

Harmony or Attack: the Function of Student Humor at Lower Secondary Schools

Abstract

This paper addresses the phenomenon of school humor, focusing on the question of how it contributes to shaping teacher-student relationships. Based on an analysis of texts written by lower secondary school students, the paper shows that humor at school serves contradictory functions, such as harmonizing teacher-student relationships on the one hand, and enabling power negotiation aimed at gaining superiority on the other. Analysis of narrative data has identified a specific phenomenon of festive humor. Within its frame, teacher-student relationships nearly always tend to be harmonized.

Keywords: *humor, school, teacher-student relationships*

1. Introduction

This paper deals with humor that develops within the school institution. It primarily focuses on the ways humor occurs in teacher-student relationships. Humor can be defined as a specific type of experience arising from the perception or evocation of a funny event (Bariaud, 1989). This term can be related to both the perception and creation of something funny.

1.1. Humor as a social phenomenon

Humor needs to be understood as a social phenomenon. Empirical research shows that people tend to laugh more often in company than when they are alone,

and that laughter is “contagious” to a certain extent (cf., Martin, 2007). The sociability of humor is also based on the fact that humor usually assumes the presence of at least two people – we either laugh at someone else’s joke or we relate ours to them. Humor fulfills a lot of social functions, two of which emerge as the most dominant: building solidarity and negotiating power.

The connection between humor and solidarity and group cohesion is well known. As Ziv (2010) wrote, groups featuring humor and laughter show a more positive atmosphere and their activities are more pleasant and attractive for their members than the activities of groups lacking humor and laughter.

According to Koller (1988), humor creates a social bond and has the potential to form a group: if we laugh at the same joke or comic moment with someone, solidarity is created between us and we gain at least a temporary in-group status. In contrast, the target of the humor is pushed out of the group for the given moment and is ascribed out-group status. If we can make others laugh at our jokes, we receive a ticket to the group. This holds true even if we aspire to enter a well-established group with a solid hierarchy and rules – the laughter of other members is an expression of certain (at least momentary) feelings and it shows that our point of view is accepted (Ziv, 2010). Numerous research studies have proven that humor contributes to feelings of closeness and solidarity among people (Fraley & Aron, 2004; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002; Vinton, 1989). Fine (1987) uses the term “idioculture” in this context to describe a system of knowledge of conditions, behavior, and habits shared among the members of a group that can be referred to by any member as a common interactive base. According to Fine (1987), an idioculture contains a permanent set of humorous references understood only by the members of a particular group.

Accentuating the aggressive features of humor is typical of a certain type of theorizing about the nature of humor.¹ Gruner (1997) explains humor as a moment of triumph of the joke teller over its target. He adds that all humor exhibits certain features of attack, struggle, and aggression. Thus, we are getting to a connection between humor and power patterns in a group, which is also well documented in research. We know that the status hierarchy in a group is, in a way, always projected into humor production and perception. Individuals with higher status produce humor more often and more successfully (in the sense of acceptance by other group members), and it can also be said that this humor is more aggressive than the humor produced by group members with lower status (Keltner et al., 1998;

¹ This is primarily typical of the superiority theory and the psychoanalytic theory.

Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). The speaker attracts attention, an inseparable property of power, with humor. The laughter that occurs in response to a joke is in fact requested laughter. If others laugh at our jokes, it means that we are able to attract their attention and that they approve of our conduct. Both these features mark a strong power position (Gruner, 1997).

It follows from the above that the evidence is inconsistent in showing which social functions tie with humor. On the one hand, humor contributes to building solidarity and a friendly atmosphere, while on the other hand it serves to control power in a group. This paradox calls for a deeper analysis, which is presented in the following text.

1.2. Humor at school

The social aspects of humor in general have been presented. Now, we will directly focus on humor in school. Although the study of humor in a school environment is not a prominent topic in the sociology of education, it has a tradition. Studies in the field of school ethnography are classic contributions. Peter Woods (1976, 1983) labelled humor and laughter as “antidotes” to the effects of the school, a certain type of escape that transforms the school reality in a way that is more pleasant for students to experience.

Dubberley (1988) emphasized the primary role of subversive laughter, speaking of a *culture of resistance*, where student humor is an important tool. Based on ethnographic data from British schools, Dubberley described the phenomenon of “testing” teachers as a manifestation of student resistance against the official school culture. This testing includes various jokes aimed at disturbing teachers and discovering their weaknesses.

A recent probe by Meeus and Mahieu (2009) analyzed written student narratives describing humorous experiences with their teachers at a primary school. They identified several key motives of student humor: (1) celebration: a humorous event that occurred during a special school day; (2) teasing and making playful fun of teachers; (3) correction of a teacher who has some displeasing personal features; (4) rebellion against strict teachers; (5) misbehavior in classes taught by non-authoritative teachers; (6) creation of a positive atmosphere – a playful form of humor which is not used against teachers. In this typology, we can identify the poles of subversive humor (teasing, correction of teacher, rebellion, misbehavior) and of joyful non-offensive humor (celebration, creation of a positive atmosphere), which harmonizes relationships between various actors and strengthens their solidarity.

2. Research methodology

On the basis of the above-stated claims and findings, I decided to conduct my own empirical research aimed at mapping varieties of humor in the Czech lower secondary school environment and the functions that humor fulfills in teacher-student relationships.

The data consisted of narratives titled “A Humorous Event at My School” written by students from a lower secondary school.² The complete collection consists of 89 texts by students, which describe a humorous episode which the students experienced with their teachers. A narrative study is relevant for social sciences because to study a narrative is to study the way people experience their world (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). It should be remembered that student and teacher narratives cannot be taken as an exact reconstruction of events they describe. For one thing, the recorded incident is always portrayed from the author’s subjective point of view (often with evident emotional timbre); for another, it describes an event that took place in the past and the memories thus can be partial, selective, and fragmentary. There is no certainty that the events took place exactly as the respondents portray them. Nevertheless, the texts written by direct participants serve as valid representations of their understanding of humor in the school environment.

Given the nature of the data, narrative analysis was chosen as the analytical method, i.e. a method designed for interpreting texts in the form of a narrative. Riessman (2008) distinguishes between thematic and structural analyses, where a thematic analysis focuses primarily on WHAT is being said, while a structural analysis focuses rather on HOW it is said, i.e., on the way of the narrative organization.

The method I chose is inspired by both types of analysis. First, a basic structural analysis was performed based on Labov’s (1967, 1970) description of the invariant deep structure of the narrative. In the collected narratives, I identified individual parts of the narrative structure and subjected these segments to thematic analysis and other methods of structural analysis. In this paper, I focus on the part of the stories that state the outcome, the denouement of the plot, and the resulting effects. This part enables the identification of the functions of humorous incidents, which is the aim of my analysis in this paper.

² The assignment was: Write a story about a funny or humorous experience you had at school.

I divided the various outcomes referred to in the texts by students and teachers – in accordance with the theoretical background – according to whether a power negotiation took place on a general level resulting in the power superiority of an actor or whether the relationships between students and teachers were rather being harmonized.

In the process of the analysis I noticed that the collection includes a relatively numerous group of narratives that do not take place on a regular day at school but rather in some special context. In this paper, I will further describe the specificity of festive humor, and I will show that it fulfills functions different from everyday humor.

3. Analysis of humorous event functions

The collected narratives comply with this distinction. They can be divided into three basic categories according to what happens to the teacher-student relationships as a result of a humorous incident: (1) a power negotiation resulting in a challenge of the teacher's dominance and establishment of students' temporary superiority; (2) a power negotiation resulting in strengthening of the teacher's dominance; (3) harmonization of teacher-student relationships, which means that mutual cohesion and solidarity are built between the two actor groups.

3.1. Student power superiority

Excerpt 1:

The teacher came into the classroom and she brought a CD player because she wanted to play a very educational CD. The whole class was looking forward to not doing anything and just listening to the CD. The teacher prepared everything and wanted to turn the player on. But it was mute. We were all wondering, "Why isn't the thing working?" The teacher even checked the player once more, but everything seemed to be OK. After a while a student said, "But, Teacher, is the player plugged in?" And suddenly the whole classroom started laughing. Why? Well, because it was not plugged in. So it was really funny and so was the rest of that class.

(A boy, 13 years old)

What is the comic principle in this excerpt? It is an incongruity between the teacher's actions and the social requirements on the teacher's role. It follows from the teacher's role that they should be always, under all conditions, more competent than the students, while in this excerpt, the students are the ones who must help

their teacher with such a banal issue as plugging the CD player into a socket. The usual teacher-student positions reverse for the moment – the students critically evaluate their teacher’s abilities, mock them, and thus easily attack the teacher.

3.2. Teacher power superiority

Excerpt 2:

Once in the sixth grade I was in a language lesson about words that sound the same. The teacher was just going through words that start with an R when a girl interrupted her and said that “to reign” should not be spelled with “e-i”, but with “a-i.” Because they quarreled about that for more than 10 minutes, the nice teacher started to lose her cool. She really tried to explain to the girl what the difference is. But then she decided that actions speak louder than words and she grabbed the girl’s hand and walked with her to the window. It had rained before and the teacher pointed at the wet streets and said, “Well, OK, do you think that it rained Maria Theresa yesterday?” The girl looked at her quizzically and finally she understood what the difference between “to rain” and “to reign” was. I will never forget the difference between these two and I think neither will my classmates.

(A girl, 15 years)

The excerpt shows that school humor is not only produced by students. Teachers often initiate humorous situations and use student laughter for their own purposes. While the students in the previous excerpt laughed at their teacher, here it is the teacher who mocks a student who has not been able to understand the spelling phenomenon they are going over. An element of the teacher’s aggression towards the student is evident in their interaction. We need to bear in mind that today we find ourselves in a historical situation when a direct authoritative expression of power at school is viewed as unacceptable. Quite a few previous teacher techniques such as punishment or criticism of students are viewed as incorrect, while the requirement that a teacher must assign schoolwork in their class remains valid. Under these circumstances, humor seems to be a technique for maintaining discipline as it allows for explicit exercise of power. Funny teachers use humor for the purpose of taking control over the situation in the classroom and they use it to express and strengthen their dominant position.³

³ Some examples of humor use can verge on teacher misbehavior (Mareš, 2013).

3.3. Harmonizing relationships, building solidarity

Excerpt 3:

My funniest experience from school was the whole adaptation course. We enjoyed these three days along with our teachers as no other school activity. The kids refused to go to bed and the Teacher had to read fairy tales to us. We gladly participated in all sorts of outdoor activities and I personally liked the Fear Factor game the most. On the following days when we were at our desks in the classroom, we would talk about it and how nice it was and we would draw pictures of our best experiences. We have a good class teacher and so I believe that we will repeat such a trip one day. I think that this adaptation course helped to strengthen the relationships in our class.

(A girl, 12 years)

It is obvious that this excerpt has a different tone than the previous one, because it lacks the opposition between the student and teacher groups. What happens after they return to school and everyday teaching is worth noticing. Experiences from the course are still the subject of processing and discussions, they are “conserved” and they can be used by the class collective to emphasize its shared definition and group identity at any time. However, it is important to note that sharing pertains to both students and teachers, whose positive roles are emphasized several times in the extract.

3.4. Occurrence of various functions in the data

Table 1. Analysis of functions – the occurrence of various functions in the data

	Student narratives (n)	Student narratives (%)
Student superiority	37	42 %
Teacher superiority	14	15 %
Harmony	38	43 %
Total	89	100 %

The table clearly shows that humor leads to the establishment of some kind of superiority more often than to the establishment of harmony. Humor, thus, more often works as a weapon in power negotiations at school than as a means to conclude peace between teachers and students. It is also evident from the table that humor does not usually lead to strengthening teacher power, but to the

establishment of student superiority. In this point, my findings agree with those of Dubberley (1988), who understands humor as a way for students to express their resistance against teachers and the school as an institution.

4. The phenomenon of festive humor

While analyzing the data, I noticed that a considerable number of humorous events do not take place accidentally in classes or during breaks, but on special occasions that happen regularly at schools and thus can be considered institutionalized. Despite being traditional and institutionalized, these occasions are regarded as special and they have a certain aura of festivity around them. These events are special either from a temporal perspective, when they are tied with specific days (Christmas, Easter, April Fool's Day), or a spatial perspective, when they are based on the redeployment of the class collective outside the school walls (a field trip, residential outdoor school, or a sports course). I will refer to these incidents as "festive humor", thus distinguishing them from the everyday humor that takes place on ordinary school days.⁴

Like Excerpt 3, Excerpt 4 is an example of festive humor.

Excerpt 4

On April Fool's Day, my schoolmates and I decided to prepare some April Fools for our teachers. I think we quite succeeded: we agreed that each time the teachers turn their backs on us, we would begin to laugh. And we did. The Teacher was a bit terrified at first, but then, when we said those words – April Fool! – she laughed, too. Two boys then hid in the closet in Czech class, and when the teacher came, we told her that they were in the principal's office because they had been running in the corridor and had bumped into a teacher who had fallen down. She quite believed us, but then she went to open the closet and found them, but even so we were laughing. In return, she told us that we would write a test on the most recent subject matter on Monday. We were quite relieved that this was an April Fool, too. We also prepared April Fools for our class teacher: one of our classmates had broken a window once and it was a big issue and we went to her and told her that he had broken the window again and now he was crying in the toilets. She believed us: "Well, you will pay for it, it will be an issue again..." And when we said April Fool, she was laughing very hard: "You wait!" She came to the classroom after the break as if nothing was going on and handed out sheets of paper. Everyone was saying: "April Fool, right?" But she said, No, she had told us we would have a test. So we wrote the date, our names and the first question and everybody started to realize that we were really writing a test, and then she said: "April Fool!" (A girl, 9th grade)

⁴ Čejková (2014) also observed that students find humorous those activities which do not take place within the usual educational framework.

This story describes various traps and intrigues that students prepare for their teachers. These activities do not only take place on festive days, but teachers tend to reproach such conduct on regular days. The situation is different on festive days, and student pranks, which teachers would otherwise persecute as unacceptable, are allowed on such days. Excerpt 4 clearly shows that the expression “April Fool!” works as a magic spell that radically redefines the situation. The teacher is at first *terrified*, but after she is assured that it is an April Fool, she laughs. Students are similarly afraid of the test at first and then they are *relieved*. The important thing is that teachers and students laugh together in this excerpt.

The connection between laughter and a festive atmosphere recalls the *carnivals of popular culture*, which Bakhtin (1984) graphically described in an example of medieval and Renaissance street festivals. According to Bakhtin, a carnival is celebrated as a festival where “everyone laughs at everything”; it is a temporary liberation from the prevalent truth and ruling order, a temporary cancellation of all hierarchical relations, privileges, norms, and bans (Bakhtin, 1984). This thesis can be successfully applied to festive humor at schools – on days like these rules are broken and the official truth is made relative.

A temporary limitation of the hierarchies within relationships between teachers and students is manifested in that teachers do not punish their students; on the contrary, the teachers accept the students’ victory when they make a good, surprising prank. Further, there is evident reciprocity in April Fools pranks, which is not present in other forms of school humor: the students tease their teacher and the teacher teases them in return. The reciprocity of April Fool pranks adds the dynamic to the whole situation. Students cannot be sure whether teachers mean what they say seriously.

Bakhtin (1984) claimed that the carnivalesque type of humor is both mocking and adoring and that the carnivalesque parody rejects as well as revives and renews. The awareness of a temporary escape from valid norms leads to a clearer understanding of them, but it also leads to a willingness to submit to them after the

Table 2. Analysis of functions distinguishing everyday humor and festive humor

	Everyday humor (n)	Everyday humor (%)	Festive humor (n)	Festive humor (%)
Student superiority	35	55 %	2	8 %
Teacher superiority	14	22 %	0	0 %
Harmony	15	23 %	23	92 %
Total	64	100 %	25	100 %

humorous frame has vanished. The question arises of whether differences between festive humor and everyday humor appear in the function analysis.

Table 2 provides convincing evidence that festive humor leads to different results, and thus it works differently from everyday humor. We can see that, with a few exceptions, festive humor leads to the establishment of harmony between teachers and students.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The conducted research shows, strictly speaking, the ambivalent nature of humor, which can work as a harmonizing element or can serve both students and teachers to express and strengthen their power position.

The question was raised about regarding the degree to which it is possible to view humor at school positively, if expressing resistance and inciting conflict are its important functions. My analysis shows that when humor is used as a means of power negotiation, it more often leads to the establishment of temporary student dominance rather than teacher dominance. Humor is thus in a sense “power of the powerless”; it is one of the few ways for students to reverse the power asymmetry that is typical of the school environment. Students are forced to submit to the dictates of the adults at school, which can produce feelings of frustration and hostility. Humor helps them to dispose of these negative feelings.

Coser (1964) and other sociologists of conflict claim that conflict can help to maintain social order by channeling tension. Moreover, humor is special in its playful unrealism (Bariaud, 1989). In humor, students can hide from the teacher. If students performed such actions seriously, it would mean the end of teaching. Similarly, the teacher can express indifference towards the students or threaten them in humor, although this would produce disastrous effects in a serious discourse. Students and teachers thus can humorously attack the school institution and enjoy it, without causing any harm to the institution itself.

The analysis has shown that humor enables students to negotiate power and conflicts and that it can also lead to harmonization of the relationship between teachers and students. The analysis has shown that festive humor plays a more substantial role in harmonizing teacher-student relationships than everyday humor due to its ritualistic nature. The fact that rituals elevate group cohesion and cooperative behavior is well known. Wulf et al. (2011) claim that rituals in schools help to build the awareness of social cohesiveness and belonging to a community. According to anthropologists (Wiltermuth and Heath, 2009), the interactive

function of rituals is achieved through synchronization, because rituals usually involve synchronous activities (dancing, singing, rhythmic walking). Laughter is such a synchronized activity in humor. The analyzed data clearly show that both students and teachers actively participate in festive humor incidents and they enjoy this humor together. A shared social action and synchronized laughter give rise to the specific effect of festive humor.

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