).

The interpretive nature of my research also lies in the fact that its underlying assumption is one of all interpretations of researched reality being unfinished, provisional and incomplete (Denzin 1989, in Peshkin 2000). Plester (2007) who situates her humour research within an interpretive and constructionist research paradigm highlights the role of a researcher in the process of a sense-making of the research data:

Since the goal of this research is to understand elements of organisational culture and humour and the assumptions and values associated with these concepts, then a process of understanding and interpretation created with participants creates an understanding of their reality' (p.77).

My research is also underpinned by a belief that the researcher (although to a different extent than participants) is involved in the studied world. I support Plester's (2007) idea that



‘in sharing this process with the researcher new and deeper interpretations may emerge and thus result in the co-creation of interpretations about the studied topics’ (p.78). I agree with Plester (2007) that, since humour and organisational culture depend on context, the positive paradigm would not be appropriate for this kind of research. Dudzikowa (1996) also situates her humour research in the interpretive paradigm in order to give the voice to the researched and to contextualise the humour phenomenon. The interpretive paradigm implies partial understanding of the researched world. As Goffman (1959, p.241) stated:

To uncover fully the factual nature of the situation, it would be necessary for the individual to know all the relevant social data about the others. It would also be necessary for the individual to know the actual outcome or end product of the activity of the others during the interaction, as well as the innermost feelings concerning him.’

What Goffman sees as rarely available information is crucial for my research – the acknowledgment of the limitations of what can be learnt about the world being researched. . What is more, those limitations themselves provide important insights and potentially guidelines for future research in terms of methodology development.

Having presented the philosophical underpinnings of my research, in the next section I shall discuss the choice of mixed methods for this study and justifications thereof.

### **Qualitative methodology**

This study used a mix of qualitative methods (unstructured participant observations, group interviews, a funny artefact collection and individual interviews). Qualitative methodology best suited my research for a number of reasons. Firstly, qualitative methodology helps to see the studied world from the participants’ perspective (Bryman 2008). Instead of testing hypotheses, the researcher explores the studied phenomenon in cooperation with participants. This allows the research to generate theory out of data in an inductive manner (Bryman

2008). Secondly, qualitative methodology puts an emphasis on context (Bryman 2008). This is particularly important when studying spontaneous humour as discovering the context of humour and meanings attached to humour helps to understand it better. Thirdly, qualitative research allows for more a flexible and less structured approach in terms of methods (Bryman 2008). Keeping structure to a minimum enhances the opportunity of genuinely revealing the perspectives of the participants (Bryman 2008, p.389). This is crucial when studying humour as participants are not restricted by methods with predetermined options but on the contrary have a chance to exemplify their uses of humour, justify and explain their opinions, offer personal interpretations of workplace humour and contextualise it so that researchers understand why certain exchange/incidents are seen by them as funny. What is more, studying humour using quantitative measures could prove inconsistent with how humour is experienced everyday (Lynch 2005).

Finally, the subjective nature of qualitative methodology makes it more personal than quantitative methodology. Although the subjectivity of this methodology and the close personal relationships that can develop between researcher and participants is the subject of critique (Bryman 2008), it provides an optimal research situation for participants to reveal/open up about their own subjective views on such a subjective subject as humour.

### **Case study approach**

The best approach for setting the framework for data collection, data analysis and presenting the research findings is a case study design. What I will be referring to as a case study is best defined by Yin (2009, p.18), who sees a case study as:

- ‘An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context’

*Here 'staffroom humour' accounts for a contemporary phenomenon and the real life context is represented in my research by staffrooms of educational establishments.*

- 'An inquiry that copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points'

*Humour is a challenging research area and so observing and discussing issues of humour may lead to unexpected results. When observing or discussing humour the researcher's attention is placed on a number of humour types, humour features and ways of expressing humour.*

- 'An inquiry that relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion'

My research uses a mix of qualitative methods with individual semi-structured interviews and funny artefacts gathered outside the staffroom serving as triangulation tools. Following Yin's (2009) terminology, the 'case' in my research is teachers' use of staffroom humour and the 'units of analysis' are: observed behaviours of teachers of three different educational settings, the staffroom's artefacts and group interviews with the teachers, individual interviews and funny artefacts beyond the staffroom.

The main advantage of using a case study is that it helps me to portray what it is like to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and thick description '(Geertz 1972, in Cohen et al. 2003, p.182) which in this particular research is a description of staffroom humour. What is more, case studies have the following strengths that I find applicable to my research on staffroom humour:

- 'they catch unique features that may be lost in larger scale data (e.g. surveys)'
- 'they can be undertaken by a single researcher'

–‘they provide insights into other, similar situations and cases, thereby assisting interpretation of other similar cases’ (Nisbet and Watt 1984, in Cohen et al. 2003, p. 184).

*In my research important features are: staffroom atmosphere, teachers’ behaviours, the actual use of staffroom space and lunch break time by individual teachers. These features are ‘caught’ and recorded by means of unstructured observations, informal interactions with teachers and the artefacts collection. Factual knowledge about the researched environment is complemented by the researcher’s impressions of the environment and participants.*

*Observing and interviewing teachers about their use of humour leads to them telling me stories about: their use of humour in their offices, their use of humour with their managers. Such stories and in particular teachers’ interpretations of such stories are helpful in understanding my participants’ behaviours and humour.*

My research uses an exploratory multi-case study method and what Bryman (2008) calls a comparative design. The comparative design ‘embodies the logic of comparison in that it implies that we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations’ (Bryman 2008, p.58). Deliberate selection of contrasting situations (see Research Inclusion Criteria in Appendix 2c table 1), on condition that the findings support the hypothesised contrast, will yield results representing a strong start toward theoretical replication, strengthening the findings compared to those from a single case (Yin 2009). However, this implies that the findings must support the hypothesised contrast ignoring the possibility that contrasting situations may produce similar findings. In my research I am more inclined to follow Bryman’s (2008, p.60) opinion that ‘the comparison may itself suggest concepts that are relevant to emerging theory’. The difference between Yin (2009) and Bryman (2008) clearly lies in their opinions of when

theory should be created; the former suggests that theory should precede the research and the latter sees theory as something that is created in the process of research. According to Yin (2009) any case study should start with a development of a theory and ‘even an exploratory case study should be preceded by statements about what is to be explored, the purpose of the exploration, and the criteria by which the exploration will be judged successful’ (p.37).

As for the development of theory, in this particular research I avoided hypothesising and allowed the theory to emerge from the findings. The purpose of the exploration was to show the use and role of staffroom humour in teachers’ professional lives. The research questions (see Chapter 2) outline the exploration area. As for criteria by which the exploration was judged successful, moving closer to understanding the workplace humour at the three settings enabling as comprehensive as possible answers to the research questions is considered a successful exploration in this particular research. Such judgment is subjective, relying on my own confidence in the research findings contributing to understanding of the studied phenomenon.

According to Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen (2010) the greatest advantage of a case study is the possibility of depth as the case study seeks to understand the entire case in the whole of the environment. Such a holistic approach is very useful in describing the complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon of both humour and workplace culture. Also, the choice of case study design for this research is justified by the fact that it connects with Goffman’s analytical framework, which I am using ‘due to its utility in exploring and analysing human interaction in specific social situations’ (Moore 2010, p.851).

Since the existing studies into educational setting humour are based on single educational settings (Miller 2008; Mawhinney 2008; Richards 1996), this research has a chance to expand the research into staffroom humour by relying on data from more than one

educational setting. However, far more important than gathering data from multiple sources is developing a methodology that fits best the research questions. The multiple case study design allows for continuous comparison of the three settings under analysis and thus bring out their similarities and differences. Such ongoing comparison facilitates the emergence of important insights and findings.

## **Sample**

The three researched settings<sup>4</sup> were: Albatros — a small language school, Lingua — a medium-size language school, and Devon College — a large comprehensive post-16 education provider.

In this section first of all the justification for the sample is presented. Secondly, general background information about each setting is given. Thirdly, work politics of the three settings are discussed. Finally, the differences and similarities of workplace humour in the three settings are presented.

### Justification for the sample

The main inclusion criterion for the sample was representing the FE sector in England. Other criteria included greatest differences in terms of the educational setting size (number of teachers and students), provision offered, intake, financing, controlling bodies<sup>5</sup>, teachers' roles, type of employment within the post-16 independent education sector, staffroom's size, usage and population (see Appendix 2c). What was also crucial was the differences in terms of work politics and workplace humour (see below).

The two language educational settings and one FE college were selected due to the fact that they represented the most varied educational provisions within the post-16

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<sup>4</sup> All the names of the researched settings and participants are fictitious.

<sup>5</sup> Ofsted in case of Devon College, the British Council in case of Lingua and Albatros.

provisions in Devon, therefore giving a chance to observe very different workplace cultures and workplace relationships manifested and reflected by means of staffroom humour. For instance, the diversity of the employment statuses of teachers, such as the division into core and non-core staff in the language educational settings and a whole variety of employment types in FE college (permanent part-time and full time, fractional, sessional, temporary and zero hour contracts), allows us to see different workplace relationships and different workplace cultures of teachers within each of these institutions. Teachers at those settings are divided into those who know each other very well and those who due to their seasonal nature of employment are possibly not fully included in the workplace life and experience job insecurity. Humour used in the staffroom reveals teachers' closeness levels, teachers' statuses/positions within educational setting and teachers' engagement with workplace life.

The presence of the staffroom in the educational setting was of great importance when selecting the sample as it was a place where teacher–teacher conversations and use of humour could be observed. Therefore, the vocational provider and University faculty at which I conducted group interviews were excluded from the sample as they lacked staffrooms. In this particular research, lack of a staffroom means lack of observation data and therefore it deprives the research of authentic and spontaneous humorous exchanges among staff members during their lunch breaks. The remaining educational settings I have contacted have not accepted my invitation to the research, either showing no interest in the research (two vocational providers) or giving the following justifications for the refusal; lack of time ( two colleges) or a too-small staffroom (one language educational setting). These access problems may have been caused by the fact that staffrooms are the sacred places for staff as they are the privacy zones (Kainan 1994) within the educational settings where teachers want to relax, eat their lunches and talk with their colleagues, and humour research in the staffroom may be seen as intrusive and invasive.

Focusing only on two large FE providers or only on two language schools may have appeared to be a more coherent sample. It would have helped to explore a particular type of FE provision with all its specific problems. However, I believe it would not have brought up certain discussions that come from comparing different settings.

Below there are the descriptions of each of the researched settings.

### Albatros

Albatros is a language school offering courses for foreign students wishing to improve their English and exams that provide learners with English language certificates that are recognised world-wide. The courses vary in length; from one week to forty-eight weeks hence the rotation of the students – some groups come and some go. The school employs 6 permanent teachers (core staff) with up to 20 part-timers depending on student numbers. Male and female staff are evenly split 13/13. Maximum capacity is 200 students at any one time in 20 classrooms, which is the average in July/August. At other times average student numbers are between 50 and 100.

The business is reliant on the number of students coming from abroad to learn English. The winter is a quiet season and summer tends to be busy. The school is co-run by two directors: one local and one in the United States. The local manager is the school's head teacher and the other manager controls the business from a distance. In the last few years the school has developed English courses for specific occupations as an addition to the general English courses.

The school is located in an old Victorian house near the sea. The location is very picturesque and not far from the city centre. The school is a three-storey building. On the ground floor there is a canteen for the students on the left and the administration office on the



right. On the first floor there are classrooms and a staffroom. Opposite the staffroom there is an office for people working on specialist courses. Just behind the staffroom is the head teacher's office. On the third floor there is an Exam office and some classrooms.

The staffroom (see Appendix 1a), is very small (3.9 m by 2.7m) and the furniture is well worn. The staffroom comprises a kitchen area (sink, microwave, kettle and a fridge in a far corner) and what could be called a relaxation area (comfortable sofa and chairs). What was very characteristic of the staffroom were the funny quotes posters placed on its walls. The funny posters were lists of staff's humorous comments and exchanges. The staffroom was a central space for socialising at Albatros.

### Lingua

Lingua is a chain language school bigger than Albatros but smaller than Devon College. The school is a part of an international education organisation. The school offers courses in English as well as work experiences/internships<sup>6</sup> in the college for non-native speakers. The total staff ratio is 17:16 women/men (both admin and teachers). However, the management/director ratio is 1 woman (in marketing) to 7 men. The teachers account for the minority of the staff at the college. During my observations there were 5 teachers (2 females and 3 males) at the school but this number varies and is subject to the number of students. The Lingua staff is multicultural and multilingual.

The numbers of students vary from occasional weeks with just one or two longer term students to weeks with up to 60/70 students doing English courses. Because there are also work placement students (who do not take lessons) simultaneously, this number could be higher. Most of the students are over 16, some over 18. However, Lingua also has younger students in the summer holidays and occasional school groups throughout the year.

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<sup>6</sup> Work experience in teaching, IT or administration/marketing.

The school is based in a modern-looking three-storey building. On entering the school there is a bright large lobby with comfortable sofas on the left and reception on the right. There is an interactive information board in the lobby that continuously displays up-to date information about lessons and trips but also information about the school, staff and rules for the students. The dominant colour in the school is white which gives the impression that the place is fresh and new, even hygienic. Due to the lack of paintings and pictures, the lobby space looks quite empty. At one point in my research I noticed the elegant rules plates on the lobby's walls. The rules concerned the behaviour expected of students such as 'Don't drink and drive' and Health and Safety issues. On the ground floor there is a staffroom and in the basement there is a staff work area with a printer. The classrooms are on the first and second floor.

The Lingua staffroom (see Appendix 1b) is slightly bigger than the Albatros staffroom with 4.0 by 4.1 m dimensions. It is an elegant and modern-looking kitchen. It is very clean and bright both in terms of colours and the amount of light coming to the kitchen through a large window. It has a table in the middle surrounded by unmovable high bar stools without back support. The staffroom has a fridge, kettle and microwave so the staff can prepare and eat their food there. There were no funny artefacts in the staffroom area when I came to Lingua to conduct the research. Teachers, in addition to the staffroom, also had a teachers' lounge, a basement area where the printer was, and that space was used mainly by teachers. As Paul (Lingua), made clear, it is a teachers' area and admin staff use this space only to collect photocopies. This space had characteristics of both frontstage and backstage depending on who used it and for what purpose. The teachers' lounge therefore was a more selective space and a less accessible place for employees other than teachers, representing a backstage to the backstage (staffroom). Its hybridity lay in the fact that it was neither an area just for work nor one just for rest.

## Devon College

Devon College is a part of a local Further Education College that is located at two campuses: Central and Devon. The Central college site is several miles away from the Devon College site – they are located in two different districts of the city. The Further Education College is the biggest education provider in the city, employing 807 staff members and providing for 16 947 students (total number for both campuses). The Devon College site employs 157 staff of whom 88 are teachers. The courses available at Devon College cover the following curriculum areas: Health & Social Care, Early years, Access to HE, GCSEs, A levels, BTec Business Studies levels 1,2 and 3, Foundation Degree in Forensic Science, Peter Jones Academy, Skills for Life, Performing Arts, Music, Media, Dance and Theatre.

On the ground floor are reception, offices for teachers and administration staff, canteen and staffroom. On the second and third floor there are classrooms. Teachers have their own offices where they work in threes (on average). They are mainly grouped by subject taught. The offices are labelled as ‘staffrooms’<sup>7</sup> (they have signs reading ‘staffroom’ followed by a room number). They are equipped with desks, computers, chairs and shelves but they are rather small (there is not much room left if all three teachers are inside). Participants talked about those spaces with enthusiasm and attachment, calling them ‘isolated little pockets’, ‘little satellite groups’, ‘my little space’, ‘our little groups’ and ‘little pods’. They used the small offices for both work and socialising.

The staffroom (see Appendix 1c) has a sign ‘staff refectory’ on its door and is located on the other side of the corridor opposite the teachers’ offices. The staffroom is bigger than the ones at Albatros and Lingua (4.6m by 8.5m). The staffroom has two entrances, one from the corridor and the other from the canteen (a large communal area where food is served for

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<sup>7</sup> These were not the staffrooms I had in mind when constructing research questions

both staff and students). The staffroom furniture looks rather new. There are five tables; three low coffee tables and two high (classroom desks). The coffee tables are surrounded by comfy red chairs, the two high tables have chairs without cushions. There is a vending machine but no kitchen appliances or food preparation area. Teachers bring their own packed lunches to the staffroom or buy food in the adjacent canteen and bring it on plates to the staffroom. The staffroom therefore is clearly a space provided for the staff to eat away from the students and without needing to go to their working space. There were some funny artefacts spread through noticeboards hung on the staffroom walls when I conducted my observations at Devon College.

For more details on research inclusion criteria please see Appendix 2c

### Work politics at the three settings

An immediate political context of the three settings under analysis can help understand both their commonness and uniqueness. Workplace humour happens with and is conditioned by a variety of rules, assumptions and attitudes. Participants' attitudes to their workplaces, to those in power and to their occupation, the significance of organisational changes and rules regarding eating and chatting all help to contextualise the phenomenon under analysis.

### Participants' attitudes to their workplaces

Participants at all three settings showed signs of both identification with and differentiation from their workplaces. Identification was used when participants asserted their approval,

understanding of workplace politics as well as when they manifested a sense of belonging within the workplace. Differentiation was used when participants wanted to signal their individuality and emphasise their disapproval of work politics. Identification and differentiation included, but was not confined to, approving or disapproving of some humour. Out of the three settings, the participants from Albatros identified themselves most strongly with their workplace. At Albatros, even the teachers who did not approve of some of the humour in the workplace appreciated the funny quotes and talked about them with sentiment. What is more, even the teachers who criticised the position and freedom of the use of humour at Albatros at the same time appreciated its relaxed atmosphere and friendliness and the approachability of their colleagues, managers, the head teacher and the director living in the US. The informality of Albatros in terms of management, hierarchy and structure influence the informality of Albatros staff's behaviour and free use of humour which is similar to the more informal company in Plester's (2009) study which had fewer humour boundaries and encouraged the use of humour.

It was common among participants from all three settings to indicate that, although they participated in common practices or shared common values of the workplace, they also had individual opinions. For instance, participants at Lingua tried to justify and appreciate the fact that their manager had a very specific vision of the school looking professional and business-like, they also enjoyed working in a modern looking building. However, they noticed the drawbacks of some of the work politics (e.g. imposed professionalism concerning dress code and use of humour in emails). Lingua represented a more formal company whose e.g. formal style of management had the effect of restricting behaviour and the use of humour (Plester 2009).

In contrast to Lingua and Albatros, the participants at Devon College most openly and decisively criticised their workplace and most strongly asserted their differentiation from the

management and its strategies/rules. The senior management at Devon College was identified with rules, regulations, bureaucracy and demands staff often found difficult to cope with, absurd, time-consuming and unnecessary (like rising paperwork). Out of the three settings, Devon College seemed most fragmented and least coherent in terms of relationships between employees and employers. Their use of anti-work humour demonstrated a need to create a counter-culture of their organisation (Parker 2007) and rebel against its formality.

#### Attitudes to the management

The Albatros participants were the only participants who had a warm and friendly relationship with their head teacher and director. The hierarchy at Albatros was downplayed by means of humour, which is in line with the study by Rogerson-Revel (2011). Humour happened across different work roles and power positions and everybody, including newcomers, was encouraged to use humour. The head teacher at Albatros consulted the main jokers as to the suitability of new employees and thus shared his power of retaining staff with some of his subordinates. The director of Albatros living in US contacted Albatros staff via Skype or email and these were occasions for shared humour and ‘to build an initial friendship with them again’ as Robert revealed.

In contrast to the informal style of management in Albatros, the director of Lingua (Matt) had a more formal management style. Participants talked about Matt’s drive for professionalism and ambitions to make Lingua formal and professional. Participants indicated a number of formal rules introduced by Matt such as posters in the lobby detailing what is not allowed in Lingua. When asked about funny artefacts or emails, they said that it would be frowned at, not allowed. Matt represented a person controlling and sustaining the formal impression of Lingua. However, he attended the staffroom and often had a joke with

his staff. Some staff did not appreciate the sexual innuendos Matt was known for. Yet the staffroom was a space none of Matt's potential customers had access to so his behaviour there did not pose a risk for the professional image of Lingua he wanted to maintain.

It could be argued that in the case of both Albatros and Lingua those in power used humour as a way of reducing distance between different power positions (see Chapter 2). However, use of sexual innuendos by Lingua's director may increase this distance with people who find it offensive or inappropriate. This is in line with Goffman (1959) who notes that unofficial communication in teams shapes social distance and formality by either decreasing or increasing it. Such use of humour can be generally seen as a question of the purpose and awareness of humour initiator. The purpose of humour may be to shorten the distance but the result can be the opposite.

As for Devon College, I never met its director. Only one participant mentioned his manager as a person with a name, others used the general phrase 'management' which clearly at Devon College had negative connotations. The management at Devon College comprised of people the staff felt distanced from, and would alter their behaviour and thus use of humour in their presence. The same concerned the manager which one participant mentioned to me. Devon College was the only setting where participants revealed that they felt under surveillance and that they were being controlled. It was also the setting where by means of humour staff so strongly expressed their solidarity against the management.

The frustrations regarding management did not just concern the disliked work politics they represented but also some rules that were practiced by them:

Harry: Trouble is, a lot of the people who haven't got much of a sense of humour, and don't engage with students in the way that you're saying, tend to move up in the bloody management system so then we are managed by people like that.

Will: Yeah people will rise... like scum.

(Joint laughter.)

Will: Sorry did I mean cream? No scum.

(Joint laughter.)

#### Group interview at Devon College

This excerpt exposes the injustice of promoting people who in the eyes of the participants do not deserve to be promoted. Being aware of such situations makes the staff distanced from the management even further. Humour at Devon College was a means of distancing from the management and ideas they represented and strengthening staff's bonds which is similar to Stromberg and Karlsson's (2009) findings. It might be also that staff did not have too many opportunities to use humour with management. The distancing did not however happen just by using anti-work humour among staff — the lack or limited use of humour between staff and management at Devon College also contributed to the distance between them.

#### Participants' attitudes to teaching

In all settings participants talked about feeling responsible for students and caring for them. They also considered in-classroom teaching a part of their job requiring professional conduct and the maintenance of formal relationships with students. Teaching may have been experienced differently in language schools such as Lingua and Albatros due to their having different policies, different students and different governing and controlling bodies than FE colleges such as Devon College.

Participants' attitudes to teaching echoed (to different extents) their attitudes to their workplaces and management. It was most evident in the case of Devon College where teachers who had been in the profession for thirty years or more used terms such as 'surveillance', 'control', 'repression', 'inhibition', 'scrutinised', 'dehumanising', 'professional misconduct' to describe how they perceived the teaching occupation. Teachers



did not blame students for the way they perceived their occupation, they all enjoyed teaching and working with students. The source of their frustrations lay in local and wider education politics (Ofsted, government initiatives). The senior teachers provided a historical perspective to explain how their freedom was gradually being restricted by subsequent changes in teaching. They talked with sentiment about times where they were not under such pressure, did not have to deal with such a great amount of paperwork and did not have to control their behaviour and language so much. Richard (Devon College) illustrated it in the following way:

Richard: (...) I compare the job, the way the job used to be, with an aircraft carrier. We used to be the planes, and we would come in and we could land or take off, and the managers were to the side, you know like in an aircraft carrier. Well now, it's like we're helicopters, and we've got this little pad and we have to come, and the managers have got the rest of the deck. We've got this little pad, and we've got that little area.

Individual interview with Richard, Devon College

This dramatic vision of teaching was not shared by young teachers at Devon College and Albatros and Lingua participants. Although at all three settings some examples of complaining or ridiculing of bureaucracy or rules and policies were found, the lack of comparison of how it used to be a few decades ago may have resulted in other teachers having more positive views on teaching.

The following section will show that attitudes to work may change in the wake of organisational changes.

Organisational changes

Workplace culture can be shaped and reshaped by different changes. Such changes affected all three settings but each was of a different nature. Albatros for instance was affected by the economic climate (recession). Funny quotes were taken down from the staffroom wall.

Robert (Albatros) explained that by the fact that the economic climate caused some stress and awareness about the business fragility. Also the college business became fragmented as it grew in several different directions. All of these affected workplace identity and thus humour.

Robert (Albatros) told me that the staff started to have less social time at the college and humour became darker (staff joked about what other jobs they could do). Robert talked about the need to re-build that lost identity and the college's plans to revive the workplace spirit.

Participants at Devon College talked about the use of humour and staffroom from an historical perspective indicating changes brought about by tighter control and increase of workload. The changes they indicated were clearly related to work politics. The policies, rules and regulations and all issues associated with bureaucracy were seen by them as freedom inhibitors making them more and more restricted. More tasks meant less time for socialising at the workplace and this in effect changed staff's behaviours, including humour, making them more careful about where and who they joked with. Will (Devon College) said that he avoided using humour with senior managers due to a 'general fear that these things can always been used against you either directly or indirectly' and he added that it is a paranoia and pandemic in his workplace. Those changes also affected the usage and role of staffroom which became underpopulated and less central for staff's interaction.

Lingua, on the other hand, experienced quite dramatic turnover in the last few years. The change was a managerial one. When I did my pilot study at Lingua, the school was based in two buildings (one old and one modern) located within same district of the city but the distance between them was one mile. When I came for group interview and observations, all

the staff had moved to the modern building. This is how Lingua teacher Anna recounts it in an email sent to me on 19/08/2011:

Unfortunately, last year was quite stressful for a number of reasons. There was a lot of pressure to get through the British Council inspections and the previous manager had some problems with this, which in turn created problems for the teachers. We were effectively being micro-managed by a non-teacher which was exceedingly frustrating. We had a lot of new staff coming and going and there were also some very apparent personality clashes between department managers (both of whom have since left the company). The other 'confounding variable' for your research is the fact that last year you were only talking to teachers in the teachers' room and not to a mix of staff from all departments as you are now. Quite a number of the staff you see are interns from various countries and they change from year to year.

I hadn't really thought about it, but from an outside perspective it probably does seem a happier place. As for the teachers, we have a really good 'team' mentality now and we all feel that we are being 'heard'.

This has certainly been reflected in the positive feedback from the British Council Inspection team; they were 'impressed'.

Email from Anna, Lingua

Out of the three changes, the one at Lingua seems to be the only positive one and only that one was described as past event. The changes at Albatros and Devon College did not come to an end possibly of their external nature-being subject to factors surpassing the immediate context of the workplace (economic climate and educational politics). The changes, although different, represent important working conditions and show that workplaces are not static and continuously develop.

Eating and chatting rules

At Devon College only, there were estates caretakers who assumed responsibility for controlling whether eating and chatting rules were followed. The rules across three settings

were subject to individual interpretations. For instance, at a very moment of discussing the issue of rules for eating and admitting that eating in classrooms was forbidden Lisa (Lingua) was having her lunch and Tony (Lingua) was drinking his coffee in the classroom. Across all three settings people ate mostly in places where they could prepare or access food or/and sit down and eat their food.

The most relaxed attitude to chatting and eating was found in Albatros which again reflects the management style and the relaxed atmosphere of the workplace. Devon College were most careful when chatting in the workplace which also reflects management style. There were some similarities across the three settings regarding rules on eating and chatting: Firstly, the rules were largely assumed as participants were not referring to particular written regulations or quoting any documents.

Secondly, it was at times difficult to distinguish whether participants were presenting their own rules, rules of the settings, or rules of the settings that they support. In Goffmanian terms there was on occasions a thin line between moral requirements and instrumental requirements. For instance, participants at Devon College mentioned rules of confidentiality and avoiding showing disrespect to anyone, they also mentioned that people chatting in the corridor should not be blocking it. These rules may represent what Jerry from Albatros calls staff's 'common sense' rather than written policy. However, they can also express and represent care, consideration for other people and good manners. Rules on chatting and eating, when adhered to by participants, represented a cohesive impression of the frontstage (workplace). What is more, they regulated workplace behaviour and in that sense they provided some insights into what assumed rules there might be with regard to other workplace activities including humour.

### Workplace humour

A description of the study's sample requires information about humour as a telling feature of workplace culture. By drawing on distinctive features of each setting, I attempt to capture the differences across those settings in terms of humour usage.

The settings were similar in how they expressed the importance of humour in the workplace but differed in how they manifested it. They were also dissimilar in terms of dominant humour types and identification of workplace jokers. However, regarding humour topics and humour boundaries there were many similarities found. On the whole, humour was found to be a mainly positive phenomenon at each of the settings and was enjoyed and practised by the participants.

As for the contribution of humour to workplace culture, humour was found to be an important and cherished value at each workplace. Humour, although it was a part of team interactions, was particularly treasured in cliques where a chance of crossing the boundaries was minimised due to familiarity among clique members. Similarly to Holmes and Marra (2002, p.1686), my study has found cliques show "different attitudes and tolerance of humour, different reoccurring sources and topics of humour and different regular verbal humour routines, different humour styles and ways of 'doing collegiality at work'". As for humour's contribution to workplace culture, humour at Albatros, in contrast to Lingua and Devon College, was an indicator of the whole setting's atmosphere, and humorous culture at Albatros was something participants identified themselves with whether or not they approved of the main jokers' practices of crossing the line. Only at Albatros was humour encouraged from the ones in power. In contrast, the humour at Devon College was often an expression of rebellion against the workplace culture associated with senior management and thus instead of contributing to it, it served to contest it. Thus humour at Devon College was an 'off-record feature' of workplace talk (Marra 2007) or, in Goffmanian terms, an unofficial and backstage communication.

Lingua was the only example of a setting where, although there was a pressure from above placed on formal behaviour, participants neither developed a strong anti-work humour nor seemed to aspire to have a humorous culture in the workplace like Albatros. Thus humour at Lingua represented an unofficial and backstage communication without strong influence on frontstage image of the workplace.

### Importance of humour

All group interview participants of all three settings highlighted the importance of humour in workplace life and admitted they could not imagine a workplace without humour. The observations and individual interviews confirmed that humour was valued and viewed as a predominantly positive component of the three workplaces. At all three settings participants admitted they could not imagine humour being penalised or forbidden in the workplace:

Interviewer: Can you imagine a college staffroom where using humour is penalised, it's forbidden?

Mike: I think we'd just use the classroom then wouldn't we? (Interviewer's laughter).

Anna: Go underground, not literally, actually we are underground (Interviewer's laughter).

Group interview at Lingua

Both Anna's and Mike's reactions show that whether penalised or not humour would continue but the location of humour would change to whatever would then constitute a backstage. Similarly, Devon College participants found the sheer thought of humour being banned unbearable:

Interviewer: Could you imagine a college staffroom where humour is not only forbidden, but penalised?

Rose: I would hate that.

Richard: Oh it'd be awful. Awful.

Rose: I'd get sacked I think (laughs).

Mark: Yeah there's too many warnings getting thrown about there, there would have to be a huge list, no this, this and this...

#### Group interview at Devon College

Mike proposes a classroom as an alternative backstage. Empty classrooms (during break time) were used by teachers in Mawhinney's (2007) study due to lack of their own staffroom. This shows that backstage is not a fixed space and that a space usually serving as frontstage (classroom) can at times serve as backstage. What changes it into backstage is lack of students, break time and teachers using it to relax, joke and chat. Mark challenges the idea of banning humour as non-feasible; he shows it is impossible to 'tame' workplace humour within a policy. This may be the very reason why Albatros participants dismissed the question with laughter. Albatros was the setting where identifying main jokers, reoccurring jokes and humour targets proved least problematic for me as an outsider-observer. It was clear from the staffroom observations and interviews that humour was valued and really appreciated at Albatros. It was also the only setting out of the three under analysis where participants mentioned and seemed proud of the friendly and jokey atmosphere that 'runs throughout the building' as Robert (Albatros) said.

Humour at Albatros existed across work roles and power positions, was not just welcomed but also encouraged both by main jokers and the Albatros head teacher and director. Neither Lingua nor Devon College gave an impression of settings filled with such an atmosphere. Thus humour at Albatros, in contrast to Lingua and Devon College, did not simply fulfil a role of backstage relaxation, a break from the frontstage (Goffman 1959) but was an accepted and cherished part of frontstage. The importance of humour at Albatros is well captured in the following excerpt:

Max: I think it's used as a sort of, (pause) I think the worst thing you could be here is to sort of be ignored in a sense that nobody makes a joke about you because they don't really know about whether you will, tolerate that or not, and you don't feel comfortable enough to make a joke about anybody else.

Group interview, Albatros

The importance of humour in a workplace can be also manifested non-verbally by means of artefacts or emails. They can act as signs of humorous culture. Albatros was the only workplace that had staff's funny quotes on the staffroom walls. The funny quotes served as an expression, a visible sign of humorous workplace culture. The Lingua school was the only out of the three settings that did not have funny artefacts. Devon College had some funny artefacts in the staffroom (but they were not the spontaneous work of the staff like at Albatros). The funny posters attached to the notice boards were mainly created by the Union and so served different purposes.<sup>8</sup> Teachers at Devon College told me that anything placed by them on the noticeboard in the staffroom or in the corridors would be taken off as these were the rules of the college. The only place where they hung and displayed funny artefacts was their small offices.

As for the use of humour in emails, humour in email communication was least mentioned by Albatros participants. Possibly due to the small size of Albatros, people were communicating face-to-face more. The Devon College participants reported that outrageous jokes were circulated via email. At Lingua the school's Facebook page was used to send funny emails and to socialise. None of the participants valued email communication over other forms of communication and none of them described it as a real alternative to face-to-face communication. This could signal that some aspects of workplace humour communication, unlike funny artefacts, are not displayed or available to those not on the team.

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. encouraging staff to join the Union, informing about Union's agenda and actions.



## Types of humour

When asked about the funniest experience in the workplace, participants provided examples that revealed what humour was enjoyed by them. For instance, participants at Albatros chose the transformation of George:

Robert: There's this relationship among two colleagues that romantic relationship has been the source of amusement...

(Participants laugh.)

Robert: I think any relationship would be...

Max: Bewilderment?

(Participants laugh.)

Max: This one's particularly ironic for various reasons,

(All laugh)

Max: In the way that it's um...

Interviewer: He put it nicely right?

Luke: Yeah he's trying his best.

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: The male half of it is exhibiting behaviour patterns which would have resulted in mockery and disdain from that same person,

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: Had anyone else displayed them.

Group interview at Albatros

The fact that re-telling this story entailed hysterical laughter on the part of George's colleagues shows how much they enjoy mocking and 'derogating of the absent' in Goffmanian terms. This example of 'jocular abuse' (Plester 2007) shows a joint amusement at the expense of the participants' colleague and a member of their clique. Observations and individual interviews confirmed that this example mirrors the type of humour often practised at Albatros.

Similarly, Lingua's participants' choice of funny experience indicated what kind of humour they enjoyed:

Mike: We have these workshops ever so often don't we?

Interviewer: (Laughs.) What's funny about them?

Mike: And when certain people take them, naming no names, they take it a bit seriously and we're having to do activities as if we're elementary level students basically, some of us end up almost crying with laughter because we just get it wrong all the time, so there was the one with the diagram wasn't there?

Anna: I couldn't stop laughing at that (laughter).

Mike: I was holding it landscape and Anna was holding it portrait and neither of us understood what we were supposed to be doing.

Lisa: When was that? [Inaudible.]

Anna: [Inaudible.] Yeah. You had to describe the pictures of the other person, what we didn't know was that we were holding it a different (laughter) inaudible

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Mike: So everything was sort of, well there's a pineapple on the left, oh on mine it's on the bottom right. (Joint laughter) and it must have been five or ten minutes before we realised (Anna's laughter.) What was happening.

Group interview at Lingua

The funny experience described by Anna and Mike (Lingua) shows that they enjoy self-deprecating humour and that they can laugh at themselves. The observations confirmed that at Lingua staff amused their colleagues at their own expense. In contrast, Devon College participants could not decide on one example but what they emphasised was that humour they enjoyed was the humour that provided a relief and liberation and was created in a sense against the management's drive towards appropriate, professional and formal rules of conduct. Ian describes how absurdity of work situations is the source of humour at Devon College:

Ian: Some of the absurdity of the demands put on us I mean sometimes we're put into contradictory situations where we're expected to go and achieve something but then the other part of a policy directly against us actually being able to achieve it, so we're caught in a Catch 22<sup>9</sup> situation! You know Catch 22?

Interviewer: Yes. Yeah.

Ian: Yeah I suppose that's the situation that we're all in.

Group interview, Devon College

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<sup>9</sup> A satirical novel written by Joseph Heller, exposing bureaucratic absurdities in an army.

This need to rebel and subvert such absurdities by means of humour was confirmed by Devon College participants in individual interviews. The funny experiences of participants at three settings give an insight into their workplace humour. The data from other sources complement the picture of the settings' workplace humour from group interviews and show it as far more complex mosaics with more and less dominant humour types. And so observations show the Albatros staffroom as the most hysterical in terms of humour out of the three settings. By hysterical I mean the most intense, loudest, with the most excitement and most visible displays of amusement (loudest laughter). Staff seemed keen to joke with each other; they were loud and used humour that was most direct and personal in the form of teasing and verbal sparring (Kehily and Nayak 1997).

Humour was considered as a means of expressing Albatros identity and being able to make and take humour was a requirement to be one of the group. In comparison to this 'humour show', humour in the other two staffrooms seemed toned down and balanced and was weaved in casual conversations rather than being a way of competing with each other, 'out-joking' each other. However, Devon College participants reported that a lot of humour and the majority of offensive<sup>10</sup> humour, including teasing, happened behind the closed doors of the small offices. The examples of the humour used in the small offices show that humour at Devon College was the most subversive out of the three settings, revealing annoyance and irritation at the policies and rules and regulations often identified with the college management.

At Lingua, humour seemed the most careful out of the three settings under analysis although Matt (Lingua's director) had double standards in terms of use of humour in the workplace as on the one hand he required formal behaviour from his employees and on the other hand used sexual innuendos with staff. Only the participants from Devon College

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. politically incorrect, or ridiculing those in power.

admitted the presence of some sick jokes<sup>11</sup> in staff's conversations and emails. However, I did not observe such humour in the staffroom as some Devon College participants revealed that such humour happened in the trust circles, behind the closed doors or via emails. Due to the secrecy around some more extreme types of humour, I did not witness it myself during my study, I was only given examples of such humour by participants during interviews. For instance, Julia (Lingua) told me about the Lingua's director (Matt) habit of making sexual innuendos when interacting with his employees in the staffroom. Sexual innuendos were found also between staff at Devon College but not at Albatros. It seemed that Albatros staff enjoyed more play on words and quick and biting ripostes.

Funny faces, gestures and exaggerated moves were observed only in the Albatros staffroom. The only fantasy humour was found in Devon College where teachers pretended they were secretly bugged with audio and video monitoring equipment in the office. The only prank in the study on the other hand was observed at Lingua. One of the women in the staffroom purposefully closed the door behind Mike and laughed at him struggling to get in. In contrast to Plester (2007), my study has not found any planned humour rituals such as fun awards or foolish actions. However, at Albatros only, jokers welcomed newcomers<sup>12</sup> by teasing and mocking them and called it 'bullying into shape' or 'status bullying'.

### Humour topics

In all three staffrooms the main topic of the jokes, during the observations, was food. Food the staff was preparing or eating was often a starting point for developing conversation. The reason for that is that I observed staff during their lunch break and in the staffroom;

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<sup>11</sup> e.g. paedophilia, the Jimmy Savile affair.

<sup>12</sup> New staff but also me – the researcher.

observations elsewhere and at other times may have yielded different humour topics.

I observed the fewest work-related jokes and conversations in the Albatros staffroom, the most at Devon College. The interviews at Devon College confirmed that humour there is often work-related. Only one participant, at Lingua, told me about anti-PC humour directed at gays and black people, used at their workplace with and by a gay person and black member of staff. At all three settings participants mentioned laughing at students in conversations with their colleagues. At Albatros and Lingua it was more about linguistic issues (pronunciation, choice of words). Students were foreigners and had English as a second language so their pronunciation or grammar was on occasion the subject of jokes. Whereas at those language schools students were the subject of jokes due to funny linguistic mistakes they made, at Devon College, teachers joked about students because of their misbehaviour, they were ‘venting about students’ as Rose (Devon College) called it.

As for jokes directed at management, it was mainly Devon College staff who humorously derogated those in power behind their back. They also were the ones who mostly joked about policies, rules and regulations. At Albatros staff reported openly mocking and teasing both the head teacher and the director. They did, however, not mention laughing about management’s decisions or ideas. Even at the time of the economic crisis affecting Albatros, staff laughed about their situation and the potential of losing a job, possibly to release stress. However, that was not directed at those in power.

At Lingua teachers laughed about rules and regulations, some associated with or introduced by Matt (Lingua’s director), behind his back. Both at Albatros and Devon College, participants noticed stress-driven humour — that is, humour coming from experiencing work-related stress. Thomas (Devon College) described it as ‘black humour stroke’ and ‘stroke moaning’ and he gave the following example of that:

(...) It's like currently we've just had an observation<sup>13</sup>, we've just had the Ofsted have just finished a major inspection and immediately the week afterwards they launched into a process of individual lecturers observations and there were loads of jokes and moans about that, because of course we didn't get a break from one thing to another, you know it's like being a gerbil (Interviewer laughs) or a hamster in a cage. You go round and round.

Individual interview with Thomas, Devon College

As for targeting other colleagues, I observed it being practised at Albatros and heard from participants of it being practised at Devon College. However, at Albatros teasing and mocking of colleagues happened outside of the clique consisting of core staff whereas at Devon College a prerequisite for such humour was to use it within a clique only. At all three settings there were also jokes about non-work issues such as football, TV, politics, fashion and very often the topics of the jokes changed rapidly. Topics of humour present the contents and targets of humour, next I will discuss the main humour initiators i.e. workplace jokers.

### Workplace jokers

In my study I tried to identify workplace jokers at each workplace. Workplace jokers are the people who created and instigated humour most often (Plester 2007). Albatros jokers were easiest to identify both for myself as an outsider and for their colleagues. They dominated staffroom conversations, initiated humour, were loud and very confident. The jokers at Albatros were the core staff members (1 female and 5 males). Their status and position within the college was well-grounded. They used a strategy of 'bullying into shape' when dealing with new staff members and other staff members that were not involved in the staffroom humour. The strategy was about provoking, teasing and encouraging staff to join the jokers in

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their humorous exchanges. Out of the main jokers at Albatros, Robert, fulfilled a particular role (he was a special main joker). He created and co-created some funny artefacts hanging on the wall in the staffroom. In the group interview Robert seemed to be proud of his workplace. I think he felt proud of the humorous culture of his workplace and to some extent felt responsible or in need of contributing to it and sustaining it which is line with how Plester and Orams (2008) describe the role of joker. Robert, for instance, talked enthusiastically about a need to inject some humour into his workplace and mocking and teasing newcomers and regular staff:

Robert: (...) We tend to be quite quick to pounce on our opportunity to make fun of someone...

Luke: Again, when he says we... (laughs).

Group interview at Albatros

Luke contested Robert's use of 'we' when talking about himself several times in the interview. That, along with his involvement in staffroom humour I observed and heard about from other participants, indicates that Robert was the main humour initiator and provoked a lot of humour himself. He also sounded opinionated about the importance and value of workplace humour. When Albatros faced an identity crisis, Robert felt the need and responsibility to restore it.

Identifying jokers at Lingua and Devon College was more difficult than Albatros. First of all, the people I observed in the staffroom were mostly different to the ones I interviewed. Secondly, the participants' indications of workplace jokers differed greatly (they had different opinions) and included self-nominations. Participants of a group interview at Devon College agreed that there was a rotation of jokers at their workplace – no-one was cast in the role of a permanent workplace joker. Interestingly, during individual interviews at Devon College, some teachers nominated their closest colleagues from their own offices

which is in line with Plester (2007) who found that people tended to identify someone as a joker in their immediate work area. During my observations in Devon College staffroom, I noticed that Agatha (admin lady) initiated and participated in a lot of humour but still was not as distinctive as jokers in Albatros. However, both group and individual interviews revealed what I would call big workplace personalities. The big personalities (legends)<sup>14</sup> were four male teachers (Harry, Will, Ian and Richard) who had worked at the college for over thirty years and it was clear from my interviews and informal conversations with them that they developed philosophical and historical perspectives on workplace humour. They saw workplace humour as being more and more restricted as teachers became more and more controlled.

The rotation can be the also the case at Lingua; at the group interview teachers agreed that the main joker was Stefano but I never had a chance to meet him and during individual interviews he was not nominated as a workplace joker by anyone.

Both Matt (Lingua) and Robert (Albatros) took on a hybrid role of both a joker and what Plester (2007) calls ‘a gatekeeper’ but performed it differently. Matt was Lingua’s director, associated with introducing and sustaining the ‘air of professionalism’ at Lingua. Lingua participants referred to Matt’s vision of Lingua as professional business and Julia (Lingua) told me that his drive towards professionalism was out of proportion. At the same time as mentioned earlier, Matt was a frequent attender of the staffroom and joked with the staff, used sexual innuendos and seemed oblivious to whether it was seen as appropriate or not. Outside of the staffroom he returned to his formal self and frowned upon funny emails and would not allow any funny artefacts in the workplace as Tony (Lingua) reported. This excerpt shows how inconsistent or effective Matt was in his role of humour gatekeeper:

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<sup>14</sup> Well known among staff and students as their colleagues revealed to me.



Interviewer: Do you receive humorous emails from your colleagues?

Tony: Um... Occasionally, but it's frowned upon. In this company we like to keep things quite professional.

Interviewer: So who frowns upon it?

Tony: Matt.

Interviewer: Matt.

Tony: Yeah. Aaaa... Well, having said that, I mean, he ultimately is the one who would complain. But I mean, I've had situations, for example, one of the admin staff sent an email where – I think we needed a new fridge in the classroom, uh, in the kitchen – and he sent an email round saying 'How about this one?' It was like a photograph of a sort of, blonde dressed skimpily with an open fridge full of beer. And one of the women didn't like that, so she complained.

Individual interview with Tony, Lingua

This situation shows that in a case where Matt acted as a joker and not a gatekeeper, a female member of staff assumed the role of a gatekeeper. Matt was trying to combine two roles acting as humour gatekeeper (which was in line with his formal vision of frontstage) and as a workplace joker (which was in conflict with his other role). Combining such divergent roles may lead to seemingly unconvincing behaviour in both of them. However, possibly Matt assumed more flexibility and frivolity in terms of his own humour use due to his power position and being a humour gatekeeper himself. It may be that gatekeeping in his case was not about keeping all humour out but treating it in line with personal preferences. By forbidding innuendo Matt would have to gate-keep himself. The other slightly different example of combining those roles is Robert from Albatros. Robert at first assumed the role of the workplace joker, one of the 'core', the central and dominant clique at Albatros. As mentioned before, he was actively involved in maintaining the humour culture at Albatros. However, later on due to the economic climate that affected Albatros, and due to the fact that Robert had more responsibilities, he started to take on the role of gatekeeper without being willing to resign from a role of joker. His opinion about workplace humour, and particularly about humour boundaries, became more toned down and he expressed a need for people to be careful in order not to cross the boundaries (offending someone and/or looking

unprofessional). What is more, he supported the head teacher's decision to remove the majority of funny artefacts from the staffroom. At the same time he was planning to reactivate the fun culture at Albatros by repainting the staffroom and placing a fresh quote board there (to continue with funny quotes) and planning to create a staff portal. He was aware of the fact that it may look 'staged' but hoped it would work. His underlying assumption of these changes was working towards the benefit of keeping the right impression of the frontstage even in backstage (staffroom). That remains in contrast to the assumptions of 'organic' humour (Stromberg and Karlsson 2009), a bottom-up activity rather than something imposed from above on employees and thus interpreted as patronising (Warren and Fineman 2007).

#### Humour boundaries

There were no written policies specifically regarding humour use at the three settings under analysis. However, teachers said that such rules might be a part of other policies such as safeguarding, harassment or diversity policy and feature in some HR documents. Although there were no specific policies on humour at those settings, different rules regarding eating or chatting at the workplace may have restricted humour exchanges to particular spaces and times especially at Devon College and Lingua where management more strongly enforced the professional image of the organisation than in Albatros. Similarly, the assumption that work emails are better not to be used for humour purposes and that it is better to use private emails in case of emails being monitored by employers was shared by Lingua and Devon College staff. What is more, the management style at each setting impacted employees' usage of humour.

In the case of Albatros and Lingua, humorous behaviour mirrored management style whereas at Devon college staff's humour contradicted management style. The informal atmosphere of Albatros was encouraged from above and Albatros staff found their employers

friendly, approachable and possible to have a joke with. The formal aura of Lingua made it impossible to create or hang funny artefacts or use work emails for humour exchanges. Humour between colleagues seemed to happen in areas that were not frontstages and where staff were not exposed to an audience (students) e.g. staffroom. It was found that participants at Lingua often referred to management's formal or professional vision and behaviour rules when talking about humour and humour boundaries. As for Devon College, the management style there fuelled staff's humour. Anti-work humour within cliques was secretly contesting the behaviour boundaries that were being established and controlled by the management.

Devon College participants, when describing the use of humour in cliques, often laughed about the fact that management would not like/appreciate/approve of such humour. Such humour seemed to give them satisfaction especially when getting away with it:

Will: On Friday we were shrieking weren't we! And we suddenly realised the principal was next door, and we were about to go to a meeting with the principal and we were discussing the most inappropriate topics at the top of our voices!  
Richard: We were, we were, we are lucky to have jobs!

Group interview, Devon College

At all three settings participants were aware of and identified some humour boundaries, usually talking about them very generally without drawing on own experiences. Some of them referred to experiences of their colleagues but were careful not to mention names. Many participants assured me that they themselves do not take offence. This may be related to the fact that is seen as offensive to accuse somebody of a lack of humour (see Chapter 4). At all three settings participants identified crossing a line with upsetting or offending a person. Upsetting a person is a rather an individual issue, the same joke can be interpreted in a number of ways by different people – amusing some and upsetting the others. Therefore, boundaries identified in my study are not specific ones but subject to the humour recipient's

reaction. Potentially offensive humour in my study is referred to as risky humour. It includes humour that may be seen controversial, personal or politically incorrect (sexist, racist humour).

To describe the negative impact of humour participants used the phrases like: crossing the line, stepping too far, going over the line, getting a bit close to the bone which is in line with Plester's (2007) study. This shows that rules about humour at the workplace in Goffmanian terms may belong to moral rather than instrumental requirements and so, rather than being regulated by official documents they may be taken-for-granted rules depending on the individual. Boundaries can be viewed from different perspectives: humour initiator's, recipient/target or a legal perspective. This is exactly why workplace humour boundaries can be seen as vague.

Participants found it easier to talk about humour boundaries in the teacher–student relationship possibly due to the fact that this relationship is more explicitly regulated by workplace official and unofficial policies than relationships between teachers.

At all three settings participants recognised that they should be careful when using humour with students. However, they joked about the students when among their own colleagues and away from students. But in terms of student–teachers interactions, they emphasised their care for students and need to respect their diversity and directly targeting a student in a humorous way was not an option. In order not to cross the boundaries when joking with students they used humour carefully and/or they targeted themselves or used slapstick humour. They did not feel that had to be that gentle and careful with their colleagues, for instance:

Will: There is this thing of the forbidden though isn't there as well, I think we say things amongst ourselves that we er thoroughly disapprove of other people saying in public.

Rose: Yeah definitely.

Will: And we would never dream of saying in front of the students but that's part of the release again it's like swearing, because the more outrageous it is the more inappropriate I think the better it does its job doesn't it?

Group interview, Devon College

Some humour may be just as inappropriate as swearing therefore it cannot be used in front of students. On the contrary, it is reserved for colleagues only. However, the majority of participants felt more confident when joking with close colleagues. Participants perceived familiarity<sup>15</sup> with a person as indicator of whether and what type of humour can be used. Restricting certain types of humour to cliques was the most common way of eschewing a chance to unintentionally offend or upset a person. However, there were examples in my study of unintentional crossing of the boundaries either due to carelessness or obliviousness of the jokers. Both Matt from Lingua and the main jokers from Albatros were indicated by participants as those who crossed humour boundaries. There were very few examples of intentional crossing of the boundaries by means of humour and those were found at Devon College (see Chapter 5).

Having discussed the sample in detail, I would like to move to the research timeline and procedures and explain step by step how the research proceeded.

### **Research timeline and procedures**

The research was preceded by a pilot study that was conducted in Lingua and Albatros in summer/autumn 2010 and comprised staffroom observations and individual interviews with teachers. The research reported in my thesis started in 2011 and was conducted in Albatros, Lingua and Devon College. The observations, group interviews and staffroom funny artefact collection were conducted in 2011/2012 (first phase of the study). There were 4–10 staffroom observations during lunch time lasting on average an hour (10 hours of observations at

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<sup>15</sup> Knowing the person and about the person.

Devon College, 4 hours at Albatros and 6 at Lingua). There were 3 group interviews with teachers (1 group interview at each setting lasting on average an hour). In total 12 participants took part in group interviews (3 participants at Albatros, 4 participants at Lingua and 5 at Devon College). During the staffroom observations 12 staffroom funny artefacts were collected (6 at Albatros and 6 at Devon College). There were no funny artefacts at Lingua, neither in the staffroom nor beyond it. The individual interviews and funny artefact collection (beyond the staffroom) were conducted in 2012/2013 (second phase of the study). There were 15 individual interviews with teachers<sup>16</sup> (6 at Devon College, 4 at Albatros and 5 at Lingua). A total of 11 funny artefacts were collected beyond the staffroom (2 at Albatros and 9 at Devon College).

### **Research methods used in the first phase of the study**

As mentioned earlier I experienced some access problems thus to eschew any potential accusation of my research being intrusive a ‘one-off’ interview (that refers to both group and individual interviews) and ‘just a few visits to staffrooms’ were used by me as catchy terms when I sent off invitations to different education settings for my study.

#### Group interviews

Group interviews were used in this research for several reasons. Firstly, unlike individual interviews, group interviews have potential for revealing group interaction dynamics (Hatch

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<sup>16</sup> Two of the participants at Albatros were ex-teachers at Albatros now performing different roles – Maggie worked in the exam office at Albatros and Robert was a material manager for specialist English courses.

2002). Since the research concerns workplace culture and workplace relationships group interviews gave me an opportunity to have some insights into the dynamics of conversations between teachers. Such interviews are useful when the group of interviewees have been working together or where it is seen as important that everyone concerned is aware of what others in the group are saying (Watts and Ebbut 1987, in Cohen et al 2007). The purpose of those group interviews was to investigate the commonness of work experience and humour shared at workplace with other colleagues so it was crucial that the interviewees knew each other and were colleagues. Secondly, the group interview can generate a wider range of responses than individual interviews (Cohen et al 2007) which can lead to a greater representativeness of the data (Denscombe 2007). Thirdly, the group interview allows participants to listen to alternative points of view, allowing them to either support or challenge some views (Denscombe 2007) unless a 'public line' is offered instead of a more honest, personal response (Arskey and Knight 1997, in Cohen et al 2007, p. 373). Fourthly, focus group interviews can unravel fairly complex problems to be pursued through further research procedures and address fairly simple issues (Vaughn et al 1996) which is particularly important when researching such a complex phenomenon as workplace humour.

Group interviews also provoked some self-analysis or self-reflection in staff with regard to their use of humour. What is more, since the group interviews served as an introductory method in the first phase of the study, they were helpful in constructing rapport with the researcher. Learning about each other through a group interview was particularly important as group interviews were followed by observations and staffroom funny artefacts collection. Additionally, the one-off nature of the interviews may have helped participants to discharge their feelings (Brannen 1988). Also the advantage of the one-off interview lies in participants' desire for secrecy and anonymity being fulfilled and possibility of gossip minimised (Brannen 1988). However, it is also worth considering the challenges of group

interviews. Being in a group may make participants more willing to express opinions that they perceive may not fit within researcher's expectations (Hatch 2002). What is more, according to Bryman (2008), being a moderator in a group interview means straddling two positions: allowing the discussion to flow freely and intervening to bring out especially salient issues, particularly if group participants do not do so. The other challenge of group interviews is the control over the interview and participants and possible problems of group effect e.g. one participant dominating the entire interview (Bryman 2008). I was aware that to overcome such problems I would need to take up the role of arbitrator in the group interview and listen actively to multiple speakers to enable prompt and accurate probing.

### Unstructured participant observations

#### Authentic humour

Humour research deprived of real life humour examples becomes an abstract and incomplete piece of work. The importance of spontaneous humour quotes is clearly visible in the studies conducted by Holmes (2000; 2007), Holmes and Marra (2002), Strömberg and Karlsson (2009), Plester (2007), Lynch (2010) or Richards (1996). Hence the need to observe authentic humour exchanges in my research. Authentic humour is humour used by participants spontaneously in every day conversation/interaction. In Goffmanian's terms it is an 'un-staged' humour, unrestricted by the expectations of audience. Observations give a researcher a chance to see and listen to how humour is used spontaneously in the workplace. What is more, observations enable the researcher to see the bigger picture (e.g. humour profile of the entire setting) rather than just a 'slice of life' (Lankshear and Knobel 2004). This is particularly the case in unstructured participant observation as there is then no predetermined tool that would stand in the way of direct and spontaneous observation.



## The role of observations and the observer

The need for an authentic workplace leads to different decisions regarding involvement in the participants' lives e.g. full immersion or acting as a pseudo-member (see Chapter 4). My unstructured participant observations could be briefly described as overt observations where I act as a 'researcher-participant' being 'semi-involved' in staffroom life. Different observation roles do not need to be distinct or exclusive, the researcher may move between them at different phases of the research and sometimes they merge into one another (O'Connell, Davidson and Layder 1994). There are many degrees of participation in participant observations and my role in the observations was the one of observer-as-participant which means participating in group activities as I desired and acting mainly as data collector (Kawulich 2005).

My participatory role as an observer included: joking with teachers, asking them questions about staffroom life, answering their questions about my research, observing and noting down their use of humour. This means that I participated in what I wanted to research. My level of involvement in each setting and during each break depended on a number of factors: the staffroom atmosphere, teachers' inviting me or not to their conversations, their reactions to my presence and my use of humour, sitting arrangements, teachers' interest / lack of interest in my research etc. However, many researchers use the term 'participant observations' to describe observations carried out from the position of the research setting's member and insider. In my study I was not a member of the studied settings and I did not share work activities with the teachers as I was not a fellow teacher.

However, because I interacted with them I decided to use term 'participant observation' to distinguish this type of observation from the laboratory-like approach that

assumes distance and limited or lack of interaction. Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) note that direct observations, in contrast to participant observations, concern observable issues (e.g. frequency) and do not inherently require any interaction between the observer and participants. What justifies the choice of the term ‘participant observation’ in my research is the interactive experience it entails and its association with the exploratory and explanatory nature of my research objectives (Guest et al 2013). What is more, in participant observations the observer is a research tool and that requires self-reflexivity on their part (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011).

According to Bryman (2008) there are contexts where participation is unavoidable or compulsory. In the case of my research my refusal to join in in joking could have been seen as a patronising, unfriendly behaviour or a sign of a lack of sense of humour and thus lack of competence to conduct research into humour (which may be expected from the humour researcher, see Chapter 4). What is more, I participated in some of the participants’ humour exchanges to help participants with free expression of humour in my presence and to build a rapport with them. However, it could be argued that my own subjective views on humour and own humour preferences might have influenced the observations either by provoking or silencing some of participants’ actions/utterances.

To see what my involvement meant for the study findings I had to include my use of humour in the observation notes so that later in the analysis stage I could investigate what role my presence in the staffroom and my use of humour could have had on the staffroom dynamics. Similarly to Plester (2007) I believe that being involved in participants’ humour is a sign of good-natured acceptance and the benefits of becoming well-integrated inside the research settings outweigh the pitfalls of researcher effect. I also fully support Plester’s (2007) idea of certain researchers’ personal qualities making the integration with participants easier. Similarly to Plester (2007), the choice of methods in my research (particularly

observations) to some extent reflects my personality traits such as: openness, cheerfulness, approachability.

### Benefits of observations

Although considered time-consuming, observations give the researcher a key to the doors that otherwise would be closed. The observations allowed me to find about of the under-usage of the staffroom at Devon College which led me to form questions for individual interviews with teachers about the reasons for teachers not attending the staffroom. The overrepresentation of admin staff over teaching staff at Lingua School helped me discover the disproportionate numbers of teachers and admin staff at Lingua School and the important role of admin staff in sustaining workplace social life. Observations helped me to gather information about staffroom dynamics, relationships among staff members and the role of humour in creating workplace culture. They did not allow me, however, to investigate particular jokes as the focus was placed on the general atmosphere of the staffroom and humour contextualisation rather than humour details.

### Funny artefacts

According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) unobtrusive measures like these are nonreactive – hidden in the context of the social situation that trigger interaction or invite a comment (Warren 2006). Artefacts are non-verbal means of communication (Wood 2007). Besides, according to Lee (2000), the more anonymous the method, the more likely it is that respondents will admit the socially undesirable behaviour (in case of artefacts language, pictures/images may reveal information about undesirable behaviour). In particular, such

unobtrusive methods enable investigators to examine aspects of a social phenomenon without interfering or changing it (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

In the case of this research, artefacts were added to the repertoire of research tools to reveal other forms and types of humour. The artefacts I collected were the artefacts that were visible, accessible to me as an outsider or shown to me by participants.

In my research, funny artefacts serve not just as a verification mechanism but also an additional dimension of workplace humour, an extra insight rather than a main source of knowledge about a workplace. The photographing of funny staffroom artefacts was a part of observations in the staffrooms so that they could be collected in situ. Combined with interviews and observations, artefacts fulfil a role of authentication and verification of the information gained via interviewing and observing participants. Artefacts are especially important, given that over-reliance on direct elicitation of information from research participants is criticised by Lee (2000), who sees unobtrusive methods such as artefacts as a way of producing complementary data to direct elicitation methods although with different advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, and this seems to be of paramount importance in humour research, funny artefacts can be spontaneous and personal pieces of participants' work (that are created prior to the researcher's arrival) so they capture certain moods, humour preferences and humour topics present at a workplace (research questions: **What behaviours comprise staff-room humour? What are the functions and purposes of humour?**).

As the study by Warren (2006) shows, employees informalise their work space with different artefacts which serve to 1) humanise the experience of work through display of informal objects people are emotionally attached to 2) to express and maintain a sense of self at work and 3) to signal belonging and a sense of community. Referring to the practice of hot-desking at work Warren (2006) shows how what seems to be beneficial to an organisation may be at odds with employees' desire for stability, permanence and belonging at work

expressed by means of their informal items. However, the use and attitudes towards such artefacts may vary among staff members, the fact that they remain present (that they have been there for some time) shows general acceptance and thus possibly the importance of such objects to the staff. However, it could be argued that staff do not show acceptance but, on the contrary, ignorance towards such artefacts making them meaningless staffroom objects. Plester (2007, p.25) who used artefact collections in her humour research notes that ‘the artefacts level of culture is “easy to observe but difficult to decipher” as many displays, activities and symbols rely on shared basic assumptions that determine their significance and meaning to the group’. The importance staff attach to funny artefacts was reported during interviews (I asked teachers very precise questions about the staffroom artefacts, their authors and their use).

### **Research methods used in the second phase of the study**

What I wanted to achieve initially was to gather data from three different educational workplaces using a combination of group interviews, observations and funny artefact collection. But because I did not get to the core of my research with those methods, I decided to devise individual semi-structured interviews with teachers of the three settings and collect funny artefacts displayed beyond the staffrooms at those settings. The individual semi-structured interviews and funny artefacts displayed beyond the staffroom were used to triangulate the data gathered by means of observations, group interviews and funny staffroom artefacts.

According to Cohen et al (2003) such methodological triangulation has a special relevance where a complex phenomenon requires elucidation. What is more, triangulation is a useful tool for researchers engaged in a case study – a particular example of complex phenomena (Adelman et al 1980, in Cohen et al 2003).

## Individual interviews

Individual interviews (see Appendix 2b) acted as the most important source for triangulation in the second phase of the data collection process as they were opportunities for face-to-face conversation about teachers' personal experiences, thoughts and feelings about the research topic. The group interviews, observations and funny artefact collection in the first phase of the research built a picture of positive workplace relationships, positive workplace culture and positive use of workplace humour. Certain issues observed or heard about had the potential to question my first impressions of humour at the three settings or simply indicated a more complex picture of those workplaces (see the table in Appendix 2e). Therefore the purpose behind the individual interviews was to establish

- how humour in the workplace was experienced by individual teachers
- whether there were any problematic/controversial areas of workplace humour that group interviews and observations did not reveal
- if there were any negative features of workplace culture and workplace relationships reflected in teachers' use of humour

Taking into consideration the importance of getting to the core of the workplace relationships and workplace culture of the educational settings, I decided to use an active interview strategy. By active interviewing I mean: the researcher taking a more 'active' perspective, acknowledging and capitalising upon interviewers' and respondents' constitutive contributions to the production of interview data-meaning consciously and conscientiously attending to the interview process and its product in ways that are more sensitive to the social construction of the world (Holstein and Gubrium 2004, p.142).

Active interviewing was used by Lynch (2009) in his research into humour in a hotel kitchen workplace to check the reliability of his preliminary findings. He highlights that this

interview style is designed to allow the interviewee to control the content and scope of the interview with as little influence from the interviewer as possible.

As for other advantages of active interviewing, there are:

- dynamic and meaning-making nature of the interview (Holstein and Gubrium 2004)

*This type of interviewing seems to be compatible with the subject of the research; workplace humour concerns dynamics of workplace culture and workplace relationships.*

- active interviewers talk with respondents in such a way that alternate considerations are brought into play (Holstein and Gubrium 2004)

*Such interviewing requires smooth switching from being responsive to teachers' funny stories (laughing with them) to acting sympathetically when teachers start talking about e.g. bullying in the workplace.*

- 'the objective of such interviews is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined by predetermined agendas' (Holstein and Gubrium 2004)

*Treating interviewees as equals can be important in the case of interviewing teachers (well-educated adults) who are not used to being treated as a powerless subordinates due to their professional roles.*

Rather than seeking the best or most authentic answer, active interviewing aims to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing — the possible answers — that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be.

Holstein and Gubrium (1997, p.125)

*Such 'activating' in this particular research can be achieved by careful detection of cues given by interviewees. Such cues may refer to interviewees' subjective feelings about and interpretations of workplace humour e.g. jokes reported as unfunny may be an important indication of difficult relationships between certain teachers.*

The questions used in individual semi-structured interviews were based on the data gathered during group interviews, observations and also staffroom funny artefact material from the particular educational setting. In so doing, I was able to verify my subjective views and preliminary findings and compare them with teachers' individual opinions. The strength of such interviews lies in the interviewee being free to express their own views and not being under pressure from others (which is possible in a group interview) to conform or remain silent on certain topics.

According to Bryman (2008), in a group context participants may be more prone to expressing culturally expected views than in individual interviews. Using individual interviews may lead to interviewees talking freely about e.g. dark humour, bullying or avoiding certain colleagues, thus unveiling workplace relationships problems and workplace culture challenges. Such sensitive topics discussed in a group interview may cause discomfort among participants (Madriz 2000, in Bryman 2008) and lead to participants' reluctance to take part in such discussions. However, as Yin (2009) claims (without distinguishing between individual and group interviews) overall, interviews are an essential source of case study evidence where well-informed interviewees can provide insights into different affairs/events and shortcuts to the prior history of such situations, helping interviewers to identify other relevant sources of evidence. In my research, however, it was individual interviews where interviewees provided me with, as Yin calls them, 'insights into a matter' (here: workplace culture nuances) and 'initiated access to corroboratory or contrary sources of evidence' (Yin 2009, p. 107).



### Funny artefacts beyond staffrooms

The last method used in the second phase of the research was collecting funny artefacts beyond staffrooms. Funny artefacts displayed beyond the staffroom can provide information about the humour preferences of a group of teachers/individual teachers, their attitude to the workplace (e.g. funny anti-workplace comments) or their attitude to the teaching profession (school-related humorous artefacts). According to Parker (2007) workplaces are profuse symbolic jungles with all the office gadgets from teddy-bear-covered computer to subversive post-it notes. With such artefacts a careful consideration of explicit and implicit messages need to be undertaken. Artefacts displayed on a teacher's desk may be highly personalised and may have hidden meanings (known only to the people who put them there). Artefacts that are displayed on the door of the office can be seen by anyone passing by so they are more public/less private and may convey messages that do not require insider knowledge. The location of such artefacts may be as significant as the authorship. Such artefacts may have many owners/authors, can be created by an individual or a group and this also may be significant to fully understand the humour of a particular artefact. Most importantly, the aim of collecting funny artefacts displayed beyond staffrooms was to collect artefacts if not spontaneously created by the teachers at least spontaneously hung/stuck /brought by them to the workplace. Therefore the artefacts hung by management /administration staff on e.g. notice boards<sup>17</sup> are not a part of the funny artefact collection. The reason behind it is that this collection concerns personalised funny artefacts that are meaningful for teachers. This obviously poses a challenge for the researcher to discover the meaning behind the photos, postcards, posters and other gadgets by asking the teachers who have presented them. The artefacts themselves do not reveal the full story ; 'the meanings that particular objects can

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<sup>17</sup> When collecting artefacts I asked teachers about who hung them.

provide does not reside only in the objects themselves, but has a great deal to do with the way that people understand the world' (Parker 2007, p. 87). Therefore it is teachers' commentary on the artefacts that plays the vital role in understanding them. Parker's (2007) collection of funny office artefacts shows the whole variety of anti-work subversive humour. The fact that teachers' funny artefacts are personalised and sometimes can be viewed by a limited number of people may mean that they provide an insight into this part of workplace culture that is usually constrained or hidden as it may be constructed against bureaucracy, management or even specific people who hold power in those educational settings.

For alignment of research methods to specific research questions see Appendix 2d.

Having discussed the methods used in the first and second phase of the study, I shall now move to describing how the data gathered by those methods was analysed.

## **Data analysis**

The analysis of the data was a lengthy process that lay in an on-going engagement with the data from the early stages of data collection. The major data analysis steps are presented below. However, before presenting the analysis steps I shall introduce the inductive approach as the data analysis framework used in this research.

### Inductive approach

According to Miles et al (2013, p.238) 'in the inductive approach, the researcher discovers recurrent phenomena in the stream of field experiences and finds recurrent relations among them'. Those relations are modified and refined as fieldwork progresses and so the causal network emerges piecemeal and inductively (Miles et al 2013). The inductive approach

therefore assumes a gradual development of concepts and theories and excludes any pre-assumptions and hypotheses.

The analytic steps undertaken in this research are in line with the inductive approach. Firstly, coding played an important role in data analysis in my study. According to Bazeley (2013) coding is a fundamental skill for qualitative analysis, providing a means of access to evidence and being a tool for querying data, for testing assumptions and conclusions. Careful coding and recoding was a lengthy process of revision and constant comparison to see which concepts fit best with the data (Bryman 2008). Secondly, in my study data collection and data analysis as well as data categories and theoretical concepts remained in a close bi-directional relationship. As for constant comparison and close relationship between data categories and theoretical concepts, my research combined reviewing of the codes with reviewing of existing humour studies. This was done to find the links between ideas revealed in my coding and the way other humour researchers analysed their data. And so I found Plester's (2007) data analysis and coding tree helpful in guiding me in construction of names for the codes, structuring my coding tree and developing code definitions.

Thirdly, theoretical sampling was applied in my study. The careful consideration and numerous re-reading of the data from the first stage of the research led to a decision of organising individual interviews and collection of funny artefacts beyond staffroom. Coming from the literature (Chapter 2) the concept of a staffroom as a central or sole place for socialising and mainly examples of positive workplace humour were evident in the first stage of the data collection, thus the individual interviews were designed to find out about spaces alternative to the staffroom and teachers' reasons behind both using and not using the staffroom, as well as dangers of using humour at workplace. To gather this data teachers invited to the individual interviews were those who either did not go to the staffroom or went there rarely. This decision exemplifies theoretical sampling which is 'data gathering driven

by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of “making comparisons”, whose purpose is to go to places, people or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 201, in Bryman 2008).

The data during second stage of the research was collected until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation in my research allowed for explorations of the questions that arose from initial analysis (Bazeley 2013). It also meant finding information relevant and meaningful for the theory (Bryman 2008) I started to develop. The theory referred to reconsidering the staffroom as a sole space to socialise within an educational setting and complex reasons for some teachers not using that space.

### Analysis steps

#### Transcription

All audio-files with interviews were sent to a professional transcriber. Once I received the transcriptions I checked them against the audio-recordings myself. I completed any inaudible fragments that I could decipher and then checked the transcription of all interviews to find any occurrences of participants’ and my laughter. The reason behind locating all instances of laughter was the fact that laughter can be an indicator of both the meaning behind the words and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. In my study the meaning of the interviewee’s words was shaped by laughter in three ways: confirming their statement (indicating amusement), denying it (the use of irony) or covering up embarrassment (nervous giggling). This laughter-locating process, although time consuming, enabled me to immerse myself in the interview data and familiarise myself with its contents and develop some initial

coding ideas. What is more, the re-reading of the transcription was necessary to anonymise participants' names and the names of their workplaces.

### Analysis in the field

The analysis was also a part of data collection. During interviews I made brief notes about the context and atmosphere of each interview and then after interviews I wrote some post-reflections often including my subjective impressions about the participants and their behaviour. When observing I also made brief notes about the climate of the staffroom and dynamics between the participants. Straight after observations I always tried to recall and record in a Word document the situations I observed but did not manage to describe in detail ad hoc. I also included my post-reflections in my observation notes because they contained thoughts aiming at explaining observed behaviours. I also recorded in Word documents (post-factum) any informal interactions I had with participants in between the data collection.

### Transfer of the data to Nvivo

To manage and organise the data I decided to use NVivo 9 software. The transcribed interview files, scanned observation notes and photographed funny artefacts were all stored in NVivo. All Word documents including post-reflections and information about informal interactions with participants and email exchanges with participants were also stored in NVivo. The data stored in NVivo was segregated by the name of the research settings and so all documents were given the following tags: Albatros, Lingua or Devon College. However, that segregation was used only to identify the data sources and not to conduct individual analysis of the data. On the contrary, the data across the three settings was analysed

together.<sup>18</sup> The integration of data from all the sources from all three settings during the first stage of analysis enabled me to concentrate on looking for patterns across the cases rather than within them.

### Coding

Data coding and recoding was a task that required a great deal of time and effort. The first codes were based on a manual analysis<sup>19</sup> of three group interviews. The similarities found across those three interviews led to construction of the following themes: Humour and Familiarity, Humour and Space/Time, Humour and Work Relationships and Humour and Workplace Culture. The quotes from printed group interviews were cut and pasted under those themes on A1 size paper. Then I transferred those themes onto NVivo and started coding according to those themes. The immersion into the data led to numerous modifications. The initial assumption that I could code line by line was quickly abandoned as that would mean losing the context and potentially the meaning. The loss of the context in the coding process is one of the main criticism of coding (Bryman 2008), therefore I decided to code larger fragments of data than single sentences or words. NVivo allows the researcher to return to the original sources of the coded text by means of a single click and thus prevents the researcher from losing contact with the remaining data (Plester 2007).

NVivo software was very helpful as it enabled me to try out different hierarchical orders on the data and check for cross-coding (by means of the Matrix coding application). Hierarchical order in NVivo meant organising nodes (codes) in the form of tree nodes (main nodes linked with their subnodes) or free nodes (free standing nodes). In order to better portray the hierarchical order of my coding tree I used several levels of codes/nodes with

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<sup>18</sup> Rather than one after another.

<sup>19</sup> Not by means of NVivo but in an old-fashioned manner of highlighting text, cutting and pasting.

categories representing the highest and code representing the lowest in the tree hierarchy (see Appendix 3).

I also found coding stripes useful as they provided a visual representation of how the selected data was coded. It was very helpful in finding out whether a quote was already coded and under which nodes. The information provided by Matrix coding, on the other hand, was of particular value as the Matrix results tables showed which codes contain the same data and how much data was cross-coded (double-coded or triple-coded). The cross coding was an indication of the categories being either not clearly defined or too similar. In some cases, however, it was an indication of a certain fragments of data being loaded with different meanings that deserved to be coded under two or more categories. According to Bryman (2008) overlapping nodes do not represent a problem. For example:

Int: And you yourself, do you send any funny emails to any of your colleagues?  
Zara: Ah, maybe just to Michael or Rose if I was to find like a funny YouTube clip or something like that I might send it to them, but chances are I just wait till we are all in the office and just put it up on my computer to begin with so. Yeah there's probably, no, because there aren't that many people in the college that I would feel comfortable being too friendly and jokey with, no I don't tend to.

(Interview with Zara, Devon College)

This fragment was coded as both 'Social lubricant' and 'Informal' as it shows humour as something that brings people together and as an exclusive entertainment for those who know each other well.

Although NVivo 9 offered a plethora of analytic and exploratory options, it did not substitute for the researcher's making sense of data, developing codes and all the intellectual effort made to find the links across the data. Nevertheless, the usage of NVivo assists coding and retrieving text, owing a great deal to grounded theory, and enhances the transparency of the process of conducting qualitative analysis (Bryman 2008).

Throughout the entire process of coding I kept an electronic analysis diary (in Word) where I included my reflections on coding, development of new categories, definitions of categories as well as first interpretations of the data. The diary clearly shows that the data analysis was an iterative process of construction and de-construction of both the codes and their definitions. What is more, the re-reading of the diary shows that analysis was a kind of researcher's monologue where I was constantly trying to prove that the analysis decisions were in line with the research design, research questions and theories, findings and classifications coming from other humour studies. For example:

My division into 3 humour categories: Nurturing, Contesting and Constructing relationships is a step further from bipolar humour divisions such as: private versus public (Woods 1979; Kuipers 2012), contestive versus supportive (Holmes and Marra 2002), inappropriate versus appropriate (Wanzer et al 2006), positive versus negative (Decker and Rotondo 2001), formal versus informal (Goodson and Walker 1991) or aggressive versus non-aggressive (Richards 1996). The oversimplification of such categorisation may leave some humour difficult to define, to place in just one of two distinct categories created in opposition to one another. In contrast, the categories I propose are fluid and interconnected. This study shows that humour that contests a relationship with one person may serve to nurture relationships with other people.

Analysis diary, p.9

Such jottings are a way of retaining mindfulness in a tedious process of coding and a strategy to strengthen coding by pointing to deeper and underlying issues that deserve analytic attention (Miles et al 2014). The diary in contrast to the post-reflection notes mentioned above was neither included in NVivo nor in the data analysis; it served as a coding companion but did not create new data.

#### Development of a coding tree

The coding tree consists of two separate parent themes: Workplace Culture and Humour Research Issues. Workplace Culture comprises the following themes: Workplace Humour,



Humour and Relationships and Working Conditions (see Appendix3) whereas the Humour Research Issues theme includes: Participants' Behaviours and Researcher's Behaviours.

All themes consist of categories and categories comprise different codes.

The idea underlying the creation of the final version of a coding tree was that the coding tree should have some conceptual and structural unity i.e. that codes should relate to each other in a study-important ways; they should be a part of unified structure (Miles et al 2013). What was also crucial when revising the coding tree was the importance of the taxonomy used. In other words, I had to constantly remind myself of the fact that the created codes were reflected in the labels attached to them and those labels would have an impact on subsequent accessibility of evidence needed to support an argument (Bazeley 2013).

Therefore I started to treat the coding tree as a manual or guide leading a prospective reader and helping them to understand the research data. The labels used in a coding tree reveal judgments in relation to the purposes of the project, the nature of the data and researcher's anticipated analysis process (Bazeley 2013).

The three most crucial decisions with regard to the coding tree and concerning all codes were: re-naming the codes and re-constructing the hierarchy of the codes and separation of research data from Humour Research Issues. Re-naming of the codes was based on finding such labels for them that would reflect more abstract conceptualisation of the data gathered under those nodes. The re-naming process also meant finding the labels that would fit with the names of other subcodes. In other words, consistent taxonomy was needed for a transparency of the ideas the coding tree was presenting. As an example, the label 'Formal/Informal' (under Space and Time category) implied certain bipolar or contrasting meanings in the content of the data gathered under it. Therefore I looked for differences and contrasts in other data related to space and discovered that I could use bipolar terms such as

‘Social / Individual’ and ‘Exclusion/ Inclusion’ to describe that data. By creating those terms, I aimed for a consistent and logical taxonomy.

The reconstruction of the hierarchy of codes meant going back to the definition of workplace culture. I compared a definition of workplace culture with a definition of workplace humour (see both in Chapter 2). This allowed me to see how they relate to each other and discover that once combined and related back to my data a new definition guiding my coding tree emerges: ‘Humour is a telling feature of workplace culture’. This led to reflections on how my coding tree could best mirror the position of humour in relation to workplace culture. Plester’s (2007) work was inspiring in the sense that by analysing how she organised her coding tree I understood that ‘Workplace Humour’ should be a distinctive theme gathering all the data relating to its use, types and boundaries within the workplace. The theme ‘Workplace Humour’ consisted of the data about WHAT workplace humour was and ‘Working Conditions’ consisted of the data about HOW workplace humour was influenced by different factors. The theme ‘Humour and Relationships’ consisted of data about humour in different work relationships and was divided into Humour and Familiarity and Humour Functions. Plester’s (2007) categorisation was in parts very useful for the creation of categories in my study. The creation of two main parent themes: Workplace Culture and Humour Research Issues was also a very important step in creation of the coding tree.

## Definitions

Coding and creating definitions were interconnected tasks in this research. Any change in coding meant reconsidering the categories’ definitions. This means that definitions were not created in a void. According to Saldana (2009, p. 13; in Bazeley 2013) ‘a theme is an outcome of coding, categorisation and analytic reflection’. In the case of my research,

analytic reflection meant a reflection both on the data and relevant literature. What is more, the creation of themes, categories and subcategories definitions was accompanied by numerous reviews of other humour studies (see Appendix 3a).

### The themes

Workplace culture in my research is defined as a set or sets of common or dominant values, opinions, practices, shared spaces and times that are shaped by a variety of conditions and thus of an evolving nature, exercised in numerous workplace relationships and mirrored in workplace humour.

Humour and Relationships covers a variety of human interactions and dealings in the workplace based on different levels of familiarity and shows different humour functions within work relationships. The data in this theme came mainly from interviews (both individual and group).

Workplace Humour covers the topics, types and manifestations of humour in a workplace as well as indicating the dominant figures creating and sustaining humorous culture at the workplace. This theme comprises all of the data sources.

Working conditions describes space and time and work politics as factors that influence and shape workplace humour and provide context for better understanding of workplace humour. This theme was formed from all of the data sources.

Humour Research Issues covers a range of interactions between participants and the researcher, including challenges of using humour on the part of the researcher and issues related to participants' use of humour with the researcher. This theme derives mainly from my use of humour with participants during data generation.

The Researcher's Behaviours theme covers researchers' behaviours towards participants.

The Participants' Behaviours theme covers participants' initiated behaviours towards the researcher.

Humour Research Issues and Humour and Relationships were the themes that included surprising data and so went beyond the scope of research questions. Other themes included data that were predominantly answers to the research questions.

### Final analysis steps

The final analysis steps concerned preparing to present the findings and comprised two stages: constructing workplace profiles and designing an outline of the findings chapter. Constructing workplace profiles lay in returning both to the data and my own memories and in analysing them within and not across the cases. Looking for information that would best describe the workplaces meant, amongst others: retrieving documents that included demographics of the settings (e.g. population of students and teachers) and returning to the drawings that showed the layout of each staffroom. The idea behind the creation of the workplace profiles was to give the reader some background information about the research settings before moving onto the presentation of findings. According to Bazeley (2013) description of the context, sample, and cases for the study is an important step to complete for analysis so that both analyst and reader can make sense of and position the results of the study. The difficulty lying in the creation of workplace profiles was the constant temptation to move beyond sheer descriptions into interpretation. Plester (2007) also used workplace profiles in her data analysis but she used them to 'exemplify key factors about each company' (p.119) and so the information about each company exceeded demographic or background data and concerned the nature of the business, the company's culture and humour as well as each company's response to the research report. In contrast to Plester (2007) I

wanted to separate the settings' descriptions from the presentation of the research findings to avoid potential repetitions and thus confusion.

Having discussed the data analysis steps, I shall now move onto discussing the ethical considerations and limitations the study's methods and the study as a whole present.

### **Ethical considerations**

My research was accepted by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education, Plymouth University. The methods used in my research were outlined in the letters attached to the consent forms (please see Appendix 4a and 4b). The consent forms included statements of anonymity and confidentiality and were signed by individual teachers. The teachers could choose to participate in some, all or none of data collection stages. They were also given the right to withdraw before the end of the data collection. There was no need for deception; teachers knew about the topic, scope and purpose of research and their questions regarding the research were always welcomed and answered. Due to there being two phases of data collection there was a need to create two different consent forms.

There were certain ethical considerations linked to the staffroom access. I was allowed to be present at staffrooms and observe staffroom humour by those who signed the consent forms. However, the rights of those who did not sign the consent forms but were in the staffroom or wanted to be in the staffroom should be explored further. Feeling insecure or uncomfortable, teachers who do not want to take part in such research may avoid staffrooms. Researcher cannot offer them any alternative staffroom space and thus they may be (for the duration of the research) deprived of their own space and opportunity to eat lunch and interact with their colleagues. However, it is possible that any kind of qualitative study entails a risk of causing some kind of discomfort or disruption to the settings' routines. For more on research ethics see Chapter 4.

## **Study limitations**

### Interviews

In group interviews participants might have conformed to other interviewees' opinions rather than expressing their own opinions. On the other hand, group interviews might have helped interviewees to negotiate their opinions as a group. The atmosphere of the group interviews gave the researcher reassurance that the interviewees were a well-integrated group of friends and colleagues. Group interviews have the inherent problem of confidentiality, however, it is beyond the researcher's control as the researcher cannot ascertain whether the information participants learn about each during the group interview other will be shared with other people (Wassenaar 1999).

The main ethical concern of individual interviews on the other hand was the treatment of sensitive topics, and since the point of creating those interviews was to get insight into e.g. the dark side of workplace humour, an extra effort had to be made by the interviewer to both get the answers and be considerate and sympathetic. Therefore, the interview questions were designed with care to eliminate interviewees' confusion, intimidation or embarrassment over the questions being asked. Another challenge related to interviews (both group and individual ones) is the way interviewees respond to an interviewer who does not share membership of the study group (Miller and Glassner 2004). There is a risk that with the lack of membership of the group, the interviewer may not know enough about the phenomenon under study to ask the right questions (Miller and Glassner 2004). However, my research does not rely solely on the interviews, thus even if a lack of membership had been an issue during group interviews that were an introductory method in the study, the follow up methods, especially observations, would have compensated for my lack of membership. Also, lack of membership is probably more problematic in the case of 'social distance' when studying

adolescents or young women affiliated with youth gangs (Miller and Glassner 2004) which is not the case in my research as teachers and researchers are not that socially distant.

### Funny artefacts

Funny artefacts can be a useful means of verification of data gathered by interviews and observations on workplace humour on the condition that the processes involved in creating and using the artefacts by participants can be understood by the researcher. Therefore artefacts needed a contextualisation such as a detailed description of their origins, purpose, usage and location. This information was sought from participants but was not always as detailed as I expected.

### Observations

#### Researcher's effect

As for observations, the main consideration was that participants' awareness of their humour being studied may have resulted in participants performing for the research project (Plester and Orams 2008). Similarly to Plester and Orams (2008) this is not considered a significant limitation of the study as data gathered by other research methods as well as informal conversations with participants confirmed that teachers' humorous behaviour was natural or, in other words, that teachers were naturally humorous and not just performing for the purpose of the research.

Although asking teachers questions about their use of humour may have led to some changes in their humorous staffroom behaviour, the groups I interviewed differed (either

slightly or greatly) from the groups I observed. At Albatros I observed all the teachers that participated in the group interview. At Lingua I observed only half of the teachers that participated in the group interview. At Devon College I observed (briefly) only two teachers that participated in the group interview. What is more, due to the fact that Lingua's staffroom was dominated by admin staff I mainly observed the behaviours and humour of admin staff there. The fact that I did not only observe the teachers I interviewed rules out the possibility of all observed participants altering their humour habits due to participation in a group interview. Besides, such changes would mean a very powerful influence of the researcher and research on the adult participants. However, the possibility of participants altering their behaviours (to some extent) for the researcher should not be completely ignored. For instance, they may purposefully avoid certain uses of humour in front of a stranger. Although an interview is a luxurious method for the participants as it allows them to present themselves and their workplace as very humorous regardless of the actual humour frequency in the workplace or the atmosphere in the staffroom, the post-interview observations pose a greater challenge for participants to present themselves and their workplace as described in the interviews (if the description was different from the observed reality).

### Sources of bias

Bias can have different sources: it can come from the researcher, participants or their interaction (Travers 1969, in Cohen et al 2011). However, observations give a chance for direct contact between researchers and researched (Pole and Morrison 2003) hence I see my



interactions with participants as an integral part of the research process. Different researcher's positions, their openness about their research and involvement with participants can determine the nature of bias.

Being a stranger rather than an insider may have had an impact on both the access and the data as being observed by a stranger may cause feelings of insecurity among staff and thus problems with trust and as a consequence problems with free expression of humour. Conducting research as an ex-colleague/ex-employee (see Miller 2008) or colleague/insider (see Richards 1996; Lynch 2005; Mawhinney 2008) or pseudo-member (Plester 2007) does not pose such problems. Lynch (2010) and Richards (1996) conducted insider's research where they combined working in a particular environment with researching it. Unlike Lynch (2010) and Richards (1996) I did not have the opportunity to conduct an insider's research at the educational settings I studied. It would have been unfeasible to become a member of three different educational settings in terms of the time each job takes up. Becoming a pseudo-member like Plester (2007) would have been hard to achieve within the educational settings as there is a difference between being a pseudo-employee at a company and being a pseudo-teacher. The 'pseudo' term in conjunction with the term 'teacher' suggests that researcher would be pretending to teach students. Such an idea seems absurd. Plester's pretending to work at a desk was a feasible task as she was among other employees working at their desks. A teaching job is different, as teaching does not happen in the office or at the desk but in classes and with students. Teaching is a sole occupation: there is only one teacher (employee) in the class. When starting my research at the educational settings, I clearly defined myself as a researcher and informed the participants about the subject of my research, thus avoiding the risk of betraying their trust. As a non-member of those educational settings, I was not involved in any teaching activities and this potentially was an obstacle to becoming fully integrated into the workplace culture(s) of those settings. Although I participated in some

conversations and some humour exchanges during staffroom observations, I knew when to withdraw and return to the researcher/observer role.<sup>20</sup>

However, the assumption that a person coming to conduct research is an outsider is an oversimplification according to Hellowell (2006). In thinking so, I completely ignored the fact that by sharing some of the participants' characteristics (age, gender, race, education) the researcher moves away from being an outsider and becomes closer to insiders (Hellowell 2006). Applying this idea to my relationship with the participants and the researched settings, I was an insider in terms of gender when interviewing or observing females, in terms of age when interviewing or observing young people, in terms of race because the vast majority of participants were white. I was also on the insiders' site because of my education as teachers were also University graduates. What I also shared with them was an interest in and knowledge and experience of education/schooling in UK. I worked as a Teaching Assistant in two schools in Devon and I graduated from an English University. However, regarding my chosen topic I was an outsider. Although coming from a different country and having a different mother tongue to them located me closer to the notion of outsider, the fact that I lived in Devon for seven years was another commonality. It is therefore difficult to assess if, and to what extent, my insider's characteristics balanced my outsider's features and whereas my humour was located on the 'insider-outsider continuum' (Hellowell 2006).

The decision to conduct my study overtly was underpinned by ethical considerations. I cared about developing trust relationships with participants and so I was open about my research focus from the beginning. However, conducting humour research overtly can be seen as the main challenge for observing spontaneous humour. Lynch (2010) and Richards (1996) conducted their studies overtly (the participants knew they were researchers) but neither told their participants that it was humour they studied. Richards informed his

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<sup>20</sup> This was done by going back to writing observation notes.

participants that he would be researching 'teachers' lives, work and talk' (Richards 1996, p.56) whereas Lynch told his participants he would be studying workplace communication. Such choices can be underpinned by a drive towards recording authentic humour. They can also be results of earlier experiences like Lynch's (2005) unsuccessful attempt of observing workplace humour in one advertising firm. After the firm's manager revealed to the team that Lynch was studying humour, he was excluded; 'not openly talked to or even asked to the pub anymore where majority of team business and humour occurred' (Lynch 2005 , p.7). He faced hostility and his research was boycotted. However, there is a possibility that even though participants learn about the research subject later on from the researcher himself, they may feel betrayed by their colleague-researcher. This is exactly what I wanted to avoid. Introducing my research as study on workplace relationships could have facilitated observations of authentic humour but revealing the real research focus later could have led to participants withdrawing from the study or asking to censor/exclude some of their quotes from the data.

Case study researchers recognise that problem of bias and strongly promote extensive researcher reflection as a control of bias (Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler 2010). Such reflection provides an insight into researcher-researched dynamics and discusses constructing and nurturing relationships with participants and indicates the meaningfulness of researcher-researched interactions which can help enhance a study's credibility (Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler 2010) by minimising the researcher's effect (Plester 2007) and so help to remedy the bias.

The scope of the study

In terms of the scope of my study, had my study lasted longer it could have examined the phenomenon of staffroom humour in more depth and provided a fuller picture of the settings under analysis. By observing teachers' humour I achieved only some insight into their humour, their culture and their relationships. What is even more important is that I observed their humour, their culture and their relationships at particular points of time and I managed to observe some and not all humour exchanges at one time. Therefore I can only refer to what I saw and heard there and then and in relation to some and not all teachers.

However, depth does not need to lie in the length of the study and fuller picture may not necessarily be obtained solely by spending more time in the field. Case study allows the researcher to focus on one or a few instances and deal with the subtleties and intricacies of complex social situations (Denscombe 2007) rather than providing a comprehensive picture. In addition, Yin (2009) argues a case study does not need to be long and that case studies are wrongly expected to be long because they are confused with ethnography. However, case study design shares many characteristics of a particular type of ethnography called 'focused ethnography', the features of which are short-term field visits and time intensity as well as a concentration on smaller units of analysis i.e. interactions or activities (Knoblauch 2005). Because of these similarities I find Knoblauch's (2005) idea of compensation of time — for instance by means of intense data collection and analysis — applicable to my study. Knoblauch (2005) claims that short-term studies do not need to be superficial as the time spent in the field can be compensated by intensive data and intensive analysis. What is more, Knoblauch (2005) does not set a minimum time-frame/scope for focused ethnography. My study provides an intensive self-reflection (on the researcher's role and the relationships with participants) and intensive analysis of humour between myself and participants in a separate chapter (Chapter 4) which can be seen as compensation for brief observations and one-off group and individual interviews.

## Quality measures

Possibly the greatest criticism of case study research is the lack of rigour of this type of research and, more precisely, lack of systematic procedures for researcher to follow (Yin 2009). To minimise this case study weakness, I used different data collection methods (unstructured participant observations, group interviews and funny artefacts and individual semi-structured interviews) which allowed for fuller pictures of the studied phenomenon. Exactly the same methods were used in the same order for each 'case'. The case study was well documented and all documents concerning the research were well organised and segregated, and securely stored. To ensure external validity I tried to generalise the results of my study to a broader theory (importance of workplace humour) thus using analytic generalisation (Williams 2000) instead of statistical generalisation (Yin 2009). Here an important question of generalisability of a case study arises. Richards (1996) describes the school he conducted his research at as sufficiently 'special' in terms of offering valuable insights and sufficiently 'normal' to make such insights relevant to other settings. He further argues that it is unnecessary to look beyond these features to abstract ideas of generalisation to justify the selection of this particular case. Plester (2007) avoids the term 'generalisability' altogether and instead concentrates on the most accurate depiction of the cases under analysis and shows ways in which her research contributes to existing humour research. The reason behind avoiding generalisations in case studies might be that case studies may rather aspire to deliver a glimpse of the studied reality than an overall picture /evaluation of other similar environments. Lynch (2005, p. 57) says that 'the case studies and experiences are used for a unique aspect, individualised in all contexts and cultures, not generalisations'. In my research my intention is not to generalise from the findings but rather focus on the studied phenomena

and present them in such a way that their complex nature is vividly depicted. Generalising could oversimplify the studied phenomenon which is the exact opposite of the very aim of case study design i.e. the in-depth investigation of a phenomenon (Yin 2009).

Bryman (2008) states simply that case study researchers do not delude themselves that it is possible to identify typical cases that can be used to represent a certain class of objects. Although one of the criticisms of the case study are its non-generalisable findings, case study researchers argue that it is not the purpose of their craft – instead they aim to generate an intensive examination of a single case they engage in a theoretical analysis of (Bryman 2008).

### Subject studied

The final limitation of my study relates to the very nature of humour and is specific to humour research and constitutes an introduction into Chapter 4. Both analysing participants' humour and my use of humour revealed the problem of missing some humour. It concerns both participants' jokes missed by myself and my failed humour attempts. There are only a few examples of missed jokes and failed humour. Missed humour is per se difficult to identify, there were possibly many instances when for different reasons I could not identify participants' humour. However, it is important to discuss the examples I have gathered as they illustrate certain challenges related to researching humour. The participants' jokes missed by me that I was aware of included jokes that I could not record or did not hear but recognised them as jokes (participants' laughter, body language). It was inevitable to miss some of the participants' jokes during in-staffroom observations due to many voices overlapping and the dynamics of spontaneous interactions (where people join in, leave, burst out laughing, change the topics etc). Concentrating on recording one joke during my

observations or when talking to a participant, I could miss humorous exchanges that happened at the same time. Being a sole researcher, some selection in recording humour was unavoidable. One whole conversation was missed by myself as it was told in a different language (Czech staff at Lingua). I also missed an inside joke at Devon College in a conversation between two teachers. I missed one joke at Albatros, being so preoccupied with writing down my observations:

Archie shouted at me and asked Luke to replay the joke. Seeing the expression on Luke's face, he decided to replay it himself.

Observations, Albatros

The hilarious scene of replaying the joke so that I could have material to work with introduced a new level of humour, namely meta-humour (humour about humour). This indicated participants' awareness of the research process and, ironically, the replay might have been a way of participants ensuring that I had a full picture of their 'spontaneously' occurring humour or making sure that I do not miss any of their 'performance'. In this case I observed humour disguised as spontaneous which was not my research focus.

There was also one joke that was missed by the researcher and this was noticed by Ed (Devon College). He pulled the observation notes and checked what I wrote. Ed and Dorothy complained about that I missed one crude joke. When they re-told the joke to me, I realised that I remembered this conversation but overlooked a sexual innuendo in the joke. The reason for missing the joke was that I was either too busy recording other jokes or I did not expect to hear such a joke among those particular staff members (well-spoken, using elegant language and non-sexual and more sophisticated humour). I also did not notice any clues that I associated with the sexual innuendo such as: blushing, shushing, interrupting the joker, criticising the joke or telling the joker off (which may differ across cultures).

This as well as the example discussed above shows that participants in qualitative research may challenge their own roles as participants and ‘step out of the character’ (Goffman 1959). They may want to contest their expected roles to become partners and not objects in the research process

As for the researcher’s failed humour attempts, on several occasions the researcher’s use of humour was unnoticed or was not appreciated. The badge reading ‘joke-proof’ I had during group interview was overlooked by participants maybe because they were so engaged in the interview that they did not have a chance to look closer at me. On some occasions, failed humour meant humour that was unnoticed or rather lost in the course of a conversation (participants continued talking) or in the case of one participant he clearly did not recognise my attempts as humour, treating our pre-interview conversation very seriously. I also considered humour as failed when my joke did not trigger the reactions I anticipated. For instance, there was one incident when my use of humour was clearly found out of place and made me feel temporarily excluded.

There was a quite uncomfortable situation for me at the end of staffroom observations today. We started talking about Archie being absent in the staffroom today because I put him in the ‘older’ category on my observation sheet. One staff member said something like: ‘I bet you had problems ticking the gender, you probably could not decide whether to tick ‘male’ or ‘female’ – he joked which triggered staff’s laughter. I quickly replied with a punch line: ‘Yes, that’s why I ticked both’ and then exploded with loud laughter and ... I met with a dead reaction as if I went a step too far for an outsider. I quickly wanted to recover from this situation saying ‘Oh, I’m provoking Archie to come here’. Then normal conversational routine was back on track. When Archie entered the staffroom, we joked as usual.

Observations, Albatros

This example shows a misread situation where the researcher felt invited to the joke about Archie but was not welcome to join in. It was acceptable of Archie’s colleague to joke about Archie’s gender, but it was unacceptable of me to joke about exactly the same issue. It clearly shows the boundaries of workplace humour for an outsider. I stepped into inside humour



without a licence. This failed humour attempt was a clear sign of an insider's and outsider's rights in terms of humour usage. According to Holmes and Marra (2002) humour contributes to in-group versus out-group maintenance, however here the lack of expected reaction to humour signalled participants' disapproval and was a warning regarding crossing humour boundaries. In this case, participants' silence contributed to 'in-group versus out-group maintenance'.

To sum up, all of the aforementioned behaviours show how difficult it was for me to remain distant from the people whose interactions I was studying. Researching staffroom humour moved on occasions to researching my own humour. It seemed inevitable since I engaged in interactions with my participants.

## **Summary**

This chapter discussed methodology and methods used in this study. The study represents a qualitative research and uses a case study design. It is located within an interpretive paradigm and uses symbolic interactionism as analytical framework. The chapter ends with the presentation of ethical considerations and study limitations. The following chapter (Chapter 4) presents the findings on use of humour between participants and myself.

## CHAPTER 4: HUMOUR RESEARCH ISSUES

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate and discuss the challenges and requirements qualitative humour research entails and help contextualise the study's methods presented in the Methodology chapter. 'Humour Research Issues' is a theme that emerged during data generation and gathers all the data on participants' use of humour with me and my use of humour with participants (see Appendix 3).

The advantage of qualitative studies on humour is that, unlike quantitative research, they take into account the context of humour (Martin 2007). However, context implies various complex interactions which the researcher inevitably becomes a part of. Qualitative humour research therefore poses a challenge for researchers to reflect upon their role and impact in the studied humour context.

In this chapter I firstly present the original and acquired focus of my study. Secondly, I discuss three sources of challenges and requirements of my qualitative humour research, namely: expectations, complexities of the humour phenomenon and method limitations. Thirdly, I discuss literature on participant–researcher informal interactions and insider–outsider dilemmas. Finally, I present the findings on my use of humour with participants in two sections: Researcher's behaviours and Participants' behaviours.

### **Original and acquired research focus**

Originally my research was set up to investigate staffroom humour at three educational settings. However, humour between participants and researcher gradually became another focus of the research. The issues of relationship between the participants and myself and the use of humour between us emerged during the fieldwork and became a crucial part of the

study. The humour between myself and participants happened before, during and after data generation. The context of humour (time, space, who initiated it as well as reactions and intentions related to the humour used) all played a role in influencing the data. Regardless of the extent of the effect each humour occurrence had on the research process, the data on the use of humour between myself and participants shows how inseparable the dynamics of the researched workplace and participant–researcher interactions are. The data gathered to answer the research questions was shaped by humour used in participants–researcher interactions. Challenges, as my study shows, may come from within the researcher and their methods as well as from the participants. What adds to the complexity of the research is the fact that it was conducted in teachers’ staffroom. A key challenge of the observations in the context of my study was the need to observe within the staffroom and during teachers’ lunch time.

Being in the staffroom to observe could be considered an invasion of the teachers’ private enclave or even a violation of teachers’ privacy (Kainan 1994). However, there was a requirement for examples of real life humour. Being present in the staffroom is one thing but being there to observe teachers’ humour poses a whole new range of challenges. Within Western society, humour is valued and it is seen as offensive to accuse somebody of a lack of humour (Chiaro 1992; Ross 1999; Shami and Stuss 1999). Consequently, observing humour in staffrooms may be interpreted by many teachers as me assessing their ‘funniness’. Thus, my research could have been sensitive for its participants in all three aspects: space, time and focus of the research (humour).

Challenges and requirements of my qualitative humour research come from three different sources: participants’ and researcher’s expectations, complexity of the studied phenomenon, and method limitations. The presentation of the difficult research processes and dilemmas contributes to the discussion about the methodology and the role of the researcher

in qualitative humour research. My study contributes to qualitative humour research by showing that despite the focus of the research being participants' interactions, there are also interactions between participants and researcher which should not be ignored or marginalised. My research aspires to provide in-depth reflections about the meanings behind those interactions.

## **Expectations**

Although the advice on how to approach participants and how to build a rapport is available in different books on social research or methodology (e.g. Bryman, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007), with few qualitative studies in the humour research area, there is a lack of guidelines on how to effectively carry out humour research within an educational context. My search for guidelines for humour researchers on how to behave when conducting humour research failed miserably, but the closest topics I have come across were texts showing criticism of an expectation for humour research publications to be funny. Martin (2007), for example, said that expecting texts about humour research to be funny is similar to assuming that studies about human sexuality should be titillating or depression research should be gloomy. Raskin (1985) comments on such expectations without controversial comparisons, but still in an emotional manner, as he points out:

Other authors have found it necessary to apologise, somewhat curiously, for the fact that their books or articles on humour are not funny (which in most cases they are not, and this book is, and intended as, no exception, no apology!) or, alternatively, castigate their predecessors, competitors and (I am afraid) successors for having written unfunny stuff on humour (p. 7).

Although writing about humour in a humorous way may not be crucial for the presentation of research findings or argument, using humour during the research can be of great importance as it can help with, among others, accessing and gathering the research data. However,

humour research as a field of knowledge has been struggling for decades to be treated as seriously as any other discipline and not associated with telling jokes (Raskin 2008).

Therefore, potentially, my approach adds to this struggle. On the other hand, my study takes on the challenge of exploring expectations of humour research and researcher to be funny.

Conducting interviews on and observations of humour presented unexpected challenges. It was quickly apparent that neither interviews nor observations about humour can be conducted in a stiff manner; on the contrary, there was an element of performance required on my behalf. The expectation of the use of humour on my part had two sources — one inner and one outer. The inner source was my willingness to prove my suitability for this kind of research to the participants. The outer source was the different signs I received from the participants that I interpreted as an expectation from the participants in my study, that I should take a humorous role. The reactions to the subject of my research included smiles, laughter, expressions of disbelief and surprise. Participants suggested that some of their colleagues should join the research because they were funny. Some participants expressed amusement and astonishment at the idea of researching humour – they thought I was joking about the research topic. What is more, during my observations at Albatros, I was constantly asked to tell jokes and I felt that I should participate in the joking banter. This went beyond friendliness and openness, and it became apparent that these attributes were not sufficient when conducting research into humour. When asked to tell jokes, I always dodged such requests smiling and returning to performing my ‘front’ e.g. either formalities such as consent forms or noting down my observations. I was not prepared for telling jokes on request; I did not remember many and those I remembered were in Polish. Besides, I felt much more confident in using spontaneous humour.

Being aware of the focus of the research, participants may have felt that they were expected to present themselves as funny; to joke and laugh. The nature of humour research,

which entails being exposed to humour, *tickles* and *itches* a person that is naturally humorous. It concerns both participants and the researcher. The very participation in such a unique endeavour as qualitative humour research creates the temptation to joke and laugh in both parties. The presence of the researcher alters the situation as participants may wish to avoid, impress, direct, deny or influence the researcher (Cohen et al 2007). Although I did not expect the participants to behave in a funny way and use humour continuously, I hoped to record examples of real life humour during the observations and I hoped to learn about the workplace humour by means of interviews and funny artefacts. Whether and to what extent participants may have acted upon such non-verbalised expectations is difficult to establish. The participants in my study were not asked about the effect of my use of humour on their interactions and it is not certain that they would have always been able to recognise a direct link between my use of humour and their interactions.

Both participants and the researcher try to read each other's expectations. Confronting those expectations by explaining any doubts participants may have regarding the research goals and the researcher's and participants' roles in achieving those goals may be the way of minimising participants guessing the expected answers and expected behaviours. This, however, can be done only if such doubts are communicated to the researcher.

Some of the perceived expectations, and thus actions, on the part of the researcher may arise from seeing the research as potentially creating certain problems for the participants. In my research, I quickly became aware of both exposure and personality 'nudity' elements in staffroom humour. The freedom of being in an adult-only, less formal environment than a classroom reveals itself in teachers' use of humour. By nudity elements I understand revealing one's own personality, opinions, and values by means of humour. Humour has the potential to expose or unmask our real selves. Joining in, as a researcher, is therefore being 'plugged into' the context and 'tasting' the atmosphere of a particular

staffroom. In this particular field, the application of humour on the part of a researcher may be necessary. The researcher can feel obliged/expected to expose their humour in return for being allowed to observe and enquire about the humorous exposures of the participants. Entering teachers' backstage, where they perform backstage behaviour, and maintaining an unshaken front may be difficult to manage. What is more, it may make participants switch to frontstage behaviour which could be far from desirable in their back time and backstage. This can happen especially at the beginning of observations as participants may need some time to recognise that frontstage behaviour (as in the classroom) does not need to be applied for the researcher.

Organising a meeting with the participants prior to research, including a discussion about their expectations and perceptions of the research, could have led to clarification of the research goals, perceived participants' and my behaviour/roles and possibly even the development of a more detailed consent (co-written by participants). However, with such a complex phenomenon as humour, even detailed consent could not capture every aspect of humour research dynamics.

Some of the expectations and behaviour on both parts may have arisen from the close physical proximity between myself and participants. For instance, in all three staffrooms I sat with the teachers and not away from them. In the two small staffrooms (Albatros, Lingua) limited space meant not having any other choice but to sit next to them. At Devon College I could have sat away from the participants but then I would not have heard what they were saying. What is more, participants in all three settings encouraged me to sit with them. Taking different observational positions, like standing, could have been read as patronising or distancing from the participants. The space between us influenced our interactions and behaviours. It is more difficult not to engage in a conversation when sitting among participants, at the same table (Devon College, Lingua) or in the same row of chairs

(Albatros) and almost rubbing up against one another. Lack of physical distance enabled and facilitated interactions and thus the use of humour between myself and participants. However, it also made the lunch break situation unnatural, hybrid (due to my presence and my interactions with participants) and thus different to what I wished to observe. As an outsider there were many things I did not share with participants. However, what we did have in common were the moments spent together in the staffroom during lunch breaks, during informal interactions and interviews, and shared laughter and humour from time to time.

Those moments of togetherness temporarily moved us beyond Plester and Sayers's (2007) 'in-group' and 'out-group' humour workplace divisions and situated me in what I would call the 'in and out' dimension of the researched setting. By 'in and out' I mean the temporary unity, sense of belonging and togetherness, the subjective impression of being a part of the studied world that lasted the length of the joke and joint laughter. The simultaneous in-and-outness can be otherwise described, paraphrasing Solomon et al's (2006) words, as hybrid space (on the back of my research) where I both was and was not a researcher and participants both were and were not participants. In between those hybrid spaces/times I was back in the role of the outsider and felt separate from the participants, their relationships and their workplace culture.

What is also worth considering in terms of expectations is what is expected from not just the researcher but the work they produce. I wanted my research to be serious and participants probably had the same expectations. So were the expectations of my university and more generally scholar profession. According to Kadushin and Kadushin (2013) one of the caveats regarding an interviewer's use of humour with clients in a social- work interview may be perceiving interviewers as frivolous, insensitive or even unprofessional. In the context of humour research, use of humour by the researcher may also cause such feelings in participants. What is more, it may introduce some confusion on their part as to the



researcher's intentions. However, it is not obvious whether, even if perceiving the researcher's behaviours as unconventional, this means that participants have doubts about the work researcher produces. One could say there is a conflict in me introducing my humour to the research (bringing back to front) and at the same time wanting it to be treated seriously (as frontstage and not backstage) by participants and prospective readers. However, when I used humour to generate data, it was a part of frontstage behaviour. The fact I used humour with participants while in the field does not mean that I treated my work such as data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing- up carelessly. Use of humour on the part of the researcher and professionalism are not mutually exclusive terms just as I would not treat professionalism and lack of use of humour on the part of researcher as synonyms. The serious conduct of the humour researcher does not guarantee that their work will be deemed professional.

Kadushin and Kadushin (2013) prove that use of humour on the part of the interviewer does not need to affect the professionalism of the interviewer or their work. Looking at the examples they provided, one can see that interviewers can act professionally when using humour with the clients. The difference is that I was not acting as a social worker but using humour for what I aimed to research, humour. Kadushin and Kadushin (2013) state that humour and professionalism in social work are perceived as antithetical concepts and that there is a feeling that humour may trivialise the nature of social work and seem unprofessional, potentially even denigrating and alienating people (Kadushin and Kadushin 2013). This is in line with Raskin's (2008) argument that for humour research to be treated seriously it cannot be confused with funny activity. My study, however, shows that removing researcher's humour from humour research is neither straightforward nor unequivocally desirable.

### **Complexities of the humour phenomenon**

The focus of my research presented several difficulties. Humour as a studied phenomenon posed some challenges but so did the staffroom as an observed space and lunch hour as an observed time. Workplace humour is inherently context bound (Holmes 2000). The context in case of a workplace means workplace dynamics, workplace relationships, workplace politics, space, time, demographic factors. My use of humour was as contextualised as participants' use of humour. This means that it mattered when I joked, where, with whom, how and where. Joking before interviews or observations, even if it served a similar purpose to joking during data collection, may have been interpreted differently by participants and affected the data in different ways. For example, joking before an interview that served to relax the participant and initiate some rapport with them could have been seen as a general friendly conversation without strategic implications (preparing the ground for the data collection).

Joking during data collection for the very same reason could have been seen as provoking humour on the part of participants, possibly interrupting and subsequently changing their behaviours/ answers. This consequently leads to the generation of data on researcher-participants interactions and not on interactions among participants. Joking with the participants after the research again had a different weight as it did not provide an opportunity for interrupting or influencing data collection. However, it could have still affected the data interpretation and thus data analysis. Nevertheless, such post-joking was helpful in nurturing the rapport with the participants. The post-joking was not used by me to gather extra data on the participants or their settings. The participants at each setting were informed about the end of the data collection period. That marked the end of research for participants but my obligations were extended to analysing and reporting the data.

Having reviewed different ways of identifying humour by humour researchers, my study shows that both intentions and reactions are not always easily identified. In the case of observing participants, I could recognise the reactions to humour but was not always able to

guess the intentions of the person who initiated humour. During interviews, I was on occasions given insight into intentions behind some humour as participants told me about the purposes of the humour used by them or their colleagues.

As for artefacts, I was aware of my reactions to funny artefacts and occasionally of the reactions of the participants but the intentions behind the funny artefacts had to be sought by means of individual interviews and informal interactions with the participants. Only in the case of my own use of humour was I fully aware of the intentions but then some uncertainty remained as to reading participants' reactions or, in other words, participants reading my intentions. When it was participants who used humour with me, I was only aware of my own reactions to humour and the intentions behind the humour used by the participants were not always clear to me. I agree with Hay (2001) that the process of establishing what should be counted as humour is rarely entirely objective. Intentions and reactions to humour create a challenge for humour research but so does the fact that humour is both a personal and a subjective experience. People have different humour tastes and preferences and thus appreciate some types of humour more than others. Both the participants and I, prior to the research, had our own ideas about what we found funny and why. Reflecting upon one's own humour preferences may help to understand one's reactions towards humour. I reflected on my use of humour with participants, recognising that my personal taste mirrored both my use of humour with participants and my interpretations of participants' humour. Recognising that participants had their own humour preferences, sometimes in contradiction with my humour preferences, allowed me to accept and react with a smile and laughter even to humour I would not have used.

My study shows that it was more important showing appreciation of participants' humour than my own private opinions about the quality or type of humour used by the participants. Social researchers cannot be required to appreciate all participants' actions when

researching different phenomena. Some research topics relate to behaviours that are not approved of at all by researchers. Nevertheless, showing appreciation for humour is deeply rooted in Western culture and has particular significance in English culture (see Chapter 2). The meanings and thus functions of humour may be complex and even contradictory. My study shows that a single humour instance may be a way to nurture a relationship with one person by contesting another person. For instance, during observations at Albatros the staff laughed about Archie's changed behaviour after he got promoted. I could not help laughing too. Archie was not in the staffroom but this humour was directed against him; it served to nurture the relationships among his colleagues. I on the other hand by laughing along was nurturing the relationships with those who joked, potentially affecting my relationship with Archie (who also was a participant in my research).

This leads to a question of if and how the researcher can investigate this complex phenomenon. First and foremost, the humour researcher needs to be aware of the paradoxical and dualistic nature of humour in the context (Lynch 2002) and never oversimplify it. Furthermore, which aspect of humour and in which context it is in focus matters too. Not all aspects of humour and not the entire context can be considered by a single researcher at the very moment of humour. Qualitative humour research calls for humour comprehension, humour awareness and knowledge of humour processes. This suggests a certain combination of skills and personal qualities on the part of the researcher but even the best equipped humour researcher needs to be prepared for challenges when entering the research setting.

Acknowledging rather than ignoring the challenges coming from the researcher and research as well as from participants may foster better understanding of studied humour.

Another challenge my research posed was the space and time I observed the teachers, which is specific to staffroom research. According to Mawhinney (2007) the staffroom is one of the

rare spaces in a school where teachers can interact exclusively with other adults, but time can be an even scarcer commodity for teachers than space during the school day, as the literature shows (see Chapter 2). The observations were conducted at lunch time so that meant conducting research not only in the exclusively adult space but also during exclusively teachers' time. Bryman (2008) notes that participant observation is likely to be especially intrusive in terms of the amount of participants' time taken up when the research takes place in organisational settings. It may not be the case when researching staffroom life, as it was undertaken during participants' free time (free from teaching). Similarly, the risk that the rhythms of work lives will be disrupted (Bryman, 2008) is minimised; however, it could be argued that the rhythms of participant leisure time at work were disrupted by my presence in the staffroom. For instance, in my study I interrupted participants' conversations and lunch consumption to introduce myself, my research and ask them to sign the consent forms.

Having discussed the complexities of the studied staffroom humour, I now would like to move to limitations of the methods I used to study staffroom humour.

### **Method limitations**

Both my and participants' behaviours were influenced by the type and style of the research methods. Unstructured participant observations made interactions between participants and myself unavoidable; they also made me a part of the context of studied humour. In contrast, non-participant observations create a distance between the researcher and the researched and do not provide opportunities for interactions. According to Merriam (1998, in Kawulich 2005) participant observation is more difficult than simply observing, without participation in the activity of the setting, since it usually requires that the field notes to be jotted down at a later time, after the activity has concluded. It is argued, however, that there are situations in

which participation is required for understanding because simply observing without participating in the action may not lend itself to one's complete understanding of the activity. This an important point for my study as I felt obliged to both participate in staffroom talk and humour and record what was being said. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, context is particularly important when researching humour. Every gesture missed by the researcher could lead to missing the humour occurrence or misinterpreting it. Resigning from either participating or recording was not an option as I felt that they were complementary for data collection and data interpretation. However, Schnurr (2010) mentions engaging in participant observation while writing down humorous comments from memory as a weakness of some humour studies. Some engagement is inevitable in unstructured participant observations and my study shows prioritising experience of participating in humour over just recording/observing it on some occasions. However, the difference is the length of observations between my and other studies.

While conducting observations I sometimes felt that engaging with the participants was about getting insights that were more useful than tidiest and most rigorous observation notes. Richards (1996) chose 'strategic openness' for his research into school staffroom life to balance 'the importance of not influencing the nature of staffroom interaction against the need to become a trusted member of the staff' (p. 58). He openly admits, however, that participant observation posed some challenges for him as a naturally talkative person. Humour research can pose some challenges for a naturally humorous person, but similarly to Richards (1996), I do not think fieldwork is the best time for character transformation.

The fact that this study used unstructured observations also matters, as a more flexible structure of the observations gives the researcher more freedom as to what to observe and how to acquire information. It also allows for interaction between participants and researcher as the qualitative researcher is not bound by, for example, careful ticking of the frequency

grid which could be the case in structured observations. However, there is a difference between observing and instigating. There is a danger of observation turning into experiment if the researcher instigates participants' behaviours. One possible solution would be for a researcher to try and confine their contributions during the data collection to laughter and not expanding on the participants' jokes or initiating humour with participants. However, there is always a possibility that participants will use humour with the researcher and expect them to get involved in humour.

As for the interviews, the active interviewing style I adopted allowed for the interviews to look more like discussions and conversations — this possibly encouraged use of humour on both sides. Active interviewing provided opportunities for the researcher to ask and prompt participants creatively (sometimes by means of humour) and was an opportunity for participants to answer the questions in a less formal manner. The fact that interviews were semi-structured and asked open-ended questions gave participants flexibility in creating their own answers. However, the similarity between the co-constructive nature of active interviewing and casual conversation, led, at times, to me sounding suggestive and asking questions that could be seen as leading. On the other hand, none of the methods used in my study aimed at restricting participants and participants were acting as active and not passive research co-constructors.

#### Participant–researcher informal interactions

Some humour studies show that sometimes the informal interactions between the researcher and participants, including use of humour, are a part of the research process. It should not be overlooked, however, that each study has a distinctive methodology, focus, researcher's role, length and depth that justifies or prevents certain behaviours and interactions on the part of the researcher. Some researchers who studied humour used participant observation as an approach and method (Mawhinney 2007; Lynch 2005; Woods 1979; Plester 2007; Richards

1996). This involved participating in humour. However, Mawhinney, Lynch and Richards worked at their research settings, Plester was a pseudo-member and Woods was an involved observer. Those positions allowed them for more participant-like behaviour; behaviour different to that of participants may have meant alienation and exclusion for them. It does not mean, however, that the researcher can only use humour with the participants if they are an insider but it may pose more challenges for the researcher to use humour with participants if they are an outsider.

Ethnographic studies (Mawhinney 2007; Woods 1979; Richards 1996) require an immersion from the researcher and thus justify their informal interactions with participants including their use of humour with the participants. Plester's (2007) and Lynch's (2005) research represent case studies. What justifies the fact that they took part in some of the humour of their participants is their studies' intensity, depth and time spent at each setting. The level of involvement in humour exchanges may vary and can depend both on the researcher's strategies/methods and participants' expectations regarding the researcher and their invitations for the researcher to take part in their humour. For instance, Plester (2007) was required by her participants to join in humour and was included in much of the joking. She found that participating in humour on some occasions furthered her understanding and interpretation of the impacts of humour and culture. What is more, it helped her to create trust relationships with participants and improved the data collection as participants more readily agreed to take part in the interviews. However, Lynch (2005) shows that humour observations can be boycotted and humour become inaccessible to the researcher if these trust relationships get broken (see Chapter 3).

Similarly to Plester's (2007) research, my involvement in participants' humour had both a not-always-intended strategic aspect (facilitating data collection) and a relational aspect (building rapport). The 'researcher effect' seems to be the main threat in the case of



participant–researcher humour. In my study I evaluate this very threat by presenting and analysing examples of both my behaviour towards participants and participants’ behaviour towards me. The examples give the reader an insight into the variety of interactions that happened between the two parties. What is more, along with examples I provide information about my intentions behind my use of humour and participants’ reactions to it.

Before I move to the examples of use of humour between myself and participants, I shall first discuss the insider/outsider dilemmas.

### Insider/outsider dilemmas

I find that Woods’ idea of a researcher being a fellow human to the research participants explains my drive towards using humour with the participants:

Whether reliving ‘laughs’ or sharing boredom with the pupils, partaking of the staffroom merriment or exchanging grumbles, drinking in the pub with various groups of staff, chatting with pupils in playground, corridors and some in their own homes — in all these aspects, I felt very much ‘involved’ in the scene and, in the action.

Woods 1979, p.262

When considering how to approach the research questions, I had to face the following problem: Since I – the stranger – am allowed to observe and enquire about (during interviews) humour exposures of adults in their only free time during their work day, should I not also (in return) offer my own humour exposure and let the participants be the audience/the observers of my use of humour? However, the assumption underpinning the above question is that of a bipolarity of notions of insider and outsider /stranger (see Chapter 3). I assumed that I was an outsider and that I should and could do something in order not to be perceived as such. Using Woods’s (1979) aforementioned phrase, both participants and the researcher are involved in the same scene. Sharing the same space and time certainly does bring them closer together. However, in the case of my research, there were number of things closely related to workplace life that I did not share with my participants. The hybridity of the

research situation lay in the fact that I was in the research settings doing my frontstage in the staff's backstage by studying their backstage behaviour (humour) without belonging to either their frontstage or backstage.

It is difficult to say whether, how and to what extent not using humour with participants would have affected the researcher–participant relationship and the collection of data. My use of humour with participants helped me in negotiating access, facilitating data collection and building rapport with participants but it also posed certain challenges and difficulties. The data was partially affected by such interactions as whenever I used humour with participants during data collection it impacted the data generation and subsequently the analysis and interpretation thereof. However, it is hard to establish the extent to which it was affected and to what extent the collection of the data was facilitated by my use of humour with the participants. It could be argued that any interactions between participants and researcher can influence the research process, however, in the case of researching humour, the use of humour in participant–researcher interactions present particular challenges.

My use of humour in the humour research made the data analysis and data interpretation more difficult. It quickly proved impossible to separate my use of humour from the rest of the data. The main problem analysing the data on participants' use of humour was bearing in mind the effect of one's own humour on that data. This confrontation (see next section) acted as a 'confessional account of methodology' (Finlay 2002, p.224) and allowed me to identify and explore different challenges of researching humour as well as the reasons underlying those challenges. Reflective analysis can prove difficult, as confessing to methodological inadequacies can be uncomfortable (Finlay 2002). Although admitting to using humour with participants during humour research may position my research as vulnerable, paradoxically, reflecting on it can transform the study's weakness/limitation into the study's strength. My explicitness about my impact on data collection and analysis serves

to enhance my research trustworthiness, transparency and accountability (Finlay 2002). However, I realise the ambiguity and messiness of the reflexive endeavour leads to researchers being damned whether they engage in reflexive practice or not (Finlay 2002).

Below, I discuss the examples of my use of humour with participants followed by participants' use of humour with me.

### **Researcher's behaviours**

Data on my use of humour and my interactions with participants was divided into: facilitating data collection, negotiating access, rapport and unsuccessful humour. The majority of data gathered under Researcher's behaviours concerns researcher's ways of building rapport with participants. The warnings of the inaccessibility of the teachers' staffroom present in the literature (Kainan 1994; Richards 1996; Mawhinney 2007) and anecdotes about staffrooms made me consider issues such as approachability of the researcher as well as teachers' defensiveness and their suspicion towards staffroom research.

As my study shows, building rapport with participants by means of humour meant mainly reducing the distance between the participants and me and thus reducing the potential image of me as a staffroom life 'intruder' (Richards 1996). Softening my professional image of the researcher with humour, and so applying backstage behaviour to my front role as a researcher, I felt I forestalled some of the potential access and rapport issues and came closer to participants, and thus the researched world. Plester (2007) shows that modifying her style of dress, language and behaviour was an attempt to fit in in the studied settings. Such adjustments can minimise the differences (perceived or actual) between the researcher and the researched and represent an intuitive, personalised approach to the participants. The main

issue in my research was time – more time spent on observations would make the proportion of building relationship relatively smaller.

### Rapport

My study shows that rapport between researcher and participants can be built in a variety of ways, often including unplanned spontaneous reactions and behaviours on the part of the researcher. The rapport can be created by means of: chit-chat, flattering, self-deprecating humour, joining in, humorous comments, friendly teasing, purposefully ignored humour and acceptance and support. Hay (2001) shows the whole repertoire of humour support strategies in conversations including laughter, contributing more humour, playing along with the gag, using echo or overlap, offering sympathy and self-deprecating humour. Those strategies serve as an acknowledgment and appreciation of humour (Hay 2001). My study shows how I, by means of humour, acknowledged and appreciated participants' humour to build rapport with them. According to Morreall (1991) sharing humour, like sharing food and sharing music, is an ancient social gesture bringing people together. Using humour with participants seemed a natural and obvious activity to me. The rapport with participants was also built by means of my non-humorous behaviours. The creation of rapport with participants required me to embrace the opportunities (and so act strategically) and at the same time behave spontaneously and use different personal qualities depending on the situation.

Often my humour started purposefully (to build rapport, negotiate access or facilitate data collection) but developed further into spontaneous humour. On other occasions my spontaneous humour became purposeful as it allowed me to gain an insight into some issue or encourage a person to join my research. I used humour to build rapport with the participants at different stages of the research: prior to data collection, during data collection and post data collection. The impact of my humour on the data generation varied depending on those stages. Prior and post data collection use of humour presented less risk than humour used by

me during data collection as it did not interrupt the flow of observations or interviews and thus data generation. Prior and post data collection humour on my part seemed more like socialising as it was not woven into observing or interviewing participants. Prior data collection humour was helpful in initiating the rapport with participants, served as a warm-up activity before the interviews and observations. Post data collection humour, on the other hand, helped to nurture the rapport with participants. Both pre and post data collection humour was possibly less confusing for the participants than the humour I used with them during data collection. Participants with whom I joked during data collection may have been confused as to whether they should continue their usual behaviour (in case of observations), continue their responses to my questions (in case of interviews) or engage in humorous exchanges with me. They may have read my humour as stepping out of the character and temporarily stopping the researcher's role. That confusion may have derailed participants from telling me or showing me the natural everyday behaviours my study was set up to investigate. This in turn may have led to hybrid spaces between us as our frontstages and backstages blurred.

Out of all researchers' behaviours discussed in this section, building rapport most prominently shows that interaction between myself and participants is connected with other interactions (including studied participant-participant interactions) in the research settings. Thus, inter-acting on my part was my way of getting insights into the workplace interactions. Getting insights was valuable as it helped see workplace interactions as complex and dynamic and sometimes problematic. However, at the cost of getting those insights, my ability to answer the research questions, and thus data, was affected. Sometimes my use of humour facilitated answering research questions but on many occasions my use of humour did not help to answer the research questions and moved the focus of the research, redirected it, posing new questions and delivering information that was not originally sought.

## Joining in

‘Joining in’ meant for me both laughing along and joking along with participants and so the data coded as ‘joining in’ provides examples of joint laughter where I was amused by what participants said laughed with them. It also included examples of me joining in the humorous exchanges initiated by participants. Both ways of my joining in show appreciation of participants’ humour and serve to build rapport with them.

After interview Ian entered the staffroom and said he ‘was off’ as in leaving to which Richard and I reacted with word play ‘off’ as in expired/smelly. The fact that I laughed with them and they laughed with me gave me a reassurance that I built a rapport with them.

Notes on individual interview with Richard, Devon College

Researcher’s missing or ignoring the opportunity to laugh along with participants could be read as impolite or arrogant behaviour. Laughing together is a thing that brings people closer and reduces the boundaries of the formal roles of researcher and participant. Although there is a risk of going native and thus ‘blind’, close relationships with participants, whether involving active participation in participants’ lives or in-depth learning about their lives, are characteristic of, and sought in, qualitative research (Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler 2010).

Clearly, joining in is a way for the researcher to take up a more active role in the researched setting and moves them into lively interaction with the participants. In this example, joining in happened after the interview with Richard, so it did not interrupt the flow of the interview but it provided a friendly post-interview atmosphere. Richard’s and my simultaneous spontaneous reaction to Ian’s being ‘off’ granted me, Ian and Richard a shared moment of joy. The following example also shows post-interview interaction:

I needed to leave so I turned my phone back on and super loud music started. I showed Robert my very loud mobile phone for Seniors, and then his took out his. ‘We’re so alike’ he commented. ‘I have SOS button’ I boasted, ‘me too’ he replied

and switched it on! He started shouting HELP HELP! and we laughed about that. He said he activates it at home a lot.'

#### Notes on individual interview with Wendy, Albatros

This example of informal interaction between Robert and I (after an interview with Wendy) was a casual friendly exchange on a non-research topic and yet it created some temporary bond, a connection between myself and participants. However, the post-interview space/time is specific as it could be seen as backstage for both interviewee and interviewer so their backstage behaviour (humour) may be more justified than during the interview. There is a question as to whether there is ever a true back region for a researcher when in the field. Perhaps interactions with participants, including humour, are just a natural part of the frontstage of research. My study shows that qualitative research is not just a set of different frontstages. It is not only about gathering data on arranged dates but also communicating with participants in variety of situations before and after observations or interviews. The researcher cannot abruptly pack their bag and leave the research setting treating it like an impersonal visit to a bank or post-office where after being served one quickly leaves. Informal interactions with participants are a part of the research process. The relationship between participant and researcher is a power relationship. However, although unequal, both participants and researchers have power status (Basit 2010).

It is due to a participant's kindness that a researcher can conduct their research. They also hold the information the researcher is seeking but the researcher's power lies in sufficient cognition of research issue and their role of asking the questions (Basit 2010). Joking with participants may be one way of flattening this unequal relationship and a means by which participants feel appreciated and not used. However, this still does not necessarily solve the unequal power issues. Using Solomon et al's (2006) claim, some roles may be only suspended but their traces remain.

There were occasions when I joined in to show support of participants' humour and to agree with them. For instance, I non-verbally pointed at myself when one participant (Devon College) during staffroom observations said that he had an 'emergency Shrek at home'. The participant told his colleagues that he had an emergency DVD of *Shrek* at home. As I am also a Shrek fan and had this DVD at home too, I looked at him and pointed at myself to indicate that he was not the only person that considered Shrek a great comedy worth keeping in case of having a bad day.

The other time I showed support for a participant's humour was when Barbara (Devon College) admitted that she is really embarrassed when watching TV programmes where people make fools of themselves. I admitted that I also have to leave the room when I see such things on TV. Such interactions with participants may lead the direction of their interactions thus generating data different to the one I set out to gather.

By joining in in such situations, I sent a clear signal: 'I am here to conduct my research but inside I am just like you, I also appreciate and find similar things funny'. Being professional does not exclude friendliness, openness or use of humour, on the contrary, according to Sharma (2008), a social researcher needs a number of social qualities such as, among others, good-humour and wittiness. However, it means managing the impression of frontstage and backstage simultaneously. The hybridity of presenting oneself as professional researcher and a humorous person at the same time makes the research process truly complex. For example, joining in, while collecting the data, may be confusing for the participants in terms of the researcher's role and the boundaries of that role. Joining in might be misread by participants in a number of ways and thus influence the generation of data. Participants may think that a researcher joins in to signal their own humour preferences (by laughing or joining in with humour) and thus potentially to assess participants' funniness. The researcher's joining in may be a confirmation for the participants that something has



been approved as funny and thus it is worth continuing/ repeating later. There is a difference between being invited to join in and initiating the humour. The latter may make the researcher more vulnerable as they cannot be certain whether the participants will welcome such contributions on part of the researcher. Thus this vulnerability lies in the researcher taking the risk of not knowing whether their humour will be accepted and appreciated.

Initiating humour without invitation from the participants may be simply regarded as interrupting their conversation. Such humour can also draw participants' attention away from their own interactions and activities and move it onto researcher's humour, despite the goal of the research being the participants' use of humour. Such redirection of research focus may impede a researcher's ability to observe natural workplace humour and instead lead them to analysing the effects of their own humour on workplace interaction dynamics. Therefore recognising the context as conducive to joining in is crucial; but this requires the researcher to be able to read and not misread signals sent by the participants. Those signals, however, may be readable/ available only to insiders. Fine and De Soucey (2005, p. 3) outline the following prerequisites for being a part of joking group: 'The joker must know the target (and the audience), and the target and the audience must know the joker. This relationship gives the joker the right to joke. However, it does more: it gives the joker the authority to get away with the joke'. An outsider researching staffroom humour may also on occasions be getting away with jokes as the one who did not know, was unfamiliar with, the context and thus not guilty of misusing/misdirecting humour.

#### Purposefully ignored humour

My study provides just one example of a participant's use of humour ignored by the researcher for the purpose of good rapport. During the observations at Devon College, one

overweight woman joked about herself saying: 'Obviously my body is a temple' and followed this with laughter. Her colleagues joined her and laughed too. I remember I was too embarrassed to laugh out loud (proportionally to how funny I found it) as I did not want to offend the lady. Suppressing the amusement and limiting it to a smile was my way of avoiding crossing the boundary between what insiders and outsiders were allowed in terms of humour. My cautiousness also resulted from the fact that I had not known the participant before as it was the first time I observed her in the staffroom. My laughter could have resulted in her taking the offence and distrusting me as a researcher. Self-deprecating humour on the one hand invites the audience to laugh at a person who jokes about themselves, but on the other may find only insiders' laughter acceptable. However, the term 'insiders' is general but insiders may create different groups within a workplace, and such groups may have different things in common and appreciate different types of humour. In Goffmanian terms both cliques and teams represent insiders but the type of relationships and interactions between them may differ largely. Returning to the above example, it is worth looking at the humane humour rules that advise among others: not to target an attribute that cannot be changed, but instead to target oneself, i.e. to use self-deprecating humour, and to target one's own ethnic group or gender, but no other ethnic group or gender (Nilsen and Nilsen 2013). Those rules expand Toth's (1981) idea of females' humour being underpinned by a humane rule that one should not laugh at what people cannot change such as race, sex or appearance. It may be argued that most acceptable laughter at a joker's self-deprecating humour comes from insiders who share similar demographics (age, gender, employment status, race) with them and are most familiar with the joker. The latter would have automatically excluded me as an outsider (neither team nor clique member). In case of the obese woman who joked about her obesity, it may have been other overweight middle-aged female colleagues who would have had most right to show amusement or disapproval of the joke.

Both purposefully used and ignored humour on the part of the researcher may have given the participants some clues as to my humour preferences and thus could have shaped the way they used humour when I was around. However, it is difficult to establish whether participants acted upon those signals and if so, to what extent those signals shaped how they joked and what they joked about in my presence. There were situations when I saw a causal link between my use of humour and participants' use of humour. For instance, my jokes about my research sometimes triggered participants' jokes about my research. However, in the case of participants' jokes about their own or their colleagues' funniness and thus their suitability for the research, it may have been my humour that triggered it or the sheer fact of participating in humour research and participants' perceived expectations of such research.

#### Flattering

The data coded as 'flattering' covers all researcher's attempts to appreciate participants, to compliment them and thus build a rapport with them. The example below shows my informal interaction with Victoria (Devon College):

Victoria came in and so I complimented her new hairstyle and said that she looked even younger she joked back 'you can stay here.'

Notes after interview with Will, Devon College

I did not observe participants on that day but nevertheless I wanted to show my appreciation for Victoria's change of hairstyle. Participants are first and foremost humans and like anyone else like to be noticed and complimented.

Researcher's compliments were not confined to a person's appearance, they also concerned a person's commitment to work/expertise, a person's and/or the whole setting's contribution to the research, the settings' funny artefacts. For example:

When the interview finished and we were going back to the lobby Lisa said: 'Tell me when you finish your research.'

I replied: 'I will, will you feel relieved then?'

Lisa: (laughter) Maybe I'll draw on your expertise.

I replied: 'Maybe I'll draw on yours first if I may'

Lisa (Laughter).

Notes on interview with Lisa, Lingua

Making participants feel important and appreciated was neither a difficult nor time-consuming task, on the contrary I found it a pleasant experience as participants enjoyed the compliments. However, there is a thin line between flattering and flirting. Flattering may be misread as flirting and cause some confusion or damage the relationship between the participant and the researcher. It is hard to establish whether it was my flattering, use of humour, friendly approach or my age and gender that caused one young male teacher to invite me for a date via email<sup>21</sup> but it certainly positioned both of us as vulnerable. His vulnerability lay in his misinterpretation of my intentions, and my vulnerability lay in not predicting such a situation and yet having to solve it professionally. My email reply was a gentle reminder of me being bound by professional conduct in relation to my participants. I never heard back from this teacher but this experience showed that my own approaches and behaviours out-of-character may have resulted in the participants' perceived familiarity or overfamiliarity with me (familiarity rather associated with cliques than outsiders).

Chit-chat

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<sup>21</sup> He sent me an email after my data collection in Devon College was completed. I observed him in the staffroom but did not interview him.

My study shows that rapport with participants can be created by means of chit-chat. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), it is important not to jump into an interview without a rapport-building pre-interview chit-chat as it may look like police-grilling (Angrosino 2007). Besides, Angrosino (2007) argues that such unguarded conversational moments may provide important cues about participants. Although Angrosino (2007) refers to participant observation research, regardless of the methods used, a qualitative researcher may benefit from chit-chat. Chit-chat happening before the interview, observations or documents collection may be a chance for the researcher to create a desirable impression of themselves and the research thus the frontstage. However, chit-chat can also be useful in nurturing a rapport with participants throughout the study and after it is completed.

Chit-chat in my study means informal casual conversations about non-research topics such as: weather, cultural differences, sport, holidays or food. Chit-chat thus was Goffmanian unofficial communication transgressing the frontstage behaviours. For example, I discussed membership at a local fitness club with Archie (Albatros), seagull excrement on the staffroom window with Victoria (Devon College), and with Antonio (Lingua) the language exam we both took. The topics of fitness membership and the language exam came about as I met both Archie and Antonio outside of the research setting, in private contexts. I bumped into Archie in the steam room of a local fitness club and I met Antonio for the first time at the local Certificate of Proficiency in English exam centre. Since the city is rather small, I also met study participants at the bus stop, on the bus, at the local shop, on the street and at the playground, in my son's nursery. Seeing each other in an out-of-research context may have helped me and the participants realise that we have some things in common and that we are just ordinary people leading similar out-of-work lives.

I definitely felt closer to Richard after I met him both on the bus, the bus stop and the shop (on three different days). Each time we accidentally met we had a bit of chit-chat and so when I met him next time in the research context I found talking informally with him natural:

We talked about what Polish education looks like. This looked more like a chat of two friends than a distanced participant-researcher relationship. He seemed to like and appreciate my ideas and was clearly interested in my education, my ideas.

Notes on Snowballing with Richard, Devon College

This chit-chat did not interrupt the process of interviewing or observing, it was just an informal conversation in the staffroom over coffee after Richard helped me negotiate some interviews with his colleagues. Certain situations such as pre or post-interview/observation moments may be conducive to chit-chat between researcher and participants and such opportunities should be embraced by the researcher as they can be for both their and the participant's benefit. Opening up by the researcher does not need to mean losing the professional image; it may be a way of entrusting participants with researchers' private affairs in return for participants' confessions. After all, any research exposes participants' lives to the researcher but not necessarily the other way round. This may create imbalance and a sense of inequality in participants. However, not all private affairs are appropriate to share. Participants may not feel comfortable when listening to the researcher's revelations. However, pre- and post-data collection situations may imply not yet, or no longer, being in-character. But the exact moment when a researcher gets in-character may not be obvious to participants who may consider some of chit-chat as in-character behaviour and some as out-of-character behaviour. Some may not be sure whether the researcher can relax or extend their frontstage. For instance, there was one situation when Harvey (Albatros) explicitly asked me during in-staffroom observations if I could be talked to. He clearly hesitated when thinking about sitting next to me with his lunch. He was not sure whether I was to be

interrupted or not. I stopped taking notes and started talking with him. I considered it rude and arrogant to do otherwise. After all, the researcher is not a programmed robot to take notes but a human whom participants may seek and want contact with. By concentrating on talking with Harvey, I suspended the observations of staffroom interactions and focused on interacting with Harvey. Such situations interrupt data generation and temporarily move the researcher away from gathering material helping to answer the research questions. On the other hand, however, a social researcher conducting a study in a natural setting hopes that participants will behave naturally and spontaneously in their presence and spontaneous behaviour includes chit-chat.

This shows clearly how expectations can shape both participants' and researcher's behaviours. Acting upon such expectations may be a way of adjusting to each other and showing politeness but it inevitably moves both the researcher and the participants away from their assigned frontstage roles in the research process (e.g. note-taking in my case and interacting with his colleagues in case of Harvey). Chit-chat with participants temporarily refocuses the research<sup>22</sup> and concentrates on issues that are distant from answering research questions. However, it certainly helps to build rapport with participants and rapport is the key to getting answers to the research questions. Thus it is and at the same time is not frontstage. It is frontstage if we consider it a relationship-building activity that is a part of research process. It is however an activity that may hinder performing such frontstage behaviours as taking notes or observing. Chit-chat between participants and researcher may therefore create a hybrid space and time just like any other unofficial, out-of-character communication.

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<sup>22</sup> I moved away from research tasks such as taking notes or observing interactions between participants.

## Friendly teasing

Friendly teasing in this study meant the researcher humorously teasing the participants. Some of the humour was initiated/ provoked by participants and the researcher replied in a similar manner (teasing them in a funny way). On occasions when the researcher was with just one participant in the staffroom or met a participant outside the staffroom, friendly teasing was initiated by the researcher. Sometimes friendly teasing occurred in the middle of observations or interviews just to regain personal contact with the participants. In all those situations the researcher used friendly teasing to build a rapport with the participants. However, using friendly teasing during data collection was the point when I had more influence on the data generation than participants. This on occasions moved the focus of the research (i.e. participants' interactions) to my interactions with participants. This moved me away from gathering material to answer the research questions that concerned humour between participants.

Although the term 'teasing' seems to imply aggressive behaviour, my teasing was conducted in a friendly manner and was tailored to the humour of participants (those I had a chance to observe and become familiar with). Acting upon humour that was enjoyed by particular participants was my way of getting closer to them. The method of acting like participants by imitating their humour expands Plester's (2007) approach of adjusting to the participants and their settings to blend in. For example, one participant in the Lingua staffroom joked about me observing how he and his colleague eat: 'They eat like animals, don't they?'. I replied confirming that that was exactly what I observed and asked them not to make any noises and eat quietly.

Such invitations to friendly teasing were not rare in my study. Participants clearly wanted to stay in touch with my backstage-self even when I was in the researching mode (doing frontstage). Such situations were also their way of checking whether I had a sense of



humour, whether I was able to reply humorously to their jokes. My friendly teasing was therefore a way of authenticating myself as a person and a humour researcher. In that sense I was extending/bending my frontstage to the participants' expectations and not necessarily acting out-of-character. My use of humour had its consequences on the frontstage for maintaining the impression of being the right person to study humour. However, friendly teasing, being the most provocative way of rapport building, carried a risk of changing participants' behaviours and their use of humour and thus moving me away from observing or, in case of interviews, hearing about natural/usual interactions that would have helped me answer the research questions. Participants may seek out cues about the aims of the research and adjust what they say and do in line with their perceptions of the research goals, whether false or true (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest 1966, in Bryman 2008). In my study, participants may have sought cues in my use of humour. However, it is also the other way round – the researcher wishing to recognise and understand the studied interactions looks for cues in participants' behaviours (Angrosino 2007).

As for situations outside the staffroom, I approached Richard (Devon College) in the printer corner to ask him whether he delivered chocolates to Ian (his colleague). He said he delivered them with my regards. I asked him whether he delivered just regards or regards with chocolates, joking that regards without chocolates are not full regards. He said he did but he had to test them before giving them to Ian. 'Oh, that's real friendship,' I teased him. 'I'm touched', I added ironically.

Such situations were without doubt opportunities for joint laughter or at least exchange of smiles. On occasions when I was with just one participant in the staffroom, friendly teasing used by me was to provoke a conversation with that person, to learn something from them rather than quietly waiting for the staffroom to fill up. For example,

when George (Albatros) and I were on our own in the staffroom and he was preparing his sandwiches, I joked: ‘Very ambitious food.’ He replied: ‘This is who I am.’

I knew from the pilot study that George was one of key jokers in the staffroom and he appreciated people with a sense of humour. What is more, I knew he disapproved of people not showing a sense of humour. I felt expected to joke to gain his approval. It is quite possible that others came to the staffroom as they heard us laughing and joking. At first we were just on our own in the staffroom and suddenly others came in.

Friendly teasing has one more advantage; it allows the researcher to shake the formal boundaries between them and participants allowing for more flexibility and openness for both parties. This, however, may pose a risk of creating hybrid interactions<sup>23</sup> and thus prevent the researcher from observing or recognising spontaneous un-staged staff interactions. What is more, for humour to be accepted, it needs to meet participants’ humour preferences and ideas of what is appropriate. This can be a challenge as the humour preferences of participants are not always obvious, especially in the case of participants whose use of humour a researcher can rarely if at all observe/learn about. What is more, the provocative nature of friendly teasing re-positions the researcher, making them the main joker, the humour initiator – acting as if one of a team or even a clique. This may cause confusion in participants as to who plays the roles of observer and who of the observed and where this performance is going. What is more, friendly teasing can be read by the participants as on-going commentary/evaluation of their behaviours and thus assessment of their funniness and thus a part of the researcher’s front.

Feeling assessed in their own space, among their own colleagues in their own lunch time may make participants feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. Friendly teasing may be risky

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<sup>23</sup> Belonging to neither just front nor backstage.

in one more way, it can (and in my study it clearly did) invite/encourage participants to provoke the researcher.

### Humorous comments

Humorous comments include the researcher's comments regarding what a participant or participants said. The researcher's contributions in the form of humorous comments were welcomed and enjoyed by participants, serving as yet another way of building rapport. Some of the humorous comments came as a result of surprise experienced by the researcher after what participants said or what happened during the data collection. For example, Julia (Lingua) asked me whether I wanted a tea (we met at a little café she worked at), she put the kettle on and we continued our interview. Suddenly I saw a mouse running through the room and so I joked (with a scared facial expression) that I didn't want the tea anymore and we both laughed.

Sometimes my humorous comment was a way to personalise an interview by adding some humour to it. It served also a reminder to the participants that the researcher is open, approachable and friendly, for instance:

Zara: If it's, if it's an open day or something like that, or an open evening or something where we've got to stay until say eight o'clock, then um, they often order in pizza and the pizza will be in here, so we all come and get it, but usually, yeah there will be a big group of us.

Interviewer: What day is that again?

Zara: Next Thursday (laughs) so...

Interviewer: Okay. I will accidentally pop in (laughs).

Interview with Zara, Devon College

It is worth discussing the process of building rapport with participants. Rapport is not something that once created will necessarily last for the entire research process. Humour can be a way of re-constructing rapport in a nuanced subtle way as it can be smoothly woven into the informal conversations, observations and interviews with participants. It requires some

skill on the part of the researcher as the participants should not get side-tracked by the researcher's humorous comments. Keeping track of the questions already asked and those to be asked guided me in the interviews so, after humorous comment, I was prepared to suggest to participants to return to the questions. In the case of observations, my way of helping participants not to get side-tracked by my humorous comments was returning back to taking notes or suggesting to them that I should go back to writing down my observations (putting the researcher's hat back on and returning to the frontstage). However, it could be argued that participants may have perceived such humorous comments as a variation of front behaviour and being in-character. This depends on the individual's interpretation.

There is a thin line between the researcher's feeling welcomed to contribute a humorous comments and participants accepting such contributions out of politeness but really wishing to finish what they were saying. The dynamics of conversation impede the unequivocal interpretations of all reactions and intentions of participants and researcher. It could be argued that an interview or interaction with participants is not a conversation but a part of the research process. However, in the case of my research I was conducting it in a social situation i.e. lunch break in staffroom (a backstage), which implied different researcher's and participants' behaviours than conducting research in a typical-for-teachers work situation i.e. lesson in the classroom (a frontstage). Also during interviews, since I was inquiring about the social interactions of participants a more conversational type of interviewing was justified (see Chapter 3).

### Self-deprecating humour

Self-deprecating humour covers all the instances when I joked about myself, my work or my blunders in front of participants. Self-deprecating humour was a way I felt I reached out to participants by pointing at myself as a humour target. Although the overriding goal of the self-deprecating humour was to build rapport with the participants, I found myself using self-

deprecating humour to achieve five goals: (1) to accustom the participants to the researcher and research; (2) to highlight my modesty and down-to-earth approach to my own role and work; (3) to sound approachable and friendly; (4) to encourage participants to open up; and (5) to encourage free use of humour on the part of participants. These reasons were underpinned by a great sympathy toward teachers who are faced with constant criticism and undergo all kinds of invigilation in their professional lives (Dainton, 2006; Woods & Jeffrey, 2002).

In the case of blunders, gaffes and mix-ups, the researcher's use of self-deprecating humour was a way of covering up her embarrassment. Such use of humour helped me to regain status quo in a smooth manner and ensure the participants that I could remain unruffled and professional in the face of adversities. In Goffmanian terms 'incidents' that weakened the impression management of my front (i.e. gaffes) were repaired by my use of backstage behaviour i.e. humour. For instance, I met Richard on the bus on the day I was going to interview him. When we got off the bus, Richard pointed to me that I had something white in my hair. I replied carelessly that it must have been my child's toothpaste and went on telling him a similar funny situation. This theme was brought back by me in the interview when we talked about inappropriate behaviours to play on the notion of 'inappropriate':

Interviewer: Or my toothpaste in my hair.

Richard: Exactly.

Interviewer: Completely inappropriate (laughs).

Richard: It doesn't matter though, does it? I love it to be honest with you. I've got a nice picture of you at home, whereas before I would have just thought, you know, you're looking very glamorous today (Interviewer laughs)...

Interviewer: No, I prefer to be authentic (laughs).

Richard: You certainly are.

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Interview with Richard, Devon College

I came to interview Richard completely oblivious to the fact that my son squeezed some toothpaste on to my hair. Instead of nervously trying to remove it, I turned it into a joke. Clearly Richard found the toothpaste situation amusing and the whole situation helped him see me as a real person. The word 'authentic' describes both the toothpaste in the hair and my humorous attitude/reaction to the situation. On the one hand, efforts of looking smart and professional, thus my front appearance, were ruined, on the other, situations like that make the researcher appear more human and less formal yet still capable of continuing with the front role. However, my use of humour may have invited Richard to flirt with me whereas it was not my intention.

Self-deprecating humour was an authenticating device for me but also a means of presenting my friendliness, for instance:

Before getting to the study room Tony and I bumped into Paul, in anticipation of his question about my presence in the school I said, 'I am bothering another teacher,' with a smile. Paul replied jokingly: 'That s fine as long it's not me.'

Notes on Interview with Tony, Lingua

Having just met Tony and being about to interview him, I was trying to build an initial rapport with him. A funny exchange with a teacher whom I had already interviewed fulfilled a function of signalling both my approachability and Tony's colleague acceptance of me as an outsider. Self-deprecating humour used on my part helped to lessen the formality of this experience and indicated that I am an open and friendly person. 'I am bothering another teacher' shows the researcher's awareness and self-reflexivity regarding the research process possibly being a nuisance from the participants' perspective. It signals the researcher's empathetic attitude towards research participants who get involved in the research despite other commitments or time constraints. However, many participants' expressions of interest

in the research and the fact that they readily signed up consent forms may suggest that it was not a sacrifice or burden for them.

Self-deprecating humour can act as a ‘bow’ towards participants; people without whom the research would not have happened. The realisation of the research being dependent on participants’ goodwill expresses itself in the researcher’s modesty, and modesty can be expressed by means of self-deprecating humour. Although it could be argued that self-deprecating humour may increase person’s vulnerability, I never found the use of self-deprecating humour to be a self-harming device that deprived me of my worth. Self-deprecating humour contains the following message: ‘I am weak, I admit it. To admit means to be strong. So, I am strong’ (Zajdman 1995:337, in Hay 2001). Hay (1995) argues that women use self-deprecation because by laughing at themselves they create a positive self-identity. However, the choice of using this type of humour with participants can also be explained by the dynamics of the researcher–researched relationship. Using self-deprecating humour on my part as a researcher was about attacking oneself and not the participants. Any humour directed at participants may have been perceived as an ungrateful and possibly even rude treatment of the ‘hosts’ of the studied setting, except of course for situations when I felt welcomed into the teasing game.

My use of self-deprecating humour carried the risk of trivialising the research in the eyes of participants. There is a thin line between minimising the distance between participants and the researcher by means of the researcher’s self-deprecating humour and downplaying the importance of the research. My strategies of avoiding overstepping that line consisted in expressing serious interest in the research topic and completion of the research when being asked about the research by the participants. Overstepping the line, however, depends on participants’ interpretations of such humour and those are not always available and clear to the researcher. Whether humour is an out or in-character communication is

difficult to judge. This is particularly the case in England where humour is a part of both informal and formal encounters (Alexander 1997) and so does not just belong to backstage behaviour repertoire and clique type of relationships.

Even more important in my case, is the fact that humour can be a test of acceptance for second language speakers (Alexander 1997). Realising that, I tried to prove my ability to use humour in a research situation. For instance, I often found much of my self-deprecating humour revolved around my immigrant status. As a woman who grew up in Poland, my accent is quite noticeable to others. I found myself using my accent as the icebreaker to many initial humorous interactions with the teachers. For example, prior to an interview, when one of the teachers was reading my letter (describing the research aim) and a consent form, I interrupted him saying: 'Don't worry; I don't work for the KGB anymore,' ridiculing my Eastern European accent.

There follows another instance where I was preparing for an interview with a teacher. When asked what my research was about, I replied, 'I don't know, I don't speak English.' The joke about my immigrant status became a part of my stick with the teachers. This is noted in the following excerpt:

There was a group joke at Lingua School staffroom directed at my research. Staff joked about me secretly recording them and suggested that I probably placed bugs in different places. I joked along admitting that the place was wired and I work for KGB.

Observations at Lingua

The re-occurrence of such jokes was linked to the fact that I wanted to refute any potential doubts teachers might have had about my cultural and linguistic adaptability to conduct the research. Humour production is one of the greatest challenges in the acquisition of a second language and, therefore, I, as an immigrant, felt that I should prove, by means of



humour, that my linguistic and cultural skills are sufficiently proficient to allow me for a full comprehension of teachers' humour. That easiness with which I used self-deprecating humour may be related to my cultural background. What is characteristic in Polish culture, and more specifically in the way we communicate, is talking negatively about oneself and others, complaining, undermining one's own and other people roles, achievements or looks. It comes naturally to us Poles and it is perceived as neutral way of talking in Polish culture (see Wojciszke 2005). However, it may be interpreted differently in other cultures where a more positive way of talking is practised and where negative talk can be read as carping.

According to Plester and Sayers (2007), self-deprecating humorous remarks can indicate what is acceptable to a person or can help one to protect oneself in advance from a likely insult. Since the first teachers I used those jokes with found it very amusing, I decided to repeat them with other teachers. In my case self-deprecating humour also served a function of showing an acceptance of politically incorrect humour and subconscious prevention of unlikely but potential doubts participants may have had about humour research being conducted by a foreigner. Richard (Devon College) asked me about whether it was difficult for me, coming from a different culture, to comprehend English humour. He was referring to me 'getting' the jokes he told me.

Also, when asking teachers to sign consent forms I often said, 'Can I attack you with a consent form?' Asking teachers to sign consent forms when observing those who had already agreed to participate was hugely problematic for me, as it required interrupting both my observations and an on-going and clearly interesting and engaging conversation. It was almost like stopping the participants from continuing their backstage behaviour to remind them about myself and my research (my frontstage). Waving my consent forms to a person who has just sat down and had a first bite of his/her long-awaited meal seemed really unfair and inappropriate. Coming up with some original phrases or witty comments about the

research or consent form was my way of reducing the impact of the interruption. This is where self-deprecating humour turned out to be a useful strategy and allowed for a smooth transition from interrupting teachers' talk to continuation of it. My use of self-deprecating humour helped me not to be perceived as a pompous, stuck-up, and full of myself as a researcher. However, such humour may have had undermined the ethical soundness of the research. It is difficult to establish whether participants would not have perceived me as simply professional or formal if I had not used humour with them. Such perceptions are subjective and subject to change.

When I started my research in educational settings, I thought teachers might associate observations with some kind of inspection. The way to get accepted by them and present the research as a non-threatening activity was achieved by modesty and humility, revealed in my use of self-deprecating humour as well as often-expressed gratefulness for having a chance to conduct my research at those settings. The message hidden in the self-deprecating humour could be phrased like this: 'Look, I can laugh at myself so you shouldn't feel intimidated by my presence and worry about having to control your behaviours and humour in front of me. I want you to trust me and feel safe around me. I am not here to evaluate your use of humour, to criticise it or report it – I just want to have an insight into it.' Using self-deprecating humour, i.e. a humour type that makes the humour initiator vulnerable, can be also read as a sign of a person being able to handle and understand all kinds of jokes regardless of their contents or form. I hoped that my approach would forestall teachers' attempts at mincing and would allow them to joke freely in my presence. Although it does not draw on researcher–participants relationships, the study by Terrion and Ashfort (2002) shows that humour has the potential to accelerate integration of strangers and that what helps to create a temporary bond is, among others, the fact that this relationship is short-term and not seeing each other again once the temporary group is dissolved.

My use of self-deprecating humour could be explained in Goffmanian terms as letting participants into my backstage to justify my presence in their backstage, or impression management on my behalf. However, my use of humour on occasions provoked or/and intensified certain behaviours on the part of participants. This was the case in participants-initiated humour towards me or my research. Participants may have attempted to fit in with my humour just as I tried to fit in in the research setting. Any such attempt could have impacted the research focus which was to observe or hear about participants' natural behaviours.

Participants may act or reply in a way they think researcher wants, expects them to act or reply, what is more they can portray a positive image of themselves for the researcher (Kalof, Dan and Dietz 2008). It could be that some of the participants' humour was an 'on-stage effect' (ibid 2008), performed as if at the researcher's request. The influence of an observer can make participants re-orientate their frame of reference (performance) and devote their efforts to creation of desired impressions (Goffman 1959). Such situations are examples of hybrid interactions where participants act upon their interpretations of what is expected as front and back.

During the interviews I used self-deprecating humour to ease both the participants and myself. The expert use of self-deprecating humour can be used to demonstrate a person's modesty, put the listener at ease or ingratiate oneself with the listener (Martin, 2007). However, how to define what is and what is not the 'expert use' of self-deprecating humour? Another question is about who should judge such expertise. Even professional comedians' success is subject to particular audience reactions and one audience may regard them as experts whereas the other may think otherwise. Since the teachers and myself were experiencing some level of stress during the interview (which is not an everyday activity for either of us), self-deprecating humour aided in lessening the impact of the stressful event

(Lefcourt 2001). This particular function of self-deprecating humour is visible in the following example from the unstructured participant observations in the Devon College staffroom. Victoria (Devon College) suggested that her male colleague should join the research, as he was supposedly funny. We joked about the consent form being actually signing up for organ donation (thus I contributed to targeting my frontstage). This self-deprecating humour was extended by participants. The male teacher [Henry] replied that his kidneys were not in a good state for donation. I decided to joke along and asked: 'Any other organs you'd like to donate?' (laughter). Once Henry circled all 'Yeses' on the consent form, I commented: 'I can't believe how naive you are.' (Again targeting my own frontstage.)

This example shows that Victoria assumed the research was for the funny people to take part in or/and for the people to prove their funniness. This says a lot about expectations participants may have had in relation to the research, possibly treating it more like a show than research.

In another example, the tables were turned. I used self-deprecating humour, but the teachers responded in a way to make me feel better about myself. They may have thought I was being hard on myself or had some hidden complexes and so one of them provided me with reassurance even though they were amused by the story. When one female lecturer (Margaret) at the Devon College was signing the consent form, I joked about her being naive to trust me. Ed (accompanying us male lecturer) replied that I had a trustworthy face. I joked about my face looking funny and confessed to them that somebody had once told me that I had a curly face and curly teeth. Ed asked me to present my teeth to prove this theory. I grinned and presented my teeth to him but he said he could not describe my teeth in those words. Such humour presents me as an approachable person able to laugh at herself, which may be expected of a humour researcher.

The aforementioned examples show how I used self-deprecating humour to build rapport with the participants. It should be considered that despite my intentions, self-deprecating humour targeting my own work and role may have cast a shadow over the reputation of both the researcher and the research, especially if misunderstood by participants, thus undermining my front impression. Any researcher represents their University and may be expected to treat their role and work with respect and gravity. Therefore targeting oneself in front of participants may be risky as it can build an image of the researcher as careless and disloyal and so not putting enough effort into managing the right impression. On the other hand, however, I received many signals from the participants that I read as expectations of me not to act seriously and conventionally. I felt invited and encouraged to use humour with them. It is difficult to say how participants in my research perceived my use of self-deprecating humour and if they felt it affected my status/reputation as a University representative. Although I did not receive any such signals from the participants, misread self-deprecating humour on the part of the researcher may undermine the research as it can suggest that the researcher does not trust their own abilities or is not certain about the relevance of their own research. Discussing the etiquette of qualitative research, Ruth and Otnes (2006) point out that the researcher's behaviour in the research setting is important as the researcher personifies the organisation/university they represent as well as researchers in general. They further argue that the researcher's behaviour reflects upon the gatekeepers who introduced the researcher to participants. Those whose interests researchers represent may benefit from researchers' behaviour or be tarnished because of it (Ruth and Otnes 2006).

Although self-deprecating humour helped me build rapport with the participants, by targeting myself I was inevitably setting the scene for the participants. My use of self-deprecating humour exposed my humour preferences and boundaries. This may have affected

my ability to collect the desired data as participants may have paid more attention to interactions with me than with their colleagues (which was the intended focus of the study). My use of humour became a part of humour exchanges among participants and so the focus of the research moved. This means that data includes my use of humour with the participants along with information about the context of each exchange and its immediate effects (laughter, smile). This certainly added workload to the research processes but excluding those examples would have meant denying my presence and the impact of my humour on the data.

### Facilitating data collection

‘Facilitating data collection’ mainly gathers data from individual and group interviews. This data concerns the researcher’s use of humour as prompts, suggestions, assistance in participants opening up/ elaboration of the discussed issues, linkage between the interview questions or concepts, ideas and information revealed by the participants. The researcher, by using humour to facilitate data collection, becomes a partner in the interview process, helping participants to uncover the meanings behind their answers or moving forward participants’ answers to the interview questions. The use of spontaneous humour (unintended as strategic) on many occasions turned out to have strategic outcomes as it facilitated data collection. In Goffmanian terms, the boundaries between unofficial and official communication became blurred.

The following example (see the sentence in italics) shows how by means of humour the researcher accessed new and important information about workplace humour and humour rules governing this particular workplace:

Max: I wonder sometimes if it’s not intimidating for people who are perhaps coming from a different sort of background or environment where they’re not expecting that kind of animal like behaviour in the copy room...

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: ...and then if it makes them feel uncomfortable, whether that would sort of permanently hinder their ability to...

Luke: Function within the group... (laughs).

Luke: Just sort of really show who they are and what they can do about it.

*Interviewer: So what's the rate of suicides here?*

(Joint laughter.)

Robert: But well I mean probably the rate of how long people last here would be interesting to ask Peter about, it might be linked, he could probably tell you which characters have left within two months and how much they were active in the staffroom mocking and joking...

Luke: Humourless.

Robert: Humourless people often don't stay long here.

Albatros group interview, italics added

The interviewer's provocative and spontaneous question: 'So what's the rate of suicides here?' leads to Robert's revelation about the consequences of people not fitting in the humorous workplace culture at Albatros (confirmed in interviews with Maggie and Wendy). Here the use of humour acts as an 'opening-up' device, possibly making participants braver in talking about the darker side of their workplace humour. The joint laughter as a follow-up to the interviewer's question introduces a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere conducive to participants' confessions. According to Kadushin and Kadushin (2013), humour in the interview reduces inhibitions about disclosing sensitive material and although they refer to it in the context of social-work interviews, it seems applicable in this case too. Participants may have felt that I was on their side as I laughed and joked with them. This may have been read as signalling my non-judgmental openness for and understanding of their humour. However, it can also signal condoning their practice and thus can have ethical implications for the research. This example shows that researcher's humour may be a useful way of obtaining otherwise inaccessible or difficult-to-access information. Revelation of the fact that some employees leave the workplace due to the humour rules/regime means unmasking problematic and discriminatory work practices. Such information may expose the workplace as a hostile environment. It could, however, be that main jokers wanted to present themselves as powerful to me. However, when such information is communicated by means of humour

and followed by laughter, its significance or gravity is downplayed. Participants entrusted me with this information possibly due to perceiving me as a person humorous enough to understand the purpose behind their workplace practices. However, a joke on its own may not be able to facilitate data collection; one needs to create a humour-prone context, provide facial and bodily signals that suggest relaxation, confidence and openness. Conversational and interactional skills are also necessary to sense the right moment for the use of humour.

There is, however, a danger of using humour to facilitate data collection and it lies in obtaining some answers at the cost of others. In other words, the researcher using humour as a prompt or suggestion may re-direct participants and make them narrow down their responses to the ideas those prompts/suggestions are carrying. By accessing one array of information, experiences or examples, the researcher loses the opportunity to investigate other arrays. Facilitating data collection by means of humour can therefore be seen as asking leading questions. However, in the case of such a complex phenomenon as humour, asking extra questions (of which some are leading ones) or making suggestions may be the only way of investigating the nuances and subtleties and most of all subjectivities of attitudes to humour, humour preferences and humour experiences. Besides, 'social constructionist researchers consider interviews as conversations, and thus view what conventionally may be seen as 'leading questions' as a natural part in the interview interaction' (Jacobsson and Akerstrom 2013, p. 718). As an example, I used a two-word humorous exaggeration that provoked further elaboration about the humour and space issues from Will (Devon College):

Interviewer: So it's safer in the offices, you would say?

Will: Yeah. As long as you remember to shut the door.

(Joint laughter.)

Interviewer: Lock it (laughs).

Will: Well I don't think lock it, just make sure the noise doesn't sort of echo down the corridor because the language can go through to you sometimes. And that's also deliberate release thing and I mean Richard said something to me this morning, a string of about ten expletives and they were deliberately massively offensive to give



some indication of how he felt about something that I said. Which was quite wild I think actually, it's not like I accused him of nicking the chocolate biscuits or something like that (Interviewer laughs). And he sort of gave a deliberate over reaction, but you have to be careful the door's shut. And it probably wouldn't go down too well in the staffroom.

After I suggested locking and not just shutting the door, Will protested and went on to explain the importance of some humour staying within the room and not being overheard by others. Although my use of humour could be seen as leading the conversation and thus closing other possible arrays of information, on the contrary it gave me an opportunity to hear more about the reasons behind the practice of shutting the office doors. This example shows that leading questions/suggestions can be challenged by the interviewee and thus counteract the leading, suggestive nature of interviewer's prompts. This is in line with Jacobsson and Akerstrom (2013) who show that an interviewee can deliver a counter-narrative and have their own agenda.

Talking about one's own humour is a challenge as it requires deep reflection, self-analysis and even self-criticism. I had to look at my own humour with a distanced, bird's eye view. Humour can act as a facilitator of participants' reflection on their uses of humour but not without a risk of leading the participant in a certain direction. Strategic outcomes of spontaneous humour can justify humour as part of doing the front. When humour results in obtaining more details, it stops being a behaviour confined to backstage.

### Negotiating access

The data gathered under this code concerns my attempts to access the settings and encourage participants or/and their colleagues to take part in my research by means of humour. The example below shows how the researcher, by means of humour, gained access to more participants and thus conducted more interviews:

Two weeks before this interview I bumped into Richard at a bus stop. I decided to use this opportunity and invite him to take part in individual interview and encourage other teachers to do so. I remembered from our earlier conversations (group interview, bumping at him at Sainsbury and talking to him over a printer in the college corridor) that he was very approachable. Knowing that he appreciates humour, I started by asking whether I could ‘abuse him again’ and asked him to take part in the interview and help me find other teachers for the interviews. He replied wittily: ‘That is what our relationship is about!’ (He meant abuse). He quickly and happily agreed to help me and soon invited me to come and see him. Before the interview we exchanged a few funny, light-hearted emails.’

Notes on the individual interview with Richard, Devon College

Finding a way to amuse a participant, to ‘hit’ his humour preferences may help to attract them and their colleagues to participation in the research. It seemed that Richard really enjoyed the rather uncommon and thus funny phrase ‘Could I abuse you again?’ His engagement and support with the research from that moment onwards was invaluable. Using surprising or unheard of phrases was also my way of communicating with the research settings by emails, for instance:

One visit to go... :) I just would like to ask you whether you could answer the following questions:

- 1) what is the maximum and minimum of Staff and Students at your school? and how many core staff do you have?
- 2) how many female/male Staff do you have?

Thank you in advance and sorry to be a not very funny pain:)

All the best,

Maria

Email to Albatros Head Teacher

The above example shows that I act accordingly to participants’ and my expectations of humour research to be funny. This can prove to be a trap as humour cannot be expected to pervade every contact with participants. Knowing about the positive effect of humour on online negotiations (Kurtzberg, Naquin and Belkin 2009), I assumed that by writing emails that were distinctive in terms of style would help me negotiate the access/ permission for

conducting my research and /or help me gather the necessary data. Several recipients of those emails expressed amusement by replying humorously or indicated that they found my emails funny, replied promptly and offered their assistance. The location and recognition of approachable people in the research setting may be both a way to facilitate access to the setting and to accelerate the process of data collection (by smoother contact with participants).

Embracing informal opportunities to talk to the prospective participants may pay off in a number of ways including a chance to present oneself and one's own research in a friendly and casual manner. Humour has a humanising effect on people's interactions (Dudzikowa 1996; Sathyanarayana 2007) thus it makes the researcher look and act less like a client and more like a partner. However, it cannot be said that without the use of humour I would not have been granted the access to those settings. It is my personal impression that the use of humour helped me in negotiating access. Relaxing the front in communication with potential research settings can help to get access to researching participants' backstage.

To sum up, this section shows both benefits and challenges associated with my use of humour with the participants. Using humour to negotiate access and build rapport with participants does not raise as many questions as using humour to facilitate data collection. The reason for that is that using humour during data collections influences data generation much more than humour used pre or post-data collection. It also may change performers into observers and observers into performers, thus creating hybrid interactions between them. This means that pre- and post-data collection humour is safer as it does not have a direct impact on data generation.

Having discussed my use of humour with participants, I shall now turn to analysing participants' use of humour with me.

## **Participants' behaviours**

Participants' behaviours include participants' provocations and their non-provocative humour. The data covers different participants' behaviours directed towards the researcher. Those behaviours were either initiated by participants or performed by them as a reaction to the researcher's behaviours.

### Participants' provocations

Participants' provocations include examples from the data that show how the researcher was teased, contested or provoked by the participants by means of humour. The humour concerned the researcher's role and her work but also covered more general topics. The humour showed participants as rebels against the research process and the researcher. Their suggestions, allusions and advice as to how the research should be conducted or what I ought to be finding out/ investigating could be read as provocative and intrusive. By provocative and intrusive I mean behaviours such interrupting my work (taking notes), questioning or attempting to change my research goal, approaches or methods and so stepping into my frontstage. Such interferences may undermine the significance of researcher's work or the whole research process. This is line with Nairn, Munro and Smith (2005) who found that interviewees' laughter and jokes served as form of resistance in the interview process but also revealed that those behaviours had other meanings such as power relations between interviewer and interviewees.

Participants' provocations in my study presented not just subversion for the sake of it but rather willingness to understand the research, co-construct it, personalise it and own it. Participants' attempts of personalising and owning research may have meant having an impact and control over the research. By trying to own it, participants and I entered a competition as if fighting over the research shape. This meant moving away from my quest to

answer the research questions and directed my attention to participants' interactions with me. My use of humour encouraged participants to open up, to reveal what they thought about the research. Participants' provocations surpassed my expectations as to the effect of my use of humour which was originally intended as a way of building rapport, negotiating access and facilitating data collection. Just as my use of humour with participants may have been seen as coming out of character, their use of humour with me seemed like coming out of character as well. However, it only shows that humour as part of social interactions cannot be easily controlled and is not a one-directional activity. My reactions to various provocations show my alertness and awareness of reciprocal humour or laughter on my part being the 'face-saving' (Holmes 2000) devices.

Humour, according to Holmes (2000), can be an effective strategy for reducing potential offence, a way to soften the impact of criticism or an insult. My use of humour in response to participants' provocations shows my joke-proofness (ability to accept the jokes directed at oneself) and joke-ability (ability to reply to a provocation/teasing in a manner similar to the joke-initiator).

My research shows that all provocative humour on the part of the participants directed towards me was taken light-heartedly. Other reactions to participants' provocations not disguised by humour, such as anger, disgust, disapproval or embarrassment, could have damaged the rapport between the participants and the researcher and thus hinder further data collection. My reciprocal humour or signs of amusement were thus types of backstage behaviour that saved the frontstage impression.

On the surface some of the provocations looked like showing off. It was mainly men who provoked or teased me, which could be too hurriedly attributed to stereotypical male humour. Hay (1995) shows that men use more performance-orientated humour than women, however she also notices that men are more likely to use jocular insults in single sex groups.

This is in contrast with the fact that I, the researcher, was female. The men in my research, however, may have perceived me as an equal in terms of humour competences and performing skills since I was a humour researcher. They may have just wanted to impress or test me with their humour – as a new person or perhaps a young female. This example from Albatros shows that my arrival was preceded by humour preparations:

Robert: Yeah, I mean you've been the source of some of our conversations (Luke laughs) and, when we heard you were coming the first time of course we started trying to tell jokes to each other (Luke's laughter), that didn't work well.  
Luke: Apart from the wheely bin joke, I did like that actually (joint laughter).

Group interview at Albatros

This example reveals some expectations participants had with regard to the research and their role in it prior to the pilot study. They felt they were supposed to perform their funniness or maybe felt stressed about appearing not funny enough in front of the humour researcher. The fact that they admitted that those attempts were rather unsuccessful suggests that they reflected critically upon their actions and possibly understood that the research goal was to observe natural, spontaneous humour (their everyday unrehearsed backstage behaviour).

For the researcher or the research to be questioned by the participants in a humorous way means moving the whole research process to a new level of understanding. The example below illustrates that myself and my research were challenged by the participant and how I acted upon the provocation:

I took the mickey out of one male teacher's very expressive way and we had a quick funny face competition. The reason I did that was to diminish his question about me being a humour expert to come there and research humour. While asking this question he made involuntarily some amazing facial expression so I decided to imitate it and it helped to soften the atmosphere and his approach and because the focus of our conversation moved to making funny faces I avoided answering this question.

Observations, Albatros

Being openly questioned as to one's own abilities and qualifications could be considered a harsh and unpleasant experience resembling the hostility Lynch (2005) experienced (Chapter 3). However, it serves to illustrate the participants' willingness to comprehend the research process and is a way of rebelling against being a silenced object of the research. As the researcher in this situation I decided to contrarily prove my aptness and qualification to conduct humour research by acting playfully. This immature and childish funny face exchange saved the situation and provided a 'restart'. That restart enabled me to answer the teacher's initial question without feeling judged or behaving defensively. I told the teacher about my educational background, about my Master's thesis on staffroom humour and about my knowledge of literature on humour. I felt obliged to inform him as fully as possible about my research competences.

The majority of participants' provocations were interpreted by me as non-threatening and good natured. However, some, like an incident with one teacher pretending to speak with his bum to me, made me reflect on the humour boundaries. My friendly and humorous approach to the participants throughout the research and across the settings may have encouraged participants' reflective approach to the research but also encouraged provocative behaviours that in other contexts, outside the participant-researcher roles and among ordinary strangers, could have been more difficult to justify. Participant-researcher roles imply a certain power imbalance which is exemplified by the above example. I could not respond to the participant's behaviour in the way he behaved as that could have jeopardised my front image of a University representative and a professional researcher and could have been seen as letting myself be provoked. The teacher who 'spoke with his bum' to me may have acted for me — the humour researcher — so that I could have some material to work with him. I remember he justified his other physical humour he performed in front of me using exactly

those words. In doing so, he was applying frontstage behaviour disguised as backstage behaviour which made the space between us hybrid. Perhaps he intended to make me feel uncomfortable, to distract my frontstage and see my reaction. This could be explained by a power struggle of who takes the role of audience and who the role of performer.

I left the school and headed to the bus stop. In front of co-op shop I bumped into Matt who despite his height got underneath my umbrella. I commented on this in the following way: 'I am a real gentleman'. 'No you're not, you're a lady'—he replied lifting the bottom of my coat as if checking my genital organs! I stayed cold blooded and repeated that I was a gentleman for letting him under my umbrella then he repeated the 'check'. He asked me what I was doing there and I replied that I was bothering /annoying some teachers. He suggested I should come for a coffee one day. This reminded me of an incident I had with Matt during my observations at Lingua. He asked me whether I would come to examine him when I became a doctor (sexual innuendo). His humour was risky somehow naturally linked to him seeming to be an old self-confident skirt-chaser.

Informal interactions, Notes after interview with Tony, Lingua

This example illustrates the thin line between familiarity and assuming too much familiarity (overfamiliarity) in participant–researcher interactions. Possibly feeling encouraged by my humorous temperament, Matt felt confident to target me with sexual innuendos. Although confused and surprised inside, I felt that on the outside I should show recognition of his humorous attempt, to cover up my astonishment. In such situations the issues of unequal distribution of power between the researcher and participant (in this case also the director of the college) crept in not allowing for unprofessional behaviours on the part of the researcher – a guest at the research setting. My study shows that workplace power relations are not just confined to the employees of a particular setting. In some sense participants' workplaces became my work places – places where I conducted my work, my research. I observed Matt in the staffroom using sexual innuendos, and this was confirmed by Julia (Lingua), that this is the type of humour he used with his employees. It may have been simply that that was type of humour he felt confident in so he used it with me too.



According to the National Institute of Business Management (1999) sexual jokes or innuendos are often men's way of initiating new members into a group (in that case me as a new person). It is further advised that responding to it with humour may establish a woman's place in the group and move this relationship past the testing stage. However, even if it just a game, such situations may arouse feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in a person targeted with sexual humour. The problem of humorous sexual harassment in the workplace lies in the fact that 'because the denigration occurs in a humorous rather than serious mode, it is difficult for targets to complain, since the sources can claim that they were "only joking"' (Martin 2007, p.121). So in my case, I might have not only faced exclusion from the research setting, had I complained, but also turned out to lack sense of humour. This positioned both me and my research as vulnerable.

Plester (2007) talks about risks related to participants' humour targeted at the researcher in the following way:

Although risk to participants was unproblematic during data collection, there was the threat of risk to the researcher in one of the companies where humour styles were extreme. This potential risk came from the continuous practical jokes in this organisation and I was included as a target for these jokes which were sometimes highly physical. The screws were removed from my chair on one occasion in the hope that I would sit and subsequently fall. As I had recently had knee surgery (a fact known to the jokers) this was potentially physically dangerous. Although I did not require counselling services, I did liaise closely with supervisors during this research phase and became very vigilant while in this company.

Plester 2007, p.117

Plester, regardless of the dangers, continued with her research and so did I as I felt that the role of the researcher required both professional behaviour and self-distance. The researcher's priority after all is to conduct the already set-up research and not to get side-tracked by such incidents which is sometimes equivalent with allowing participants to follow their own agenda and side-tracking the research. Sharing such experiences with other

researchers or supervisors and asking them for advice is a good way of preparing for dealing with any such incidents in the future.

### Non-provocative humour

Non provocative humour means all participants' use of humour in their interactions with the researcher that did not target the researcher (not making me the humour subject). This non-provocative humour was used by participants to make a start of a conversation, to make a general comment, to refer to something they found funny. Such humour acted as a conversational device: it helped to initiate, maintain and finish the conversation but it also had an extra dimension of personalising the relationship between the participants and researcher. Participants used humour during interviews, observations and informal interactions with me. It happened naturally and spontaneously in the course of talking. Sometimes participants used self-deprecating humour so targeted themselves with humour. For example, Thomas (Devon College) joked at his expense during the interview with me:

Thomas: That's right, (laughs), I'm really in the pub most of the time.

Interviewer: Don't worry; I won't report you (laughs).

Thomas: I've got this cardboard cut-out that's been at my desk.

Interview with Thomas, Devon College

Just as with provocative humour, the non-provocative humour on part of the participants signalled their willingness to be more than just participants and to have a say after the interview and off the topic:

After the interview, Tony out of the blue he started playing a psychological game, asking me what animals I like and what adjectives I would use to describe them. At the end of the test he told me that the first description I provided was how I perceived myself and the last was how I was perceived by others. Then he asked me how I would describe an ocean and my reply turned out to be description of my love ('big and cold'). After the interview Tony clearly turned into a teacher lecturing on some aspects of psychological tests and then moved to telling me about tarot and hand-

reading in a quite scientific manner. I listened with interest and inner smile about the reverse roles- him taking the lead and asking questions. I suspect Tony felt a need to play the wise guy either to impress me or to recover from being mere interviewee. It could be linked to the fact that teachers talk a lot as a part of the job and are those passing the knowledge onto others.

#### Notes on Interview with Tony, Lingua

It could be that participants sought natural, spontaneous and friendly interactions with the researcher. They may have wanted to have some out-of-character communication with me. Humour is an informal activity that can creep into such formal activities as interviews and observations to make them a personal rather than impersonal experience for both researcher and participants. By personal experience I mean that neither researcher nor the participants are treated instrumentally.

On the whole, across the three settings the vast majority of participants' behaviours (humorous and non-humorous) towards me were interpreted by me as good-natured and friendly. This very fact makes me think with sentiment about the whole research process, of which the participants were an invaluable part. Participants' behaviours towards me and my behaviours towards them represent a parallel. My friendly teasing is parallel to the participants' provocations, participants' non-provocative humour is parallel to the researcher's ways of building rapport with participants. Those similarities can be explained by the cause-effect /action-reaction dynamics between those two parties. On many occasions I acted upon participants' behaviours and participants acted upon my behaviours. My study shows that both participants' use of humour with me and my use of humour with participants fulfilled different functions and served a variety of purposes. My use of humour, among others, expands the creative ways of doing qualitative research and gives insight to a discussion about the qualitative researcher's skills and qualities. Participants' provocations contest the research and the researcher, providing a reality check, or in other words an

opportunity to consider the process of the research. The ways myself and participants used humour with each other proves our engagement with the research. Our formal roles sometimes were too tight and constraining for both of us, just like a too-small costume for an actor. Coming ‘out of the character’ (Goffman 1959) in this case by means of humour, the researcher and participant learn about each other and co-construct their understanding of the researched world. Rebelling against the given roles also means personalising the research experience, attempting to own it. My study shows that a researcher in qualitative research is the main instrument of data collection (Deters 2011) and participants are the main data dispatchers.

## **Summary**

This chapter showed that neither participants’ nor researcher’s behaviours happen in a void. They are interconnected and both shape the research process. Those behaviours should not be treated as separate research data since all those participants–researcher interactions took place during the research and not after the research. However, those issues deserved to be discussed individually to reflect particular dilemmas, challenges and requirements qualitative research can pose. All qualitative studies are entangled with some expectations, complexities and limitations of their methods on both the researchers’ and the participants’ part. However, my study meets the challenge of reflecting specifically upon the use of humour to show how, alongside the intended focus of the research (humour among participants), an acquired focus of the research (interactions between participants and researcher) emerged.

There is an important parallel in both findings on the use of humour between myself and the participants and the findings on the use of humour among participants. In both cases the use of humour was shaped by the context so there were a variety of conditions that

influenced the humour. It is crucial to note that I was a part of the context and so the variety of different conditions shaped both the humour I used with the participants and their use of humour among themselves. However, roles, knowledge about, functions and agency of individuals differed. Therefore the findings on both my use of humour with participants and participants' use of humour among themselves were sets of similar but differently distributed conditions.

The challenges outlined in this chapter suggest that the researcher's use of humour with participants may be better justified and pose fewer doubts if the research represented an ethnography, a long and intense case study or if it was conducted from an insider's perspective. Thus further research could investigate and discuss the role of humour in participant–researcher relationships in different research contexts and across different methodologies. Combining and analysing experiences of the use of humour from both participants and researchers could allow for the creation of a scholarly response to the guidelines in the use of humour in social work interview created by Kadushin and Kadushin (2013). Having analysed examples from real social-work interviews, those authors illustrated both beneficial and problematic uses of humour between interviewer and client and constructed 10 point guidelines. It would be useful to see if and how these guidelines could be used or modified for the purpose of qualitative humour research.

The acquired focus of the study suggests the need to revise the ethics of humour research. Participants were aware that I was noting down their exchanges in the staffroom, however no new consent form was issued for the purpose of recording my humour with participants. This can be justified in a number of ways. Firstly, reporting informal interactions with participants is an integral part of any qualitative research. Similarly to Finlay (2002), I believe that research is co-constituted, being a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationships. Informal interactions serve to contextualise or illustrate research

issues such as access problems (e.g. Lynch 2005) or building rapport with participants (e.g. Plester 2007). Reporting informal interactions can be seen as reflexive research practice and reflexivity has a firm place in qualitative research (Finlay 2002). However, in my study informal interactions are treated like research data and not merely context or illustration of research issues. Humour between myself and participants was analysed, coded, interpreted and theorised just like data on humour among participants. Thus there is a question of including informal interactions (especially those outside of the official research parameters<sup>24</sup>) in consent forms. Informal interactions are often a taken-for-granted part of the research and do not feature in consent forms or letters to participants. Similarly, participants do not consent to a particular interpretation or presentation of particular data. If member checks can threaten the relationship between participants and researcher and threaten the research stability (Carlson 2010), so can including informal interactions in the consent forms. It can raise issues such as participants' avoiding interactions with researcher or unwillingness to participate in the study.

Secondly, I realised the importance of participant–researcher use of humour at early stage of analysis. I did not plan to focus on participant–researcher humour. My intended focus was participants' use of humour amongst themselves. Thirdly, what participants consented to originally — observing staffroom humour — was still valid although the meaning of 'staffroom humour' expanded as it included my interactions with the participants in the staffroom and beyond it. The anonymity and confidentiality promised in the consent forms was extended to my interactions with participants. As I realised this particular area of the research might be detrimental to teachers' reputations, I made an effort to eliminate data that could facilitate the identification of particular teachers.

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<sup>24</sup> Here I mean beyond group interviews, observations and individual interviews.

Another ethical aspect of humour research that is worth considering is finding a balance between using humour as provocation or a proof of researcher's suitability and respecting the sensitivity of participants. My joke-proofness and joke readiness as mentioned earlier allowed me to joke freely with participants in a range of situations and accept and appreciate all uses of participants' humour (whether or not I enjoyed it). It also allowed me to authenticate myself as competent to conduct humour research.

There is a potential danger, however, that when a humour researcher is joke-proof, they may wrongly assume similar joke-proofness/joke tolerance in participants. This on occasions may lead to upsetting or offending participants who do not appreciate certain humour types. In my research I tried to find a balance between humour provocations and acknowledging that some participants may not be willing to participate in some humour. I tested the ground before joking with participants, trying to sense whether they would accept more provocative humour or not. I observed them and their use of humour and adjusted my use of humour to their style. For instance, when interviewing the Albatros main jokers I knew I could use more risky humour than when interviewing Lisa (Lingua) who was quiet and rather serious.

When a participant did not send certain signals inviting me to use humour with them, I was more careful and circumspect. Adjusting use of humour to individual participants can be a way of minimising the risk of sounding insensitive to participants. However, where there is humour, there is a risk of misinterpretation/misunderstanding. Even a potentially neutral remark may be taken as offensive, therefore a complete eradication of risk of misunderstanding remains an illusion.

Having discussed the use of humour between participants and researcher, in the following chapter I present the findings on participants' use of humour amongst themselves.

## CHAPTER 5: HUMOUR AND RELATIONSHIPS

This findings chapter aims to present the relational aspect of the workplace humour.

Relationships are presented here as the most immediate context of workplace humour.

The first section of this chapter describes the nature of relationships in the workplace. Then it moves on to discussing the link between use of humour and complexities of familiarity, unfamiliarity and overfamiliarity in work relationships. The second section of this chapter discusses humour functions in the context of workplace relationships.

### **Humour and familiarity**

#### Familiarity and formality of work relationships

In my study familiarity was found to be the most important condition for participants using humour with their work colleagues. Familiarity in my research means knowing someone, being familiar with a person, and familiar with their humour style: knowing another person's humour preferences/likes/dislikes and boundaries. My study shows different degrees of formality in work relationships. Participants created both informal and formal relationships in their workplaces. In Goffmanian terms some of them belonged to cliques and all to teams at their workplaces. Some relationships, however, were of a hybrid type: neither formal nor informal.

At all three settings participants had some sense of belonging to a wider group of employees (a team). They expressed it most often by showing similar beliefs regarding students as their main concern and people they care for. There was also a sense of



commonness based on similar tasks, similar experiences, and similar frustrations. The togetherness of teachers and thus sense of team membership at Devon College was particularly strongly created against, or as a counterbalance to, the management and the values, ideas and rules they represented. The employees' humour at Devon College can be seen as a counterbalance to the organisation's formality and not be in line with the organisation's formality which contradicts Plester's (2009) findings. In contrast to Plester (2009), my study shows that humour may be a rebellion against an organisation's formality. Assessing workplace humour against an organisation's formality/informality may be on occasions difficult. As my study shows, the distinction between formality and informality in the workplace may be a real challenge, especially with regards to such a complex phenomenon as humour.

At Lingua and Albatros there was a general air of friendliness and openness and, in contrast to Devon College teachers, Albatros and Lingua staff identified more (were more bonded) with their workplaces.<sup>25</sup>

Participants at all three settings most often indicated one, two or a few people they were friends with. Many participants across three settings outlined two major prerequisites or signs of close workplace relationships: safety of using risky humour and seeing each other outside of work. The latter indicates that informal relationships, and particularly cliques, transgress the location of work front and backstages and are nurtured in other more informal contexts – Goffmanian third region. People became friends due to shared space (particularly in Devon College), time spent together, same subjects taught, similar age, same gender, knowing each other from a different context, shared interests and opinions. Different participants noted different prerequisites for friendships. Harry (Devon College) for instance apart from enjoying similar humour, mentioned similar political views, views on authority

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<sup>25</sup> Please see the 'Participants' attitudes to their workplaces' section.

and views on modern society as helping in selection of friendship. Will (Devon College) said intelligence level was something he seeks in people. He treated it as an assurance that people will also understand what he means also in terms of humour.

Participants used different terms when discussing work relationships: ‘friendships that happen naturally’, ‘casual friendship’, ‘professional friendship’, ‘clique’, ‘close knit’, ‘associates’ thus exemplifying the range of interpersonal relationships individuals engage in at work (Sias 2009). Thomas (Devon College), for instance, used the term ‘clique’ whereas Michael (Devon College) said ‘I hesitate to say cliques because we’re not like a secondary school, but we’re all good friends’. His use of term ‘clique’ had a pejorative connotation – clique as in exclusive gang which is not in line with Goffman’s definition. Goffman used the term ‘clique’ without judgment, treating it as neutral. Wendy (Albatros) on the other hand saw a link between casual employment and casual relationships with colleagues: ‘they go in and out with everyone else sort of thing’. There were also some examples of relationships where people were just ‘getting on with’ each other:

Will:(...) I can’t recall an office where there’s enmity between the people but ah, I guess most of the offices are friendship groups even if you have to perhaps grit your teeth and get along I would imagine.

#### Individual interview with Will, Devon College

It seems that lack of enmity can be sufficient for ‘getting along’ and so for having relatively good relationships with work colleagues. However, the formation of cliques requires more than getting on with somebody and this is probably why participants used different terms for different types of relationships. For instance, Ian (Devon College) juxtaposed ‘close friendships’ with ‘professional friendships’ and Thomas (Devon College) ‘cliques’ with ‘associates’. Those different definitions may reveal individual experiences of work relationships both over time and at the particular time of the research. The example of Robert (Albatros) shows how workplace relationships become redefined in the wake of

changes in the workplace and change of one's own priorities. The difficult times of recession and a more fragile economic situation at Albatros put some pressure on the school and led to Robert's attitude to work and to work relationships becoming more serious:

Robert: All for one. Nobody, nobody need... Nobody can let the team down. Everybody needs to be a good team player. So somebody who's not a good team player you can easily lose respect for, and therefore a friendship with them.

Individual interview with Robert, Albatros

As far as working towards common goals is concerned, Robert's definition of team is in line with Goffman's. However, what contradicts Goffman's idea of cliques and teams is that Robert sees being a part of a team as a prerequisite for being a part of a clique. In other words one needs to be a good colleague first to become a friend. Ability to manage the frontstage is everyone's duty, backstage relationships and interactions come second. Both the different terms participants used to describe their relationships at work and the ways they defined them show the relativity of relationships' formality. I think it is best illustrated by participants at Devon College who noted that although they were not a part of some cliques and more self-conscious when outside of their cliques, they acknowledged that other team members also create cliques and roar with laughter when they are together. An excerpt from an interview with Richard shows how those who teachers have formal relationships with (managers) may have informal relationships with each other (other managers):

Richard: Well, I mean, if it's with Andrew it's fine. You choose who you banter with, don't you? So I mean there are people you can banter with and you can sort of relax, but there are other people that you have to be sensitive to, and they, certainly the managers would be like that, wouldn't they? They don't really have much of a sense of humour. I mean, they probably do in their own offices, with themselves, they probably have a great laugh at our expense, but to us they are very humourless.

Individual Interview with Richard, Devon College

The workplace thus can have many parallel cliques who maintain the desirable front impressions to each other but in fact may be similar in enjoying humour at the expense of one another as Richard suggested. It may be that humour functions in a similar way among managers and among employees (see Holmes 2000). The management's humour was not the focus of my study and therefore Richard's speculation was not explored. However, my study shows that management who were identified with all formal rules and regulations also used humour. As Harry (Devon College) noted he was often surprised at what he heard some of the management joking about (e.g. sexual innuendos).

Interpretation of work relationships, as my study shows, lies also in acknowledging the existence of cliques. Although observations, group and individual interviews at Albatros showed the existence of a strong central clique, Jerry (Albatros) denied that any cliques existed and stated that Albatros is quite open and everybody just gets along really well. Lisa (Lingua) could not see any friendship groups at Lingua. However, neither came to the staffrooms and admitted not interacting with their colleagues too often. It may also be that they wanted to give me — the audience — the frontstage impression of a cohesive work team at their workplaces. This, in Goffmanian terms, is an example of dramaturgical loyalty that lies in not betraying the secrets of the team such as, in this case, fragmentation of the team into cliques.

Humour does not solely happen within cliques. Similarly to other informal interactions, humour was not reserved for informal relationships, which studies by Holmes (2000) and Rogerson-Revel (2011) confirm. However, humour of a risky type was more likely to happen within cliques whose very nature was meeting for 'informal amusements', although, in a more careful form, it featured in teams and between performers (teachers) and audiences (students) as well which is in line with Goffman (1959). However, cliques are characterised by sharing humour that would be potentially risky outside of those

relationships. Risky humour may jeopardise the impression of frontstage and thus formal relationships with people who are associated with frontstage (management, students).

Michael explains why he would not use certain humour with his manager:

Michael: Because he's in charge of us and it feels like you can be more relaxed around other teachers because we're all in the same boat, but the manager like I said he does have a great sense of humour and you can joke with him, but to me it just feels like, you know this, I want this guy to have a really good attitude, to have a really good impression of me, to know that I am a you know, a professional, which I am, I've come across now as being a bit of a lunatic, but I am a professional (Joint laughter) and I do my job .

Individual interview with Michael

Being *in the same boat*, and thus on the team, so experiencing work life similarly in terms of positions, responsibilities, workload and so on allows for more informal interactions and relationships. Managers belong to one big team with their staff but also constitute their own team (team of managers). The team of managers and teachers together are two teams in which one is superior to another. This division means that managers are placed out of 'the know', the shared understanding inherent to the teachers' team and the shared context many Devon College participants found essential for understanding humour.

Keeping these relationships separate and granting them different statuses can make maintaining of the front easier. People of higher status may joke less and be more cautious when using humour (Plester and Sayers 2007) which may be related to the perception that the higher the status, the more there is to lose if humour goes too far. However, my study shows that apart from a willingness to maintain the front impression of a professional organisation to the students, some participants did not use humour with people beyond their cliques primarily to avoid causing offense. 'Getting offended', as explained in Chapters 3 and 4, was a subjective and individual issue. It often meant the line of humour appropriateness for certain relationships. Crossing the line led to change of relationship status. Participants at all

three settings reserved certain types of humour for interactions within cliques or members of a team that would appreciate such humour and not get offended. The distinction between formal and informal relationships in my study meant different degrees of carefulness in participants' behaviour and use of humour. It meant that some behaviours were more likely to happen away from students or management (who they had formal relationships with). However, just as Goffman argues 'it should not be assumed that the pleasant interpersonal things of life – courtesy, warmth, generosity, and pleasure in the company of others – are always reserved for those backstage and that suspiciousness, snobbishness, and a show of authority are reserved for front region activity' (p. 132). My study shows that 'pleasant interpersonal things' (Goffman, p. 132) can be also part of the front, whereas backstage, due to the safe relationships within it can be used for pleasantries and as well as to 'lapse into an associable mood of sullen, silent irritability' (Goffman, 1959, p.132). The following example shows that being among colleagues is a good occasion for moaning:

Interviewer: And then you discuss lesson plans, or you just laugh about, you know, anything, or chat about...

Tony: Well, that... moan as well (Int's laughter), complain about whatever the latest idea is, or management, or students, um... yeah, pretty much anything really.

Individual interview with Tony, Lingua

Moaning is a part of staffroom interactions between colleagues as the studies by Kainan (1994) and Mawhinney (2007) show. Mawhinney (2007) shows how laughter at students or the job comes from teachers' frustration. Moaning becomes an integral part of humour in teacher–teacher interactions. The above example shows that moaning concerns frontstage relationships: management, students but happens backstage (in the staffroom) and within informal relationships. At all three settings it was found that informal relationships with

colleagues (especially within cliques) allow for dropping of the front and behaving more in accordance with one's mood rather than audience expectations. Risky humour, like moaning, belongs to relationships where backstage behaviours are both understood and accepted. Knowing each other (familiarity) is a passport to safely dropping the mask and safe dropping of the mask by means of humour can be the way to getting to know people too.

### Informal relationships

Familiarity expressed in humour in my study was an indicator and predictor of informal and formal relationships. This is in line with Morreall (1991) who claims that humour is a good indicator of intimacy between people. My study shows that certain types of humour indicate a certain degree of intimacy and warmth in relationships that henceforth is called familiarity. The use of humour was particularly important for the formation of, belonging to and nurturing of the cliques. Use of humour helped in familiarising with others and constructing informal relationships in the workplace. The following example presents how familiarity is negotiated through interactions with colleagues and time spent together:

Luke: I've spent a lot of time, I feel like I've reached the core in the last few months and I deliberately spent time in that room just to get to know everybody and you know, that's what it's about isn't it, to have a laugh and so I've had to deal with the outsiders, and I've got to know you guys as well, and it is odd how out in the wild it almost is when you're dealing with these teachers. Because there's some really strange personalities out there...  
(Joint laughter)

Group interview at Albatros

Luke (teacher at Albatros) decided to spend lunch times with his colleagues in the staffroom to become familiar with them and to give them an opportunity to become familiar with him — which contributes to the integration of the team (Pullin 2011). In teams,

familiarity is enforced and automatic and it does not need to slowly develop with the passage of time spent together (Goffman 1959). However, the time Luke spent together with his colleagues contributed to building an informal relationship with them and feeling a part of the group — ‘the core’ — thus expanding his status of team member to both team member and clique member. However, Luke’s reconnaissance also allowed him to identify work colleagues whom he could not build a closer relationship with (people who would be on the same team but not clique). Thus getting familiar is a process of situating oneself in the work context and distinguishing between colleagues one can and cannot build an informal relationship with. This example shows that familiarity with work colleagues is a process which is in line with Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) who point out that familiarity with a person’s humorous practices and conversational key/prior occurrence are two factors that affect intended humour being understood as humour.

Participants in all three settings decided who to joke or not to joke with, and how, based on familiarity with that person, which is in line with Plester and Sayers (2007) who show that individuals’ knowledge of each other determined how humour was used and with whom. The following extract exemplifies that:

Interviewer: Are there any staff members here you would never use certain types of humour with?

Zara: Yes. When, oh um (pauses)...

Interviewer: I don’t mean names but...

Zara: No, um, I guess, well I don’t know, it’s difficult, like sometimes I can be quite sarcastic and I probably wouldn’t be in front of more senior members of staff or some of the older members of staff because I feel, um more self-conscious in front of them, um I tend to be quite silly, like I’m likely to make quite silly comments or facetious comments um, usually I have to do that in front of everybody, but yeah I mean the kind of jokes that maybe are a bit risqué or like the sort of things that you probably wouldn’t say in front of anybody other than your friends, like I often wouldn’t say outside of maybe a few other members of staff.

Interview with Zara, Devon College



Zara shows she tries to adjust her humour to some staff members however she cannot control herself enough to avoid using humour altogether. Humour may be such a natural behaviour for some people that it features in both in-character and out-of-character behaviours, across formal and informal relationships. My study shows that careful behaviour was applied in relation to colleagues participants were unfamiliar with or who were known for their serious approach/lack of appreciation for humour. It was also applied to the students as participants felt expected to behave more formally when teaching. Participants often referred to their behaviour with students to highlight the contrast between how they act in front of students and away from them i.e. among other work colleagues:

Robert: And so when you have a chance to go and have a release from that, you want to go and have a release and so after a two hour lesson, teaching people that you must be polite to, must be professional with it's quite nice to just let loose (Interviewer and Luke laugh), you know just feel more personal and human again so I think the personal relationships are good because the pressure of the non-personal relationships in the work situation.

Group interview, Albatros

This example shows the importance of having informal relationships in the workplace. They can provide a recovery, a symbolic backstage from other more formal behaviours that are expected of the school staff when maintaining the front impression for the audience, which is in line with Goffman (1959). What Robert refers to as a 'release' is dropping of the mask which in the context of a school workplace often happens away from students or other people for whom teachers need to keep a professional mask on (Mawhinney 2007; Woods 1979).

## Humour and unfamiliarity

However, work relationships vary and not all of them provide an opportunity for dropping the front or 'letting loose', using Robert's phrase. This example shows carefulness in relation to work colleagues:

Rose: I'll eat lunch in there but I find that I'll censor myself, and then if I do forget to censor myself, I find myself going 'oops'... I'm not saying anything offensive or upsetting, it's just that...  
Mark: You are aware of your Ps and Qs.<sup>26</sup>  
Rose: Yeah [inaudible.]'

Group interview, Devon College

Rose found that she was controlling herself (even when away from students) in front of colleagues she did not know that well. This self-applied control, managing the impression, was underpinned by a concern that her colleagues could misinterpret what she was saying. Familiarity with work colleagues allows a person to recognise both humour preferences and reactions to humour which results in freer/safer use of humour. Humour (and other informal behaviours) in relationships with other team member can act as a device of testing the ground, checking whether the mask can be fully dropped or not (Goffman 1959).

Unfamiliarity is linked to uncertainty about both a person's intentions and reactions to humour. Knowing someone well reduces the chance of misunderstanding humour and getting offended (Morreall 1991; Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). The unpredicted results of using one's own humour discouraged participants in my study from using potentially risky humour with people who, using Richard's (Devon College ) phrase are not 'amendable to risqué humour'. This leads to an issue of humour boundaries and levels of vulnerability of both humour initiator and humour recipient. Defining and thus avoiding risky humour is challenge

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<sup>26</sup> Mind your Ps and Qs means to be on your best behaviour.

as different people have different humour preferences and different humour boundaries. Tony (Lingua) made an important point during his interview: ‘To one person it’s funny; to someone else it’s offensive. Where to draw a line?’

The following example shows what happens when the boundaries get crossed:

Will: I can remember one colleague being taken to task by another colleague and told, made a comment that really didn’t go down that well (...) so and she took it really, really personally. The guy who made the comment, not terribly funny remark was distraught, he was in tears because he had upset her and he was devastated for about a week.

Interview with Will, Devon College

This example shows how by humour one can unintentionally cross the boundaries in a work relationship. Although Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) argue that it is possible to minimise the risk of misunderstanding when using risky humour with friends, there is a question whether it is possible to be ever familiar enough with anyone to avoid offending them by means of humour or to avoid certain kinds of jokes just in case.

The above excerpt exemplifies the vulnerability of both humour initiator and humour recipient. A general comment intended as funny turned out to be offensive and personal to the humour recipient and thus triggered feelings of guilt and remorse in the humour initiator. Vulnerability is closely linked to the subjective nature of the humour phenomenon (Chapter 2) and dissonance between intentions and reception of humour (Hay 2001). The issue of vulnerability in connection with humour and familiarity expands the work of Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006), Morreall (1991) and Plester and Sayers (2007) by emphasizing complex consequences of misperceived familiarity when using humour.

The example below shows that the vulnerability of both humour initiator and humour recipient decrease as familiarity between initiator and recipient increases:

Wendy: My preferred lunch place would probably be with Maggie and Dora, with the girls, yeah, definitely. I find... obviously I get along with everyone very well here, however I just have more in common with these two, I can be more relaxed, more myself, you know, say stupid things (Int laughs) they don't laugh at me, they laugh with me when I say (laughs) stupid things.'

Interview with Wendy, Albatros

This excerpt shows that the closer the relationship is the easier it is to be oneself, to act spontaneously and without restraints. Whether humour is intended or unintended it is less vulnerable for both initiator and recipient if they know each other well.

### Humour and power

However, my study shows that sometimes people who assume certain familiarity with others, may act spontaneously and use humour freely but be perceived as overfamiliar (assuming too much familiarity) and crossing the boundaries. Such use of humour exposes unequal power issues in the workplace. The consequences of both Matt's (Lingua) and Albatros's main jokers' humour, whether well received or not, did not seem to affect them as they either could not see they crossed the line or did not worry about that. The relationships they had with some of their colleagues were hybrid, but not just simultaneously formal and informal, but also based on taking advantage of different power statuses. Although at all three settings some examples of humour downplaying unequal relationships (Rogerson-Revel 2011) were found, Matt's strategy of moving closer to some teachers by means of humour may have been seen as awkward and had the opposite effect, potentially emphasising power imbalances between those of higher and lower statuses (Holmes 2000).

This excerpt shows how Matt, Lingua's director, behaved, oblivious to what teachers thought about him. According to Julia, some people thought Matt was 'autistic' 'or had 'Asperger's just slightly'. This is how she justifies that:

Julia: (...) he had no concept of what might be funny or what might not or what might be a little bit close to the bone, and he'd be going (makes heavy breathing sound). And everyone else would be like, are you...

Interview with Julia, Lingua

Matt, in Julia's eyes, was really bad at socialising. He used a lot of sexual innuendos and although admin people did not seem to mind it, teachers did not appreciate that. Having the chance to observe him in the staffroom, I noticed that he was loud, dominated conversation and used humour that might have been seen as intimidating. He seemed rather pleased with himself. It could be that he ignored the fact that the power position he had and sexual innuendos he was using did not quite fit the interactions with some of the female marketing staff. Especially given that, outside of staffroom interactions, he was known for a drive towards maintaining a formal image of Lingua.

The main jokers at Albatros also represented people with powerful status due to having permanent contracts and being at Albatros longer than others. They used humour that was potentially offensive and blamed the humour recipients for not appreciating some of the jokes. They assumed that others should adapt to their humour and not the other way round. In a sense they were trying to impose rules of their own clique on a wider team. Those jokers found that their humour *going wrong* meant humour recipients' misreaction/overreaction (taking offence was a wrong reaction). Instead of appreciating humour and continuing joking, they got offended.

Thus both humour used by Matt (Lingua) and the main jokers (Albatros) had the potential of making humour recipients vulnerable in the sense that they may have felt expected to enjoy this humour. Again familiarity with the people, the settings and awareness of one's own position (superior in terms of work experience or place in the hierarchy) in the workplace made both Matt (Lingua) and main jokers (Albatros) feel safe, confident with their

humour and perhaps even immune. Albatros jokers as people of established status or power position in the workplace assumed more familiarity even with people of higher status than themselves. Their impunity is illustrated by the following excerpt:

Luke: You see these guys are secure you see, he's my boss, so I find that I've got to be careful what I say. Whereas you two are safe where you are (laughs).  
Max: He can't touch us.

Group interview at Albatros

Luke, being relatively new in the clique, did not feel confident or secure enough to mock Archie as the others did. He was not yet a part of in-group and thus was excluded or excluded himself from some humour, which exemplifies the relativity of inclusivity of some humour (see Plester and Sayers 2007). George (the manager at Albatros) seemed more powerful and confident and told me during my pilot study about the 'bullying into shape' practice at Albatros (see Chapter 3). The following example shows that it was not always appreciated:

Maggie: (...) the conversations are a bit uhh... it's either likes or dislikes or picking at people so it's either joking about someone, and most of the time it's joking, like 99 per cent of it everyone's having what we would say, banter. It's friendly but some of the time it gets a bit close to the bone (...)

Interview with Maggie, Albatros

Maggie's dislike for some people's joking practices discouraged her from coming to the staffroom-jokers' arena. She disapproved of personal, direct humour and preferred not to take part in it. Maggie's decision was based on her familiarity with the jokers' humour preferences/style. Having knowledge of their humour, she was able to identify differences between what she and them considered funny. Familiarity is thus a vital prerequisite for making choices about using humour in different workplace relationships. Wendy (Albatros)

told me in an interview that the jokers who crossed the boundaries were on occasions told off or given a signal that they'd gone too far and, according to her, they had slightly altered their behaviour during recent years. She noticed a change, but not all personal humour was gone and humour bullying was still in place according to Robert. It could be that staff that did not enjoy jokers' humour were not present in the staffroom, just like Maggie, and so the humour observed might have been the humour which observed participants were both familiar and comfortable with.

Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) find that teasing and self-directed joking is the most risky as they can have undesirable effects. My study shows that other types of humour such as sexual innuendo or joking about taboo topics can also be risky. My study confirms that friends are more likely to see risky humour as a sign of closeness than others (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006) but it also shows the unique complexity of workplace relationships and humour.

My study shows that boundaries can be crossed both in informal relationships and hybrid relationships. However, the difference is that those in power may arrogate the right to ignore the humour boundaries due to their higher status. It thus can cause a greater sense of vulnerability in humour recipients who represent lower status.

My study shows that potentially risky humour happens within friendships but also beyond them with people participants are familiar with. Friendship has been found in my study to be the obvious optimal informal relationship for safe use of risky humour. This means that participants felt most comfortable when using such humour with their friends. However, participants indicated or/and were observed using risky humour with people they were not close friends with. This is in line with Goffman (1959) who sees it as natural that team members seek social contact and companionship from other team members that are not necessarily clique members. This can be explained by the fact that there is familiarity

(although of a different degree) in the case of both cliques and teams (Goffman 1959). My study shows there are ways of minimising risky humour being misunderstood (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006) such as knowing a person's humour preferences and/or recognising them as able to appreciate risky humour. However, as the examples of Albatros's main jokers and Matt (Lingua) show, minimising risky humour being misunderstood or, in other words, safe use of risky humour is not taken into account in some unequal power relationships.

#### Familiarity: Two-way and dynamic process

Humour can be influenced by the humour initiator's sense of sameness, but also difference with others (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). The study by Terrion and Ashfort (2002) shows that teasing and self-deprecating humour can help to bring together people who are strangers to each other. They even note that the differences among temporary group members facilitate the development of trust and rapport. Similar to my study, their study shows that unfamiliarity may be overcome by means of humour and that the shared activity of humour fosters togetherness.

My study shows that familiarity and humour are bi-directional; familiarity can influence humour and humour can influence familiarity, for example:

Max: I think self-deprecation is a sort of good, sort of feature of other people who are in the middle. I think most people who are actively involved in the in crowd are quite happy to accept or to make fun of themselves, um whereas you know the people who are out of it, you don't know if they are or not and it makes you reluctant to include them in the jokes if you don't know if they're taking themselves very seriously or not.

Robert: It takes time to get to know them.

Luke: Yeah, yeah, true.

Max: Yeah if you can make a laugh at your own expense then automatically almost, you're welcomed into the group.

Group interview, Albatros



Familiarity is fluid; degrees of familiarity are subject to change, which expands work by Plester and Sayers (2007) and Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) who do not discuss the dynamics and degrees of familiarity in relation to humour.

The dynamic nature of familiarity and humour is best portrayed by Robert's change of attitude towards own colleagues. Robert (Albatros) is one of the main jokers at Albatros, when I met him first he was very proud of the humour practices and fun culture at Albatros. Then he became more careful and aware of potential dangers of humour in work relationships. As Albatros experienced some organisational changes and pressures, workplace relationships became affected:

Robert: (...) Some people are able to finish the working day at 3.30 and be straight out the door without any concern about other responsibilities. Others, including myself, usually arrive early, leave later, we're working beyond the normal nine to five now, because we have to meet targets and deadlines, and that naturally, unfortunately, creates a slight division between people.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Robert: There's no animosity, there's no ill-feeling, there's no sense of... I don't feel rejected, or you know... But still, the staff room has that sense of fun, and it depends on your time, on what's going on in your life...

Interview with Robert, Albatros

This example shows that work relationships are not static, and evolve. Robert's sense of responsibility and commitment to his own work as well as the importance of professional behaviour at work, revealed later in the interview, made him distance himself from people who do not share his values. It seemed that it was not the organisational changes themselves but his attitude to his new responsibilities that shaped his relationships with colleagues. He seemed to focus more on the formal aspect of his work and managing the professional impression of the setting than on the backstage of workplace life. This resulted in him perceiving some of his clique colleagues as just team members. His expectations of others moved him away from carelessness and thus from colleagues who approached their work in a

more relaxed manner. Robert started to see nuances and subtleties with regard to humour and relationships. He pointed to a need for people to be careful and to remain professional when using humour in the workplace. His familiarity with the colleagues and their humour resulted in his withdrawal from the regular staffroom interactions:

Robert: ... George and Archie are still regulars, Pam's been on maternity leave, me and Max I would say, no we'd rather be finishing the job that we've got to do or, as I say, I like to go and exercise, use the time wisely. So that core is broken up. Luke is there whenever he can, but he's a part time worker, so he's not here every day. So maybe, I mean you'd have to ask them, but I'm a bit tired of that core.

Interviewer: Really?

Robert: Yeah. I mean you need to generate different ways of being sociable with colleagues, because you know, the same-old, same-old...

Interview with Robert, Albatros

Robert seemed bored and tired of his usual companions and their humour.

Knowing work colleagues too well may not necessarily be conducive to nurturing relationships with them as this example shows. Being familiar with work colleagues means knowing if they will be able to change or understand other people's changed views and behaviours or not. Robert excluded himself to some extent from some informal relationships with his colleagues and strengthened his relationships with other colleagues (Max, Maggie) recognising their commitment to work and similar values and co-maintaining his impression of the team. This is well captured in the following quote:

Robert: (...) Some people are able to finish the working day at 3.30 and be straight out the door without any concern about other responsibilities. Others, including myself, usually arrive early, leave later, we're working beyond the normal nine to five now, because we have to meet targets and deadlines, and that naturally, unfortunately, creates a slight division between people.

Individual interview with Robert, Albatros

However, it may have been a phase, a temporary cooling in some relationships and warming in others. Having said that, cooling some informal relationships does not imply the transition of informal relationship into formal relationship. In Robert's case, his change did not make him unable to joke with his colleagues but rather influenced his enjoyment and need for such interactions. This signals the dynamic nature of work relationships and leads to considering issues of relationships, humour and familiarity as interconnected.

Having discussed the dynamics and processes of humour across different degrees of familiarity and types of workplace relationships, it is now time to name and discuss the particular functions of humour in workplace relationships.

## **Humour functions**

### Constructing relationships

Humour that serves to construct relationships acts as an aid in initiating contact with strangers or new employees. At all three settings friendly talk or daily interactions were a means of getting to know a new person, and served as a reconnaissance device and an ice-breaker and a way to welcome a person. Humour allows for finding commonalities among work colleagues as it helps to uncover a person's interests, value and opinions and thus fosters familiarity. Constructing relationships through humour can be initiated by the new employee or directed by longer serving staff towards a new employee. The study by Pullin (2011) shows that both new employees joining with laughter or humorous remarks and longer-serving staff using humour with new members contribute to the integration of the team. However, it serves integration only if it is enjoyed by both parties, as my study shows.

Across the three settings use of humour with a new person was primarily a means of testing and identifying that person's boundaries. My study confirms Goffman's (1959) point

that teasing is an informal initiation device employed in this case by just one clique to train and test the capacity of new employees to ‘ take a joke’, which means sustaining a friendly manner while perhaps not feeling it. Such interactions with the new work colleague may present some risks, which are best portrayed by Thomas (Devon College):

Thomas: (...) It’s like if you talk about, I know Richard and Will from that far away and I’ll say anything to them, all sorts of things and even in some cases quite scurrilous about them and that’s not a problem because you know that they’ll come right back and so on. And that’s it’s that sort of gallows type humour they use, but you wouldn’t want to do it with somebody you don’t know, like a new colleague or something of that sort, because you’ve no idea how people are going to react. I think it’s the same in the high street, you wouldn’t turn to somebody in the bus and start cracking jokes (Interviewer laughs) on a certain topic, you may feel you may end up on the floor mightn’t you (Joint laughter)?

Interview with Thomas, Devon College

Thomas points out an issue of uncertainty with regard to using humour with new colleagues and the vulnerability of both humour initiator and humour recipient. Max (Albatros) also noticed that humour may be potentially scary and intimidating for new people in the setting. It seemed though that it was not the major concern for Albatros jokers who enjoyed humour regardless of how it was interpreted by others. It was most evident in the group interview at Albatros, where participants carelessly described and laughed about the fact of humourless people leaving their workplace.

Kristina (Lingua) said that as a new staff member she listens more to humour, rather than producing it. This may indicate that it takes time for both new staff and longer serving staff to get familiar with each other in the workplace and confident to joke with each other. This implies that joking requires some familiarity or commonness. However, the study by Pullin (2011) shows that the new staff and longer serving staff have professional knowledge in common and can use it as a starting point for humour. In Goffmanian terms, being on the same team (whether administration team, teaching team or subject teaching team) could be

sufficient to have things to talk about, as being on the same team means keeping the same impression of frontstage.

However, some people may not worry about being a part of the team and maintaining the right impression. For instance, I observed seasonal teachers interacting with permanent staff at Albatros and they all were so equally involved in humour that I was surprised to learn later on that some of the staff were seasonal (employed for the busy summer period). From my experience of working in schools, I assumed that seasonal staff would be quiet and withdrawn. As Wendy told me some of the new staff ‘jump’ straight away into the humour exchanges at Albatros. Wendy felt that it may be because they feel comfortable with that humour or/and are confident and find it easy to join in. Robert (Albatros) on the other hand suggested that they did not risk that much being there only for short time.

Mark (Devon College), however, said he was purposefully ‘lagging behind’ as a new person in the workplace to get an insight before coming forward with humour. However, an exception was his former lecturer and now colleague. He found that having the same country of origin (Northern Ireland) and similar political views in common with one of the teachers facilitated humour between them. Thus commonalities and discovery of similarities, not necessarily work-related, may accelerate the use of humour between work colleagues. Only at Albatros was using humour with new people an important longer-serving staff’s strategy of both starting the relationship and judging the person’s adaptability to the workplace culture. Such humour was ‘a way of displaying aspects of the culture to the new employee and gauging his subsequent reaction’ (Plester and Sayers 2007). What was crucial there was the ability of the humour recipient to both respond to and initiate humour. Although there was no humorous ritual performed for the new members, as in the case of Plester’s study (2007), the new members were tested in the use of spontaneous humour. Being able to join in and take

jokes about oneself and laugh at oneself was treasured at Albatros, especially by the main jokers, which is in line with Goffman (1959).

Lack of those qualities in a new staff member was a predictor of how long such a person would last at Albatros, as main jokers and two other staff members told me. Wendy (Albatros) told me that those who could not fit in in this humorous culture left the school, which is similar to examples of employees' leaving their workplaces as a result of not fitting in with the workplace humour in studies by Holmes and Marra (2004) and Plester and Sayers (2007). However, my study also shows that, apart from leaving the workplace, some people who did not enjoy humour stayed away from the staffroom (away from the jokers).

Using Holmes and Marra's (2002) terms, the main jokers used contestive humour to test whether people they targeted could contest it (retort). In order for contestive humour to be perceived as supportive humour by the recipient, the recipient's reaction towards humour must be an appreciation. In other words, a recipient needs to enjoy such humour. Otherwise contestive humour could damage the relationship with the humour recipient. However, even if contestive humour results in the recipient or target taking offence it can still fulfil supportive functions among the jokers (uniting them at the expense of the humour recipient/target).

Although it could be seen as a cruel practice of elimination, a new person who rejects the humour of longer serving colleagues creates a distance and excludes themselves from the team (or a part of the team). Depending on a person's humour preferences, humour can be a welcoming or a selective/exclusive practice (even taking a form of bullying). Thus some humour may serve to both contest and construct work relationships representing a hybrid. Such humour entails the risk of damaging relationships with colleagues to construct a relationships with them on their own terms. For some newcomers this could be read as a sign of acceptance (Plester and Sayers 2007) and thus a way of constructing relationships but for

others it could be a sign of rejection. Apart from Albatros, my study does not provide examples of humour as a purposeful welcoming strategy. It may be, however, that humour is an obvious part of English language and culture (see Chapter 2) or is identified as just a part of general talk.

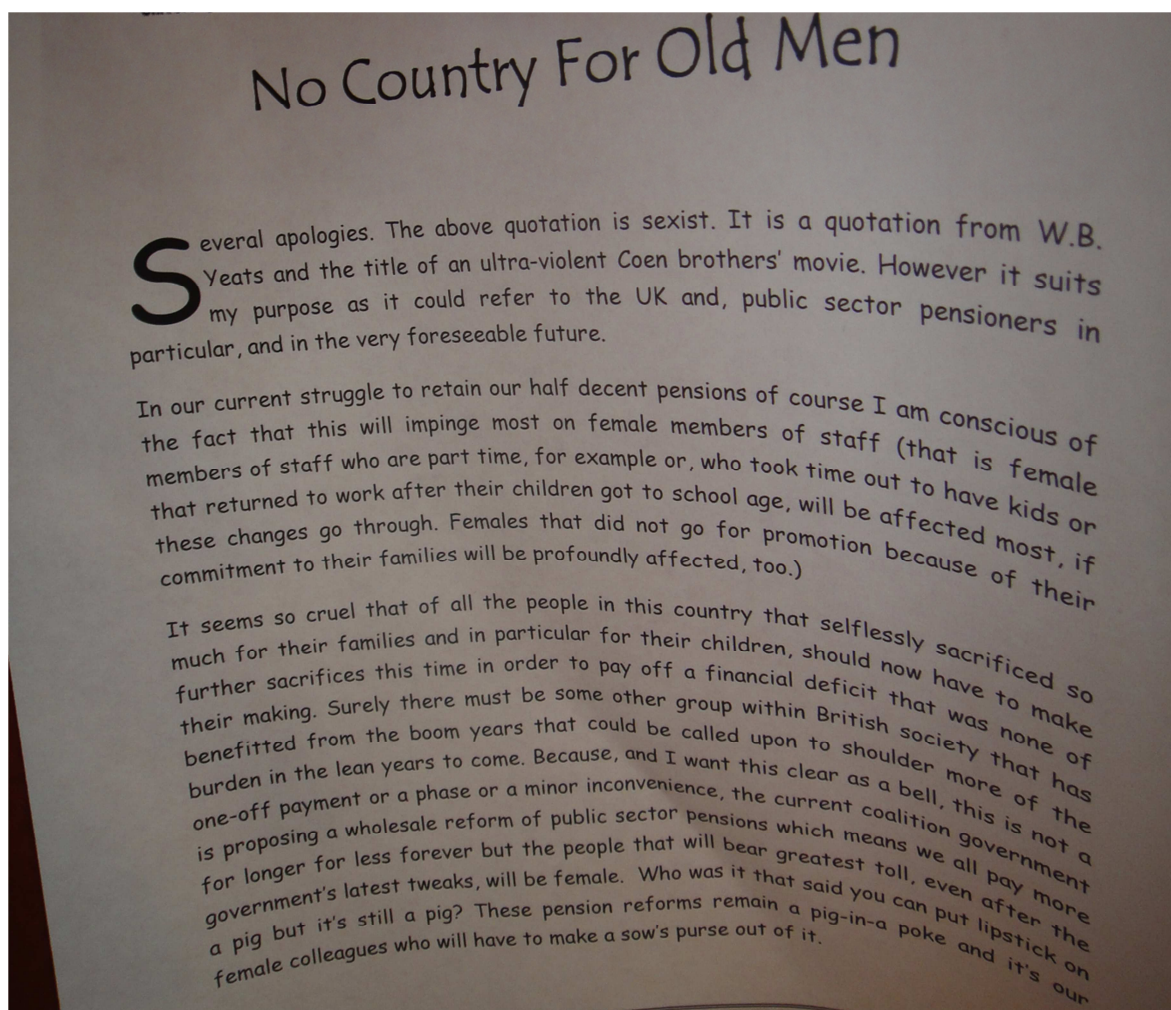
Also I noticed that funny artefacts present at both Devon College and Albatros had the potential to negotiate relationships with new staff by means of humour. For instance, the funny quotes board and other funny artefacts in the staffroom gave some insight into both workplace culture and workplace relationships at Albatros. The funny quotes board served as a means of ‘social integration’ according to Maggie (Albatros). There were no rules as to who could write on it or what could be written on the posters and everybody could put up a funny quote there. Robert (Albatros) said that it was mainly part-timers that put the funny quotes up as they were more prepared to seem unprofessional than the full timers. What illustrates the accessibility and inclusivity of the staffroom funny artefacts, is the fact that Pam’s husband (who does not work at Albatros) felt comfortable enough to enter the staffroom and write a comment underneath a funny artefact including a photo of Pam<sup>27</sup> with funny quotes of hers.<sup>28</sup> His comment read: ‘Nobody told me this before I married her!!’ and was followed by his signature. From the observer’s point of view, fun culture at Albatros was welcoming and inviting for people who appreciated humour and were willing to contribute to the fun culture. Funny artefacts at Albatros could amuse people who were new to the setting and encourage them to build relationships with work colleagues who created and/or were mentioned in those artefacts. Newcomers to Devon College may experience the same feeling when seeing funny postcards placed in the offices’ doors and windows out looking onto the college corridor which, according to Will (Devon College), is probably designed to be seen by other people.

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<sup>27</sup> Female teacher at Albatros, one of the main jokers.

<sup>28</sup> There were three funny quotes of Pam’s under the photo: ‘There’s more salt in ice cream than in sea water’. ‘Toddlers are only knee-high’ and ‘But then people in the South West are shorter than anywhere else in England.’

Thus, funny artefacts at Devon College staffroom have the potential to construct relationships with the staff. Both a fund-raising poster and a donation poster, on the other hand, used humour to attract the reader and encourage him/her to join the advertised action. The funny posters placed in the staffroom by the union, on the other hand, were there to negotiate the relationship with teachers, attract their attention and encourage them to become a member. This way of constructing relationships was more political and strategic. In Goffmanian terms these posters used backstage language to do the front (their front was about attracting new members). Interestingly, however, they were constructing the relationships with teachers by contesting the relationships with those in power at schools (management).



Funny artefact, Devon College staffroom



The title is an exaggerated allusion to the poem by Yeats and the film *No Country for Old Men* and can be read as sarcasm in the context of serious pension issues described in the poster. The bitter comment such as ‘half decent pensions’ is directed against those who are responsible for not increasing pensions and at the same time builds an understanding and sense of solidarity with those who are not happy with their pensions. Similarly, further pig comparisons (at the bottom of the poster) serve as blatant portrayal of the consequences of pension reform that attacks those in power and sympathises with those affected by the pension reform. In that sense the function of this humour is hybrid as it contests some relationships to construct another — it contests one to support another. However, it could be argued that as long as it is done backstage i.e. in the staffroom and not in the corridors it does not ruin the frontstage impression. In Goffmanian terms, ‘derogating the absent’ is easier done backstage as it avoids confrontation between those who create and introduce the rules and those who are affected by them. The poster ends with a Union meeting reminder and provides contact details and so tries to negotiate a more permanent relationship with the reader outside the backstage where it hangs.

Whatever the original purposes of funny artefacts at Albatros or Devon College were, I imagine that they may foster adaptation at a new workplace and be the starting point for constructing relationships between regular and new staff. They can make people curious about the topic and as a result trigger a discussion between new and regular staff. The lack of funny artefacts at Lingua and the presence of serious artefacts such as rules posters on the other hand conveyed a more formal and serious image to me as a new person at that setting. Artefacts can play an important role in work relationships but they first and foremost need to be noticed, interacted with or/and discussed to be able to serve to construct relationships at

work. Otherwise they remain meaningless items. This expands studies by, among others, Karlsson and Stromberg (2009), Mawhinney (2007) or Richards (1996) who concentrate on verbal humour in workplace relationships.

### Nurturing relationships

Apart from constructing relationships, humour can also serve a function of nurturing relationships. My study shows that there are different ways of nurturing relationships by humour. Humour can act as social lubricant, by way of communication and non-verbal self-expression. It can also represent more complex, hybrid functions whereby both contesting and nurturing relationships takes place. Both survival and humour which contests in order to nurture are examples of hybrid humour.

### Social lubricant

This type of humour was the main humour observed in the staffrooms at all three settings. Such humour helped teachers relax and improve the atmosphere. Some said that it helped to while away the time spent together in the staffroom. Humour represented a whole range of topics. Humour acting as social lubricant was woven into conversations, enriching and expanding them. It was an integral part of small talk and resulted from general topics such as food, weather, stories from private lives, recent media news. I observed humour resulting from discussions about food in all three settings. They seemed a starting point for humour, especially at Albatros. As an example, I noted during the observations at Albatros that after one teacher mentioned a crisis in production of pasties, joking about pasties began. It shows that anything could be turned into humour and that that was the case especially at Albatros where participants readily and quickly grasp any opportunity to make a joke. The following notes I made during the observations exemplify that:

‘Participants laugh about KFC job requirement to squeeze into tiny uniform’.  
‘Two male teachers laugh about sandwiches’.  
‘Teachers joke about upcoming summer school meal’.

Observations at Albatros

Archie, annoyed at the badly written text he received on his mobile phone, started the conversation about deteriorating language levels nowadays. Other staff members joined in with examples of mistakes in the names of businesses’.

Observations at Albatros

It may be that some of that humour was produced as a way to ‘facilitate social interactions’ (Morreall 1991), make conversations more attractive and make time go faster. It has a supportive function – it supports both the conversations and relationships with people. My study presents social lubricant type of humour as an entertainment humour that helps to nurture relationships between work colleagues:

Rose: I guess sometimes it can be quite unproductive, from a practical point of view... so if we get into one of those moods (Joint laughter) where we’re almost hysterical, and we’re basically just trying to one-up each other and things like that, it’ll go for more than an hour, for about an hour and a half, and then we’ll go ‘right we’ve gotta do some work, right we’ve gotta do some work’ and we’ve got our shoulders shaking and then we all start saying... ‘If I do get into one of those moods, I’m not working’...

Group interview at Devon College

My study shows humour as social lubricant as a non-strategic type of humour, and so not intended to improve work efficiency. It represents an enjoyable experience of strengthening relationships between colleagues. This experience may positively affect the work atmosphere and teachers’ wellbeing and contribute to the positive workplace culture. Social lubricant may also be work lubricant but considering it strictly in terms of work-efficiency may be misleading. The concept of work efficiency in relation to humour implies

measurability and, according to Hughes and Avey (2009), humour cannot be easily translated into a magic elixir for desired workplace outcomes. However, my study shows that humour does not need to be seen as producing tangible effects (improved productivity) to be perceived by teachers as justified and worthwhile. It plays an important role in smoothing relationships and causing the flow of a discourse within the group to be more agreeable and acceptable (Fine and de Soucey 2005).

By the way humour

By the way humour in my study is accidental humour that happens as a by-product of a work-related conversation, can happen anywhere and at any time, strengthens the work relationships while doing something else. By the way humour can be seen as variation of social lubricant; however, it is not a part of long conversations but rather represents exchanges on the go. By the way humour can be woven into a work mode such as: completing different work tasks, preparing lessons, visiting colleagues to discuss work-related issues.

The following excerpt shows that humour can be an addition to seeing work colleagues to discuss some work issues:

Michael: To be honest, a lot of our sort of contact with each other is on the fly, so like an hour ago, Greg, he's the other chemistry teacher, he came by and he just, he literally popped in for five minutes. Sometimes um I find I need to go next door and ask Claire something. I'll go and ask her what I want but then we'll have a laugh as well, joke about something for five minutes as well.

Interview with Michael, Devon College

My study shows that humour permeates work interactions and appears even if the subject of the conversation or the purpose of the meeting is serious. It creates a balance

between formal and informal aspects of work and acts as a reminder of work relationships being also social relationships. Serious issues and humour do not need to be mutually exclusive. Humour can be a follow-up, a starting point or an interlude in a discussion about work or work activity. It can act as a refresher or a little break, just like having a cup of tea, which is in line with the idea of humour serving as a break in performance (Goffman 1959). For instance, Robert (Albatros) talked about completing a project with his colleague Max when exemplifying ‘feeling humour at the workplace and feeling a bond at the workplace’. Although they were focused on the project most of the time, they also joked. The jokes were often about the things that were inappropriate:

Robert: (...) in the language test we were thinking about designing, we were thinking about how to create a barrier between the student, the candidate, and the examiner, because there needed to be a part of the test that involved no eye contact. So we were talking about all different types of screens that we could use and whether the screen would be pushed into the test in the middle of the test, or whether we would have a little window that we could open (Interviewer’s laughs), or whether we’d put on a mask...

Interview with Robert, Albatros

Robert told me that working together and joking together can help to strengthen the relationships between colleagues and make the work less tedious which confirms work by e.g. Miller (1996) and Papa and Brooks (1992). Socialising by means of humour does not need to happen away from work activities or after completing work tasks. Besides, joking at work may seem more justified/ excused if the work tasks are being completed at the same time. It shows that humour can be a part of frontstage (can happen in a space designated for work) and does not always require spatial and temporal separation from work. Joking while working creates a temporary hybrid space that allows for informal relationships and informal interactions to be nurtured without jeopardising the maintenance of the frontstage. The above example of the office as hybrid space helps to move beyond stereotypical division into

frontstage—classroom and everything else (see Chapter 2). This leads to a question about conditions for frontstage. It seems that the main condition is the audience and who comprises the audience at a given space and time and what relationships there are between the audience and performers.

### Self-expression via artefacts and electronic communication

Some humour helps to express one's identity, personality, preferences or affiliation, often by means of funny artefacts or funny electronic communication (emails, Facebook). Meanings of objects reside both in themselves and people who make them (Parker 2006) and have a great deal to do with the way people understand the world (Parker 2007).

#### *Funny artefacts*

My study shows that some funny artefacts may fulfil the role of nurturing relationships by non-verbally communicating humour. Expressing oneself by means of funny artefacts and displaying them so that they can be seen by others may be a way of finding similar minds, people with a similar sense of humour, alter ego at the workplace. It can be also a way of nurturing existing relationships with colleagues, manifesting sameness in terms of interests, ideas and humour. Similarly, emails or Facebook may serve as an additional to face-to-face communication with colleagues. Those who hang such artefacts or distribute emails signal assumed commonness in humour expression. Thus certain artefacts create group identity, for instance, a poster with photos of Rose, Michael and Zara (Devon College) placed on the wall of the office they were based in. In the photo Michael has an injured head<sup>29</sup> and makes a silly facial expression. The story behind that photo is known to those three teachers and Michael

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<sup>29</sup> Michael had his head smashed whilst playing hockey (he was hit on the head by a hockey stick).

expressed his attachment to this artefact in the interview. The feelings, stories and memories linked to certain funny artefacts empower them to convey meanings.

My study shows that the meanings of the objects arises from who uses them, and how, who talks about them, and in what way, and where they are displayed. The poster with three photos shows that funny artefacts may have been used to demonstrate close relationships among colleagues. Funny artefacts may be a means of sharing laughter and thus strengthening ties – they are symbols of work relationships being nurtured. Ian (Devon College), for instance, designed an animal artefact presenting Rose (a psychology lecturer) as a squirrel trying to bite a nut, the sign below the picture said: ‘Rose tries to deal with a nutcase’. Rose put up this photo above her desk in the office after the management asked her to take it off from the office door as they considered it unprofessional. Treasuring certain artefacts indicates sentiment and attachment to them. Both at Albatros and Devon College participants talked with sentiment about certain funny artefacts, often mentioning artefacts that were created or displayed by others. Similarly, the sets of funny artefacts inside the offices in Devon College and the funny artefacts in the Albatros staffroom gave an insight into workplace relationships.

The co-creation of funny quotes boards at Albatros by different staff members made them a shared workplace artefact. They expressed both the individual and the group identity of those who co-created them, signalling belonging and a sense of community (Warren 2006). The funny quotes boards were placed on the staffroom wall and participants proudly pointed at them when I first visited Albatros. Participants remembered what was written there and the context behind the quotes. For me as an outsider, the funny quotes were like a manifesto of the humorous Albatros culture and friendly relationships and a symbol of togetherness. It turned out that, just like the funny quotes boards, the work relationships were affected by organisational changes (see Chapter 3). Thus maintenance of artefacts was

closely linked to maintenance of work relationships as those funny artefacts reflected, described and commented on workplace relationships. The overriding goal of maintaining a desirable front impression affected both relationships and humour within the relationships. It signalled a need for changing both relationships and humour to avoid looking unprofessional.

### *Funny electronic communication*

As for emails as another means of non-verbal self-expression, there were examples of electronic communication at all three settings, although they were not a real alternative to a main channel of communication i.e. face-to-face. At Albatros some funny emails were printed out and hung on the noticeboard in the staffroom and so they changed their status from funny emails to funny artefacts. At Lingua, staff used Facebook for informal communication and nurturing relationships with colleagues. It could be seen as virtual communication but it had effects for actual relationships. Nurturing relationships was not confined to the actual space and time of the workplace. Both at Lingua and Devon College participants did not want to use work emails for sending private messages, they found it risky and worried about such emails being monitored or leaving a 'trail' as Michael (Devon College) called it, which is in line with Schnurr's and Rowe's (2008) findings although they refer to workers not wanting to use subversive humour in emails and not humour in general. Richard (Devon College) received funny emails from Harry on to his work email but even though he enjoyed it he did not keep them in the work email box:

Richard: Yes, because I'm concerned about it being monitored. If I write things, you know, naughty things, I don't want it to be anything to do with the college, so I write it as my own personal stuff.

Interviewer: Is it because of your own past experiences of being reported or what laughs)?

Richard: No, but it's being sensitive to the fact that you're not in charge here, whereas if you use Yahoo or Google or Hotmail, I mean, you kinda know that people could look at it, or they could find it in the hard drive, but they're probably not going to



bother. Whereas if you use our Intranet, which is the college, you think 'Not a good idea'. Now, Harry does. He sends me quite funny ones, and sometimes quite rude ones as well and I read them and then delete them. But if they're really fantastic then I send them to myself (Interviewer laughs), so I can send them on later in the day or something.

Individual interview with Richard, Devon College

Sending on funny emails despite the risk of being tracked seems to be bravado. The fact that staff uses electronic communication whether it is a private email or not shows that staff need and enjoy this kind of interaction. My study shows that it can provide an extra channel of unofficial communication at the workplace. Sharing humour via email allows two people (the one who sends it and the one who receives it) to participate in the experience of humour across time and space. They may be laughing at the same joke separately, away from each other and yet feel some unity of shared amusement. However, participants were using electronic communication with colleagues who they had already established relationships with (outside of email communication). This means that they were able to assume that what they are sending, the other person would find funny too. Sharing videos, pictures or other funny material by means of Facebook or email gives an insight into what humour is enjoyed in particular work relationships and can act to strengthen these relationships:

Paul (...) if it's teachers to teachers then it's usually language related or teaching related, so it will be either something funny you've seen on Facebook or – or one of the (clears throats) one of the teachers' websites, I don't mean like Oxford, Cambridge, MacMillan, the – the main publishers, I mean websites that other schools and teachers set up but particularly things like blog posts where people can (laughs) ask silly questions or give silly answers to questions and so we can- we share those with – with each other.

Individual interview with Paul, Lingua

Electronic communication, overriding physical boundaries (Meyrowitz 1990), provides an extra dimension, an additional opportunity for nurturing relationships with colleagues. Those relationships are not just virtual, they continue to be maintained both at the frontstage and

backstage of an actual work setting. The example of Michael shows that electronic communication and face-to-face communication do not need to be separate interactions:

Michael: (...) if I'm on here and I see something funny on YouTube, I minimise it and then when they come in I say, 'you two look at this' so I tend not to email because the humour is in these sort of satellites groups.<sup>30</sup> So I tend to just say to these two, 'look at this' or when I bring things up I just get them to look at it right there and then when they're there or show them later.

Individual interview with Michael, Devon College

Sharing humour from the internet (virtual space) in actual space and time and with his closest colleagues in the case of Michael shows that he cares about experiencing it with people who he is certain will find it amusing. Sharing it outside of the satellite group or a clique represents certain risks such as misunderstanding or offence. It may be that emails are reserved for those in cliques who find emails an extension of already well maintained relationships.

Having discussed funny artefacts and funny electronic communication as examples of the non-verbal self-expression type of humour, I would like to turn to discussing survival and contest- to- nurture types of humour.

#### Survival and contest-to-nurture humour

My study shows three types of humour that draw on humour's paradoxical nature and serve to contest and nurture relationships. I have already discussed humour that contests a person to construct a relationship with him/her. There is also humour that serves as survival and humour that contests a person to nurture a relationship with this person or other people. Both humour types can serve to preserve the relationships and their boundaries. They represent an internal/insider's way of communicating in informal work relationships. The survival type of

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<sup>30</sup> By satellite groups Michael means small offices.

humour and contest- to- nurture are more complex than social lubricant, by the way and self-expression humour as they work on two levels.

### *Survival*

Survival humour on one level contests existing policies, rules, clients, bureaucracy or anything else that represents work-related difficulty, whereas on another level it triggers closeness, sense of unity and solidarity among the work colleagues. Such humour acts differently in different relationships. It can serve the dual purpose of nurturing some relationships by contesting other people or issues that represent problems for the employees (management, inspectors). It therefore contests one person/issue to support a different person. It is often borne out of work-related stress or frustrations, as my study shows. By being amusing, a remark/exchange can allow for the stress/frustrations to temporarily disappear and can help to find a healthy perspective, some distance from work issues. Survival humour is about work; put briefly its purpose is to survive the work, separating a tolerable job from an intolerable one (Warren and Fineman 2007). While trying to survive at the workplace by means of humour, people move closer to each other, depending of course on what or who makes which part of the job intolerable. This excerpt exemplifies survival humour:

Harry: I think actually erm you know I've been teaching for 45 years what is really noticeable is the level of surveillance of teaching staff and I don't know... the way I experience what Rose was saying about that sort of hysterical laughter is that it is partly a response to really letting your hair down because...

Rose: Pressure I think.

Harry: The surveillance takes really every form that there is, you know. It's visual, it's oral, you know, people can hear things; every thing's measured every thing's recorded you know and that's very constraining isn't it?

Will: It's often a part of the humour itself. About a year or two ago we often come up with these ridiculous sort of flights of fancy which I think is a feature of male humour generally when you sort of build on someone else's voice.

Rose: Plays like Monty Python!

Interviewer: (Laughter.)

Will: Yeah! This sort of scenario that we reckon we've been secretly bugged and with this sort of audio and visual's monitoring equipment in the office

Rose: (Laughter.)

Group interview, Devon College

The reality of teaching has changed and the increased bureaucratisation and limited freedom in the teaching profession (see Chapter 1) encourages teachers to ridicule the processes they are affected by. Humour becomes as ridiculous as the situation teachers find themselves in (omnipresent surveillance encourages them to pretend they are being bugged). This example shows how by means of humour teachers can forget about their lack of influence or control of certain work issues. Survival humour temporarily empowers teachers or gives them the illusion of power. They temporarily become censors of disliked reality imposed on them by means of surveillance, policies and rules. This can be explained by the superiority theory of humour (Chapter 2), where humour is based on negative feelings and expressing disappointments and frustrations by means of humour gives people sense of being beyond (superior to ) the ridiculed problems. What is important is that survival humour happens within work relationships. This laughing the stress away together unites people and gives them a sense of being in it together according to Robert (Albatros). This on the other hand can be linked to the relief theory of humour (Chapter 2) whereby humour provides relief, relaxes and helps to release tension. Survival humour is a shared relief because it concerns shared problems.

Solidarity expressed by joint laughter and shared humour about audience/frontstage representatives (management, students) or frontstage props (rules, documents) can be called a ritual profanation of the audience and front (Goffman 1959). However, that profanation serves to maintain the solidarity of the team and acts as a compensation for the loss of self-respect (Goffman 1959) or loss of faith in maintaining good relationships with management. One female teacher at Devon College told me that at the same time each year there is a discussion about redundancies at the college; staff cope with it by joking about that. It could be said that it is trivialising the problem but, having no impact on certain work issues, it may be better to turn them into joke. My study shows, similarly to the study by Stromberg and

Karlsson (2009), that humour is used in the workplace to register resistance but not necessarily to make changes to the frontstage. By turning serious issues or problems (like redundancies) into jokes people may have the temporary feeling that they control the situation. This shows how resistance and control can happen simultaneously but have different directions. Participants by means of humour both resisted and controlled (Lynch 2002) the problems that were seemingly out of their reach and influence.

Survival humour was most prominent at Devon College and it portrayed the distance/division between staff and management. Devon College participants revealed in both group and individual interviews that they laughed about work-related issues away from those who represented power and implemented rules. Richard (Devon College) noted that humour is a counterbalance to all the repression and inhibition teaching entails. The survival humour happened behind the closed doors in their circles of trust thus simultaneously served in-group identification and out-group differentiation (Lynch 2002).

It was different at Albatros where humour about the manager happened in his presence (he was more a recipient than a target). Both manager and head teacher at Albatros were seen as approachable and joked with their subordinates. Interestingly, the head teacher of Albatros never sat with the staff in the staffroom – maybe not to change the existing relationships between him and staff and among staff. Separating his front from the teachers' backstage may have been about securing their informal interactions.

The director of Lingua came to the staffroom and his presence hindered the staff's use of survival humour according to Julia (Lingua). Julia felt that it would be awkward to joke about work-related issues in the presence of the employer. As Goffman (1959) suggests derogating of the front (e.g. management) happens in secret. Open derogating of those in power could lead to conflict and damage the relationships with them. Anti-work artefacts at Devon College are good examples of acts of resistance that, although displayed in the offices

and not main public spaces, convey important meanings as to the assumptions about what work is and what it is not (Parker 2007). Parker (2007) found that anti-work humour (here survival humour) is both heroic and tragic as it bites the hand that feeds it. Although survival humour may not change the work issues it draws upon, it serves to provide a temporary release and reactivation – a backstage necessary for the team to keep on working and to continue maintaining the impression of frontstage. Thus, laughing about work helps people to stay at work. Survival humour also restores a healthy perspective of work problems, presenting them as common to other employees. Regardless of its form, whether in spontaneous conversation or by looking at the funny artefact it can serve as a reminder that it is just work and everybody needs to deal with it. In that sense it acts as togetherness booster.

#### Contest- to-nurture

This humour is direct, personal humour such as insults, jocular abuse, teasing but also dark humour and any humour described by participants as risky, offensive, risqué. It includes humour that may be seen controversial or politically incorrect (sexist, racist humour). It signals and reinforces already established relationships with colleagues. Such humour contests a person(s) to nurture a relationship with them. It simultaneously contests and supports the work relationship (the relationship between humour initiator and recipient). It thus, similarly to survival humour, draws both on the relief and the superiority theories of humour (Chapter 2). ‘Contest-to-nurture’ type of humour is the only one that is both contestive and supportive towards the same person. Its competitive nature signals closeness and freedom of expression among the jokers.

My study shows that among close work colleagues, potentially offensive or risky humour can be uniting and a signal of closeness, which is similar to jocular abuse in Plester’s (2009) study. Crossing the line by means of such humour is a way of communication and

affirmation of belonging and the unique nature of relationships within which it occurs. Although of a provocative nature, this humour signals a sense of safety in humour initiators. This sense of safety lies in humour initiators not worrying about misinterpretations of humour by humour recipients. However, there is a more risky side of this humour when it serves to contest some relationships to nurture others. My study shows that jocular abuse and teasing served to define both in and out groups at workplaces so they were inclusive and exclusive at the same time (Plester and Sayers 2007).

As long as the humour recipient and the humour target are the same person, and they are amused by the joke or/and responded to it in the same manner (e.g. teasing back) the humour is enjoyed by both humour initiator and humour recipient. The following example shows the joy controversial and risky humour brings to work relationships:

Richard: you can go into the office and say anything here and we do push right to the edge and over, don't we?

Unidentified (choral): And we do... yeah yeah.

Richard: Sometimes I think what have I said? I shock myself because it's out there...

Rose: (Laughter)

Richard... I mean we do sexism and stuff but we also do the scatological things you know, things that...

Interviewer: Mmm.

Will: Oh we can out do 15 year old boys when it comes to tacky smut.

Rose: Yes.

Unidentified: Yes.

Rose: We try to outdo each other and go one step further so you do something and then someone else does rah rah rah and (inaudible).

(Joint laughter)

Unidentified: Yes.

Harry: But without mentioning names because I do so much travelling round to all offices. (Pause = as if weighing words) you would be quite astonished in what I've heard and what kind of conversations I've engaged in with people up and down the corridor from the bottom... let's face it Richard (Joint laughter) ... to the top the top... sexual innuendos and God knows what!

Group interview, Devon College

This example shows how even potentially offensive humour can act as a liberation and cause shared joy. The moments of shared risky humour may strengthen the relationships

by its secret/conspiratorial, not allowed or/and disapproved-of nature that Rose (Devon College) described as ‘tongue in cheek’ humour. It brings satisfaction to those who take part in it because it is not just shared but also an understood, accepted and enjoyed act of crossing the boundaries. This ‘verbal sparring’ (Kehily and Nayak 1997) seems to be exciting as it serves to cross boundaries by means of humour without upsetting anyone, without being reported or told off. This satisfaction may be compared to kids’ joy at organising a house party without their parents’ knowledge. What is special about that is that outside of their cliques, people need to apply more control over their use of humour in order not to offend someone or/and to look professional. The beauty of such humour lies in being able to say what you cannot really say, avoiding confrontation with those who humour is targeted at and yet feeling relief. The exclusivity of such humour makes it a treasured good of a particular group — a good that is worth nurturing and defending. What is more, the beauty of humour comes from unusual, often sophisticated logical constructions, unexpected play on words or uncommon comparisons/ allusions. This is true art. I agree with Chiaro (1992, p.123) that jokes are the form of ‘poetry’ and can be masterpieces and jokers are ‘poets’. I would expand it highlighting that it is particularly true with regard to spontaneous humour as often one needs to be a true master of humour to amuse others without preparation.

However, apart from the main jokers at Albatros and Matt at Lingua, my study shows that it takes time and effort to find and familiarise oneself with such work colleagues and build such work relationships that allow for and treasure free and uncontrolled humour. Ian, Richard and Will (Devon College) said that years of knowing someone and going through different and often difficult situations with people helps to establish such a relationship, where they can joke about anything. Albatros main jokers practised ‘bouncing off each other’ or ‘winding each other up’ as Wendy (Albatros) called it. They enjoyed mocking/teasing colleagues and did so often regardless of whether they had close relationships with them or



not. I asked Wendy whether their behaviour is a humour provocation to actually invite others to join in and she replied:

Wendy: Yeah I think so but then you have some people who can be very aggressive and it's their way or no way (laughs)

Interviewer: I see

Wendy: and they're not susceptible to you know, open opinion (laughs) even if yeah, even if it is meant to be fun.

Individual interview with Wendy, Albatros

Thus, in contrast to Devon College participants, they extended joking between safety and mutual understandings of a clique to a wider team — they did not care that it maybe it should be just within the clique. Consequently they risked that their teasing, which synthesises elements of aggression, humour and ambiguity, would represent a danger for the target of humour (Plester and Sayers 2007) by being offensive/upsetting and so contestive. In the case of teasing at Devon College, the boundaries were governed by each individual's knowledge of others and this defined how such humour was used with different people (Plester and Sayers 2007).

Once the humour target(s) and humour recipient(s) are two or more different people or/and the humour recipient/target does not enjoy the humour, there is a risk the relationship with the humour initiator may be negatively affected. Hay (2001) argues that for humour to be successful, it needs to be recognised, understood and appreciated. There were many jokes about Archie at Albatros. Archie got promoted to Assistant Director and so he got a new nickname 'Ass Doc'. During my observations Albatros jokers created a new nickname 'Starchy Archie'. The jokes about Archie strengthened the bond between the jokers at Archie's expense, for instance I observed Archie's colleagues laughing behind his back about Archie using his clipboard to make notes like: 'Drink coffee' or 'Take a break'. It could be

argued that as long this happened behind Archie's back it did not openly serve to threaten the relationships between the jokers and Archie but it also took away the opportunity for Archie to respond to it (whether humorously or not). Before Archie was promoted I observed him provoking humour at his expense. He often, which was confirmed by others, analysed his food in great detail which caused a lot of amusement. 'Ham and Cheese sandwiches' was a reoccurring joke at Albatros associated with Archie.

On one occasion I asked Robert whether Archie knew about them calling him 'Ass Doc'. Robert was pretty sure Archie knew about it which either confirms the jokers' carelessness or Archie's obliviousness. After all, Archie was one of the main jokers and knew the style of the main jokers. The concern Archie's colleagues expressed about Archie's 'humour being killed due to his new responsibilities', made me realise that their teasing could have been born out of care and willingness to get the old Archie back and to keep him backstage and in the clique. Robert said, since Archie is not equal (superior), wherever there is a chink of light they pounce with humour. The secret derogation of the absent may serve to nurture the relationships between the jokers and between the jokers and a derogated person.

When discussing contest-to-nurture humour, it is worth noting the two examples of people both crossing and preserving humour boundaries at the workplace. They both contested and nurtured workplace relationships by means of humour. The hybrid roles assumed by both Matt and Robert (see Sample section, Chapter 3) might be difficult to perform, which may lead to them having to choose between being a joker or a gatekeeper. Although these roles can be potentially combined if people do only what is accepted in both roles, the demands of these roles are often in contradiction to one another. Being a go-between person may prove difficult, especially when operating in the presence of two teams the go-between is a member of (management and staff) – he may then look like a man

desperately trying to play tennis with himself, thus looking isolated and mistrusted (Goffman 1959). Both Matt and Robert exemplify that not just humour can be hybrid — encompassing contradicting elements — but also people may perform a hybrid role in constructing and maintaining workplace humour, which is in contrast to Plester (2007) who distinguishes the role of gatekeeper from the role of workplace joker.

My study supports the claim that opposing humour functions do not need to be mutually exclusive; they can happen simultaneously (Lynch 2002) but have different directions (i.e. a joke can be directed at one person (target) but also towards another person (humour recipient). Instead of belonging to either a supportive or contestive category (Holmes and Marra 2002) they belong to both, as they contest someone else to support their own relationship. They draw on contestive opinions, feelings or attitudes but have a supportive effect on relationships as they foster a sense of togetherness and solidarity. They ridicule a person(s) or, in Goffmanian terms, ‘derogate’ one relationship (with the humour target) to strengthen other relationships (with those laughing at the humour target). Finally, the contestive nature of humour is relative, as what would be deemed contestive outside of the clique becomes supportive within it. This is linked with different boundaries between people involved in humour and so between humour recipient, initiator and target.

Having discussed humour functions that draw on shaking of the boundaries, it is now time to present humour that crosses the boundaries and contests relationships.

### Contesting relationships

Humour that has the potential of contesting work relationships has many different facets. My study shows two main types of contesting humour: unintentional and intentional, which is in line with Fine and de Soucey (2005) who identify joking that is purposefully or unintentionally insulting. There is humour that if misinterpreted/misdirected or misused unintentionally contests the existing work relationships and has the potential to damage them.

Whether intentional or unintentional, by crossing the individual's boundaries humour can upset, offend or annoy work colleagues. There may be situations where humour is intentionally used to contest relationships but the humour recipient does not show offence or does not feel offended/upset and interprets such humour as unintentionally contesting or not contesting at all. Nevertheless, the intentions of the humour initiator qualify this humour as potentially contesting.

The boundaries of humour are not static; on the contrary, they are as dynamic as work relationships for different reasons. What influences boundaries can be personal humour preferences, context, people involved in the joking but also the current mood humour recipients are in. This is all linked to the subjective and contextualised nature of humour (Chapter 2).

What is more, humour boundaries are discovered by means of work colleagues' reactions to humour. There were several examples in my study of humour initiators recognising that they crossed the line after seeing the humour recipients or humour witnesses' reactions. Tony, for instance, described the following situation:

Tony: I wasn't caned. (Joint laughter.) That's more Paul's department. I have been... I guess I've stepped over the line. I once, um, I once joked around with a girl in reception who I get on quite well with, and one of the older, more serious women didn't really like it. It wasn't like, serious complaint procedure thing...

Individual interview with Tony, *Lingua*

This example shows that the person who found this humour inappropriate was not the humour recipient but a person who happened to witness that humorous exchange. It may be that for the humour recipient the line was not crossed. Lisa (*Lingua*), who nominated Tony as the workplace joker, when asked whether Tony was ever challenged or told off she said that because of his lovely personality he got away with things. Crossing the line with a joke can

be explained by saying that something was said in jest even if it was not. However, the fact that someone was just joking is not always enough to disassociate intentions from affronts (Fine and De Soucey 2005). The teachers who left Albatros or stopped coming to the staffroom because they did not enjoy the staffroom humour seem to be a good example of this. Wendy (Albatros) said that even though she was aware of the fact that what was said, was not meant to be personal, sometimes it was just uncomfortable for her and she happened to walk out. However, the majority of participants across the three settings were aware of people at their workplace who would not appreciate some humour and so they avoided or were more careful using humour with people who were more sensitive than others, but also with some people of higher status or some older colleagues. Some mentioned that stress a particular colleague is experiencing at a moment may have an impact on their ability to appreciate the joke, for instance:

Ian: I think there's always a possibility, especially if someone's under extreme stress that they don't see the humour of something and they don't see why you are happy for example because you might turn round and say something, it's intended to lighten the atmosphere, and they think you know that you aren't taking them seriously, so I think there's always that danger and I think there's sort of that fine line there.

Group interview at Devon College

Participants at all three settings mentioned 'the line' but it seems that the line was sometimes identified post-factum and sometimes it was more of a guess what the line is and for whom. People often choose to alter their behaviours in order not to cross the boundaries or after some boundaries have been crossed. The unintentionally contesting humour, in contrast to intentionally contesting humour, is followed by an attempt to repair the relationships, to avoid complaint. Maggie (Albatros) shows how sometimes contesting humour led to apology and on other occasions to confrontation:

Interviewer: Have these main jokers ever been challenged or told off?

Maggie: Yeah, yeah sometimes. Sometimes I think they've walked off with their tail between their legs and apologised later, um, sometimes I think people have just walked out of the staff room because it's become a little uncomfortable, maybe you know a little bit sort of close to home for some people, um, yeah, I think so, I think it depends on your personality of whether you would actually challenge them or not.

Interviewer: So not everyone can stand their jokes?

Maggie: No. And it's not all of their jokes, maybe it's only a few of them, but yeah I'd say some people have been challenged, sometimes people have been walked out, sometimes there's been a silent protest...

Interviewer: Oooooooooo...

Maggie: ...by someone who's said 'I don't like the atmosphere' and left the staffroom. Umm some people sometimes stand up to people. I don't think there's been any major confrontation. But I think some people have been quite sharp back and said things like, 'yeah, that's that just rude' you know, really sort of put them in their place and been quite honest.

#### Individual interview with Maggie, Albatros

Contesting humour can result in the humour recipient challenging the humour initiator back but not in jest. It can lead to serious confrontation when a person who feels offended expresses their disappointment, anger or pain in a non-humorous way. This can lead to damaging of the relationship between initiator and recipient or even other colleagues. Maggie (Albatros) for instance did not like the jokes like those directed at her overweight female colleague and she stopped coming to the staffroom.

My study shows that not just verbal humour, but also non-verbal, has also the potential to damage relationships. Forwarding or circulating funny emails around may not serve to nurture relationships in the workplace, for example:

Thomas: (...) to a certain extent the email stuff isn't safe, because most of the jokes that I see that get forwarded, or have been forwarded and I still get them even though I don't want them, are pretty risqué, and in fact you know it will be, like loads of jokes about Jimmy Savile which you can do without.'

#### Individual interview with Thomas, Devon College

Some humour that gets forwarded to work colleagues is not a type of humour some wish to be associated with. Thomas told me he has been trying to stop a large number of the emails

being forwarded to him that were either racist or sexist. It is hard to establish sometimes whether humour was intentionally or unintentionally contesting – one person may take offense, other may find it amusing and send it on. Schnurr and Rowe (2008) argue that identifying humour in emails in general is difficult due to lack of context. I believe that, particularly in the case of forwarded emails, humour intentions and reactions may be misinterpreted or simply difficult to guess as email sender and recipient may not know each other. When people know each other and often exchange humour with each other either via email or face-to-face they may find it easier to interpret such humour as not intentionally contesting. Humour forwarded in emails poses a challenge for defining original humour intentions, original humour sender (or/and initiator) and original humour recipient.

My study shows a few examples of intentionally contesting humour that is characterised by expressing protest, frustration or disapproval and is directed towards the person responsible for a problem or in power/position to fix it. Ian (Devon College) provided an example of protesting by means of humour:

Ian: (...) when we had these things called graded observations, when they would come in and they would check your lessons and give you a grade on it, and people got really, really worried about this. Now the only way which I could see to overcome this was to show how ridiculous it was. So I asked IT and they said ‘you have to have this document and this document and this document’ –I said you know ‘lesson plans,’ they said ‘lesson plans’ – and I said ‘right, well what does a lesson plan look like?’

Interviewer: Mmm.

Ian: And the person said ‘it can be on the back of a cigarette packet for all I care’ (Int’s laughter). Lesson plan came along, admin’s there, and I handed in my lesson plan on the back of a cigarette packet.

Individual interview with Ian, Devon College

This example shows that contesting humour can be about changing of the frontstage or at least making the management realise the flaws in their thinking. Ian (Devon College)

admitted that sometimes, to deal with organisational madness, a person needs to go along with madness. A slightly different example of giving a lesson to someone in power is provided by Lukas. He recalled a situation where someone covertly put a sign 'Ear defenders must be worn here' on the door of a manger who swore a lot. In both examples a subordinate reminds those higher up about the necessity of good team relationships for the sake of maintaining the same front impression. Crossing the line therefore means derogating either the present or the absent, either covertly (ear defenders sign) or in a form of direct and open protest (plan on a cigarette pack).

### Summary

This chapter focused on informal relationships and hybrid relationships (neither formal nor informal) to explore the links between humour and familiarity and expose the issues of the vulnerability of all people involved in humour i.e. humour initiator, recipient and target. This helped to introduce particular functions humour fulfils within the context of workplace relationships.

Humour carefulness or adaptability was an indicator of degrees of formality of workplace relationships in my study. Formality and informality of workplace relationships suggest different uses of humour and not necessarily avoidance thereof. Although there were exceptions, the fact that many participants recognised humour boundaries means that they cared about the quality of workplace relationships in general (whether being familiar with someone or not). The motivation for that care may have had different sources from being seen as professional and not being reported (selfish reasons) to being seen as friendly and caring and not offending anyone whether it is reportable or not (altruistic reasons).

My study shows that familiarity plays an important role in participants' making individual choices as to whom to joke with and how to joke with them. Knowing a person



well allows for using humour freely and safely without a risk of being misinterpreted and offending someone or not using some kinds of humour with some people. However, there are situations when assuming too much familiarity (overfamiliarity) or unfamiliarity expressed by means of humour may contest the existing workplace relationships. Both unfamiliarity and overfamiliarity represent unsafe ends of the familiarity scale where crossing the boundaries of humour introduces some vulnerability on the part of humour initiator or/and humour recipient or/and humour target. This vulnerability lies, in the case of the humour initiator, in misjudgement of the boundaries. Thus instead of expected amusement they may be left with an expectation to apologise, explain or withdraw from a conversation. The vulnerability of the humour recipient or target lies in perceiving humour as a personal attack, an offence which makes them unable to find it amusing. My study shows that overfamiliarity is linked to power position and characterises hybrid relationships where humour is directed by a person of higher position towards the person of lower position. Although boundaries can be crossed both in informal relationships and hybrid relationships, the difference is that those in power may arrogate the right to ignore the humour boundaries due to their higher status. Thus the power position of the humour initiator gives him a sense of impunity which increases the vulnerability of the humour recipient and/or target.

Having situated workplace humour in the context of workplace relationships, my study proposes a division into three humour categories (constructing, nurturing and contesting humour) and subcategories. This division is a step further from a bipolar humour division such as contestive vs supportive (Holmes and Marra 2002) and develops it into a continuum that takes into consideration opposing functions of humour happening simultaneously (contesting a relationship with one person may serve to nurture/construct relationships with other people). Thus the categories I propose expand the idea of broadly contestive and broadly supportive humour (Holmes and Schnurr 2005). My humour

categories draw on the messiness of humour functions which is in line with the paradoxical and dualistic nature of humour that can be simultaneously performing contrasting functions (Lynch 2002). Humour thus can be hybrid as it can draw on different humour theories across different humour forms, topics and types and in different work relationships.

The categories my study proposes are fluid and interconnected which brings out the complexity of humour. The oversimplification of bipolar categorisation may leave some humour difficult to define and to locate in just two distinct categories. Similarly to Lynch (2005), I found the ‘exactness’ of classification challenging and ‘inconsistent with how humour was experienced everyday’ (p.93).

My study shows that different uses of humour and their functions mirror the work politics of particular work settings. Only at Albatros was constructing relationships purposefully executed by the crossing of boundaries. ‘Bullying into shape’ was practised by the main jokers and acted as a selection device. What was specific to Devon College was nurturing relationships by means of by the way humour. This way of nurturing relationships was impacted by the spatial structure (small offices), temporal structure (timetables) of the college and work commitments. Survival humour was most prominent at Devon College where staff used anti-work humour to show solidarity with each other and survive the constraints and rules imposed on them at work. At Lingua, people’s attitude to and use of humour seemed most careful and toned which reflected the professional vision of the setting.

Dynamics between humour initiator, humour target and humour recipients show how nuanced humour recognition and categorisation processes are. Thus my study supports the less rigorous treatment of the humour categories as it reflects better the complex, subjective and dynamic nature of spontaneous humour. Humour, whether spoken, written or graphic, can impact on relationships, thus the proposed humour functions are related to relationships. Locating humour functions within relationships fills in a gap in existing humour assessments

(see overview by Richmond and Wrench 2012) that often combine a variety of humour properties (style, form, frequency, targets, initiators, functions etc.) but do not include the complex effects of humour on work relationships and thus may not be applicable in studies on spontaneous workplace humour where relationships dynamics provide a context for humour.

This chapter discussed and showed humour as situated in workplace relationships — its most immediate context. The following chapter discusses the further context of workplace humour — space and time.

## **CHAPTER 6: HUMOUR, SPACE AND TIME**

This findings chapter discusses the spatial and temporal context of the staff's use of humour. Space and time are crucial working conditions as they 'locate' teacher-teacher use of humour and thus enable us to see this important feature of workplace culture as spatially and temporally situated. This chapter discusses issues of space and time relating to the use of humour and explores the idea of staffrooms and lunch breaks being hybrid spaces encompassing different degrees of Goffmanian back and front. It consists of three major sections. In the first section, I address the formal and informal uses of space and time in workplaces and discuss how verbal and non-verbal humour or lack thereof can indicate informality of space/time. Next I discuss how different spaces in workplaces can facilitate staff's inclusion or exclusion or, at times, be arenas for both exclusion and inclusion. In the third section, I analyse the individual and social dimension of space and time in the workplace and discuss the role of an individual in making choices about usage and meanings of space and time.

### **Formal/Informal**

Different spaces and times entail more or less formal behaviour. Humour of more risky types, whether verbal (spoken) or non-verbal (graphic, written), is one of the indicators of whether space/time is safe enough to behave informally, in a more relaxed manner. Although spaces can actually be formal and informal, there can also be symbolically formal and informal/abstract spaces. My study shows that space influences people and vice versa

(Meyrowitz 1990). This section shows how humour can both be an indicator and determinant of informal spaces and times.

### Verbal humour

#### Classroom versus other spaces

In my study teachers often referred to classrooms as the spaces where they were required to behave formally. Albatros and Lingua participants contrasted classroom space with staffroom space to locate more and less formal behaviour. Classroom was thus frontstage where teachers had to manage their impression before an audience, i.e. students. This was in contrast with the Learning how to Learn (LHTL) project where participants mentioned both classrooms and staffrooms as formal areas (McCormick et al 2011). At Devon College classroom space was not contrasted with the staffroom but with small offices that to some extent were staffroom substitutes. However, the Devon College staffroom was seen as neither an informal nor a formal space. In the following excerpt Rose (Devon College) contrasts upstairs (classroom) behaviour with downstairs (small offices) behaviour:

Rose: And sometimes, because you are, you have to remain formal upstairs within the classroom and things like that sometimes something happens and you're literally like 'argh' like filled with... you're finding it really funny or it relates to something really funny and you can't really necessarily express it or laugh or upstairs so... you kind of just go downstairs.

Mark: Keep it for a while and it will get bigger and bigger...

Rose: And then you go and tell everyone what's happened and then you laugh about it.

Mark: Yeah, yeah (laughter).

Rose: But if you were to do it upstairs then it could be I don't know potentially informal or might upset somebody or something... yeah (inaudible), yeah.

Rose: (Laughter.)

Group interview, Devon College

Rose juxtaposes classroom space (upstairs) with office space (downstairs) to highlight the spatial dimension of humour. Classroom is portrayed by Rose and other participants across the three settings as a place where the teacher controls themselves, maintains formal image, the 'front' which often entails being serious. Informal space in the above example is a space shared with well-known colleagues (cliques) in front of whom teacher can behave more freely, laugh and joke, drop the front. This is similar to Mawhinney's (2007) observation of teachers putting their 'teachers' masks' back on, stopping smiling and acting seriously when students entered the room where a group of teachers had lunch. Interestingly, the comparison upstairs (classroom ) versus downstairs (offices) goes beyond frontstage versus backstage but represent a hybrid as offices are foremost spaces for doing the frontstage (teachers do not work just in classrooms).

Returning to the above excerpt, it is not the space itself that imposes more or less controlled behaviour and use of humour but certain assumptions and expectations about the usage of certain spaces and about relationships between people occupying certain spaces (including the relationships with students).

For instance, participants at Devon College admitted they use risky forms of humour (e.g. spiteful humour) at their offices behind closed doors and among close colleagues. As Parker (2006, p. 6) notes: 'office humour is generally spiteful, a form of vengeance that generalises the hypocrisy and pomposity found in so many workplaces'. In my study I would not generalise that all office humour was spiteful but rather humour about management or policies or paperwork — so work-related issues that were frustrating for employees. The Devon College participants mentioned two important conditions for extreme humour to happen at their offices: shut door and close relationships with those they joke with. These two conditions granted the informal and safe usage of the office space. Keeping the door shut or

making sure the door is shut is in line with Goffman's (1959) idea of guarding the backstage before the audience. It may be that the physical boundaries of certain spaces such as distance or doors are there to remind people of the need or possibility of changing behaviour (switching between front or back or changing the fronts) when entering different spaces. The example of the shut door illustrates the thin line between formal and informal spaces at workplace:

Interviewer: Is there any place you would never use certain types of humour here at this workplace?

Wendy: Um (pause) I think sometimes you do... yeah, you do have to be careful with some, some things especially you know, not like, not making fun of students, but you know it's best because Albatros's such a mix, so many different types of people, so many different religions and that kind of thing, I think in that area you do have to be careful and quite often when you're sat in the teachers' room, and I don't know if you've seen it yourself, the topic of conversation is changing and maybe it, you know it could be offensive to students and somebody will shut that door (Joint laughter) straight away. Yeah exactly that door will shut, you know, because sometimes you have students going up and down the corridor to see teachers, so yeah the door shuts.

Individual interview with Wendy, Albatros

Although the shut door does not rule out the possibility of students overhearing the conversations if passing by, it symbolises a safe or safer, closed space where private affairs can be discussed and less formal behaviour/talk can happen. The transition from open to shut door is a temporal change from formal to informal space. The use of the word 'temporal' is justified by the fact that this study shows that the formal and informal are not always binary terms. It is worth considering whether within the workplace there are any spaces that are purely informal. Since the workplace is not a private space, the spaces within the workplace, however cosy and friendly, can only be partially informal, as 'traces of work' are everywhere in the workplace (Solomon et al 2006). For instance, offices at Devon College, although they often act as informal spaces where teachers joke and laugh, they are predominantly work spaces where teachers carry out serious work tasks such as marking, writing reports etc. It is

similar to the exam office at Albatros that was seen as both informal and formal space by the three females using it.

The exam office was a work space but it also served for social interaction, gossiping and joking. A space designated as work space does not need to be exclusively used as work space and can serve as an informal space too, however, it is located within a formal institution and that entails more formal than informal use of the space. The aforementioned spaces exemplify hybrid spaces in workplace that are both formal and informal (Solomon et al 2006).

#### Time and events determining formality of spaces

Having mentioned the physical distance determining the formal or informal nature of space, it is important to note that time also determined whether the space was used as informal or formal. McGregor (2004) said that time organises the educational spaces and I would add that it also explains the complexity of the usage of space. My study shows that both making time and having time to socialise with colleagues, to have a laugh, informalises work spaces.

Putting aside work for some time or visiting colleagues in their office creates some temporary space for social conversation and humour. However, it does not instantly change work space into informal space as work is still there with all the work remainders, 'traces' (Solomon et al 2006) acting as front props (computers, papers, books etc.). Work space does not need to be exclusively formal space; as my study shows it can be used to eat lunch, talk and joke with the colleagues. Robert (Albatros) and Maggie (Albatros) mentioned having little breaks in work in their offices. Those short detachments from work permit informal interaction with the colleagues in the same office. Anna and Paul (Lingua) mentioned training as an opportunity for social interaction and humour amongst all serious work-related exercises.



Formal and informal spaces are sometimes difficult to separate, they often blur into 'hybrid spaces' (Solomon et 2006). The hybridity of such spaces lies in the fact that even if they are temporarily used as backstages they do not stop being frontstages. The frontstage dimension of the space is just 'suspended' (Solomon et al 2006). What is more, the researcher's presence may formalise the space and the phenomenon under analysis, as Solomon et al (2006) show, and this can happen even in informalised spaces (see Chapter 4).

An example of difficulties in recognising whether space is informal or formal are events organised by the workplaces such as Christmas meals. On the one hand they can be seen as official/formal because organised by management, on the other they are opportunities for informal interaction among staff. Something which also has characteristics of both formal and informal space-time are staff's Skype calls with the manager at Albatros. During group interview Robert (Albatros) said that whenever they Skype in their office with their manager who lives in America, the first thing he does is try to make fun of them and that helps to establish that initial friendship again, after having not seen him for six months. It is difficult to speculate how much of the virtual space or actual space can be informal when it comes to the relationship between management and their subordinates. It could be argued that any interaction with the management anywhere and at any time is to some extent formal and represents a front just because of the unequal power distribution.

Backstage behaviour of management towards their subordinates can be an in-character (whether strategic and planned or spontaneous and natural) variation of front behaviour. Humour can act as a temporary equaliser of power relationships in the workplace which is in line with Rogerson-Revel (2011). However, it does not change the power status of the people, as Goffman (1959) argues it can be done without jeopardising people's status differences. People's statuses remain the same in spite of temporary equalisation by means of

humour. To equate formal with lack of humour and informal with humour would be an oversimplification.

Michael (Devon College) for instance does not deny his manager's ability to use humour with his employees but he is aware of the power imbalance between them. He mentions staff meetings as the serious space/time:

Interviewer: So what are the spaces you would never use certain types of humour in...  
Michael: Meetings, I tend to be quite quiet in meetings (Interviewer laughs) 'cause we have a few members of staff who are quite vocal and will say, 'well I'm not doing that, that's nonsense', and you know, where as I tend to be quite quiet. There is some humour in meetings, but generally not a lot. That's the place I'd say with the least amount of humour being used ...because it tends to be a lot of serious stuff (chuckles), and it's usually stuff that makes our lives harder. So it's harder to laugh at that. But then again what will happen is, we'll have the meeting and we're like alright, we'll come back here to this space we'll be like, 'that's ridiculous, how are we supposed to do that?' and then there'll be jokes and humour related.

Interviewer: Behind the closed doors.

Michael: Behind the closed doors but not in front of because our manager's got a really good sense of humour there's been some moments he's really got us laughing. But it just feels inappropriate, it's not really a policy, it's just we don't want to, because we are formal, and in that environment you want to definitely make sure that everyone knows that you are formal. Whereas in the smaller isolated group we can have a bit more of a laugh and joke about it. But like you said, I think that's accurate, a lot of the jokes the humour is driven by the stress, or new jobs, new tasks, I would say.

Individual interview with Michael, Devon College

What Michael says about having to leave the meeting and certain people to be able to change his behaviour (laugh behind the shut door of his office) resonates with Goffman's (1959) idea of the performer having to leave a space in order to change their behaviour. Certain spaces and times require serious atmosphere and behaviour and are not used for joking. It is possible that both those in power and their subordinates purposefully behave seriously to make a formal impression on one another and to co-maintain the front. Humour according to Goodson and Walker (1991, p.33) 'hinges on rapid calculations that need to be made about the extent of control in situation at particular moments of time'. People's absence

as well as presence at certain times and spaces influenced the extent to which staff's interaction were informal/formal. Julia (Lingua) admitted that she minded the presence of Matt (the director) in the staffroom but she would not have minded the presence of students in the staffroom. The presence of Matt restricted some of the conversations teachers had as they did not feel comfortable joking about some things in front of him, as Julia (Lingua) told me.

The friendly and relaxed relationships Albatros staff reported to have with the head teacher indicated that his absence in the staffroom was not necessarily a condition for teachers to have fun and joke freely. The Devon College staffroom, although I did not see a management representative there and teachers said that the staffroom was used by admin and teachers, did not have an 'informal feel' as Albatros did. Thus the management's physical absence was not synonymous with the total absence of the ideas, agendas and visions management represented. I would thus expand the claim by McCormick et al (2011) that who is present when and what interaction results are all related to the space by emphasising that this relationship can be two-tier i.e. space influences people and vice versa (Meyrowitz 1990) and also that the sheer presence or absence is not as meaningful as the relationships between people who are either present or absent.

In all three settings there were times and spaces that escaped informal / formal division. Humour of some sort, as participants reported, occurred in more and less formal spaces and times but the humour they enjoyed the most, and treasured, as they reported to me, happened within more informal space and time among closest work colleagues. Humour, although most fitting into backstage, is not confined to backstage. Humour, being adjustable, can transgress the boundaries of front and back. Humour at the three settings, as the majority of participants indicated, was often adjusted in different circles and some more extreme or potentially offensive humour was used in particular space-time and with a selected group of

people. However, the main jokers at Albatros and Matt (Lingua) often did not worry about adjusting their humour depending on the type of relationship they had with a person. Also, the researcher's presence adds to the complexity and hybridity of the space as the formal intrusion of the researcher can formalise the informal interactions of people (Solomon et al 2006). However, as discussed in Chapter 4, in the case of my research my use of humour with participants acted to informalise the relationships between myself and participants within the formal research context.

### Non-verbal humour

Non-verbal humour in contrast to verbal humour is tangible, more permanent and can be proved, tracked. The exception is humour expressed by means of body language. Whether it is a poster, email, postcard, notice or an image it contains a documented message. However, in contrast to verbal humour, non-verbal humour at workplaces was easier to control and remove/get displaced. My study shows that the funny artefacts created or/and used by staff can informalise a space, sometimes by subverting its formal designation or, as in the example of Albatros, the informal space can be formalised; subverted by removal of funny artefacts. There is a tension between the formal and informal image of the workplace in all three settings and in all three settings funny artefacts were found as a potential threat to their formalism. There are parties in all three settings that care about and control whether the workplace is seen as formal to the inspectors.<sup>31</sup> In that sense funny artefacts become a political issue as they can spoil the formal image or in Goffmanian terms the maintained impression settings want to convey.

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<sup>31</sup> British Council in the case of language schools and Ofsted in case of Devon College.

## Controlling and formalising informal spaces

Both Albatros and Devon College had funny artefacts. Lingua did not have any funny artefacts and that was, as participants explained to me, due to the formal vision the director of Lingua advocated. Lingua has developed a series of rules posters in the lobby wall which could be seen as serious, formal artefacts. According to Tony it was an ongoing process – decorating walls with rules. Although some participants did not fully support the director’s vision, they complied with it and did not hang up or display anything that would seem not formal.

Julia (Lingua) said that the drive towards formalisation of Lingua and the imposed formal vision was at times ridiculous:

Julia: Yeah, sometimes you want to slack off work or the boss or you want to just go oh God, you know some meetings that we used to have that were just a bit ridiculous, and we’d be like, oh God who does he think he is, he’s just some poxy little language school, it was like, get over yourself (laughs), it was like, you know. Um (pause) I don’t know, but that’s my sort of, bit cynical sense of humour I guess but I don’t think anyone was into it, you know, you just want a job don’t you, I don’t know, you just want to buy into this vision and I liked what I did in the classroom, but I wasn’t interested in marketing or how we were going to sell the school. It’s like for me, it sells itself if you’ve got people who are having fun, you know in a place that they’re supposed to be having fun in.

Individual interview with Julia, Lingua

The director of Lingua (Matt) wanted to present and ‘sell’ Lingua’s space as formal to attract customers and to be perceived as serious. White walls and new furniture, an interactive information board and posters with rules on the walls all seemed to comply with his vision

and the marketing aspirations he had. As Lingua was a chain of schools there might have been some standardised rules and visions for every school. Not just the actual space of the setting but also Lingua's website (so virtual space) conveyed such an image by being well organised and highlighting the organisation's ambitions, recognition and awards. On the other hand Matt kept coming to the staffroom during lunch break and joked and used sexual innuendos with the staff as if trying to temporarily loosen his association with the front. His behaviour in the staffroom was in contrast to the formal image he was trying to convey outside of the staffroom. His attempts to dominate the staffroom backstage to present himself as capable of joking led to him looking odd, as Julia (Lingua) revealed.

Julia thought that Matt's drive towards the professionalisation of Lingua was at times the triumph of form over substance:

I think there's an air of formal, formalism on the outside, but deep down it almost seems a bit Mickey Mouse...'

Julia thus, paradoxically, found a funny side to the efforts put by the director to sell Lingua as formal and serious. When I came to Albatros for my observations, on the other hand, I found the setting more informal than formal. That was due to the funny artefacts placed in the staffroom. The presence of funny quotes boards, funny posters and notices conveyed a message about the staffroom being a staff-friendly space. The funny artefacts reflected the humour culture that I observed in the staffroom. It felt that the staff were the owners, the hosts of that space. They were the authors, co-authors and users of the funny artefacts. They were attached to them and had memories of the stories linked to those artefacts. When I came months later to interview Robert and noticed that the funny quotes boards and notices were removed, I knew that was a sign of a deeper change at that workplace. It possibly revealed different layers of setting – those available for public and those remaining private. The staffroom space was formalised by the act of removing informal

artefacts. The funny artefacts that were removed could have potentially spoiled the image of Albatros as a formal institution. They were taken off for the inspection but they were not put back on the staffroom's wall. Interfering with staff's informal space revealed new work politics.

By controlling the staff's informal space the management may have tried to impose a drive towards formalism and professionalism on the staff. The removal of some of the funny artefacts could be interpreted an act of censorship and imply new standards or rules about humour appropriateness. However, it also might be that after inspection staff did not feel it was right to put them back or simply they did not have time for it.

Interestingly this act was presented to me as 'tidying up' by participants who were hedging from a straight answer to the question of who removed it and why. This aroused my suspicions as to the intentions behind the removal of funny artefacts. When the head teacher rushed towards me as if to ensure me that they were still a humorous place by passing me a funny artefact that was created by Max (funny medal sheet see Appendix 5), I understood that maybe the head teacher was confused about how he wanted the college to be perceived.

The one funny artefact (Verbal diarrhoea poster, see Appendix 5a) that survived the changes and remained in the staffroom reflected that the informal aspect of the space was being defended against full formalisation. Robert explains why that particular artefact was least threatening in terms of the workplace formal image:

Interviewer (...) And you decided to leave the 'Verbal Diarrhoea' poster in the staff room.

Robert: Is that still there?

Interviewer: Yes.

Robert: I think maybe... It's a play on words, isn't it? So I think maybe the British Council would have appreciated that one.

Interviewer: Yeah. (Laughs.)

Robert: I mean, I don't know whether... I mean, you could ask Peter whether the council have a sense of humour or not. But, things like that often bring staff together, as you know, just to have something funny to refer to.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. And when something is written do you consider it more scary, more dangerous? Because you mentioned the funny quote board as something possibly risky, in terms of your formalism.

Robert: Yeah, I wouldn't want my name on the quote board if it suggested that I was doing something *unformal*.

Individual interview with Robert, Albatros

Robert opposed neutral play on words (verbal diarrhoea poster) with potentially informal funny quotes boards. The presence of authentic and non-anonymous staff's phrases, utterances and comments on the funny quotes boards created a potential danger of portraying Albatros staff as informal. To outsiders such as inspectors funny quotes may have been seen as a form of anti-work culture (Parker 2007) associated with an unprofessional attitude to the teaching job in this case. The verbal diarrhoea poster on the other hand conveyed a message about linguistic interest and thus connection to the profession (Albatros was a language school employing just teachers of English). It seemed therefore adaptable to and justified in both back and frontstage. The other artefacts seemed to belong to the backstage only which is in line with Goffman (1959) for whom some things/behaviours should stay backstage to keep the front protected. Further discussion with Robert revealed a certain struggle, Albatros's identity crisis in terms of balancing the existing humour culture with introducing a formal ethos. This relates to the stereotypical perception of humour and work as antithetical terms (Chapter 2). Here the important question of whether the formal image of a workplace is synonymous with serious behaviour arises. The way the three settings control what is displayed and where, shows that the management fear that humour can threaten and subvert professionalism and expose unprofessionalism.

My study shows that it is easier for employers to control non-verbal humour and thus easier to recover formal space. At Lingua there were no funny artefacts and participants knew they would not be allowed to display any so they did not try, nor had heard about anyone



trying, to do so. They were certain such artefacts would be removed. This feeling was shared by participants at Devon College who only considered their offices as spaces they could safely display their funny artefacts. Any attempts to place artefacts in the corridor failed as the corridor displays were controlled by the Estates.

Out of the three settings, Albatros seemed to exercise the most freedom in terms of displaying funny artefacts but this changed and even such informal spaces as the staffroom underwent censorship. Removing or not allowing staff to display funny artefacts may have a detrimental effect on the employees just like hot-desking in Warren's (2006) study. Hot-desking was beneficial to the organisation but at odds with employees' desire for stability, permanence and belonging at work expressed by means of their informal items (Warren 2006). In the case of the Albatros staffroom, I had an impression that the formalisation of that cherished informal space (front-isation of backstage) was an uprooting practice for the workplace relationships and culture. Having their own space and then losing it or losing the right to use it as before (lessening its backstage function), can evoke feelings of detachment and resentment towards the space itself and the people behind such decisions. For those who, like Wendy (Albatros), already used a different space to socialise it may be as traumatic but the feeling of sentiment towards old artefacts and hope to get them back remains. However, removing funny artefacts may be seen as organisation playing safe –preferring restricting humour to preventing its dangerous effects (Plester 2009).

### Subverting and informalising formal spaces

At Devon College I noticed a reverse practice of subverting and informalising formal spaces. What drew my attention at Devon College were the funny postcards and posters placed in the offices' windows from the inside but facing the corridor. For instance the postcard saying 'I

was meant to lead the revolution, not to teach' sounds like a funny and at the same time bitter comment about the teaching profession. However, the fact that it crosses the office's space and can be seen by those passing through (students, management) the corridor (formal space) makes the postcard slightly subversive and provocative. In the context of Devon College corridors being used as space for formal displays and postcards like that may be seen as undermining the management's efforts to keep the formal image of the corridor. Thus such artefacts can help create an oppositional identity at work (Parker 2007).

Another act of subversion I saw at Devon College was a funny anti-Ofsted poster (Appendix 5b) placed on the wall in the printer's area in the corridor. Will (Devon College) told me there were more funny artefacts like that in the printer area but he did not know what happened to them. Informalising formal space such as the common printer area<sup>32</sup> may look like a fight over free territory beyond the offices or like a backstage creeping into frontstage.

According to Warren (2006), objects trigger interaction or invite a comment and so such acts of subversion may be also ways of communicating with colleagues, sharing opinions and feelings, in this case regarding Ofsted. Placing funny artefacts and having them removed (both at Albatros and Devon College) represents some negotiation over space within the workplace. It also shows that staff are not passive in terms of space control and arrogate the ownership of that space. Parker (2006) compares the workplace to a cage and claims that people who produce and consume anti-work artefacts are reflexive agents who can satirise the bars of the cage that traps them. Turning front into backstage may be one attempt to temporarily poke out of the cage.

To sum up, the distinction between informal and formal spaces is not always straightforward. My study shows that sometimes what makes a space informal is as little as a shut door. Some spaces may be both informal and formal depending on the time and the

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<sup>32</sup> Available to all staff but not students.

people using them. Other spaces may have just a formal use and meaning. What may indicate whether a space is informal or formal is use of humour — both verbal and non-verbal — or lack thereof within the space. Spaces can be designated as less or more formal, the staffroom sometimes being on one end of continuum and the classroom being at the other end. However, what also makes spaces less or more formal/informal is how people interact within and use certain spaces. Time is closely linked to the way the space is used. Thus formal space can become informal when staff have time off work /a break in work. Space and time apart from being formal or informal may also serve inclusion or exclusion which is discussed in the following section.

### **Space exclusion/inclusion**

At all three settings some examples of spatial exclusion and inclusion were found. Across the three schools under study staffrooms were set up as spaces for teachers to spend their lunch breaks and potentially for staff to integrate. The staffroom space was the most obvious example of both spatial exclusion and inclusion at the three settings which resonates with the way the staffroom has been portrayed in literature as a space exclusive to teachers and providing isolation /separation from students as well as an opportunity for staff integration (Chapter 2). However, my study also shows that the staffroom does not just serve staff integration – it can provide an arena for exclusion amongst staff too. This exemplifies the power aspect of staffroom space (Paechter 2004; McGregor 2003; 2004; Kainan 1994).

### **Inclusion despite exclusion**

Although Richards (1996) disagrees with spatial separation being a prerequisite for backstage, the example of small offices at Devon College shows that sometimes backstage requires some spatial separation. Devon College teachers identified separation of the small offices with safety from those who did not belong to their cliques. That safety entailed more relaxed behaviour including humour within the offices. Separation from non-clique members facilitated integration with the cliques. Both the group interview and individual interviews revealed really close networks and friendships within the offices. Staff at Devon College were allocated spaces and they did not have a choice as to which office to work in. Teachers were mainly grouped by the subject taught. The imposed separation (locating people in the offices) resulted in formation of close-knit well-integrated groups, for example:

Interviewer: You don't have a choice really do you?

Will: Not really no. I would um, I'd been dumped in with Richard and a guy called Thomas in an office down that end and then last year, we were told, Richard and I were told we were moving to Ian's office. We were a bit disappointed to leave the office there, because it was quite convenient, students knew where we were, it was often a good way of catching students as they came out of the refectory, and we felt we weren't going to have that advantage up there. The three of us were good friends before that anyway, and as it happens we all had health issues and we, so it worked out quite well, and I think that was why we were put together. It was the departing head of [inaudible] put us together, I think that he had in mind that we'd be good moral support for each other, and that's worked out brilliantly.

Interview with Will, Devon College

The choice of word 'dumped' suggests no control over choice of working space. But this example shows how exclusion led to closer inclusion of people that found themselves in the same office. This expands Mawhinney's (2012) point about teachers' willingness and adaptability to make their own restorative places.

My study shows that integration at Devon College happened not just within but also across the small offices. Staff paid each other visits or, in Mawhinney's (2012) terms, 'migrated', often on business, in the course of discussing some work related-issues, staff socially integrated. Teachers, rather than meeting in the staffroom (where there was more

space and more people could fit), met in each other's small offices. Although the purposes of those visits were usually serious, more light-hearted conversations and humour exchanges also happened during the visits:

Michael: To be honest, a lot of our sort of contact with each other is on the fly, so like an hour ago, Greg, he's the other chemistry teacher, he came by and he just, he literally popped in for five minutes. Sometimes um I find I need to go next door and ask Claire something. I'll go and ask her what I want but then we'll have a laugh as well, joke about something for five minutes as well.

Individual interview with Michael, Devon College

Michael shows that integration with colleagues does not need to be separated from work issues, does not require a special space or time. Being in the staffroom in contrast to the office requires greater separation from work, Richard (Devon College) explained to me. It may be that teachers prefer to socialise while working rather than away from work. They may find social integration as a by-product of work conversation more justified in the workplace. It is also a more convenient and desirable integration, as people chose whose office to visit whereas everyone (staff-wise) is allowed into the staffroom and so integration within a small circle may be interrupted by others.

Due to different timetables it would be impossible to find one time slot when all the staff wishing to meet could meet in the staffroom at Devon College. Thus visiting each other in the offices is easier, although it probably means interrupting one's own and/or someone else's work or lunch. Sharing of others' space can temporarily change that space into a backstage both for hosts and visitors, becoming a 'talking space where people have conversations within or between work times' (Solomon et al 2006, p. 7). It shows that 'relational' space (McGregor 2004) matters more than actual physical space as the relationships between people create a space across and beyond fixed, delimited spaces. It is what Goffman calls 'symbolic' space — space between people. Furthermore, Devon College

staff's integration 'on business' in the offices is better camouflaged than integrating in the staffroom (away from computers, work papers etc.). Teachers mentioned control and surveillance as detrimental to social life in the workplace. Thus, being seen as working may have been a priority for some teachers, as Ian (Devon College) explains in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: I have the impression that only a fraction of the school, college staff comes here for lunch break.

Ian: That's right. Yeah.

Interviewer: So where they are during lunch break?

Ian: Most of them are in their offices working.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Ian: Because the pressures of the place and the demands of the place tend to go and make people insecure about their jobs and if they... Sometimes I think that they feel if they're not seen to be working then people will go and question them.

Individual interview with Ian, Devon College

This example shows that separation from work to integrate with others and have a break is not desirable or is not thought of as desirable. This implies that spatial separation into offices allows people to avoid potential accusations of moving away from work tasks. The staffroom is opposed to the office as a space serving separation from work. Thus being seen in the staffroom space effectively means 'not working'. Staffroom space does not contain any work facilities such as computers, printers or books so it is clearly not designated as work space. Those work facilities serve as elements of frontstage in the office space. Keeping the frontstage by means of surrounding front props helps to camouflage and lessen the impact of backstage behaviour in the office. Office separation can facilitate concentration on work and as mentioned earlier does not exclude staff integration. The example of the Kapack company in Plester's (2007) study shows that some people were anxious about taking time out for joking and laughter as that would be perceived as informal or not working hard enough. Joking as a peripheral, out-of-character and unofficial communication in the

workplace thus clashes with the expectations and requirements of workplace, however, some teachers across all three settings mentioned humour as not reserved just for the backstage but also part of frontstage, and so in-character and official communications with students, managers or head teacher.

### Exclusive inclusion

The fact of having individual offices at Devon College hampered integration with other staff members, however some participants did not feel the need to go out and meet new people. It was therefore their individual choice not to integrate with others. Participants referred to the other campus of their college to illustrate how different layout can influence integration.

Thomas : (...) Now over the other campus they seem to be better set up, it's a more friendly, it's like a little hole, the seated area. Have you been to the other campus?

The other side? It's quite large the canteen and there's quite a big area set up.

Interviewer: Well I've never been there but I've heard of it, so.

Thomas: It's quite a big area set aside for staff.

Interviewer: But apparently they don't have small offices there?

Thomas: Ah, yes and no.

Interviewer: So that's why they spend their time in the staffroom.

Thomas: Yes and no, depends upon what department they're with.

Interviewer: Oh right, but not everyone has got an office.

Thomas: No, sometimes they're just perched in corridors, but mainly I mean, not everyone's as well appointed as we are just down here, in other parts of the college, like in Richard's corridor there will be groups of ten to twenty people.

Individual interview with Thomas, Devon College

Being isolated in offices may prevent people from integrating with others and using the staffroom but instead can foster intra-departmental integration like in McGregor's (2003) study. Having frontstage (work space) and backstage (relaxation space) within a single space of the office may prevent staff from looking for and needing other spaces to be used as

backstage. But it is not the only reason why people do not integrate. Thomas also mentioned size and friendliness of set-up as factors making the staffroom at the other campus more attractive. It is therefore not certain that simply lack /removal of offices would dramatically change the staff integration at Devon College.

### Exclusive and inclusive humour

The use of humour in small offices at Devon College and the staffroom at Albatros exemplifies how safe spaces with well-integrated staff can be a prerequisite for unsafe and exclusive humour. The offices were seen by participants as little safety asylums where they were able to practice humour that would seem inappropriate and possibly offensive outside of those spaces. Safe spaces, in Goffmanian terms, are backstages. What some participants referred to as their own, informal, safe space/time was the space/time where they can freely joke about formal issues of work. Those formal issues were de-formalised by means of humour. This is similar to Woods (1979) who presents the staffroom as teachers' space and an arena for laughter but the staffroom humour he discusses is often work-related (e.g. senior personnel and pupils are the targets of jokes). The example of Devon College offices resonates with Bullough (2012) who argues for the need of safe spaces for both teachers and students (where dark and light humour coexist). Especially at Devon College such safe humour spaces (offices) were seen as essential for teachers' well-being, with 'relationships that are simultaneously playful but also richly challenging and mostly honest' (Bullough 2012, p.291). However, they did not meet the important criterion of the aforementioned safe spaces, as they were not spaces of dialogue between people representing contending interests (Mayo 2010, in Bullough 2012). The Devon College offices thus represent safe spaces because they are separated from those they laugh and complain about (e.g. management); and because they are used for social and emotional support (Mawhinney 2007). Although Devon



College participants also use humour to challenge (provoke, insult) each other, they do so within their own closed circle.

As for the Albatros staffroom, the main jokers treated the staffroom as an arena for testing others' humour adaptability to the workplace which suggests a political dimension to staffroom space, which is in line with McGregor's (2004) study. At Albatros there were also staff members who enjoyed the main jokers' humour and used the staffroom to interact and integrate with the staff. Interestingly, despite it being a selection area<sup>33</sup>, the Albatros staffroom was highly populated and represented a central space for staff integration. This is similar to the staffroom described by Kainan (1994) that was also a space of contrasting functions as it served as an arena for teachers' cooperation and competition. However, at Albatros it was about competing (humorously) with each other to cooperate. In Goffmanian terms, the staffroom at Albatros had features of both back and frontstage. It served as a backstage when teachers chatted with each other, laughed, joked, relaxed and ate their lunch but when humour was used or interpreted as an exclusion device (Albatros suitability check) the staffroom served as a place of 'doing' the front. The doing of the front lay in backstage exclusion via humour having its consequences beyond the staffroom, in the frontstage. Here the line of backstage/frontage was the line of being accepted or rejected. Similarly to the informal company in Plester's (2009) study, humour at Albatros serves as an identity-building tool for some and meant exclusion for others. All three factors: space, humour and time lead to exclusion of some people from others and organising them into audience and performers.

The image of the Albatros staffroom as mainly inclusive or exclusive depended on individuals and their perception of people and interactions among them and thus was relative.

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<sup>33</sup> The staffroom was used to test the suitability of new employees, see Chapter 3.

Fulfilling opposing functions at times, balancing between front and back, the staffroom was a hybrid space.

### Need of separation

Although Goffman saw the staffroom as an obvious backstage in educational settings (Richards 1996) in my study the small offices in Devon College fulfilled the role of temporary backstages without being ‘externally labelled’ (McCormick et al 2011) as such by those higher up as a space of informal use. The safety of small offices was often contrasted with the staffroom space. Michael in the example below explains the differences between those spaces:

Michael: One thing I suppose I could say is that because it’s so close to the canteen, in terms of being in a place away from you know, your work role, it’s not that great, cause you’ve got two doors one here and one at the other side where students are always walking past, and that door at the end is often open, so you’re still exposed, you know you’re still out... to an extent.

Individual interview with Michael, Devon College

What this example shows is that if a space is not separated enough, people are unable to integrate well enough within such space. It thus does not qualify as backstage since the audience can glance in. The two doors (with windows inside), one leading to the canteen and the other to a corridor, make the staffroom space neither open nor closed. Ian (Devon College) compared the staffroom to a doctor’s waiting room, which suggests it is an intermediate space, as opposed to a target site, which is in line with Paechter (2004) and Kainan (1994). A different location and layout would have changed the meanings attached to that space by some teachers who simply consider their offices more backstage – like than any other space in the college. Exploring it further, in the context of Devon College it represents neither a full spatial exclusion, nor does it allow for uninterrupted inclusion. The

exclusionary layout of Devon College (i.e. small offices) adds to exclusion beyond the offices. For instance, people who I observed in the staffroom (the group sitting together at one table) were mostly people working together in same offices. So although they were leaving their offices and coming to the staffroom during break time, they integrated within their exclusive group. Thus they were just relocating themselves, moving the symbolic backstage from one space to another by travelling there in the circle of friends who constituted their backstage. It may be that the spatial segregation into offices at Devon College etched itself onto them. At Devon College in particular both space and time – separation enforced some work relationships.

#### Having time for using space

Time–space relationship is particularly evident in the case of educational settings. Studies by Plester (2007), Lynch (2009) and Stromberg and Karlsson (2009) did not take into consideration time as a determinant of space use because open-space workplaces provide more opportunities for interaction among employees. At Devon College, the opportunities to integrate were not just limited by the office separation and distance between some offices or/and staffroom but also by different timetables for different staff members. The lack of fixed lunch time for all teachers at Devon College introduced another level of separation. In the light of that, the integration within the small offices seem convenient, opportunistic and most available space and time-wise. My study supports McGregor's (2004) claim that time and space at schools are closely linked; the timetable being a distributor of bodies, resources and curriculum time. In my study at all three settings participants often referred both to space and time issues when talking about social interaction with their colleagues, for example:

Zara: Maybe a bit more interaction would be nice (Interviewer laughs), but it's just having the time, everybody having the time.

There is an important point here of whether synchronisation of fixed back time (lunch break) with fixed backstage is more conducive to developing backstage behaviour. At all three settings, but most visibly at Devon College, this synchronisation was not always necessary to develop a temporary backstage interaction. This indicates the existence of individual backstage behaviour.

Teachers' time availability is linked to their availability as colleagues. Several teachers across the three settings mentioned staying with the students after the lessons as a reason for not having a break or/and a factor impeding their social integration with other staff. My study shows that the pattern presented in the work of Kainan (1994) where the bell signals the end of the lesson and teachers quickly move from classroom to staffroom can be disrupted by teachers having to stay with some pupils during the break. Thus front can be extended in teachers' back time changing the back time into front time. Smooth separation from students and thus integration with staff is therefore not always possible. This is linked to the very nature of teaching; teachers spending more time with students than with colleagues. My study supports the idea that teachers' integration during work is particularly challenging as teachers are isolated from other staff in classrooms (Mawhinney 2007). Paul (Lingua) found it hard to talk about interactions between teachers because teachers do not have much chance to interact with each other.

### Relational space

Across all three settings work relationships are formed within space and in spite of space and people take an active part in formation of work relationships within and despite different spatial boundaries, which confirms that relationships create spaces (Solomon et al 2006)

which Goffman (1959) calls symbolic spaces. At all three settings it was relationships that determined the use of space. In other words, it was not where they were interacting that mattered most but with whom they spent their time. The integration at Devon College, Albatros and Lingua depends solely on neither space nor time but foremost on relationships formed within certain spaces at certain times. This resonates with McGregor's (2004) claim of space being not just a container of interactions but having a relational dimension too. The example of Devon College offices shows how office space designated as frontstage (work spaces) may also serve as backstage due to the relationships between people occupying that space. Although confined space may enforce formation of relationships, there were cases at Devon College where exclusion happened within exclusive office spaces, for example:

Zara: Yeah, yeah, I do know some lecturers who have sort of fallen out with people in their offices and it can get quite like, uncomfortable, and especially for other people in the office as well, if you've got two people who have fallen out and everyone else is just feeling awkward, it can be bad. It doesn't happen often.

Individual interview with Zara, Devon College

Although there was a case when people who disliked each other were moved, Zara noted that such conflicts can be difficult to resolve as there is not a lot of room in the college to move people. The lack of space to transfer people who do not get on with each other well can be an obstacle for inclusion and can foster exclusion. Besides, there might be an expectation that adults should be able to work together. The example of Thomas who got moved from one office to another due to reorganisation shows that exclusion can have different sources.

#### Swapping one isolation for another

Mawhinney (2007) writes that the staffroom provides a space where teachers can escape isolation experienced in the classroom, however, it can be swapping one type of isolation for

another. Teachers isolate themselves from students and so work to integrate with their colleagues. This does not mean that staff integration was happening solely at the staffrooms at the three settings. My study supports the findings of the study by Mawhinney (2007) that shows that staff can integrate in spatial isolation from others, in their own small groups, in different rooms.

Taking advantage of spatial separation to reach better integration amongst the selected people is also found in my study. However, in contrast to the study by Mawhinney (2007) where staff created different lunch groups in different spaces in the absence of a staffroom, my study shows how staff use other spaces for integration despite having staffrooms. For instance, the exam office at Albatros where three females<sup>34</sup> worked was a space where social interaction happened albeit mainly between themselves. They were rarely visited for social reasons by other staff members but they also did not participate, or did so rarely, in the staffroom life. In that sense, they were both excluded spatially and maintained this exclusion. This exclusion, however, allowed them to develop closer relationships with each other. In their office they created a backstage on their own terms, unlike in the staffroom. As for Lingua, smokers integrated in the outdoor space behind the building. Thus smoking as a backstage behaviour, not allowed in front and banned in educational settings (see Hargreaves 2001) was practised away from the non-smokers and outside the setting.

At Devon College, some staff went for walks during break times, some sat outside on the picnic benches, in the canteen or in their offices. This shows the existence of different backstages within one setting. They can be chosen by an individual depending on what, who, when a person wants to be separated from, how they best relax and what activity/space helps them to drop their front. Spatially speaking, staff at Devon College had many more options to integrate than staff at Albatros or Lingua. However, Devon College had the biggest number

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<sup>34</sup> One was an ex-teacher at Albatros, one was a teacher at Albatros and the other one has always worked in Albatros as an administration person.

of staff and was the biggest size-wise out of the three settings which could hinder integration of all staff. Some participants at Devon College admitted that despite working many years in the same workplace they did not know many of their colleagues as there are so many staff working in the college. This could, however, be related not just to the number of staff but also the isolating character of the teaching profession (Mawhinney 2007). Smaller settings could potentially foster inclusion and prevent exclusion by seeming cosy, accessible and manageable. However, at all three settings, despite their size, some examples of spatial and social exclusion were found. For instance, the location of admin staff on the ground floor and teaching/management on the first floor at Albatros could be seen as spatial separation that enforces both social integration among people of the same work roles and exclusion from people having different work roles. There was just one admin person attending the staffroom, it could be said that staffroom did not serve as a space to integrate all the staff. Maggie (Albatros) exemplifies the space as network determinant in the following way:

Interviewer: How would you describe friendship groups among staff members?

Maggie: Um, I don't really think there are friendship groups, I think there's departmental groups, so depending on the department you work in, that's more of a friendship you might strike up.

Interviewer: So Teachers with teachers? Admin with admin?

Maggie<sup>35</sup>: Teachers with teachers. There's the downstairs admin, there's the courses department, where Robert is, he is upstairs in the courses department admin so they've got quite a close friendship, there's us in the exam office three of us, so we've got quite a close friendship, because we work together 8, 9 hours a day. Um, those are the people that you get to know.

Individual interview with Maggie, Albatros

Although space may act as a facilitator for some networks and obstacle for others, the example of Devon College staff integrating across offices despite the spatial boundaries of

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<sup>35</sup> Maggie was first a teacher at Albatros and then she started working in the exam office.

office division shows that social integration can happen despite spatial separation. As the study by Plester (2007) shows, the subgroups are also created within open plan offices. Plester's (2007) study shows that there are other factors than space also determining exclusion and inclusion at workplace such as team/ departmental divisions, specific work tasks, demographic factors or a shift work system.

### Dynamic use of space

Employees actively construct their backstages within and across spaces serving as front and backstages. Thus space is dynamic rather than static and completed (McGregor 2004). The dynamic nature of spaces can be exemplified by the relocation of Lingua and its consequences for staff's integration. When I first came to Lingua, they were located in the old Victorian house. When they were in the process of moving to a big freshly renovated building, they organised the staffroom upstairs. It was both a staffroom and a manager's office. The manager was working on her computer in the corner, there was a big table covered with work papers in the centre of the room and a big bookshelf with English language books on the side. So the frontstage of the manager was also designated as a backstage for staff. The old layout did not allow for full social integration as it was a workspace too, and so a hybrid space. There was no designated space within the old staffroom that was set up as a relaxation area. Even I as a researcher, when conducting my pilot observations, had mixed feelings about that place and felt awkward sitting at the table behind the manager who was working. Julia (Lingua) confirmed that it was more an exclusive than inclusive space. The example of Lingua's old staffroom shows that different status and power relationships were present within that space, and meanings associated with that space prove that some spatial delimitation may be helpful in knowing how to use a space.



When I came to conduct the study at Lingua, the staffroom was organised downstairs. It was a kitchen with a table and bar stools and it was not used or intended as a workspace and thus acted more as a backstage than frontstage. Teachers did not miss the old layout and seemed pleased with the kitchen-as-staffroom solution.

### Virtual space

Not all space at the workplaces under analysis was physical and tangible. At all three settings the existence and use of virtual space was noted. McGregor (2004) refers to the example of the Internet as a social space. It is a space without physical boundaries and it can go beyond the work's space and time. Lingua staff for instance use Facebook for social interaction (occasionally emails) and at Devon College and Albatros staff uses email as an alternative but not-frequently-used communication space. When I last spoke to Robert (Albatros) they were planning to create an online forum on the Albatros website to foster the staff's integration. However, he seemed aware of some dangers of virtual staff integration:

Robert: (...) what we're also talking about – this might be of interest to you – is having a staff portal, where we communicate with each other online rather than having to have regular meetings. We feel that we still need to know when each other's on holiday, when we've done something... We're thinking of this, to create a positive impression of all our roles, is that we can post something on this portal for all the staff to see when they log in. That today you've signed a contract with such-and-such, and that this group of students are coming, and that's good news. Or we could post something humorous perhaps.

Interviewer: But isn't it moving away from face-to-face interaction?

Robert: Yeah, it is, isn't it?

Interviewer: Can it replace it?

Robert: Well, I wonder if you've noticed this. The people at this college, as it stands at the moment, are excellent at communicating face-to-face about informal, social things, but they become very poor about communicating about work-related things face-to-face. People have come to rely on electronic communication, and that's part of the problem that we're trying to overcome at the moment is that lack of awareness of each other at the moment, as a human, as well as a colleague, so I think it would be good not to rely on a portal, but it might be the only way that we can actually share a lot of data that we need to share to make sure everyone is in the loop of communication.

This expands Karlsson's (2004) idea of school sites and spatial practices being used politically to produce particular situations and moves it beyond the school's physical building. What Robert proposes seems to be a strategic way of integrating staff in a virtual back space for better work-related communication in the actual front space. He treats humour as a possibility (peripheral activity) which indicates that a staff portal will be a virtual extension of actual frontstage. Thus this integration will consist of an exchange of information belonging to frontstage thus contributing to team and not clique building.

#### Beyond school spaces

Not only were virtual spaces used by the study participants, but outdoor spaces were also mentioned at all three settings. However, the use of those spaces was determined by time of year and weather. Robert (Albatros) for instance mentioned the roof terrace as an extra integrative space apart from the staffroom at Albatros. However, the roof terrace was only used in the summer. Outdoor spaces can serve both integration among a group going for a walk or sitting outside and also provide a physical separation from the workplace building.

There were also occasions when staff integrated away from the workplace but not during lunch break but after work. Pub spaces and parties were used by Lingua staff to socialise after work. This may indicate some need for separation from work both spatially and temporally to integrate. What is more, it gives staff the opportunity to find temporary backstage beyond the work setting and breaks down the within-workplace barriers (McCormick et al 2011). However, the full detachment from work among work colleagues may not be possible as there are always, as Solomon et al (2006) suggest, 'traces of' work even in non-work space.

The fact that Lingua staff wanted to meet outside of work meant that their integration was not imposed by sharing the same workspace. However, according to Julia (Lingua) such integration spots were exclusionary for her as a tee-totaller. On the other hand, a full inclusion of staff at any setting may be just an illusion as there always can be someone who either feels excluded or excludes themselves from the rest.

To sum up, spatial and temporal inclusion and exclusion in the workplace are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, my study shows that they are closely related, as for example the inclusion of some people automatically entails their exclusion from others and yet does not eliminate internal within-group exclusion. The discussion about inclusion and exclusion and their relation to space and time issues points to a social and individual aspect of space and time.

### **Social/individual spaces**

Amongst the spaces and times designated for inclusion, used for inclusion or exclusion, treated as more formal or more informal, people make individual or social choices as to if and how to use them. This section discusses staff's reasons for and against the use of staffrooms at the three settings to explore how people arrived at their decisions.

Staffroom set up/layout or design was one of the reasons some people used the staffrooms and others did not. This means that the same spatial factor was encouraging the use of the staffroom for some of the staff and discouraging for others. What adds to the complexity of the space usage is that some people who did not sit in the staffroom during lunch break still were able to see it as an inviting space, encouraging to use:

Jerry: It's encouraging because it's quite small, particularly in the summer, it gets very very busy in there because you get a lot of the teachers. Um, I mean obviously well, it doesn't necessarily mean that you stay in the staffroom, you might use the

kitchen facilities and then continue any work that you need to ...but it's an encouraging space but it can be small in the busy times.

Individual interview with Jerry, Albatros

For some, work commitments was a reason for not coming to the staffroom and others used this space to work. Ian (Devon College) found it discouraging to go to the staffroom not only because of its design and layout, but also because some people treated it as workspace and used it for work-related meetings. The reasons given by staff in favour of and against staffroom usage reveal the relativity of individual preferences. Decisions as to whether to use or not use the staffroom can be made and remade, they are not permanent and fixed. People may on occasions enjoy going to the staffroom or decide to stop using it after a while. Many participants gave several different reasons as to why they use or they do not use it which reveals the complexity of staffroom usage. Having no time, for instance, meant either not wanting/needing to use it (being unwilling to make time) or having work commitments. Some had alternative spaces to go to during lunch time and work commitments and lacked time to go to the staffroom. My study shows that staff were not simply passive and spatially distributed or constrained by work politics, workload and time but made individual active choices as to when and where they wanted to socialise, eat their lunch and how they wanted to spend their lunch breaks. Those choices were made 'around' various constraints and not necessarily regardless of them or in line with them. This expands McGregor's (2000; 2003) claim of time constraining teachers' usage of staffroom by showing that time constraints can actually be an oversimplified explanation of more complex issues and individual choices.

The fact that there are spaces provided for teachers to eat lunch or relax does not mean that they have time to use them. The causal link between time and space is evident in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: There's one thing I don't get, and we need to clarify it.

Richard: Yeah.

Interviewer: We've got a huge staffroom here, comfy chairs, and you still prefer to chat and joke within your tiny, tiny office, rather than come out of the office, make – how many steps, five, six steps? – go here, sit with your colleagues, invite the lovely women you like to visit in the office and joke together. How do you explain that?

Richard: It's the time. If you've got half an hour for lunch, and a lot of us have only got half an hour for lunch, you know, you can do the banter, you can eat, and you can read the emails, and you can prepare for your next lecture, and you can do that in the half hour.

#### Individual interview with Richard, Devon College

Richard finds time influencing the decision to stay in the office and using the office to do the backstage. Participants at Devon College contrasted their situation with that of admin staff, seeing them as having time to sit, chat and joke in the staffroom and so to use it as a backstage in back time. This is line with Hargreaves' (1994) distinction between the monochromic time perspective of admin staff and polychromic time perspective of teachers. This may explain the domination of admin and marketing staff during lunch breaks in the staffroom at Lingua. Some teachers across all three settings used lunch breaks as a time to catch up with work tasks and to eat lunch; socialising and joking was squeezed in that time slot rather than being allocated separate space and time. They were trying to carry out their work without neglecting the social aspect of work. They used frontstage and front time (so not lunch breaks in the staffroom) to squeeze some of the backstage behaviour in.

Some like Ed or Barbara (Devon College) would rather have had shorter lunch breaks and be back home earlier. Ed said that cutting social time at work means going home earlier. Some teachers at Lingua who only worked half days (mornings only) did not have a lunch break in the staffroom but went straight home. The choice between socialising with colleagues and leaving work earlier it is not necessarily a choice between being social or not

but rather prioritising free time or other commitments over work time or time at work. It may be also about prioritising home life (which can also be social life) over social life at work. This is inevitably linked to changes in the teaching profession, where what used to be ‘free time’ (relaxation time) is now preparation time, group time, individual time, planning time (Hargreaves 1994). And so the back time has been politically managed and transformed into front time. This leads to questioning the notion of free time at work. For instance, the idea of lunch time as free time was contested by Luke (Albatros) who, although using staffroom space and lunch time to relax and joke with colleagues, said it is not really free time as they are still in ‘work mode’ even in the staffroom at lunch and away from work tasks. So the free time at work is not as free as time beyond work but is freer – as one can do things (eating, chatting with colleagues) that are difficult or impossible to do when performing work tasks (e.g. teaching). Some times at work are hybrid as they encompass elements of back and frontstage (e.g. chatting with a colleague while preparing lesson materials or eating while marking).

Some individual preferences as to how to spend lunch breaks are less social than others, my study shows. Robert (Albatros) spends his lunch breaks at the local gym, Michael (Devon College) enjoys watching a comedy show on YouTube on his own in his office and Lisa (Lingua) likes spending lunch breaks at her desk in the teachers’ lounge. They take ownership of their time and choose to spend their lunch break in a way that suits them best, even if it excludes or limits opportunities for socialising with colleagues. Michael finds that watching a comedy show is a better way of turning off than going to the staffroom where there is the potential of being exposed to other teachers’ moaning about students and teaching.

The complexity of reasons given in favour of and against staffroom usage might be related to the fact that spaces within schools are unreflective and inconsiderate of the

complexities of today's teacher's role and work (Bissel 2004 and McNamara, Murray and Jones 2013). This is particularly evident in the case of Devon College's staffroom that is seen by participants as badly located, unappealing in design, layout and furniture and unsafe. It represents 'lost opportunities to create spaces for teachers to build social and formal relationships with teacher colleagues based on trust and cooperation' (Bissel 2004, p.32).

At all three settings teachers who, for whatever reason, did not attend staffrooms or did so rarely, found some other space-time solutions for their lunch breaks and socialising. This may indicate, similarly to Mawhinney's study (2012), the staff's ability and determination to have some back time and backstage at workplace.

The staff in all three settings actively took part in finding both time and space for individual and social purposes. Participants' choices as to how and where to spend lunch breaks were often impacted by time management.

## **Summary**

My study shows that space is temporally, politically, relationally and individually shaped and re-shaped but foremost, is relative. It shows that at times some spaces may serve both inclusion and exclusion in relation to different people (depending on individuals, their relations, power statuses). Similarly, whether a space/time is more or less informal depends on whether the relationships (also power relationships) between people occupying that space are informal or formal and how individuals perceive that space. This confirms that meaning ascribed to spaces by their users is more important than being designated by any external labelling (McCormick et al 2011). Also, whether a space/time is social or individual depends on how people want/need to use it. Therefore it is mainly relativity of space and time that makes staffrooms as well as lunch times hybrid spaces/time.

Many spaces and times at the three settings under analysis are ‘hybrid’ in the sense that they are neither solely formal nor informal; neither back nor front. Whenever a space serves as both front and backstage, both front and back behaviours are applied. Depending on time and relationships with the people who share that space, a person switches to either front or back behaviour or displays both but in relationship to different people. The existing actual boundaries of spaces (designated staffrooms, offices) and times (lunch times) are transgressed by individuals, giving them their own symbolic and sometimes contrasting meanings and uses. It also shows that staff at all three settings actively rather than passively use and manage different spaces and times in the workplace and beyond it.

Participants are conscious of ‘political’ and ‘relational’ aspects of space and time (McGregor 2004) and work ‘around’ the temporal and spatial politics (timetables, designated staffrooms). They have flexibility and control over how they use space and time as back or frontstages according to the necessities of the moment (Hargreaves 1994). Staffrooms are therefore just one of the spaces and lunch time one of the times being used for interaction between teachers in the settings under analysis which contrasts with some of the literature presenting these spaces and times as central for interaction between teachers (see Chapter 2).

The very portrayal of the staffroom as a central space for teachers’ interactions was the reason I conducted my research there. My study shows decentralisation and dispersion of interaction between teachers possibly linked to the changes in the teaching profession discussed in Chapter 1. The dispersion of interaction between teachers in the workplace is in line with McGregor’s (2003; 2004) and Mawhinney’s (2007) studies that show complexity of use of space for interactions between teachers.

As for humour, humour in relation to space and time reveals its relative nature. It can facilitate both spatial inclusion and exclusion depending on how it is used, by whom and how it is interpreted by the humour recipient. Furthermore, my study shows that the sheer



presence or absence of humour (both verbal and non-verbal) is not a straightforward delimiter of informal or formal space/time. It is rather the type of humour (less or more extreme) used that indicates informal or formal relationships with people and makes the space/time used for the interactions more formal or more informal. And again, whether humour can informalise a formal space/time is subject to the individual's interpretation. Finally, humour does not just feature in social gatherings such as lunch break in the staffroom (as I assumed when designing this study) but can also be a part of different individuals' ways of spending time and using space. Humour happens in both actual and virtual space and so is not confined temporally or spatially although it is contextualised by given space and time.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This chapter provides a conclusion to the thesis. Firstly, it presents the key research findings. Secondly, it discusses how my research contributes to an understanding of workplace humour in educational settings. Thirdly, it presents the research limitations. Finally, it outlines recommendations for further research.

### **Key findings**

My study presents the researcher's use of humour in humour research as both a result of various expectations of humour research and a hybrid situation where frontstage and backstage come together and are difficult to separate.

My use of humour with participants helped negotiate access to the researched setting, facilitate data collection and build a rapport with participants. However, my use of humour with participants also posed certain challenges that were linked to the complexity of the studied subject, mine and participants' expectations of research and method limitations.

The difficulties experienced when researching humour come from the very characteristics of the humour phenomenon. The dynamics between humour initiator, recipient and sometimes also humour target are complex, as people may have different humour preferences and different humour boundaries. The subjectivity of humour determines if its

reception is successful. As humour depends on context, intentions behind humour and reactions to humour proved difficult to understand on occasions potentially leading to misinterpretations.

The risks associated with data being affected by my use of humour with participants depended on the different stages of the research process. Humour used with participants during data collection both gave an opportunity for facilitating data collection and affected data more than humour used pre and post data collection. Researcher–participants’ humour used throughout different stages of research process helped to construct and nurture the rapport and relationships between myself and participants but on occasions it also contested those relationships. Contesting relationships happened when boundaries were crossed, unintentionally or intentionally. These situations unveiled complex power dynamics between researcher and participants.

Humour at all three settings was of particular importance for informal workplace relationships. However, it also occurred in relationships that were neither formal nor informal-hybrid relationships. It was found that the type of a relationship influences the type of humour used by different people at the workplace. Familiarity played a major role in participants’ choices as to whom to joke with and how. Both unfamiliarity and overfamiliarity represent unsafe ends of the familiarity scale. Crossing the boundaries of humour introduces some vulnerability on the part of humour initiator or/and humour recipient or/and humour target. The link between overfamiliarity (assuming too much familiarity) and use of humour exposed power imbalances in unequal relationships.

My study shows that the distinctive characteristics of humour used at each setting provide important insights into workplace culture, often reflecting the work politics of a setting. Workplace humour can be either in line with beliefs, norms and values endorsed in the workplace or against them. Workplace humour was found to have three main functions as

it served to construct work relationships, nurture work relationships and contest work relationships. Constructing and nurturing workplace relationships by means of humour was found mainly between equals while contesting humour happened mainly between those of different statuses. Sometimes, however, humour becomes hybrid, transgressing those divisions, when it contests a person to nurture or construct a relationship. Such a function of humour was found mainly but not exclusively between close colleagues. Apart from hybrid relationships, my study shows the existence of the hybrid roles people assume with regard to humour when combining the role of workplace jokers with humour gatekeepers.

Space and time constitute important working conditions, having a significant impact on participants' use of humour. Space is temporally, politically, relationally and individually shaped and re-shaped. Space and time in my study are relative factors and so is humour enacted in different spaces and at different times. The relativity of space and time lies in them serving both staff's inclusion and exclusion, acting as formal and informal and reflecting both social and individual choices.

Many spaces and times are 'hybrid' as they are neither solely formal nor informal, neither back nor front. The time and types of relationships a person has with people who use a particular space determines if the person switches to front or back behaviour or displays both but in relationship to different people. What is more, my study shows decentralisation and dispersion of interaction between teachers and indicates spaces other than the staffroom and times other than lunch breaks as opportunities for interaction between teachers.

### **Contribution**

My study contributes to a better understanding of staffroom humour in several ways.

Firstly, by exploring understudied areas of staffroom humour in FE teachers' interactions, it contributes to humour research in education. Rarely discussed humour between teachers is

explored in the light of different work politics and space and time factors. This helps to situate analysed humour in the immediate context of staffroom and lunch break and the further context of work politics.

Secondly, it provides important insights into staffroom humour being a mirror of workplace culture. It also shows humour is tightly linked to work relationships and thus expands literature on workplace humour.

Exploring the familiarity processes to understand the dynamics of humour in different workplace relationships may add some insights into choices people make when using humour with some people and adjusting or avoiding humour with others. Presenting familiarity as fluid and discussing its degrees helps to uncover the relationship between different humour boundaries and the vulnerability of humour reception/interpretation.

Thirdly, my study develops Holmes and Marra's (2002) binary division of contestive and supportive humour into a continuum that emphasises opposing humour functions such as contesting to support. The hybrid nature of some humour exposes both the dynamic and complex nature of humour itself and of its most immediate context — workplace relationships.

Fourthly, it uses a new analytical framework combining the work of Goffman (1959) and Solomon et al (2006) to explore the complexities of space, time, relationships and finally humour. Goffman's concepts of back and frontstages are useful when depicting behaviours that are consistent with expectations of particular spaces and roles. They however become insufficient in situations when frontstage and backstage meet or are difficult to separate. This is when Solomon et al's (2006) idea of hybrid spaces helps to illustrate the complexity of certain behaviours or roles.

Fifthly, my study develops Solomon et al's (2006) notion of hybrid space, further showing that relationships and humour, as well as the roles some people assume, can also be

hybrid and thus escaping binary divisions. Solomon et al's (2006) idea of hybridity of space as increased by the researcher's presence is also expanded in my study which shows how the use of researcher's humour with participants adds to the hybridity of the humour research situation.

Finally, my study invites us to rethink approaches to studying spontaneous humour in the workplace. It also encourages further debate on researcher's behaviour in the field and rapport between researcher and participants. In doing so, it exceeds the humour research field and provides an original contribution to qualitative research in general. The issues of rapport and communication between researcher and researched add to a discussion about the practice of qualitative research. The potential problems such as informal relationships between researcher and participants, insider/outsider dilemmas and researcher positioning that are given particular attention in my study are reflective of the subjective and messy nature of qualitative methodology and can be applied to a variety of qualitative studies across different research contexts.

### **Limitations**

The two major limitations in my study are the researcher's effect and the scope of the study. The researcher's effect, and, more precisely, using humour with participants before, during and post data collection poses challenges for data generation, analysis and interpretation. My use of humour influenced the research data, however, I confronted its influence by in-depth reflection and intense analysis of different examples of researcher-participant humour. This confrontation allowed me to identify and explore different challenges of researching humour as well as reasons underlying those challenges. Minimising the risk of the influence of researcher's humour on the data can potentially be achieved by the researcher confining their humour during data collection to laughter and not expanding on the participants' jokes or initiating humour with participants. However, my study shows that removing the

researcher's humour from humour research is neither straightforward nor unequivocally desirable. This is due to the expectations humour research is entangled with.

The scope of my study is its second-most important limitation. Spending more time at each of the settings and interviewing more participants could have broadened my knowledge and understanding of workplace humour. This limitation was compensated for by means of a range of qualitative methods and detailed self-reflection and intense data analysis. The range of methods allowed exploration from different angles in a short time whereas self-reflection and intense data analysis deepened understanding of the studied phenomenon. What is more, concentration on selected aspects of the studied phenomenon allowed me to gain valuable insights that could have been missed in a large-scale research.

### **Future research**

Further research could investigate several aspects of workplace humour which my study leaves unexplored.

Firstly, it could include emails, Facebook, text messages as a method of humour communication among teachers within and beyond educational settings. Electronic communication could be explored as an additional to face-to-face dimension of interactions between teachers or its substitute. Humour circulated via electronic communication, although posing research challenges in terms of anonymity, confidentiality and access, can be an important source of information about workplace culture or anti-culture. Its secret and private nature may help to express risky humour that is not approved of at a particular workplace. Exploring the secrecy of electronic humour can expand the idea of the beauty of subversive humour my study emphasizes.

Secondly, observing teachers' interactions beyond the staffroom and beyond educational settings could expand knowledge about how, where and when teachers interact

with each other and whether such interactions include humour. Such data could yield important insights into the differences between teachers' interactions within and beyond their workplaces (in pubs, at private house parties, on trips). This research context is particularly worth exploring as teachers represent a specific occupation with limited opportunities for interaction with colleagues determined by both space (working in a classroom alone) and timetables. Unlike workplaces that use open spaces and those which have a lot more time flexibility, in schools finding space and time to interact with colleagues face-to-face may be difficult and so nurturing work relationships may require more effort than in other work contexts.

Thirdly, interviewing and observing teachers who are new to the workplace could contribute to an understanding of the issues of humour and familiarity. Using humour to construct work relationships as well as avoiding the use of humour with new colleagues could help explore the boundaries of humour and degrees of familiarity.

Further research could explore issues of humour and familiarity in different work contexts and across different employment statuses (part-time, full-time, novice, regular).

Interviewing management (managers, head teachers) on the other hand could provide some insights into whether humour is controlled or encouraged by management and how it is enforced and manifested. Exploration of what constitutes power across different power positions and how it impacts the use of humour in the workplace could show a more complex picture of exercising power by means of humour at workplace. It would be particularly interesting to analyse humour initiated by those of lower position towards those of higher position and how this impacts the power relationships in the workplace. Comparing employees' perceptions of employers' humour with employers' perceptions of employees' humour could also give valuable insights into the role of humour across the workplace hierarchy.



The dynamics of humour types and the power position of the humour initiator in hybrid relationships would also be worth analysing. What is more, the permanence of hybrid relationships (on what conditions they remain hybrid and when they return to formal/informal relationships status) could be explored.

Finally, it is hoped that my study opens up a discussion about the researcher's use of humour as a facilitator/ inhibitor of data collection and a way of building rapport with participants. This could be expanded by focusing on different conditions (not just time and space) for reducing risks associated with the use of researcher's humour across different research contexts and methodologies. This could invite a debate about the ethics of humour exchanges between researcher and participants at different stages of the research and issues of vulnerability of all three: the researcher, participants and the research.

My study discusses humour in researcher–participants interactions but future research could explore other behaviours of both researcher and participants that are an integral part of their communication (chit-chat, flattering, body language and physical contact). These different behaviours could be explored, similarly to humour in my study, in terms of challenges and benefits they entail for the research, the researcher and participants.

What is more, my study poses some questions about ethics with regard to informal interactions between researcher and participants. Informal interactions between researcher and participants are useful as they help contextualise and illustrate different research issues. Reporting informal interactions serves as reflexive research practice but remains unregulated for instance in terms of consent forms. My study shows that informal interactions can be treated like research data; being coded, analysed and interpreted. Future research could explore further whether and if so how such informal interactions should be documented and reported; and when it would be worthwhile to analyse such interactions alongside the research data like in case of my study.

Other questions that require further investigation are those concerning the importance and limits of the researcher's reflexivity. Debating the right dosage of reflexivity in the research could expand current discussion about whether or not to be reflexive about one's own research. Another issue my study raises is the flexibility of the researcher in adjusting to their own and participants' expectations. This invites a debate and sharing different qualitative researchers' experiences of limits of pleasing the participants and limits of facilitating the research process.

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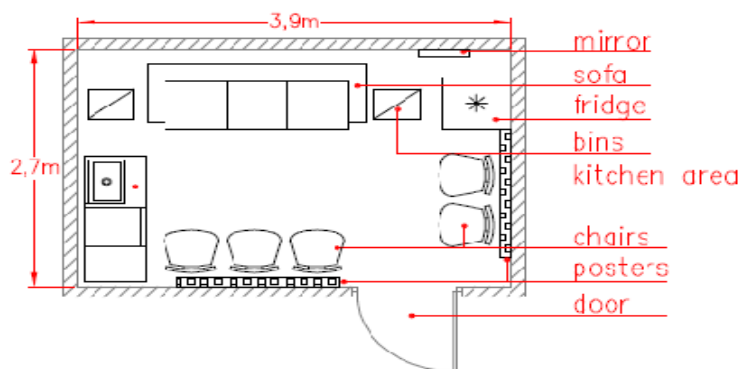


## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1a

### Layout of Albatros staffroom

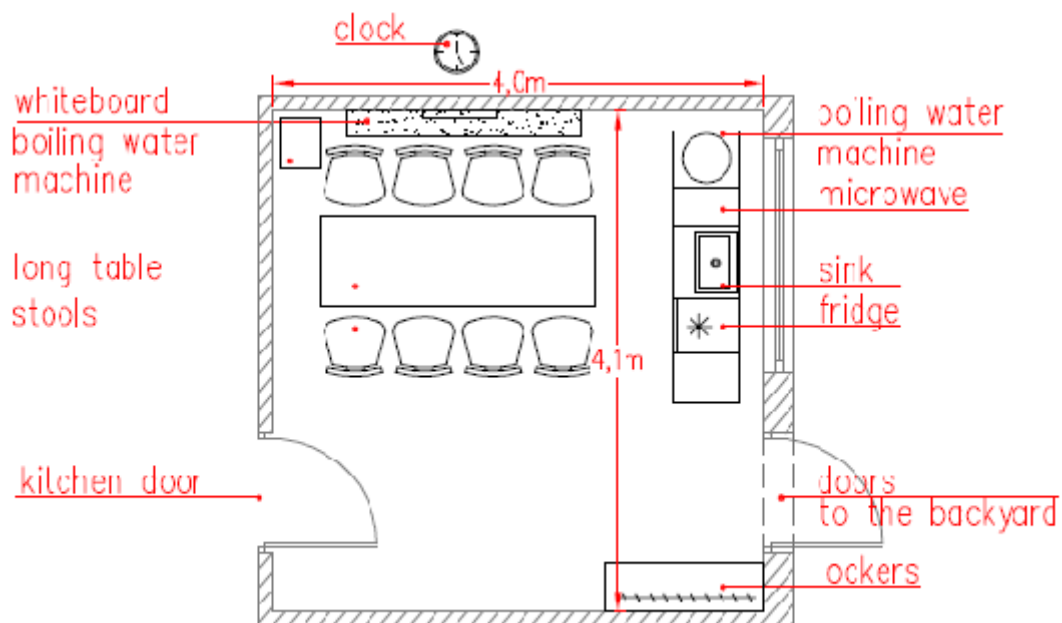
03	Staffroom
10,5m <sup>2</sup>	carpet



## Appendix 1b

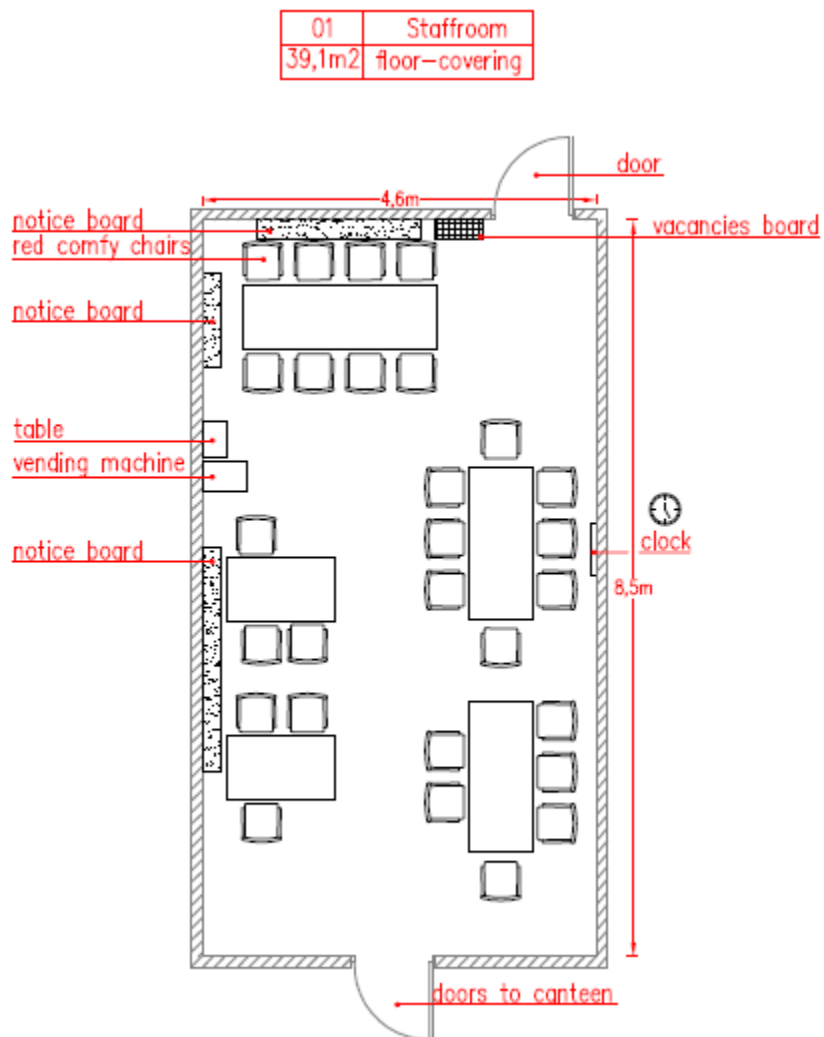
### Layout of Lingua staffroom

02	Staffroom
16,4m <sup>2</sup>	tiles



## Appendix 1c

### Layout of Devon College staffroom



## **Appendix 2a**

### Group interview schedule

1. Tell me about your experiences of humour at school
2. Are there specific times and spaces in your school where humour occurs more intensively and more frequently?
3. What kinds of humour are used by teachers?
4. Is there a particularly popular thing or topic you and other teachers frequently laugh about?
5. Have you noticed any regularities/patterns in teachers' use of humour?
  - experience
  - self-confidence
  - sociability
  - position in the school
6. Use of humour and teacher–teacher relationships –What function does humour have in teacher–teacher relationships?
7. Workplace joker – would you nominate anyone as a workplace joker?
8. Imagine a college staffroom where using humour is not only forbidden it is also penalised...
9. Are there any dangers to free use of humour among teachers?
10. What are advantages of using humour at workplace?
11. How would you classify the most frequently used type of humour at your workplace?
  - humour that helps to cope with stress
  - humour that brings people together

- humour that is a defence mechanism
- humour as a rebellion against some rules/regulations
- humour that subverts or sustains power relationships

13. Your funniest experience at the college...

## **Appendix 2b**

### Individual interview schedule

#### **Individual interviews at Devon College**

1. I had the impression that only a fraction of college lecturers come to the staffroom for a lunch break? Are there any other spaces for staff social interaction within the College? Who does not come to the staffroom during lunch break? Any particular group of lecturers?
2. I know that college lecturers have their offices in the college. How is humour in the offices different from humour in the staffroom?
3. What do you talk about during lunch break?
4. What do joke about during your lunch break with your colleagues?
5. Are there any rules with regard to eating within the College?
6. Are there any rules with regard to chatting within the College?
7. Do you have a designated safeguarded lunch hour?
8. Who would set such rules?
9. Do you receive humorous emails from other lecturers? Do you send such emails to your colleagues?
10. When it comes to social interaction among lecturers do you see any differences or patterns in the use of humour of part-time and full-time lecturers?
11. How do new lecturers integrate with the college staff?
12. How would you describe groups of friends among lecturers?
13. Is there any place in the College where you would never use certain types of humour? Are there any staff members you would never use certain types of humour with?
14. Are there any policies regarding the use of humour at this workplace?
15. Do you joke about work with your colleagues?
16. How would you describe the staffroom population?
17. How do you become a main joker in the staffroom?
18. Is there any link between the structure/layout of the staffroom and staff's use of humour in the staffroom?
19. Does your workplace have any funny artefacts (photos, memos, posters)?

## **Individual interviews at Albatros**

1. I have an impression that the majority of teachers come to the staffroom during lunch break? Are there any other spaces for staff social interaction within the College?
2. Why would some teachers not use the staffroom?
3. How do you become a main joker in the staffroom?
4. Is humour used differently by core and non-core teachers?
5. What do you do to welcome new teachers?
6. How do new lecturers integrate with the college staff?
7. Are there any humour exchanges between teachers beyond the staffroom?
8. Do you receive humorous emails from other lecturers? Do you send such emails to your colleagues?
9. I have read a lot about different companies creating different rules for the employees' use of humour. Does management set up any rules with regard to use of humour at this workplace?
10. How would you describe the staffroom population?
11. Is there any link between the structure/layout of the staffroom and staff's use of humour in the staffroom?
12. Who puts funny quotes on the posters in the staffroom?
13. What are the rules regarding adding new quotes?
14. Have ever any quote been removed?



### **Individual interviews at Lingua**

1. How do you like to spend your lunch break at the college?
2. I had an impression that your kitchen was full and lively and multilingual during lunch breaks. Is it a place for socialising at your college?
3. Do you miss your old staffroom set up?
4. Are there any other spaces for staff to relax within the College?
  
5. When I was there, there was a lot of humour in the kitchen during lunch breaks. Are there any humour exchanges between teachers beyond the kitchen?
6. Do you receive humorous emails from other lecturers? Do you send such emails to your colleagues?
7. Do you have funny artefacts (photos, memos, posters) anywhere at your workplace?
8. How do new teachers integrate with the college staff?
9. Do you stay in touch outside of school hours? Do staff organise any events to bring the staff together?
10. Is there any link between the structure/layout of the staffroom and staff's use of humour in the staffroom?

## Appendix 2c

Table 1. Research Inclusion Criteria

Relevance to the research	Albatros		Lingua		Devon College	
Different places for teacher-teacher interaction	Very small educational setting– one small staffroom, tiny corridors		Small educational setting–one kitchen that serves as staffroom, small outdoor space, teachers’ staffroom (printer room)		Big educational setting –staff have own small offices, big canteen, spacious staffroom, large corridors, outdoor picnic benches	
Different workplace relationships, different staffroom dynamics, different cultures and languages (LS2)	Several core staff and changing number of temporary staff	English spoken in staffroom	Several core staff and changing number of temporary staff plus temporary foreign apprentices	Different languages spoken in the staffroom	Permanent full- time and part-time staff, fractional, sessional, temporary and 0-hour contracts	English spoken in staffroom
Things in common, similarities vs differences in type of teaching and teacher’s role	Teachers of same subject (English)	Same manager for all teachers	Teachers of same subject (English)	Same manager for all teachers	Teachers of different subjects	Different managers for different faculties
Gender /Age differences in use of humour	Male dominated staffroom	Mixture of ages	Female dominated staffroom	Mainly young staff	Female dominated staffroom	Mixture of ages
Different numbers of staff in the staffroom, possible impact on staffroom atmosphere and job	Quiet and busy intake seasons		Quiet and busy intake seasons		Similar numbers of students all year round	

security			
Different seating arrangements, bigger staffrooms allow for creation of groups	Small staffroom 3.9m x 2.7 m	Small staffroom 4m x 4.10m	Bigger staffroom 4.6 m x 8.54 m
Different workplace culture and possible impact on workplace relationships	Mainly teachers in staffroom	Mainly admin/marketing staff in staffroom	Mixture of teachers and admin
Staffroom dynamics	No work in the staffroom	No work in the staffroom	Work happens in the staffroom
Staffroom dynamics, workplace relationships	Set lunch time	Different lunch times for admin, set lunch times for teachers	Different lunch times

## Appendix 2d

Research methods used in the study

The table below shows the alignment of research methods to each specific research question.

<b>Main question</b>	<b>Sub question</b>	<b>First phase of data collection/Methods used to collect data to answer the question</b>	<b>Second phase of data collection/Extra methods used for triangulation</b>
How do teaching staff use humour in the staffroom?	What behaviours comprise staff-room humour?	Unstructured participant observations – authentic humour examples	Individual semi-structured interviews – personal meanings attached to staffroom humour
	What are the functions and purposes of humour?	Group interview-questions 6,10,11 Unstructured participant observations and artefacts – authentic humour examples and staff reactions to humour, and teachers’ humour preferences	Individual semi-structured interviews – personal experiences of different functions and uses of humour, possibility of revealing unwanted purposes for the use of humour in the staffroom
	What are staff experiences and perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of humour?	Group interview-questions 1, 9,10,11 Unstructured participant observations – teachers’ stories (coming from my conversations with teachers in staffrooms)	Individual semi-structured interviews – individual boundaries /limitations for the use of humour and reasons for it
What influences staff’s use of humour in the staffroom?	How does humour form workplace culture within a staffroom?	Unstructured participant observations – staffroom dynamics, funny artefacts-contents and meaning, imposed prepared humour or spontaneous work of teachers	Individual semi-structured interviews – where else is a workplace culture being formed and is it done by means of humour?
	How does humour influence teacher–teacher relationships?	Unstructured participant observations -what do teachers joke about and how they react to each other’s humour?	Individual semi-structured interviews – looking for extreme cases of humour destroying relationships or separating/segregating people into different subgroups in the workplace, is a staffroom a place for all staff or is it a place where only some

			teachers meet?
	Structure/layout of the staffroom and its use	Group interview question 2 Unstructured participant observations – the use of staffroom space, creation of subgroups in the staffroom, presence of work-materials in the staffroom	Individual semi-structured interviews – opinions and examples of whether there is a link between use of humour and structure/layout of the staffroom, possibility of discovering other factors influencing staffroom humour
	Are there differences across the three settings in the way that humour is used?	Comparing group interviews, unstructured participants observations and staffroom funny artefacts	Comparing individual interviews and funny artefacts beyond the staffroom

## Appendix 2e

The educational setting	Albatros language school	Lingua language school	Devon College
Potential problems/issues seen during observations	Dominant and powerful group of jokers	Staffroom dominated by admin staff	Only a fraction of College's staff in the staffroom
Potential problems/issues revealed in group interviews	'status bullying' – the core staff annoyance with non-core staff stiffness	Overconcentration on teacher– students humour in interview could it mean not many opportunities/time for adult– adult humour?	The cultures of the small offices
Potential problems/issues revealed in staffroom funny artefact collection	The funny quotes are mainly the quotes of the core teachers	Lack of funny artefacts in the staffroom	Lack of spontaneous funny artefacts created/posted by teachers in the staffroom. Funny artefacts on the small offices doors and windows.
Issues revealed in email correspondence with participants		Changes in management / a lot of temporary interns from different countries	

## Appendix 2f

### The pilot study and verification of research tools

Before justifying and discussing the methods used in the main research, I should explain how those methods were developed. In doing so, I am intending to show how and why certain methods were chosen. When planning the pilot study and then the research methods for the study, I had the thrill of entering almost virgin territory and having the opportunity to create an innovative approach to humour research, as there was no well-designed recipe for how to conduct such research. On the other hand there was the struggle of how to make it both manageable (size and scope-wise) and deep and rich (data-wise).

I conducted a pilot study for two reasons. Firstly, it served as reconnaissance and verification of the observation and interview methods. The pilot study helped me to develop the following research tools/ideas: a justification for the group interview and the idea of funny artefact collection. Secondly, it was about gaining confidence as a humour researcher. I needed to test the ground to see how to approach people and learn how they react when being observed by a stranger.

My sample for the pilot consisted of two language educational settings in Devon. At the first educational setting (Albatros) I interviewed individually 6 staff members (each interview lasted around 20–30 minutes) and then visited the staffroom 3 times in the lunch breaks to observe (each visit lasted an hour). Before the interviews and observations started I had a very informative conversation with the educational setting's head teacher who gave me an introduction into the courses run by the educational setting, the number of teachers employed by the educational setting, the number of students attending and who answered my questions about the educational setting's staffroom routines. My main interest was whether or not it was frequently used.

At the second educational setting (Lingua) I was also introduced to the setting's life by a lady who was both a manager and a teacher there. I interviewed 4 staff members individually (an interview lasted around 20–30 minutes on average) and observed in the staffroom for 3 days during lunch breaks (each visit lasted an hour). At both educational settings, when interviewing and observing I took notes instead of audio-recording.

The pilot study helped me verify the research methods. I will firstly discuss group interviews and then move onto observations and artefact collection. Having conducted unstructured observations in the pilot study I realised that in the case of this particular research, I thought that group interviews, similar to observations, would help to unveil commonness of humour topics and humour preferences. What is more, group interviews could yield an insight into how humour impacts work relationships and workplace culture. I also hoped that group interviews would allow me to see how participants interact with each other, which to some extent revealed their relationships /attitudes towards each other. Therefore I decided that in the study I should use a group interview. However, I had to take into consideration the possible challenges of group interviews.

Interestingly I did not change the interview schedule and used the same questions in the study for group interview (see Appendix 2a). The interview schedule comprised 13 questions: the opening and closing questions create a frame as they both refer to participants' funny experiences at a workplace. Other questions concern humour kinds, space and time when humour is used, role of humour, humour topics, humour patterns, humour and work relationships, workplace jokers, humour advantages and the dangers of free use of humour which covers a great number of humour-related topics, especially if we take into consideration the fact that participants may touch on a variety of unmentioned issues since they refer to often very individual experiences. Although group interviews in the study revolved around pre-prepared questions about workplace humour, there was no strict plan as to order or timing, furthermore flexibility and spontaneity in asking additional questions was necessary as interviewees sometimes answered more than one question at once or mentioned some issues that were not on the interview schedule but were worth exploring. According to Yin (2009) case study interviews require you to operate on two levels simultaneously: satisfying the needs of the interviewer's line of inquiry and at the same time putting forth 'friendly' and 'nonthreatening' questions in the interviewer's open-ended interviews. I also decided that the group interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed. When interviewing in the pilot study I was frightened to suggest audio-recording to the participants in order not to discourage them from taking part in the research. I considered audio-recording a very intimidating procedure for participants and worried that they would avoid saying certain things being aware of the presence of a recorder. I could not be more wrong; in both educational settings staff I interviewed were very open and willing to talk about humour, gave a lot of examples of humour and opened up easily. It was taking notes and listening at the same time that caused me more trouble and due to that I may have failed to be perceived as an attentive listener as I struggled to take as detailed notes as possible and keep eye contact with my interviewee.

Finally, I should explain the emergence of the idea of collecting funny artefacts in the staffroom. The first educational setting I conducted my pilot research at had a great collection of funny quotes displayed on the wall of its staffroom. That was a collection of humorous comments/ exchanges that were said by staff members or students. Having been inspired by such a rich source of information about staffroom humour, I decided to include this research tool in my study.

The order of the methods used in the pilot study worked well and so I decided to leave interviewing participants prior to observing them as this gave me a chance to introduce myself to the participants and gave them an opportunity to become familiar with me before the observations started. This seemed crucial as being observed means being exposed and if I had started with observations straightaway I might have frightened participants and made them feel insecure in my presence which as result could have affected my access to humour used by them. As for the observations, unstructured observations in the staffroom helped me to see a general picture of staffroom life and atmosphere.

As for the scope of the study, it was also determined by the pilot study experiences. Before I started the pilot study at Albatros, the Albatros head teacher expressed his hope that the study



would not take more than few days. He was concerned or perhaps wanted to make sure that I understood that teachers should have their own space and time. He was clear that he did not want to decide for the teachers whether to join the study or not and after he gained their approval he emailed me to say that I could come and do my pilot study there. When asking him for permission to carry out the study, he again said that it would be up to teachers. I also remember him popping into the staffroom and jokingly asking me why I was still there. These experiences influenced the planned scope of the study at the three settings.

During the pilot study I also quickly noticed that humour research in the staffroom is a very demanding activity for both researcher and participants. So far almost 'untouched' by researchers, the area of the staffroom should not be ransacked but only probed by a researcher. In the very small staffrooms of the first two educational settings my presence was highly visible as I occupied one of just several seats there. Also, observing adults at their workplace during their free time may be slightly inconvenient as they wish to eat and drink and obviously talk to their colleagues which might be for some too much exposure. My main intention here was not to scare the potential participants by talking about lengthy observations and numerous interviews but rather encouraged them to participate in something brief and not too intrusive. It is a different kind of impression when the participants are relieved when the researcher leaves and when they don't mind them staying.

### Appendix 3

Themes and categories — the coding tree

<b>WORKPLACE CULTURE</b>	<b>Parent theme</b>
WORKPLACE HUMOUR	theme
Importance of humour	category
Types of humour	category
Humour topics	category
Workplace jokers	category
Humour boundaries	category
<b>HUMOUR AND RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>theme</b>
Humour and familiarity	category
Informal	code
Formal	code
Humour functions	category
Constructing relationships	subcategory
Nurturing relationships	subcategory
Social lubricant	code
By the way	code
Self-expression	code
Survival	code
Contest- to- nurture	code
Contesting relationships	subcategory
Intentional	code
Unintentional	code
<b>WORKING CONDITIONS</b>	<b>theme</b>
Work Politics	category
Attitudes to the workplace	code
Attitudes to the management	code
Attitudes to teaching	code
Organisational changes	code
Eating rules	code
Chatting rules	code
Space and Time	category

Inclusion/ exclusion	code
Formal/informal	code
Social/individual	code

<b>HUMOUR RESEARCH ISSUES</b>	<b>Parent theme</b>
<b>RESEARCHER'S BEHAVIOURS</b>	theme
Rapport	category
Joining in	code
Purposefully ignored humour	code
Flattering	code
Chit-chat	code
Friendly teasing	code
Humorous comments	code
Self-deprecating humour	code
Facilitating data collection	category
Negotiating access	category
<b>PARTICIPANTS' BEHAVIOURS</b>	theme
Participants' provocations	category
Non-provocative humour	category

**THE KEY:**

**Subcodes, codes, categories and subcategories represent, in NVivo terms, different levels of nodes. Nodes are labels given to particular ideas coming from the data.**

**Parent themes gather different themes. Themes gather categories.**

## **Appendix 3a**

A fragment of my analysis diary

Leidner (2010) defines workplace culture using the plural form of culture and set : ‘Work cultures, broadly defined, are sets of values, beliefs, norms and sentiments about work and the symbols and rituals that express them.’ Those plural forms indicate multiple and possibly distinctive cultures and sets of values within a workplace which I find closely related to my data. What was also important when creating the definition of the Workplace Culture theme was to relate it back to the structure of the coding tree and show the relation of subordinate themes to Workplace Culture. And so working conditions, relationships and workplace humour were linked to the Workplace Culture in specific ways: conditions shaped the culture, the culture was exercised in relationships and mirrored in humour. The latter is consistent with the Holmes and Marra (2002) definition of workplace humour reflecting workplace culture and emphasises the distinctive position of Workplace Humour theme in the coding tree. When constructing the definition of the Workplace Culture theme I decided it should contain terms: shared spaces and shared times because it emphasises the role of space and time in creating workplace relationships which is evident in the coding tree. What is more, it refers to McGregor’s (2003) idea of space being a container of school culture and to her notion of spatiality i.e. space-time whereby teachers’ interactions are determined.

Analysis diary (p. 4)

## Appendix 4a

Letter and a consent form for the first part of the study



(To be retained by the participant)

Maria Kmita  
Research Student  
Faculty of Education  
University of Plymouth  
Rolle Building  
Drake Circus  
Plymouth  
PL4 8AA

### **The importance of humour in the staffroom of an educational setting**

Dear Participant,

I would like to thank you very much for your interest in my research about the importance of humour in a college staffroom. My research will be the basis of a PhD thesis. The purpose of my research is to highlight the importance of teachers' well-being and the need to make teachers' free time at a college a quality time. My study will concentrate on the importance of humour in staffroom interactions during lunch breaks. Staffroom humour will be perceived in the study as a vital component of a workplace culture. My research is underpinned by a great sympathy and respect towards teachers and a belief that teachers have a right to have an exceptional time during lunch breaks in the staffroom.

Since staffroom humour is marginalised and neglected in the contemporary educational research, this study has a chance to be a pioneer in Europe. Therefore taking part in such an innovative research can bring many benefits to the participating institutions and staff such as rediscovery of importance of humour and finding links between humour and well-being and humour and exceptional workplace culture. Moreover, schools that are interested in introducing some changes to their staffrooms will be provided with creative ideas and innovative advice from both the international literature on humour and the researcher. Accessing the staffroom will be an enriching journey for me as a novice researcher in Education. I hope this research will help attract both researchers and policy makers to the discussion about a role of humour in education.

For this study I will be looking at teachers of different subjects who teach in educational settings.

#### **What it entails:**

I would like to interview a group of 5–7 teachers at your educational setting. This will be audio-recorded and then transcribed.

I would like to observe staffroom life during 5 to 7 lunch breaks. No audio recording will be used during observations.

I would like to analyse staffroom artefacts during the observation period.

You have the right to withdraw from the study fully or partially without offering any explanation at any time before the end of data collection. Moreover your details will remain confidential to me and my supervisors. The raw data will be retained in secure storage accessible only by the researcher and her supervisors for 10 years.

If data are quoted or published I will not use real names or the name of the educational settings in any part of this dissemination.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors as below. If you would like a summary of our findings, please write this when returning your consent form.

Thank you again

Maria Kmita

**Contact Details:**

Maria Kmita MSc

[maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk)

Postal address:

Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, Rolle Building, Drake Circus, PLYMOUTH, Devon, PL4 8AA

Director of Study: Dr. Ulrike Hohmann

[Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk)



## Participant Consent Form

Please email this form to Maria Kmita MSc at: [mmkmita@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:mmkmita@plymouth.ac.uk)

If you have any questions you can contact us by e-mail: [maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk) or my Director of Studies: [Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk) or my other Supervisor: [D.Reynolds@soton.ac.uk](mailto:D.Reynolds@soton.ac.uk)

### Importance of humour in a staffroom of an educational setting

#### Maria Kmita

I agree to participate in this study based in the Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth. I have read the details provided and understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without offering any explanation or suffering any disadvantage, and have the results of my participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, removed from the research records which will be kept for 10 years in a secure store.

I consent to participate in a group discussion that will be audio recorded Yes/No

I consent to provide artefact material in support of the research Yes/No

I consent to be observed in the staffroom during lunch breaks Yes/No

I would like a copy of the summary report Yes/No

(Please circle your choice)

Name of Participant: .....

Signature of Participant:..... Date:.....

Your email address for report:.....

THANK YOU.

## Appendix 4b

Letter and a consent form for the second part of the study



(To be retained by the participant)

Maria Kmita

Research Student

Faculty of Education

University of Plymouth

Rolle Building

Drake Circus

Plymouth

PL4 8AA

### **The importance of humour in the staffroom of an educational setting**

Dear Participant,

I would like to thank you very much for your interest in my research about the importance of humour in educational settings. My research will be the basis of a PhD thesis. The purpose of my research is to highlight the importance of staff's well-being and the need to make staff free time in educational settings a quality time. My study will concentrate on the importance of humour in staffroom interactions during lunch breaks. Staffroom humour will be perceived in the study as a vital component of a workplace culture. My research is underpinned by a great sympathy and respect towards staff and a belief that staff have a right to have an exceptional time during lunch breaks in the staffroom.

Since staffroom humour is marginalised and neglected by the contemporary educational research, this study has a chance to be a pioneer in Europe. Therefore taking part in such an innovative research can bring many benefits to the participating institutions and staff such as rediscovery of importance of humour and finding links between humour and well-being and humour and exceptional workplace culture. Moreover, educational institutions that are interested in introducing some changes to their staffrooms will be provided with creative



ideas and innovative advice from both the international literature on humour and the researcher. Accessing the staffroom will be a very enriching journey for me as a novice researcher in Education. I hope this research will help attract both researcher and policy makers to the discussion about a role of humour in education.

For this study I will be looking at staff of different subjects who teach in educational settings.

**What it entails:**

-I would like to interview individually 5 teachers at your educational setting. This will be audio-recorded and then transcribed.

-I would like to analyse funny artefacts displayed beyond the staffroom and within your educational setting

You have the right to withdraw from the study fully or partially without offering any explanation at any time before the end of data collection. Moreover your details will remain confidential to me and my supervisors. The raw data will be retained in secure storage accessible only by the researcher and her supervisors for 10 years.

If data are quoted or published I will not use real names or the name of the educational settings in any part of this dissemination.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors as below. If you would like a summary of our findings, please write this when returning your consent form.

Thank you again

Maria Kmita

**Contact Details:**

Maria Kmita MSc

maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk

Postal address:

Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, Rolle Building, Drake Circus, PLYMOUTH, Devon, PL4 8AA

Director of Study: Dr. Ulrike Hohmann

Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk



## Participant Consent Form

Please email this form to Maria Kmita MSc at: [mmkmita@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:mmkmita@plymouth.ac.uk)

If you have any questions you can contact us by e-mail: [maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:maria.kmita@plymouth.ac.uk) or my Director of Studies: Ulrike Hohmann [Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:Ulrike.hohmann@plymouth.ac.uk) or my other Supervisor: Liz McKenzie [liz.mckenzie@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:liz.mckenzie@plymouth.ac.uk)

### Importance of humour in a staffroom of an educational setting

**Maria Kmita**

I agree to participate in this study based in the Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth. I have read the details provided and understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without offering any explanation or suffering any disadvantage, and have the results of my participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, removed from the research records which will be kept for 10 years in a secure store.

I consent to participate in an individual interview that will be audio recorded Yes/No

I consent to provide artefact material in support of the research Yes/No

I would like a copy of the summary report Yes/No

(Please circle your choice)

Name of Participant: .....








Signature of Participant:..... Date:.....

Your email address for report:.....

THANK YOU.

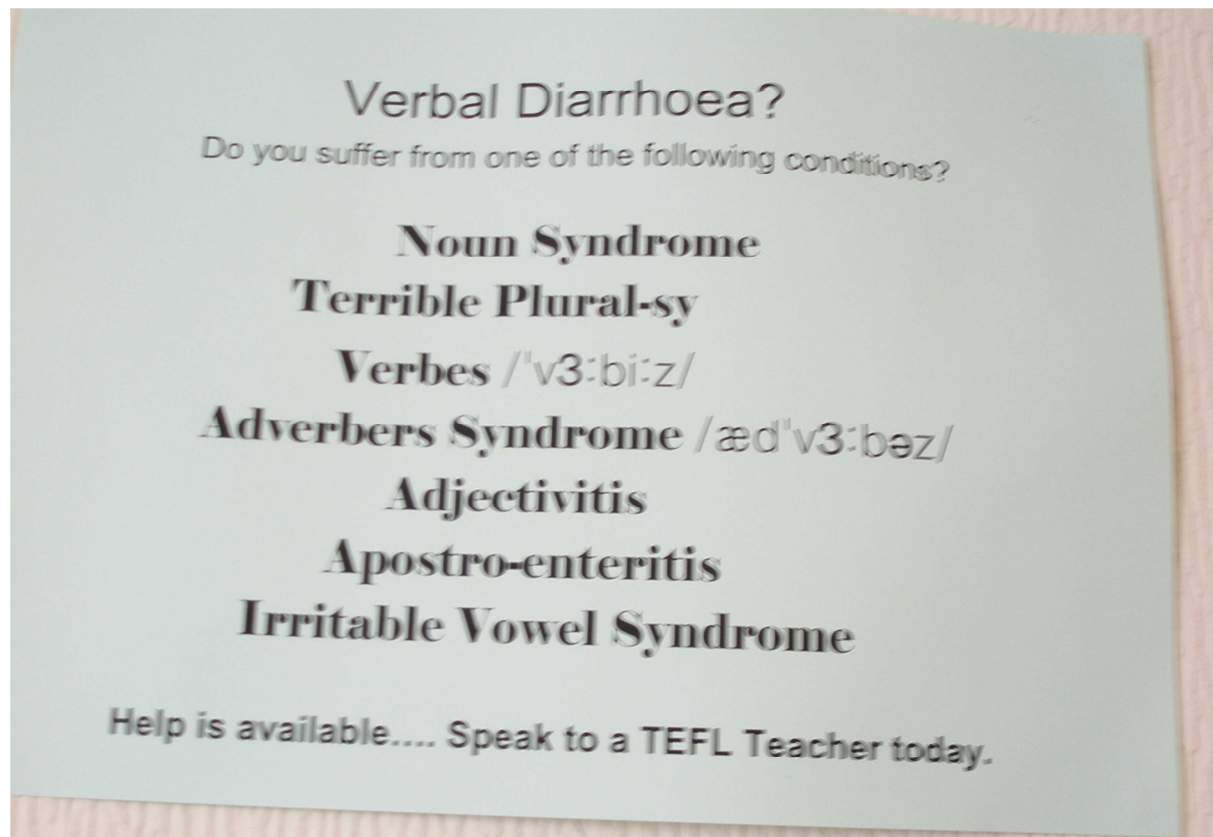
## Appendix 5

### Funny medal sheet from Albatros

						
<b>Order of Merit</b>	<b>Medal of Defence</b>	<b>Mentioned In Dispatches</b>	<b>Russian Campaign Ribbon</b>	<b>Kyrgyz Campaign Ribbon</b>	<b>Bulgarian Campaign Ribbon</b>	<b>Civilian Award</b>
For those aviation teachers whose unflinching devotion to duty has led to them teaching lessons with impoverished materials without complaint.	Awarded to aviation teachers who have been subjected to terrifying conditions in the classroom, such as ATCs hurling books at each other and swearing in foreign.	For any English teacher who takes on the mantle of aviation teacher, and steps boldly into the classroom, looking knowledgeable.	For those aviation teachers who have taught a complete a course populated by Moscow ATC or Gazpromavia pilots.	For those aviation teachers who have taught a complete course populated by little Kyrgyzs.  Those who manage to get more than 2 level 4s from one group are considered for a Mayflower Cross.	For those aviation teachers who have taught a complete course populated by Bulatsa.	For those non-aviation personnel who have contributed in some way (e.g. doing a recording)

## Appendix 5a

Funny poster from Albatros staffroom



## Appendix 5b

Funny poster from printer area, Devon College



## Appendix 6a

### Albatros group interview transcript

Interviewer: I've got some questions for you, [inaudible] could you tell me about your experiences of humour at this workplace? (Pause.) Is there any humour at this workplace?

Robert: There is no sense of humour at this workplace.

Interviewer: No? Not at all?

Robert: That's the first joke.

(Luke's laughter.)

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Robert: We have a sense of fun here in our workplace, but um, (pause) as you've seen from previous visits there's also a little bit of sort of status bullying in the humour and I think that might be very interesting to, to analyse further.

Interviewer: Do you laugh a lot here?

Luke: Yeah.

Interviewer: What's the frequency of... of laughing?

Luke: Per hour? Or?

Interviewer: Mmmm.

Luke: Per hour, I laugh quite a lot, I'm quite a laugher.

Unidentified: I'm married so...

Interviewer: Mainly Friday laugh?

Luke: Sorry?

Interviewer: Mainly Friday and Christmas laugh?

Luke: No every day, yeah.

Max: I think when I started working here it was, one of the (pause) reasons I wanted to stay was that it wasn't, it didn't feel like a very intimidating, serious place, it was, I mean there were professionally, people were not unserious, but

there was, a nice atmosphere of (pause) you know, not taking everything too seriously.

Interviewer: What about like time and place, where you laugh the most, most frequently at this workplace? (Pause.) Morning, evening?

Robert: Well it depends on roles because I'm not in the classroom anymore, but when I was in the classroom obviously using humour is great, but I think your study is more about between colleagues. So between colleagues then, we try to, we try to have some laughs as frequently as possible just to get through the day, just to recognise that we are in a type of organisation that we have described that's not ultra-serious and just to have a nice atmosphere, and also to try and counteract those characters that we don't get on with so well. Yeah I think those that do enjoy laughing, try to do so as much as possible, in the staffroom,

Luke: That's where we all meet isn't it, that and the teacher's resource room.

Max: Yeah

Interviewer: Which is the printer room, right?

Luke: Which is the printer room, yeah, and occasionally in the doorway of the courses department room which is where Robert is.

Interviewer: So in your free time right, or staffroom or you said printer room, it all happens during your free time off work right?

Luke: Yeah, yeah, well no, at lunch times so, it's not necessarily free time if you know what I mean, we're still in work mode (laughing).

(Joint laughter: Interviewer and Luke.)

Luke: Do you know what I mean?

Max: And in our printer room it tends to be more (pause) work related yeah,

(Talking over one another.)

Max: Sort of whatever, to try and alleviate some of the stress of little groups or things like that.

Interviewer: Any other kinds of humour you are using here?

Luke: Yeah, diversionary humour (laughs).

(Talking over one another.)

Robert: Sarcasm. But I think that's the nature of working with, in this case they are fee paying students, or any role where you're forced into a small room with people you don't know well can be quite stressful. And so when you have a chance to go and have a release from that, you want to go and have a release and so after a two hour lesson, teaching people that you must be polite to, must be professional with it's quite nice to just let loose (Interviewer and Luke laugh), you know just feel more personal and human again so I think the personal relationships are good because the pressure of the non-personal relationships in the work situation.

Interviewer: What about particular thing or topic you laugh most frequently about? Like recurring topic for instance, like cheese and ham...

Robert: Sandwiches.

Interviewer: Sandwiches.

Robert: People's likes and dislikes is a big thing. People talking openly about their habits and beliefs and obviously at lunch time, food habits are one big thing so that's

Luke: A personal trait as well.

Robert: Characteristics.

Luke: Characteristics (Luke laughs).

Robert: Certain people eat in a certain way (Interviewer laughs), one person I'm thinking of, eats in a way that I find totally disgusting, and so we joke about that.

Luke: Cleanliness. Dishes is always a good one [inaudible] that's 'cause there's a sink, no one washes it. Signs above the sink, that's always one, haven't you read the sign, that's always a good one.

Max: I suppose it's often sort of, directed at people, personally.

Luke: Not necessarily, there's also conversational stuff, like comedy programs, if you've seen something that's really funny, then you talk about the shared experiences on the TV.



Interviewer: But not work related stuff as well.

Luke: Yes, oh yes.

Interviewer: So it's not always about school?

Luke: No, no.

Max: Quite often not I think, I think it's more generally about the people that the staff, um (pause) because it's not that often about students or (pause).

Luke: It can be (laughs).

Max: Well yeah, sometimes you get people who are asking for it...

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: But I think in general it's more about other teachers and...

Luke: I think the...

(Talking over one another.)

Max: I think our college in general um...

Robert: The nature of this workplace is quite an old building that could fall down at any minute and I think. We joke about I think the type of business that we are as well, we joke about the fact that we are EFL teachers, so I think the nature of that work is not, like first class service.

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Robert: And I think we, the people that want to work here, they (unidentified laughter).

Luke: Easy, easy (laughs).

Robert: They're not first class, they revel, they're first class people ooo!(Luke laughs), they revel they revel in this kind of relaxed attitude to work and to being part of a friendlier team and I would be interested to know what your studies reveal about different workplaces, because I would imagine that this is a very laid back workplace.

Int: That's why I'm here, I mean, back here (laughs). What about any regularities and patterns, humour patterns with regards to age, gender, experience, self-confidence, social ability and position in the school?

Luke: Yeah all of them (laughs).

Interviewer: So you can see them clear.

Robert: So just immediately we mock, we mock our bosses, we mock anyone who's, like Archie has in the last year, he's...

Luke: (Laughs.) Like Archie...

Robert: He's become the assistant director, so as assistant director he's more mockable (Luke laughs) than when he was just one of us.

Int: Oh right because he's not equal anymore.

Robert: He's not equal so there's a chance, wherever there's a chink of light we pounce (unidentified laugh).

Luke: When he says we, you might want to say I (laughs).

Robert: Never say I...

Max: I mock Archie

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Interviewer: Good to know.

Luke: You see these guys are secure you see, he's my boss, so I find that I've got to be careful what I say. Whereas you two are safe where you are (laughs).

Max: He can't touch us.

Luke: Exactly, I'm under the umbrella.

Interviewer: Rihanna's umbrella?

Luke: No, Archie's.

(Joint laughter.)

Robert: We also mock the boss of the company who lives in America, you know I'm not saying anything completely defamatory here, but um, I think the

nature, we work in this sort of crumbling old building, and he lives in a mansion in America, so (Luke's laughs) there's potential for making some jokes there, and um, it's not personal, but it's just the nature of being underclass and I think that's how people unite, is using humour to unite behind that force.

Max: And think there's a sort of, it's like, once you become able to mock and be mocked, means you're sort of in the in crowd so you're probably not going to be sacked any time soon (Luke laughs), because it's when you're in the group I think it gives you that kind of...

Luke: It's a kind of initiation isn't it really? If you can take it and give it (laughs).

Robert: Well it is really, Max and I were talking recently, should I mention names on here or not?

Interviewer: You can, it will be anonymised.

Robert: Okay Max and I were talking only recently about communication with our boss in America, and he, Max was saying that he now feels he's got a slightly closer relationship because our boss will mock him in an email or make a joke. So whenever we sort of skype in our office with our boss, the first thing he does is try to take the piss out of one of us, and that tries to sort of builds that initial friendship again having not seen him for six months or something, so he uses humour with us to try and get us...

Interviewer: To try and strengthen his relationship.

Robert: Well it's a way in isn't it? If you've got sort of humour then people sort of try and gel with you better I think.

Interviewer: Okay so what other roles does humour have here in this workplace, I mean between you and other colleagues?

Max: I think it's used as a sort of, (pause) I think the worst thing you could be here is to sort of be ignored in a sense that nobody makes a joke about you because they don't really know about whether you will, tolerate that or not, and you don't feel comfortable enough to make a joke about anybody else.

Luke: Politeness

Max: That sort of shows that you are distant from being one of the group. So I think it's a role that plays is that kind of group identity or, something.

Luke: Yeah.

Robert: Identity's a strong part. I would say that as well that it's probably gone, a joke or humour or whatever you want to call it sometimes goes too far, so the balance, I think some of us who are more in the centre of that identity parade that Max's mentioned, some of us have realised that there is a line not to cross, and some of us haven't realised that (Interviewer laughs). I'm probably one of those people. But then again, it depends what your motive is, just speaking personally, my motivation for trying to inject some humour into my workplace is to, what is it, I kind of think it's to, show that I'm relaxed with people, but so relaxed I can push those boundaries a little bit and I want other people to feel comfortable as well, but I recognise that sometimes it can make people feel uncomfortable with humour.

Interviewer: But I can't imagine this workplace without humour, or humour being banned at this workplace officially.

(Unidentified laughter.)

Robert: No laughing.

Interviewer: No laughing policy.

Luke: Ah, it just depends on the people a lot of that isn't it, it's not something you can write into a rule in a company, so if you worked for example I imagine in a lot of secondary schools, it's probably so pressured and stressed, and you'd just lose...

Robert: I'm not sure though, maybe not in the same way, but if, I get the impression, well when I've worked in more stressful environments yes there's less laughter but you still use humour as a release but maybe it's frowned upon more because you should be concentrating more and focusing on your work. But the bosses here, as I said they encourage that kind of mocking approach and if we approach our boss Peter with a request for a day off, he will immediately suggest that you're doing something you shouldn't in a jokey way. Or that you really need that day off with a wry smile, so the humour runs throughout the building.

Luke: That's where I think it differs in other institutions.

Robert: In corporates...

Luke: Yes exactly

Robert: Yes, public institutions.

Luke: You just wouldn't get that... ooosshhh [sic].

Luke laughs.

Interviewer: Can you think of any funny experience, like really funny event here or?

Luke laughs

Luke: ...in the last six weeks, yeah (laughs), I can think of something (laughs).

Robert: Can you?

Luke: Yeah.

Robert: Come on.

Luke: Yeah the transformation of George I think has been quite funny (laughs).

Robert: That's just something else for us to gel, to bond over. (Luke's laugh)

Robert: Do you want to?

Luke: Do, go on (laughs).

Robert: Go on (laughs) you're alright.

(Joint men's laughter.)

Robert: There's this relationship among two colleagues that romantic relationship has been the source of amusement...

(Men laugh.)

Robert: I think any relationship would be...

Max: Bewilderment?

(Men laugh.)

Max: This one's particularly ironic for various reasons,

(All laugh.)

Max: In the way that it's um...

Interviewer: He put it nicely right?

Luke: Yeah he's trying his best.

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: The male half of it is exhibiting behaviour patterns which would have resulted in mockery and disdain from that same person,

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: Had anyone else displayed them.

Luke: Yeah,

Robert: Yeah, agreed.

Luke: Agreed (laughs.)

Robert: So things like that cause people to have more material to work with.

(Joint laughter.)

Interviewer: Like me!

Robert: Yeah, I mean you've been the source of some of our conversations (Luke laughs) and, when we heard you were coming the first time of course we started trying to tell jokes to each other (Luke's laughter), that didn't work well.

Luke: Apart from the wheely bin joke, I did like that actually. (Joint laughter.)

Robert: But we need triggers as well, because we do work a lot together quite closely I think, you need something to hang on to with these kind of things, you can't just (snaps fingers) hey let's make some humour about...

(Luke laughs.)

Robert: Yeah so we tend to be quite quick to pounce on our opportunity to make fun of someone...

Luke: Again, when he says we... (laughs).

(Inaudible over laughter.)

Interviewer: Are you always spontaneous in joking or do you like to have rehearsed, well-rehearsed jokes?

Robert: No there's nothing rehearsed, it's always spontaneous I think.

Luke: Yeah, yeah definitely.

Interviewer: And are there any disadvantages of using humour at this work place, have you noticed any? Disadvantages?

Luke: Just like what Robert said, sometimes you can go over the line.

Interviewer: And what happens then?

Luke: Then it's a matter of it being resolved somehow, if somebody's upset then they'll say they're upset, or something will happen, but it will resolve naturally.

Max: I wonder sometimes if it's not intimidating for people who are perhaps coming from a different sort of background or environment where they're not expecting that kind of animal like behaviour in the copy room...

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: ... and then if it makes them feel uncomfortable, whether that would sort of permanently hinder their ability to...

Luke: Function within the group... (laughs).

Luke: Just sort of really show who they are and what they can do about it.

Interviewer: So what's the rate of suicides here?

(Joint laughter.)

Robert: But well I mean probably the rate of how long people last here would be interesting to ask Peter about, it might be linked, he could probably tell you which characters have left within two months and how much they were active in the staffroom mocking and joking...

Luke: Humourless.

Robert: Humourless people often don't stay long here.

Interviewer: Oh right, because they can't blend in?

Robert: Maybe, I think Max's got a great point because maybe they're not able confidence wise to show their true self how they maybe go into themselves and that's not great is it for any company.

Interviewer: And last question, how would you classify the most frequently used type of humour in your workplace and I've got four categories, humour that helps to cope with stress, humour that bring people together, humour that is a defence mechanism, and humour as a rebellion against some rules and regulation, there's a fifth one, oh God, humour that subverts and sustains power relationships.

Luke: What was that last one?

Interviewer: Subverts and sustains power relationships.

Robert: Ooo there's a bit of a few there.

Luke: I'd say it's a little bit of everything isn't it really.

Robert: The one's that definitely stood out, could I read them again just to, um, the, I think, yeah, that one; I laughed when I heard the rules and regulations against rules and regulations, this rebellious streak. I think that's the nature of what we were talking about against the status of other people or, um I'll mention Archie again, but it's not a personal attack, for example, he's the health and safety...

(Luke laughs.)

Luke: He's the ass doc.

Robert: ...and recently he's the ass director, because he's the assistant director (Luke laughs), he's also health and safety boss and recently he bought a bike...

Robert: ...and he rode it into work and he put his bike in the bike rack at the front of the building and for some reason he chose to park it across a, emergency exit door and he chained his bike there and came upstairs and he was immediately complaining about what a ridiculous situation it was that the bike rack was in front of the emergency exit. But we just pointed out to him that if he just turned his bike around the other way then it wouldn't be blocking the



emergency exit, and that was health and safety officer we thought he should be able to recognise that...

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Interviewer: What an irony!

Robert: So something where you see an opportunity to mock what rules and regulations we have and I guess against people's idiocy...

(Joint laughter with Interviewer.)

Max: Sometimes it's more like a rebellion against incompetence.

(Joint laughter.)

Robert: And that comes in with a lot of people will say things with strong beliefs and have no evidence to back that up and then they are attacked.

Luke: I remember when I was on the computer and I was like I can't find teacher docs I just can't find teacher docs it's not there, it's not there, and I went to one of the students, go get Max, so this student was like, why don't you hurry up, because I had the listening thing to do. So he ran and got Max, Max came and went, you're on the student browser so just log off and go back on as teacher and I went, oh fuck. And then I think within two days Max had handed out this piece of paper (laughs) saying frequently asked questions about computers, and one of them was if you can't find teacher docs, and I just read through and I went ...

Max: You weren't the first.

Luke: Yeah I know, I know, and I read through and I went, yeah fair enough...

(Joint laughter.)

Luke: It's like eight points, try turning it off and (laughs).

Max: Yeah most of it's, turn it off.

Luke: I thought that was quite funny (laughs).

Robert: Also the, I was thinking of what Max had done, Max was leading a course for aviation students and for teachers on that course some of the, some of the women found it quite difficult I think to deal with these big cocky air traffic

controllers and pilots from other countries and Max came up with a nice system of medals awarded for surviving the classes (Interviewer laughs). And I think that, just things like that are quite common in here and we try to, that sort of aspect to do with stress comes in, something we're supposed to do or that people can look at or giggle at together, and Max created that one, and I think it were quite nice because it's recognition that we're all in it together and we'll get through.

Interviewer: Amazing.

Max: Yeah I think there's a good sense of team here, at least amongst most people, and um, yeah the sort of trying to make people laugh is definitely part of that, so I guess it's the top two on your list.

Interviewer: Mmm so bringing people together too. Okay.

Robert: A survey of whether team work is stronger here compared to other workplaces might be interesting as well, because my sense of here, people will do things for other people very easily. Probably because we've come together over the last two years of whatever.

Luke: Maybe if you're in that group, because you've got teachers that come in through summer school, you'll get a lot of them, a lot of teachers that will just stay out.

Robert: True.

Luke: And then 'cause I've had to work with those teachers quite a bit and I've spent...

Interviewer: Because you are core right? You're always here?

Luke: I've spent a lot of time, I feel like I've reached the core in the last few months and I deliberately spent time in that room just to get to know everybody and you know, that's what it's about isn't it, to have a laugh and so I've had to deal with the outsiders, and I've got to know you guys as well, and it is odd how out in the wild it almost is when you're dealing with these teachers. Because there's some really strange personalities out there...

(Joint laughter.)

Luke: ... and at least I know I'll come in and I can have a laugh with Robert or Max and you know, it's just like you're just having a laugh and that's where you're at, whereas with these you could deal with some really strange areas (laughs).

Max: I think self- deprecation is a sort of good, sort of feature of other people who are in the middle. I think most people who are actively involved in the in crowd are quite happy to accept or to make fun of themselves, um whereas you know the people who are out of it, you don't know if they are or not and it makes you reluctant to include them in the jokes if you don't know if they're taking themselves very seriously or not.

Robert: It takes time to get to know them.

Luke: Yeah, yeah, true.

Max: Yeah if you can make a laugh at your own expense then automatically almost, you're welcomed into the group.

Interviewer: Well thank you ever so much, that was an enriching experience for me (Luke laughs) and I'll see you in the staffroom (Interviewer laughs), thank you.

Luke: Cool, I've got to run.

## Appendix 6b

Transcript of individual interview with Ian (Devon College)

Interviewer: Okay, how do you like to spend your lunch break?

Ian: How do I like to spend my lunch break? By exchanging jokes with Richard, Richard and anybody else that comes into the office.

Interviewer: So you're quite close with Richard, I understand.

Ian: Yeah, I've known him for 40-odd years, so I knew him before I came to work...

Interviewer: Before he was born almost. (Laughs.)

Ian: Well, almost, yeah. At least 30, 30 years, back in – when did I meet him? – 1976, thereabouts. So, a long time ago. We shared the back of a van together, holding out our arms to stop two wardrobes falling on ourselves (laughs).

Interviewer: (Laughter.) That's great. So you are in the office with Richard and Will...

Ian: ... and Will, yeah...k

Interviewer: ... so three of you? [Inaudible.]

Ian: Yes.

Interviewer: I have the impression that only a fraction of the school, college staff comes here for lunch break.

Ian: That's right. Yeah.

Interviewer: So where are they during lunch break?

Ian: Most of them are in their offices working.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Ian: Because the pressures of the place [inaudible] and the demands of the place tend to go and make people insecure about their jobs and if they ... Sometimes I think that they feel if they're not seen to be working then people will go and question them...

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Ian: ... and question their ability and their commitment possibly. But also you get students, and it's one time when you can see students in a fairly relaxed... out of the class, and prepare lessons and things like that. So, I mean, although we have this staff room, compared with the last office that I worked in, which was about the size of this and had lots of staff in it, um... this is very, very segregated. So you've got your individual offices and people don't exchange that much.

Interviewer: Is there any person here at this workplace who would control what you're doing at your lunchtime? Whether you're working or relaxing...

Ian: No, I don't think so. I mean, I don't think that there's, that there's a particular person who's going and looking at it, I think that there's just an assumption which is brought about historically by circumstances in the college, by past circumstances.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Ian: [inaudible] One time, um... people used to be very frightened of losing their jobs, and so they would keep their head down and preferred not to be seen.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Ian: You know, which is a sad thing, really.

Interviewer: Okay, interesting. But your offices are quite close to the managers' offices? Or not?

Ian: Yes, yes, yeah.

Interviewer: (Laughs.) That's quite unfortunate.

Ian: Well, not really.

Interviewer: Not really (laughs)?

Ian: I'm too old to worry about such things.

Interviewer: Oh that's true, that is true. And you are expired (laughs).

Ian: Yes, I'm expired, but I come back to haunt the place (laughs).

Interviewer: Um, so who's using the staff room during the lunch break? Because I've seen some lecturers, I've seen some admin staff here...

Ian: Admin staff, lecturers, part-time lecturers... But very often you'll see lecturers come in, and they'll be going and working at the table or they'll be having meetings in here.

Interviewer: Oh right. Meetings with whom?

Ian: Meetings with colleagues. I mean, I work on the programme, so for example, when we've got some moderation process you bring all the stuff in here and you have a team meeting and people go through the sort of moderation papers, so you're still working, which I try to avoid.

Interviewer: Oh right. Definitely (Ian's laughter) you should. Um ... So we established that some people don't come to the staff room. So who doesn't come to the staff room? Can you describe this particular group of people or...?

Ian: Well, quite a few of the lecturers from downwards, and also down to the other end, because I mean there's some distance and to there to go and walk, and people bring their own sandwiches and so on. So, I think, you know, I mean I rarely come into the staff room. You know, sometimes, I'll come in and have some meal in here, or sit down and chat, but the staff room is not really used that much by most people. It's ... I mean, you see people in here... For example you walk past and you see line managers having a meeting with various people because they can't meet in their office, so you don't want to disturb...

Interviewer: Oh right. So you said that you've got your own offices in the college. So, how humour in the offices differs from humour that's happening here in the staff room?

Ian: Um ... Not much, actually, because when you come in here usually what'll happen is it then goes and picks up, and the humour tends to be about what insane working conditions we have.

Interviewer: (Laughs.) Yes. Oh, Right.

Ian: And the fact that this is an unreal world, that we don't really exist (Int's laughter) in any sort of reality. (Ian's laughter.)

Interviewer: What are you talking about during lunch break, with your colleagues?

Ian: Oh, all sorts of things. I mean, sometimes we talk about things that have been on television. With Richard we talk about football, but we also have sort of running jokes which go on, and I mean, there's a lot of stuff, for example, which is taken from things that Monty Python...

Interviewer: Oh right, yes I love that (laughs).

Ian: Do you know Life of Brian?

Interviewer: Of course.

Ian: Yes, a lot of stuff is taken from that (Interviewer's laughter). I mean, it gives us a chance to let off steam.

Interviewer: Oh definitely. What else do you joke about?

Ian: Um... Classes. Because Richard's a sociologist, and I do sociology by my speciality is philosophy, sometimes we talk about subjects, about subject matter, and other things about children, about things that are coming up, and so on. About problems that people have, if people have had a particular problem.

Interviewer: So it's a field related?

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are there any policies regarding the use of humour at this workplace?

Interviewer: Any?

Interviewer: Policies, rules, regulations.

Ian: Uh, probably there are. But I think probably, in the office, in between colleagues they're ignored.

Interviewer: Happily ignored (laughs).

Ian: Yes.

Interviewer: Is there any place in the college where you would never use certain types of humour?

Ian: Yes, I think in the classroom, in front of the students, there are certain types which of course you can't go and use, which would be terribly inappropriate.

Um, and probably also if, say for example, senior management were in, you probably wouldn't go and use it over there.

Interviewer: That means that you only feel comfortable to joke freely with your close colleagues, is that right?

Ian: Very often yes, I mean because very often, I mean in terms of that, if you have a look on the office door there's a big thing about management plans over there, which is... which starts off in a sort of Biblical sense, 'In the beginning there was a plan' (Interviewer's laughter), and it goes on like that and, I think you know, that with management sometimes they'll get a bit precious about their plans and they don't like being criticised. I mean certainly in the past, with a sort of line manager that I had, I was told that I had to go and find out from my colleagues about a particular plan that they had, and everybody knew that this plan was terribly – was really, really bad, and was going to fail, but that we would get the blame for it failing. And when I went and told them, he started banging his head on the wall.

Interviewer: (Interviewer laughs.) (Ian joins with laughter.) Um, are there any staff members you would never use certain types of humour with? You mentioned sometimes staff, senior management people, and, any other staff members?

Ian: No. The type of humour is going to vary according to whom you are talking to... So yes, I mean, even with, say something like, say, senior staff members, it depends on how comfortable you feel with them. I had a colleague, who would go up to the principal and say, 'Where's Piggysy and Monkey?' I don't know if you're familiar with, um, the Chinese fable of Buddhism being brought to China, and he uses – there are these two characters called Piggysy and Monkey. And the principal said 'what do you mean?' he said 'I mean your vice-principals, surely you're the Buddha', and walked off.

Interviewer: (Laughs.) That's a good one.

Ian: (Laughs.) Yeah.

Interviewer: Em... returning to eating within the college, lunchtime. Are there any rules with regard to eating in the college?

Ian: You're not supposed to eat in the classrooms, and you're not supposed to eat in the computer centre. [Inaudible.] Otherwise, I don't think there are. I



mean, there are probably rules about things like kettles and sort of microwaves in the office, but those tend to be ignored. I mean, there's probably health and safety issues there, but, for example, if I go and make a cake or someone goes and makes a cake we'll then bring it in, and then other times, for example, I'll go and cook, because I like cooking curries I'll bring them in and share them with people. But I don't think that there are any specific, as I say, apart from the rules about bringing in microwaves, using microwaves, using kettles, I don't think that there are any rules as such. You have sandwiches and things which you can go and eat in your office.

Interviewer: So you eat in your office, your lunch?

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: Oh right, I see. Do you have a designated, safeguarded lunch hour?

Ian: No. Although theoretically speaking, yes, there's a break in the timetable. But given the pressures of the work and also that you can't really guarantee that because you'll have students with problems coming down and that might be the appropriate time to go and see them.

Interviewer: Mmm. Right. Is the time, the lunch-time the same for all teaching staff or is it different?

Ian: It's different.

Interviewer: It's always different. Oh right, and who sets such rules? You said that there is, theoretically, a set lunch?

Ian: It would be whoever sets the timetables. So for example my timetable might start off, it might start off at nine or nine-thirty. Other people's timetables might start off; mine might start at nine-thirty. I might have a lunch break from eleven o'clock or from twelve o'clock till one. Someone else might get it from twelve-thirty to one-thirty, and another person might get it from one till two o'clock. You get variations, and that might be a problem in terms of getting people to actually use the staff room...

Interviewer: And also integrating.

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: Because if you never get a chance to actually sit here and meet other people. There are a few other occasions, I understand...

Interviewer: A few other occasions, yeah.

Interviewer: ...that you can actually chat to them informally.

Ian: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: because you don't – or maybe you have – some, I don't know, Friday afternoons where you go out to the pub or something?

Ian: No.

Interviewer: Nothing like that?

Ian: It's not encouraged, because if you go out to the pub then you've been drinking and that then becomes a disciplinary thing.

Interviewer: But I mean after school.

Interviewer: Yeah, but there again what will happen is that people will go and disperse. So, for example, I'll see Will, and sometimes I'll see Hugh, and Richard, Richard I'll see, but most other lecturers I don't go and see, and I don't have that much contact. Very often you don't even know where they live.

Interviewer: Oh right. Ah. So there are limited opportunities for integration.

Ian: Very much, yeah.

Interviewer: And what happens if a new staff member comes in?

Ian: Uh... We try to go and introduce them and that, but usually what will happen is that they interact with the people in their office or their team, and it depends on how well you actually know them. I mean, several of the staff members over here – people like George, for example, I don't know if you met him, he's the other English teacher; Sandra who's psychology; Claire who's also a teacher here – I taught them, they were my students, so, so I mean, I can go and interact with them. But even so, as I said, what you have to be is very, very careful sometimes.

Interviewer: But people who come to the staff room. I don't know if it's my impression or not, but don't they work in the same offices too?

Ian: Yes.

Interviewer: Laughs. So they just leave the office and come here together

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: So it's still interaction within the same group of people?

Ian: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: So it's not like that they come out of the offices to sit in the staff room to meet others, to talk to others?

Ian: No, no.

Interviewer: It's still the same group?

Ian: Yes.

Interviewer: God! Amazing! Um ... We talked about receiving humorous emails from other lecturers. So, you do receive emails like that, and you do send?

Ian: Yeah, mainly from colleagues, colleagues that you know and that you're comfortable with...

Interviewer: So again, it's the same group.

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you wouldn't send emails to people you hardly know, know to only some extent.

Ian: That's right. Yeah, yeah. You have to be very very careful because, in terms of that, some of the emails, as I say, tend to be a little bit on the risky side, so you have to be aware that the person knows you well enough to know that you aren't being serious.

Interviewer: So am I right saying that you need to know the person in real life...

Ian: I think probably yes.

Interviewer: ... in order to send him a funny email?

Ian: Yes, although say for example, I think that you need to go and socialise with them, right. So for example, I've got a colleague Dominic, down there,

who used to be in the Navy, and Hugh who also used to be in the Navy, and Hugh used to share an office with Richard and Will. And when we were in there, we would go in and Dominic would come in and they'd exchange, they'd exchange naval banter.

Interviewer: Right.

Ian: But also, primarily because I've known Dominic for a long time and I've been teaching on the same course with him, right, he's a Maths teacher, I teach Sociology, because we were teaching the same cohort, or the same group of students, um... we can go and exchange... some banter quite easily, because I've known him for a long time, I know what his sense of humour is...

Interviewer: Right. Yeah.

Ian: ...I know, because he's come out and said things and I've thought 'This is funny, yes' and I've said things, and he said yeah ... that sort of sums it up perfectly.

Interviewer: So you wouldn't risk sending a funny email to all staff members, no?

Ian: No, no.

Interviewer: No.

Ian: Because if you do that there's a good chance that it'll be misunderstood and that someone will get offended.

Interviewer: Oh right, and what would happen then?

Ian: Um, probably a complaint would be made, and you would be hauled...

Interviewer: You mean an official complaint?

Interviewer: Oh yeah, yeh.

Interviewer: So somebody would report you?

Ian: Yes.

Interviewer: To whom?

Ian: Um, probably to your line manager or someone like that. I mean, you sort of get some strange things happening at times. I mean, if say for example...

Many years ago I was teaching, I was teaching philosophy, and we were sort of discussing ethics, and I explained to the group that when I got married I got married because my wife had money.

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Ian: I know, 'shock horror'. 'You mean you didn't love her, you married her for money?' 'I didn't say that', I said 'I said I married her, I couldn't have married her if she didn't have money' (Interviewer's laughter). They said 'why?' I said 'well, you've got to pay for a marriage license; you've got to pay for the reception.'

Interviewer: Laughs

Ian: I didn't have any money. And someone complained about it, someone complained about it.

Interviewer: Really?

Ian: Yeah, and I had my head of department come in and say 'well, you said this', and I said 'yes', I said, 'but it's a philosophy lesson and us philosophers can say anything that we want'.

Interviewer: That's amazing. I'm shocked (Ian laughs). I'm truly shocked. Do you see any differences or patterns in the use of humour of part-time or full-time lecturers?

Ian: Yes, it depends on how, on how long a lecturer has been here and how comfortable they feel. I think, you know, that if you feel reasonably comfortable then what tends to happen is that you tend to go and take, take more risks with your humour. So, for example, when we had these things called graded observations, when they would come in and they would check your lessons and give you a grade on it, and people got really, really worried about this. Now the only way which I could see to overcome this was to show how ridiculous it was. So I asked IT and they said 'you have to have this document and this document and this document' – I said you know 'lesson plans,' they said 'lesson plans' – and I said 'right, well what does a lesson plan look like?'

Interviewer: Mmm.

Ian: And the person said 'it can be on the back of a cigarette packet for all I care' (Int's laughter). Lesson plan came along, admin's there, and I handed in my lesson plan on the back of a cigarette packet.

Interviewer: (Laughs.) That's amazing!

Ian: He said 'oh', he said that is not a lesson plan I said 'look it goes and breaks down' (Interviewer laughs) I said 'your boss told me' (Joint laughter) .So go and check with your boss (Joint laughter). So, you know, so anyway he had to accept it and then I had another one come in and he was talking to me about my grade and he said 'well you got a two', and I said 'I'm going to appeal', and he said then, he said 'well you won't get a one', and I said 'no, no, I 'm appealing against that', I said ' I am appealing because it wasn't a very good lesson and I ought to be downgraded'.

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Ian: And he said, he said 'are you mad?' And I said 'no', I said 'this is the only sane way to go and work in a mad organisation' (Joint laughter).

Interviewer: Go along with madness.

Ian: Yes (joint laughter), and after that they either send in in twos or they don't send them in at all (laughs).

Interviewer: Amazing, that's great (laughs).

Ian: But I mean, you can go and do that if... I mean, when I first started off part-time, because I was working part-time on different jobs, and I always worked part-time, I was always self-employed, when they turned round and said 'you'll get a secure job here', I turned round and said 'well, security is neither here nor there, I can always go and get another job somewhere else.' I said 'I know I can survive, so you know, don't use that as a threat'. So the threat, for example, of being sacked is neither here nor there to me.

Interviewer: Mmm. I see.

Ian: So I feel secure, but a lot of people, maybe, don't, and in terms of that, that's what makes them very, very careful about what they [inaudible].

Interviewer: So it's years in service that determines your use of humour here, is that correct?

Ian: Sorry?

Interviewer: Years in service determine, um, your use of humour here, rather than your part-time status or full-time status. Is that what you are saying?

Ian: Yeah. I mean primarily because I've never taken a job which I don't like doing, right? I like doing the job. But there's also – and I think now they accept it – there's also limitations on what I will go and do. So, for example, they'll turn around and say 'well we want it done this way', and I'll say 'no, I've already done it this way; I'm not going to do it again'. And they seem to go and accept that now. Probably because I've been here for a long, long time, I've actually run a course, and students... I've had a lot of students through on me... I'm probably one of the only teachers in this college that has an appreciation society on Facebook.

Interviewer: Oh right, yes, yes.

Ian: ... and a whole lot of my students that have gone through, because I've been teaching now for twenty years, they say, you know 'look you know at first, at first we didn't understand a word you were saying, now we do realise that what you were teaching us was good and that it actually helped us.' So I think that in terms of that, that to a certain extent management do go and value the odd maverick. Because part of the problem is, if you, if you have everybody conforming to a set pattern, you can't tell whether that pattern is really efficient or not.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Ian: And this comes out from people ... like [inaudible], for example, in closed countries when you don't get any input from the outside, big mistakes could be made, and people because people can't see that there's an alternative they can't actually test against it.

Interviewer: I see.

Ian: I think, in some ways, the way in which education is going over here, where everything is going to be standardised, is bad, because if a mistake is made they won't realise until it's too late.

Interviewer: Exactly. Yeah, you're right.

Ian: So you need variety. But also in terms of teachers, from my own experience, remembering teachers that I've had, it's not the ones which necessarily had the best prepared lessons or were the biggest disciplinarians or the ones who stuck to the rules, it was personalities. And in terms of that, a good sense of humour, a sense of humour from a teacher did a lot more for my, for my education... I remember one teacher for example, who used to cane a child, beat a child, at least one child every week...

Interviewer: Mm-hmmm.

Ian: But another one who never, ever beat a child. And the way in which he used to control people, and he had more respect than anybody else, was through humour.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Ian: And I thought, you know, there's an example of a good teacher. There's a bad teacher who you never learned anything from because you were too frightened, and there was a good teacher who would go and control a class, and control a class by humour. So, for example if someone was doing something [inaudible], the person would think 'I'm being foolish, I'd better not go and do that'.

Interviewer: Mmm. Oh right.

Ian: I think that's a good skill to go and learn which...I means, they don't really take that into account. As I say, we tend now to become robotic and functional.

Interviewer: Yes. Yeah.

Ian: Everybody teaches in the same way. [Inaudible.] No variety. No wonder the...

Interviewer: And don't you miss the spontaneity in interactions with colleagues. You mentioned that you feared being controlled, that you sometimes can be reported to somebody else.

Ian: Yeah, yeah

Interviewer: Don't you think that it should be encouraged that you should meet at least once a day for like spontaneous chats with your colleagues, to integrate with others...



Ian: Yes, yes. I mean, I believe a little bit, a little bit of anarchy is good. In the office, when we're in full flow over there, there's anarchy, anarchy reigns. I mean, you can go and see it. Work gets put aside, and you might have pressing work, but it gets put aside, and there's humour and when you go back to it you feel refreshed.

Interviewer: But only behind closed doors?

Ian: Only behind closed doors, yeah.

Interviewer: Um... How do new lecturers integrate with the college staff? They come here for the first time...

Ian: ...yes ...

Interviewer: ...and who welcomes them, and how?

Ian: They are given an induction programme where they are told about the rules and the regulations...

Interviewer: Well that's very formal...

Ian: ...yeah...

Interviewer: ...you know?

Ian: And then what you do is you find a friendly face and...

Interviewer: Oh right yeah.

Ian: ...you take it from there. You find someone who you can go and trust and who will go and help you through. Because a lot of it is, in terms of the material that you're doing, 'Right, Am I doing this right? Am I filling this form out right? What do I do in this case?' And if you go to an older lecturer, and older lecturer will turn round and say 'right, you're making more work for yourself if you do it this way, take a short-cut and you can actually short circuit the system if you do a short-cut, and you can then impose your own personality on it'.

Interviewer: Oh right, yeah. How would you describe friendship groups among lecturers?

Ian: Uh... I think that there are some close friendships and there are some professional friendships. And so close friendships will come about – I've got a close friendship with Richard, I've got a close friendship with Will, I think I've

got a close friendship with Hugh, with a couple of others – but in terms of a lot of lecturers, once they finish here, they go away. This is work and home, home time is completely different.

Interviewer: What about other offices, not just yours but other offices, are there close friends working there or not necessarily?

Ian: Not necessarily.

Interviewer: Okay. But people who like each other? How, what do you think about that?

Ian: I think that there are people who will go and get on with each other, yeah, they will have a common thing of a subject, so they might go and discuss a subject, or they'll have a common thing with students...

Interviewer: So you are segregated by subject in the offices?

Ian: Very often yes.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Ian: So you get all the psychologists together. Richard and I are the sociologists and we're together, but we've got another sociologist over there.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Interviewer: I see. And it's always three people in one office?

Ian: It's three people, sometimes you have three people but then you will get part-time people, and part-timers can hop desk.

Interviewer: Would you nominate anyone as a workplace joker at this workplace?

Ian: I nominate Pete.

Interviewer: I see. Are there any differences between use of humour by older and younger lecturers in your workplace?

Ian: Yes, I think so. I don't think that, I don't think that younger lecturers have, have the cynical outlook that older lecturers have.

(Joint Laughter.)

Interviewer: They're too fresh to have it?

Ian: Yes, they're too fresh and they're... And very often it's their first job and they're very very serious about it, and they're serious about educating things and they've had all the education philosophy put into them, and then you suddenly realise that the educational philosophy has been discredited years and years and years ago and it's never applied anyway (laughs).

Interviewer: (Laughs.) What role does gender play in the use of humour here at this workplace?

Ian: Um, sometimes, sometimes it can be a little bit problematical, but again it depends on how well you know the person, and, um...

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Ian: Because you can go and test, you can go and test and then you think 'oh well, I shouldn't have said that (Interviewer laughs), I need to be careful', you sort of batten it down. But once you get to know a person, that person knows that, although uhh for other people it might sound offensive, because you don't mean any offence it's not taken in the offensive way.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Ian: Um, I mean certainly if someone said something about me, I don't get offended. I don't get offended at all. I don't assume that the person is out to go and offend me. You know, I assume that people mean the best and they mean it in a good way.

Interviewer: Right.

Ian: So, for example, Harry will come in and he says, he says some terribly offensive things to me, and I'll say some terribly offensive things back to him.

Interviewer: And you're equal (laughs)?

Ian: Right. But I know that he doesn't mean them, all right?

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Ian: He doesn't mean to be offensive to me, he doesn't mean to be rude. In some ways, the reason that he says these things is that he likes me and he sort of feels safe with me, which is important.

Interviewer: But it's not male humour?

Ian: No, it's not necessarily male humour. It can also be in terms of, also inter-gender humour; we can go and use that.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. So are these offices same gender offices or not?

Ian: No, no.

Interviewer: So they're mixed.

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Ian: How do women and men use humour at your workplace?

Ian: I think men's humour tends to be less subtle. Uhh... Women's humour tends to be much more subtle, I think. It's much more nuanced and much more aware of possible pitfalls, whereas we're much more likely to go blundering in, (laughs) like a bull in a china shop.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Is there any link between the structural layout of the staff room and staff's use of the staff room? And by structure and layout I mean size, location, furniture...

Ian: Yeah, I mean... It's, um... It's not really conducive to actually going in and meeting people. It would be nice, for example, if we had a bit more personalised furniture. This furniture is okay but it's not really that comfortable.

Interviewer: So you mean sofas, or...?

Ian: Well, it's much more like a waiting room, and uh ... and because it's much more like a waiting room it tends to be a place where you go in and you come out as soon as possible. And like all waiting rooms, you don't go and look at the person opposite or something like that.

Interviewer: Don't you think it could be a strategy to...

Ian: Possibly.

Interviewer: ...because I've read somewhere that staffrooms sometimes have uncomfortable furniture in order to, for the people who sit on it, to quickly leave the staff room and not stay there for ages.

Ian: Yes, yeah. I mean, um ... as I say, it's like a waiting room. It's like a waiting room in a railway station, or a doctor's waiting room or a dentist's waiting room, you sit down there and you think 'I'm here to go and do something' or 'I'm not here, what am I here for? What am I waiting for?' Yeah. And out you go.

Interviewer: So it's not too comfy?

Ian: No.

Interviewer: Does your workplace have any funny artefacts, photos, memos, posters?

Ian: Not really.

Interviewer: But you, you've got some in your office right?

Ian: Yeah, I mean we bring them in ourselves.

Interviewer: But that's very personalised I guess.

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's not necessarily understood by others...

Ian: No, I mean, I'll go and bring in stuff. I mean, last year, no, the year before, I went and put up, because I was sharing with a colleague, a female colleague and we were sort of talking about putting up identification as to who was in the staff room. So I went onto the internet and I pulled out a picture of a chimpanzee sitting like this...

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Ian... and I put a caption underneath saying 'This is Nora waiting for new students to come in'.

Interviewer: (Joint laughter.) And where did you hang it?

Ian: I put it on the door.

Interviewer: Oh, lovely.

Ian: And then I had this other one, with a very, very angry gorilla and I put 'This is Ian if you go and mess with him.' (Joint laughter) And um... other members of staff came along, and the head of department came along and said

‘I’d like one of those, can you do me one with a giraffe?’ (Interviewer laughs.) So I went and found a giraffe, and this giraffe was sticking his tongue out (Int’s laughs), and I said ‘This is the head of department’s response to instructions from higher up’.

Interviewer: (Laughs.) Fantastic.

Ian: And I did one for each of the offices and for each of the staff, but very few of them actually went and put it up.

Interviewer: Uh... Interesting.

Ian: And we were told to take them down.

Interviewer: Uh... By whom? Who told you?

Ian: By... the deputy principal.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Ian: But, I mean, yeah...

Interviewer: So you’re not encouraged to hang out humorous ... thing.

Ian: Well no, I mean you have this idea of a corporate identity, like, as you probably realise, I don’t wear badges, I don’t wear a badge. You’re supposed to wear a badge. But I mean last time I was asked ‘where’s your badge?’ I said ‘well I don’t need it because I know who I am’.

Interviewer: So what would happen if you hang something completely rebellious on the notice board or somewhere in the hall, or...

Ian: Oh you would probably be hauled across the coals.

Interviewer: Really?

Ian: Probably be. I mean, I used to go and put up signs for my students: ‘Don’t be frightened of confusion’, you know, expect to be confused, confusion is good because it’s actually youth asking, ‘what is going on?’ so, it’s getting you to think, and again I was told to take that down, take that down. Um... And this was in a classroom, the classroom which I used. And I mean, I said to my students, ninety-five percent of the time we do things, we can do things because we’ve done them so often before without really thinking. So I can walk to the door, I can go to the door and I don’t really think, it’s only when the door gets

stuck that I think about what I'm doing. Um, and I was told 'No, no, you can't go and do that'.

Interviewer: Is that killing your humorous identity? You know, taking down...

Ian: ...yeah...

Interviewer: ... spontaneous and very funny...you know.

Ian: ...but there is this idea of a corporate identity. I mean one time they were asking, for example, whether lecturers out to be allowed to wear jeans, or whether we ought to have... And we have, for example, the college tie...

Interviewer: (Laughs.)

Ian: (Laughs.) Yeah.

Interviewer: (Exaggerated sigh.)

Ian: And you get some people and they wear the college tie, tie and you can see them and you think, 'This person is going on for higher management, me in my tatty clothes, no'.

Interviewer: Oh, you'll be wearing uniforms soon I see.

Ian: Yeah (laughs).

Interviewer: Um, are there any rules regarding artefacts you hang somewhere? You said you definitely couldn't wear; you couldn't hang up something rebellious here. But what about some humorous postcard, or...

Ian: Well, humorous postcards again we'll put them in the office.

Interviewer: So you feel much safer to keep them in your own offices.

Ian: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Whereas, I suppose that, to a certain extent you might be able to go and put them up over here, but there would be a risk that someone would come along and say, 'Well, that shouldn't be up there'.

Interviewer: Oh right.

Interviewer: And certainly out in the corridors, you can't go and put them up over there. Um, classroom, classroom again is doubtful that you could put them up...

Interviewer: I'm looking forward to taking photos of your funny artefacts in the office because they are amazing. Thank-you ever so much for the interview, that was great.