

Creating the 'Our' in Humor: A case study of one teacher's transfer of ideology into action.

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Almost four years ago the authors of this paper began exploring Balson's (1992), Rogers' (1990) and Glasser's (1988) claim that language was a key component in the classroom management process. What emerged from the respondent selection process was the discovery of a teacher who had a very different approach to classroom management and teaching in general. As a result of having never received any formal instruction in classroom management this teacher had embarked on a developing his own approach using non-verbal cues and humour as deliberate tool of 'sculpting' the class into a cohesive and cooperative unit. Rather than being an entity in itself and a primary element of concern, for this teacher optimal classroom management is simply a bi-product of engaging children in an ebb and flow of what he terms 'the mental gymnastics of the classroom"

This session will detail the broader components of his belief system and the ensuing 'language in action' that emerged after extensive video taping and interviews with both the teacher and his students. In more specific terms, the various forms of humour and repeated patterns of interaction used to create a highly integrated set of interpersonal and collective relationships will also be discussed.

The admission of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom.

W.H. Moore (1991)

From Inclination to Implementation

This study had its roots in the early stages of both our academic careers. While we both had our research foci in the area of language, learning and literacy, with each step into a classroom we couldn't but help reaching the conclusion that while many of the rooms we visited were invigorating in regard to the implementation of curriculum in respect to the power structure instituted in the class, 'she or 'he who must be obeyed' was more often than not the golden rule. None of the numerous teachers we used as respondents had ever received any form of pre-training or professional development after graduation in the area of classroom instruction. They each had reverted to various forms of authoritarian power plays often involving school-based mechanisms such as listing of names on the blackboard or detention. While they coped more than adequately, just as Slee (1992) found they too suffered from an overall professional dissatisfaction with the relatively limited scope of current theories and positions that they had incidentally heard of or briefly scanned in the occasional article or briefly listened to during staff development days.

It wasn't until we stepped into 'Macca's' room that we instantaneously realised the difference. In this room there was laughter, instantaneous shifts into intense periods of work and then a sudden interchange of jokes between teacher and pupils. There was a completely different feel!

Thus, we embarked on the unearthing of one teacher's 'school story' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996). Because of our lack of an intimate understanding of the field we decided to approach this project through what Van Manen (1990) terms a 'hermeneutic phenomenological' approach.

...when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way...pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience,...a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the life world....[and]...play with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one's pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. (Van Manen 1990:1-2)

Beginning with a broad focus of trying to understand this teacher's transformation of ideology into action, our frame of reference became funneled into an investigation into his use of humour and body language. This dual focus evolved through a cascading or cyclical conceptualisation process involving the interplay between the ongoing observation process, the related literature and debriefing interviews.

[T]he methodology of the constructivist is very different from the conventional inquirer ...[it] is iterative, interactive, hermeneutic and at times intuitive and certainly open.

... It is a different path, one strewn with boulders, but one that leads to an extravagant and hitherto virtually unappreciated rose garden (Guba and Lincoln 1989:183).

In this instance the path to the 'unappreciated rose garden' was not strewn with boulders but laughter. The difficulty for us was not so much dodging the boulders as recognizing the path through the intricate oral and proxemic language dance that occurred between pupil and teacher.

A Personal Definition of Learning: Language as the curriculum

The environment is the key for me. By that I mean more than the physical environment. I mean the total structures the teacher sets up, most of which involves the language used. ("Mac")

In order to fully understand this teacher's current ideology and practice, it's necessary to realize its conception. After completing high school, 'Mac' had initially decided to undertake a law degree, but decided on teaching instead believing that it would be more personally rewarding. While he believes this most certainly proved to be the case, when he finally graduated with a Diploma of Education, he found that the course he had undertaken was virtually of no use in developing his classroom practice or the refinement of his own personal ideology. He found this particularly frustrating, but this lack of substantive help was the catalyst he needed to begin to search for the optimum mode of teaching. Thus he embarked on a private crusade of professional development. Having no other starting point he decided to simply be himself, using the principles by which he had not been taught. The elements of school life that he craved and thought would be a natural part of any classroom were the development of relationship between student and teacher, the

ability to questions things that he didn't agree with and simply having fun. For 'Mac' these conditions form part of what he believes the ideal family should put into place.

It wasn't until I got into the real classroom that I learnt anything. All I could do was start enjoying myself. This meant just starting to throw in 'one liners' to ease the kids in. I kept on remembering what my own family had been like.

These set of familial beliefs and the instigation of throwing 'one liners' at the children apparently produced results. 'Mac' believed that not only was he more at ease and did not "fall in to the trap of simply playing teacher". He believes that this is perhaps the reason why many children do not either engage with learning or fail to reach their potential. As he sees it, children want a meaningful relationship with their teacher but too many 'chalkies' are either afraid they lose class control or are unable or unwilling to reveal their true self.

You had your lessons with the chalk and talk, and half the teachers wouldn't know you by the end of the year. I don't ever remember sharing a joke with any of my teachers

This course of action was not without trauma, because most of the transition from theory into practice came through trial and error learning.

College gave me no help in the dynamics of doing it. Only a small bit of the process and product of curriculum. I simply had to do it myself. I had to come up with the goods. I made lots of mistakes, but you know I had fun doing it. It was just me, that was the secret, just being me. I can't help myself, I just have blurt it all out.

In the initial stages, as 'Mac' developed his practice of deliberately throwing humour at individual children and the class in general he noticed that the children began to 'throw humour back'. Although apprehensive at first, rather than discourage the children he believed that his classroom needed to founded on mutual respect.

And so, after 20 years of teaching, 'Mac' has developed a very different approach to teaching. One that is not always fully appreciated by parents or other staff members. In both the classroom and staff room he delivers jibes and jokes at the most unexpected times. Quips that carry not only a laugh but more often than not a strange mixture of wit, social comment and a pungent sense of self-evaluation. Always ready with a gag, he has a powerful vocabulary and turn of phrase. His comments often contain traces of a sixth sense of anticipation, that leaves all recipients, both children and peers, with a smile and an apparent after taste of personal reflection written on their faces. As one staff member said,

"Mac' can always relieve the tension in any situation. He has the gift of genuine comic relief."

This was particularly evident in the staff room immediately following a morning observation in his class. A female member of staff was discussing a very personal problem concerning her daughter's morals. 'Mac' was fiddling with a clarinet he had been showing the class, and at a very emotive moment piped up with

I practice safe sax!

An Ideology of Humour: An emic explanation

Phil, kids are the best judges of everything that happens in the classroom. You have to be real and everything you do has to be real. You have a product to sell, and it's got to be real to turn the kids onto it!

'Mac's' personal philosophy is extremely simple. As far as he is concerned,

the classroom environment is the key for me.

But for this practitioner, the term 'environment' means much more than the physical elements of the classroom. 'Mac' views this term to mean the interaction between pupils and teacher, and the subsequent relationship that is formed. He believes that developing this interaction, of which humour is the key component, is the means by which a classroom atmosphere of empathy and inclusion is formed. To achieve this he instigates several distinct strategies. Herein lies an apparent anomaly. While he aims to deliberately set up instances where he can develop humorous interactions, he is also completely spontaneous. His pupils in fact have come to realise that they can always expect the unexpected. They eagerly look forward to the times in which they can enjoy each other's sense of humour.

'Mac' believes that when he "aims humour at the class" a channel of communication is begun in which the children will reciprocate and open up to him as well.

I think kids almost eliminate teachers from their experience if they don't open up. Kids like it. You get much more from them, they start to open up to you as well. Enjoying a laugh is the best way to this.

As 'Mac' sees it, he believes that as the year progresses and the children see first hand the openness of the teacher and the gradual unfolding of the relationships formed through the humour, each individual and the class as a whole open up more and more. Thus a culture of mutual respect is developed instead of a climate based on "do as you're told or there will be consequences." Although instituting a broad variety of classroom management strategies, 'Mac' believes that all are funnelled through the use of humour and the development of an atmosphere and classroom climate that engenders this opening up. Motivation for both the individual and the class to engage in a relationship is thus formed and enhanced through an intrinsic rather than an imposed philosophy of control.

Motivation is being with the kids and being for the kids, and enjoying the language and interaction that naturally flows from this kind of viewpoint.

In further pursuing this aim of establishing a harmonious working atmosphere through the developing of relationships based on this notion of 'self divulgence', are a set of language strategies which are both deliberate and aimed at further recruiting the child to be a part of the collective whole.

'Humour' in Practice: A negotiated explanation

College stressed correct steps to take, cycles and all sorts of stuff, there was a 'correctness' about it. It always seemed to me that as long as you looked good in the classroom, kept the kids quiet, you were seen to be an ok teacher. The reality in that kind of classroom isn't pretty! Nothing happens! The stuff that happens in my room isn't correct, we laugh and dig at each other. But there's a reality to it. We all enjoy being there, and the kids just want to come, even when they're on death's door, they'll front up.

As we sat with 'Mac' in front of the television screen and reviewed the videotape of his classroom practice, several layers of ideology in practice were revealed. Through this constant review process, a "sophisticated level of consensus" (Guba and Lincoln 1989:149) was reached. This emergent, and as yet incomplete 'grounded theory' is described in the ensuing paragraphs followed by the schematic diagram that evolved through the debriefing sessions. The terms used in this section are those negotiated between the emic and etic perspectives, with the total process of interaction having been represented as a typical day.

As seen in the following interaction, 'Mac' begins to aim the use of humour immediately the class begins to move into their classroom.

'Mac': Do you know what I'm talking about?

'Roy': An oasis?

'Mac': This is not even an intellectual oasis. (all the class bursts into laughter). Not even a modicum of intellect. I'm not sure what a modicum is but I like it. (Whole class giggles)

'Naomi': Isn't an oasis a computer program ?

'Mac': Oh no!

'Naomi': Rats!

'Mac': Thank you 'Naomi' for stating the obvious. Up you go, we might get some sensible answers upstairs. Roy before all this I thought you were intelligent. (Whole class, giggles)

'Naomi': You've taught us everything we know

Although many educators would deem 'Mac' to be using a form of sarcasm, this interaction begins the thrust and parry of humour that will carry over through the rest of the day. Both teacher and pupil will be constantly on the lookout for opportunities to lampoon and "have a go at each other". Rather than being a derogatory precursor to the day, this interaction sets the tone of positive interaction that would occur for the remainder of the day. Rather than being sarcastic, 'Mac' views this as the means of developing trust. Both teacher and pupil interact in order to maintain the relationship. However 'Mac' carefully prepares his class so that both parties never step over the line in which wit becomes sarcasm, both strive to simply begin to enjoy the closeness of the interaction.

In each of the ensuing teaching sessions, 'Mac' uses several forms of humour. All could be considered as part of what he came to call the "language of genuine care and openness". Consisting of three interlocked forms, each is connected through a genuine concern for the children's well being and the need for them to feel safe and comfortable. 'Mac' actually believes that children are very conscious of what he terms "genuine involvement". Teachers who have this trait are "willing to get their hands dirty, reach out and touch the kids, meeting them at their level." Conversely, he feels very strongly that if children cannot detect this air of involvement, then they often deliberately choose not to develop any lasting or true relationship, with either the teacher or the class as a whole.

As seen in the brief excerpt below, a common type of humour 'Mac' uses is a form, which is very casual, and relaxed, what he also terms 'chatting about reality'.

'Mac': Yeah, Keith, writing the first draft is simply the beginning. It's not like when I was at school. You had to knock the teacher's socks off first time. It was very difficult because the nuns all wore stockings.

'Keith': So you were the only boy at an all girls' school?

Another conscious form of humour is the type that occurs between lessons. During the various lesson stages or segments, 'Mac' consciously takes a break from the more formal requirements of the classroom by deliberately introducing a more relaxed atmosphere, what in a cultural sense could be termed 'the side swipe'. During these episodes humour plays a large role in what 'Mac' calls 'focusing on another to draw the whole in'. The focus is placed on a third party in this form. The intention is to create a holistic focus as other children observe the interaction between teacher and pupil.

'Erin': Hi Mr. Fitz.

Phil: Hi 'Erin', what's that you've got?

'Mac': She's making a balloon out of duck's intestine. It's the sort of thing that Mr. Fitz gives his kids every Christmas. (whole class laughs). Ok, kids pack up please.

A third form used is on the surface extremely confrontational. And yet the neither the teacher nor children took offence. The interaction below, surrounded by uproarious laughter from the rest of the class, is characteristic of this form.

'Mac': 'Kay', you're a dag. You know what that means?

'Kay': A sheep's bottom.

'Mac': No

'Kay': Tail?

'Mac': It's, we'll talk in scientific terms. It's a poo ball, that sticks to the wool.

'Kay': Mr. 'M', I now know what planet your from

'Mac': Oh yer?

'Kay': Yep, Uranus!

While often lasting only a few moments, for 'Mac' these are the most important aspects of his day. It is during these sessions that he believes that both teacher and pupil open up. As far as 'Mac' is concerned these instances are what tie the whole classroom experience into a cohesive whole, by totally loosening the formality. The total aim of this personal approach is to break down the barriers that may exist, forcing the student to take steps towards the conclusion that 'Mac' is totally approachable, and that each student is also free to open up and reveal themselves to him as well. In his opinion, anything less than such a commitment leads the children to view the teacher as being totally removed from their sphere, which leads to the setting up of communication barriers and the ultimate rejection of the teacher by the pupil.

Non-verbal Communication in Practice: A Tentative Explanation

The types of humorous interludes that 'Mac' and the children find so stimulating are not random but the creation of a specific type of classroom environment. A great many aspects of classroom climate can be easily detected by outward, physical aspects such as the use of colour or the design of the room. However, there are important elements that impact on classroom climate that are less well recognised. One of these lesser-known elements is non-verbal communication.

Our study, in part focused on elements of 'Mac's' non-verbal communication and how this added to the creation of a particular type of classroom environment. What we discovered was that 'Mac' used several distinct non-verbal episodes during the classroom day. We have labelled these episodes Toolgiving, Co-learning, Discipline and Explanation. Each of these episodes seemed to function as a type of non-verbal scaffolding system to cue children to the type of behaviours that were required of them during each specific episode. During each of these episodes 'Mac' cued the children non-verbally as to their role. As 'Mac' moved from episode to episode during the day the roles of the children changed accordingly.

During the Toolgiving episodes, which were very teacher centered, 'Mac's' nonverbal behaviour reflected this by demonstrating a range of closed postures such as sliding to the back of his chair, placing his right calf or his left knee and grasping his right leg below the knee with interlaced fingers. During these episodes 'Mac' was instructing the children about the activities they would be undertaking, asking a range of closed questions and clarifying any concerns regarding the activities. During these episodes there was little child input.

This was in direct contrast to the Co-learning episodes which were much more child centered. During these episodes 'Mac' slid to the front of his chair, leaned towards the children and legs spread wide placed his elbows on his thighs, spread his fingers and displayed his open palms to the children. These are non-verbal behaviours such as reducing the space between him and the children and entering what Hall (1969) describes as personal space. There are particular ranges of gesture clusters that also accompany this type of non-verbal behaviour that Leathers (1986) would refer to as openness gestures. While seated, Mac used just such a range of open-body positions that included legs apart, elbows on thighs, fingers spread, palms open and towards the children. He also moved closer to the children and smiled, initiated and maintained eye contact, all indicators of high immediacy behaviours. During these types of episodes 'Mac' assumes the role of facilitator, his questions range from lower to higher order ones and he probes the children's responses to encourage them to define their understandings. During these episodes there was massive child input.

When Discipline episodes occurred they were always child initiated and 'Mac' physically shifted in order to make or maintain eye contact with the child, often using a hard gaze. The majority of Discipline episodes arose from a Toolgiving episode. There was both individual child and teacher input within these episodes.

Explanation episodes occurred when the children needed clarification of an aspect of the lesson. During these episodes 'Mac' often used non-verbal behaviour to illustrate verbal behaviour, this is a form of communication that Knapp (1980) termed an 'illustrator'. This could be likened to pointing when giving someone directions or using the hands to shape the object being discussed. These episodes were always teacher controlled although child initiated.

The type of non-verbal behaviours we observed in 'Mac's' classroom occurs whether teachers are aware of the power and influence of the non-verbal or not. Although largely unacknowledged, this form of communication impacts upon the intricate communication processes within a classroom. As 'Mac's' classroom demonstrates, an educator's underlying beliefs and ideologies are demonstrated through the non-verbal behaviour that represents those ideologies. Research has

demonstrated (Hansford, 1988; Ikeda & Beebe, 1992; Robinson, 1995) that teacher non-verbal behaviours exert a powerful influence on the classroom. At times it functions as a type of non-verbal scaffolding system to cue children to the types of behaviour that are acceptable during a particular episode within a lesson (McKenzie, 1997).

Interestingly many of the current classroom management models (Balson, 1992; Rogers, 1994) recommended to teachers and favoured by schools use models that for the most part fail to acknowledge the power of non-verbal communication.

The types of behaviours exhibited by 'Mac' in the classroom are those that Ikeda & Beebe, 1992; Robinson, 1995 have all labelled teacher non-verbal immediacy behaviours. These behaviours positively affect classroom climate and student learning by serving to promote a type of personal affinity or emotional bond between teacher and students. In 'Mac's' classroom the free use of humour between and among class members ably demonstrates this bond. Although this research is presently in the preliminary stages with respect to humour, it is envisioned that more detailed research will identify how and where humour fits into some of these non-verbal classroom episodes.

A Final Summary: An etic perspective

The ideology in practice was not a passive underlying structure, rather it was viewed by the teacher as a 'communicable being' in its own right. Very much like an iceberg with a small visible and tangible tip, resting on a large semiotic submerged base.

Language could also be called a stereophony.... by that I mean it is a space, it puts thoughts and feelings into place according to different volumes and distances. (Barthes 1985:104)

Similar to the suggestion made by Hampes (1999) that there is a strong link between humour (and in this case the use of body language) and the development of trust, the data in this study demonstrates that the relationship could be likened to a 'magnetic mirror. The following schematic diagram shows the working of this metaphor of humour in action, as the teacher draws children into a symbiotic relationship through his demonstrations of humour through the revelation of the 'way he is' and 'who he is.'

Table 1: Humour as Engagement

This model is also similar to Pearl's (1981) description of the optimal climate of psychological security often sought by adolescents. A climate free from psychological and physical harm as opposed to the creation of a "feudal estate with a landlord" (White 1988:317). In a time when classroom management in Australia is receiving greater scrutiny than ever before, could it be that the psychology based models currently being purported to be 'best practice' actually omit the most important elements of quality teaching and optima classroom management? Has the

Chatting about reality

criticism levelled at managerial models a decade ago by researchers such as Tattum (1989) and Slee (1992), decrying their narrowness and lack of dynamic adaptability been ignored? This study would suggest that educators and administrators need to seriously rethink their positions and policies.

Rather than the development of a power structure in which the teacher was dominant and the students submissive, the actions of this teachers suggests that a more empowering structure can be developed. One in which the teacher and pupils share an environment in which the teacher was a directing element, and humour is used to "reduce tension, motivate students, aid instruction, strengthen teacher-pupil relationships, and help the teacher stay interested and relaxed (Rareshide 1993:26)

In essence, this study suggests that a highly specific co-operative classroom culture can created in which the students became an integral part of the norms, roles and social fabric as opposed to one in which they were coerced or forced to comply with the teacher's demands. The result of this shared belief system is that the children are drawn into a genuine relationship based on empathy, self-disclosure and respect. The structure set up by the teacher could possibly produce produces harmonious benefits, drawing both teacher and pupils into a deeper levels of learning as co-learners.

There is, thus a way of looking at socialisation from what one might call a 'policeman's point of view'; that is, socialisation can be viewed primarily as the imposition of control from without, supported by a system of rewards and punishments. There is another, if you will, more benign way of looking at the same phenomenon, namely, one can look upon socialisation as a process of initiation in which the child is permitted to develop and expand into a world available to him (Berger and Berger 1981:63).

'OUR' Implications

In general terms the most significant aspect arising from this project is the notion that 'language' use in the classroom must be seen as a total package of influence. Hence, in discussing the specific implications of this paper when we use the term language we are in fact referring to this ideal. The holistic 'language in action' of this teacher suggests that, in regard to classroom management:

- **rather than being a peripheral force and form, a teacher's language use would appear to be the central determinant in creating optimal classroom control.** While language is often quoted as being the curriculum, this study suggests that language use is the environment. While what teachers say to children is of vital importance, how they interact with children is of much more value. Could it be that this then is the reason that academics such as Slee (1992), Doyle (1986), and Lewis and Lovegrove (1987) have long complained that both teachers and academics traditionally held an extremely narrow view of classroom control and discipline?
- **teachers need to realise that language use involves more than dialogue.** The results of this inquiry clearly demonstrate that lip service only has been given to the role of non-verbal communication in the classroom. Clearly teacher-pupil interaction is more holistic than academics and teachers appear to believe. The language use of the teacher in this case study involved and ebb and flow of both verbal sparring and body language. In this instance the aim of this dance between teacher and

pupil was not to gain control over the children but to establish a relationship built on mutual trust. Perhaps the reason anxiety over classroom control has a long history (Marsland 1970, Otto 1986, Lewis and Lovegrove 1987, McManus 1989) is due to the fact that classroom management has seen to be a 'thing' that can be handled through steps, stages and processes rather than an interaction that can be crafted through the establishment of relationships?

Doyle (1986) has continually suggested that a more holistic approach may provide a more balanced model, as opposed to the typical research findings in this field, which Lewis and Lovegrove (1987:173-186) describe as "dense, impractical, unenlightening and inconclusive".

- **the need for teachers to develop their own belief system and approach to teaching in general, especially in the area of classroom control.** The articulation and development of tacit knowledge into classroom practice that this teacher undertook suggests that rather than take on the theoretical positions espoused by academics, teachers need to develop a clear "conscience of craft" to guide their work (Green 1984 cited Pratte and Rury 1991:64). This development of 'clear conscience' necessitates each individual teacher establishing their own professional framework through the establishment of a platform of knowledge based on a 'what works for me' design.

- **educators and researchers know relatively little about the development and evolution of teaching skills.** The claims of Denscomb (1985), Hopkins (1987), Richardson (1990) and Burden (1990) that we understand very little about how experienced teachers develop their craft seemed to be sustained by this project. This lack of direction has occurred mainly due to the prevailing belief that teacher and staff development could be enhanced through withdrawal workshop programs run by 'experts for the novice' (Richardson 1990, Barton 1992). Despite a large volume of literature, this situation was exacerbated, as Carter (1990) candidly states, because there was only an extremely minimal amount of research in attempting to assess both the short term and long-term effects of these programs. It would also appear that the limited amount of staff development these teachers had received in the area of classroom management had failed not only because of the nature of staff development because of a deficit in understanding in regard to the manner in which pupils and teachers communicate (Norton 1983).

... we need to find and study expert and experienced teachers, ... they can more than most teachers provide us with the cases, the richly detailed descriptions of instructional events that should form a part of teacher education events. (Berliner 1986:13)

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