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Title: Nothing serious? Candidates' use of humour in management training

Publication year: 2002

Journal title: Human Relations

ISSN: 1741-282X

Publisher: SAGE

Link to original published version: <http://hum.sagepub.com/>

Citation: Grugulis, Irena (2002) Nothing serious? Candidates' use of humour in management training. *Human Relations* Vol. 55, No. 4, pp. 387-406

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**NOTHING SERIOUS? CANDIDATES' USE OF HUMOUR IN  
MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

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**Acknowledgements** The research on which this article is based was funded by the  
Economic and Social Research Council award number R00429424138.

## NOTHING SERIOUS? CANDIDATES' USE OF HUMOUR IN MANAGEMENT TRAINING

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*This article explores the use made of humour in three different private sector organisations. It draws on observations of managers working towards a management qualification and, from the jokes they exchange, it argues that studying humour may offer insights into sentiments not easily articulated in 'serious' conversation. Humour's ambiguity enables contentious statements to be made without fear of recrimination. Equally, constructing jokes by juxtaposing two different frames of reference provides a glimpse of alternative (and shared) perceptions of 'reality'. This sensitivity to complexity makes humour a particularly appropriate vehicle for conveying ambitions, subversions, triumphs and failures and this article considers some of the 'serious' messages underlying the jokes.*

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**Key Words:** humour, misbehaviour, NVQs, methodology

## **NOTHING SERIOUS? CANDIDATES' USE OF HUMOUR IN MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

This is an article about humour and the way in which in which humour was used in three organisations. As such it is a contribution to a growing body of literature which accords this ostensibly 'trivial' topic serious consideration (see, for example, Mulkay, 1988; Collinson, 1988; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Powell and Paton, 1988; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Davies, 1992; Mulkay and Howe, 1994). It would be inaccurate to dismiss this increasing interest as academic excursions, mere ventures into a 'playful' frame of reference (Wilson, 1979) that offer only 'light relief' from worthier discussions. Rather, as these 'serious' analysts of humour argue, apparently frivolous exchanges may be valuable analytical tools, offering insights and illumination which more earnest discussions cannot.

One of the main reasons for this sensitivity is that, as both Kahn (1989) and Douglas (1975) argue, many types of humour are 'situational', inextricable parts of the social context in which they occur. Exploring jokes may provide insights on relationships, group dynamics or individual feelings (Freud, 1905/1966; Coser, 1959; 1960); considering the reasons that some subjects are selected for witticisms can supply information on those subjects and the impact they have (*The Economist* December 20th 1997; *The Economist* May 9th 1998); and unravelling the jokes themselves may offer lessons on the various different frames of reference through which topics can be perceived (Mulkay, 1988; Suls, 1972). As Watson (1994:191) comments, there is no such thing as "just a joke".

Using humour as a guide to individual emotions is comparatively straightforward and well understood. Humorous exchanges, situated in a 'playful' frame of reference are 'unreal' interactions (Raskin, 1985) in that they are seldom accorded the same 'serious' consideration that 'non-playful' discussions attract. Accordingly, individuals may feel more comfortable expressing certain emotions (hostility, ambiguity, sexual desire, individual problems) in this 'unreal' space (Freud, 1905/1966; Mulkay, 1988; Greig, 1969). This may extend to relationships with others. The 'permitted disrespect' of the 'joking relationship' identified by Radcliffe-Brown (1952) provides a safety valve, in that it licences the expression of negative feelings in a form that is not calculated to cause offence.

Such a combination of friendliness and antagonism is possible because of humour's discursive ambiguity, because humour is not part of 'real' conversation. The humorist uses both verbal and non-verbal clues to isolate their jokes from normal discussion (Wilson, 1979) and if these are understood by listeners then that interaction is accepted as an aside, governed by different rules to those which rule serious exchanges. This 'unreality' liberates the conversational actors and problematic topics may be raised with less fear of rejection, offence or recrimination. These may include sexual attraction (Jacobson, 1997), individual criticism (Bradney, 1957) and, as will be considered below, institutional criticism. Because humorists are not engaging in 'real' conversations, challenges, mockery and questions are all allowed, and none cause offence.

Much of this ambiguity can be attributed to the fact that comic exchanges acknowledge more than one interpretation of reality. Indeed, it has been argued that situation specific humour actively relies on the existence of numerous, complex realities for its comic impact (Kahn, 1989). Humour may incongruously juxtapose ideas from one frame of reference to another, mutually incompatible one (see Koestler, 1964, for a discussion of 'bisociation') or contrast the image of the world as it is with the image of the world as it ought to be (Fiebleman, 1939). Svebak (1974:102) argues that this juxtaposition (and, particularly, the acceptance of another potential world order that it implies) allows humour to challenge established social meanings. This challenge is a joint one since the joker is provided with a 'licence to joke' by their audience (Handelman and Kapferer, 1972:484). For such exchanges to be appreciated by the listeners, for these jokes, juxtapositions and incongruities to be amusing, then both interpretations of reality need to be shared; it follows, therefore, that learning to appreciate this context-dependent humour sensitises the researcher to some of the 'realities' of the 'researched'.

Here, the humour documented and discussed is drawn from longitudinal participant observation of small groups of managers in three different organisations, all of whom were working towards the same qualification, the Management NVQ. This article explores the NVQ candidates' jokes in order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact that working towards the certificate had on them. Many of the 'playful' statements that they make mirror the serious criticism of NVQs, but, significantly, because these criticisms were expressed in humorous terms, the organisational norms prevalent in 'serious' mode were in abeyance. This had two main implications, firstly that humorists could raise problematic issues without fear of recrimination and

secondly, that these issues would not be acted on. As with Benton's (1988) political humorists, the jokers here knew and hoped that their comments would be taken in fun. They wanted to criticise, to expose folly where it existed, but had no desire to issue an open challenge or incite their colleagues to action. In these case studies, 'serious' critics neither initiated nor engaged in joking exchanges (see also Powell, 1988) and humour provided a vehicle for both expressing and containing criticism.

### **The qualifications and the research**

Unlike traditional credentials, NVQs have no set curriculum and no published syllabi. Instead, they focus entirely on the *outcomes* of vocational training, the behaviour exhibited by a competent worker. NVQs are, quite simply, lists of behaviours (the occupational 'standards') that a 'competent' candidate of several years standing should display (Mitchell, 1989). As long as evidence is provided that these 'competences' have been demonstrated to the level required in employment (Debling, 1989) an NVQ may be awarded (for a fuller discussion of the advantages of this approach see Jessup, 1991; Fletcher, 1991).

Attractive as the notion of flexible, vocationally relevant qualifications might seem, NVQs have, in both practice and theory, proved to be extremely problematic (Hyland, 1994; Norris, 1991). As was noted above, the 'competences' that make up these qualifications are an attempt to define (exactly) the behaviours expected in the workplace. Yet specifying such behaviours is difficult. Not least because work is rarely as predictable as the occupational standards demand (Senker, 1996; Grugulis, 1997).

Such a dramatic change in VET merited further study and this research aimed to explore and evaluate the processes involved in working towards the Management NVQ. Given this emphasis on process, fieldwork took the form of ethnographic participant observation in three organisations: SupermarketCo, the head office of a major supermarket chain; PrivatPLC, a recently privatised utility and ConstructionCo, a construction company (the names of both candidates and companies given in this article have been fictionalised). Fieldwork took place over eighteen months and involved extended periods in each organisation observing, interviewing and socialising with the managers being studied. Supporting interviews covered their colleagues, subordinates and superiors as well as senior management within the three organisations and access was gained to company documents as well as individual portfolios. The research was couched entirely in ‘serious’ terms and studying humour was no part of the original proposal. However, one of the advantages of adopting an open, ethnographic approach to fieldwork is that the data collected is often rich enough to provide evidence for themes which formed no part of the original research design. This topic is one such instance.

In the fieldwork notes every effort was made to minute and transcribe verbatim accounts of contacts. Jokes were included partly from a conscientious urge to document the process ‘properly’ and partly to add leaven to the tedious and time consuming work of transcription, in the hope that typing up a comic exchange of views might act as light relief. Such passages were never originally intended to be incorporated into the finished document. Yet it soon became apparent that in each of the three organisations candidates exchanged and took pleasure in, similar

(occasionally the same) 'NVQ-jokes'. The barbs echoed one another with such regularity that it was hard to believe the exchanges could be without significance.

Little of this was apparent in the early workshops where candidates were primarily anxious to express pleasure at being selected for the programme and speculate on the positive impact participation might have on their careers. However, as the courses progressed and candidates became aware of what demands the qualifications made of them, this enthusiasm waned. As this happened, the comic exchanges grew more pointed and a specific 'NVQ-humour' began to emerge. Once the candidates shared an understanding of the group task it was reasonable that this should form part of the conversations they enjoyed and that it should be integrated into and eventually dominate their humour.

Clearly, working towards the qualification was not the only source of humour in the groups. Some of the candidates' quips might be heard in any office. Group members apparently exceeding their peers in productivity would be gently and jokingly chided and those falling behind would be reprimanded under cover of humour (see Bradney, 1957, for an account of parallel instances in a department store). Richard and Lisa's exchange in SupermarketCo, for instance, both distances them emotionally from a potentially serious incident and illustrates 'macho' management:

Lisa: A girl in my office sat on a secretary's chair and the back broke and she fell.

Richard: Did you bill her for the chair?

When the group considered a trainer's objectives as too 'exalted', these too became 'fair game'. In PrivatPLC Alan Senior added a new twist to the knowledge experienced managers might be expected to hand over to the graduate trainees on the residential course:

Tutor: From some of the graduate programmes we've got in the business they are one-offs in their units so they're not on any one graduate programme. From my point of view it's worthwhile for them to be with experienced managers - Michelle was an example - for the first few days she wanted to be told what to do and how to do it then she thought for herself.

Alan: Smoked like a trooper and drank like a fish by the end!

Others were prompted by my presence and these ranged from one manager commenting, after I had introduced myself as "the only non-PrivatPLC person here", "But we still love you!" to another, after I explained why I was taking notes, adding, "She says that *now*, but really she's a spy for [the Chief Executive] and everything we say is going to appear on his desk on Monday morning!" Such comments were a reasonable reflection of my own marginal position in their society and the unfamiliar nature of my work. More seriously, however, it also allowed the expression of a concern that the group was being 'spied on' without a display of overt hostility that might have had a damaging impact on the group itself (for instances of the researcher becoming the butt of their own 'subject's' humour see Collinson, 1988 and Lundeberg, 1969).

From the exchanges that did focus on working towards the NVQ it was possible to identify two distinct themes. Jokes were used to challenge the NVQ, presenting it as the impractical antithesis of candidates' own, 'commonsensical' understanding of

managerial work and to question the way they were being assessed (both the viability of collecting evidence and its function as ‘impression management’, Goffman, 1969). Jokes also helped individual candidates cope with difficulties, distancing them from the judgements made about their ‘competence’ and providing them with the social support of laughter.

### **Challenging the NVQ**

The first way in which candidates used humour was to challenge the ‘best practice’ model put forward in the standards. To successfully gain this qualification, candidates were required to produce evidence which documented their ‘competence’ against each of the prescribed behaviours (the management standards). As a result, their main tasks were to understand what was required and provide proof that it had been done. In serious mode it was important for the managers to be seen to be making progress. The management standards were, in the words of one of SupermarketCo’s tutors, the “benchmarked best practice of all the managers in the UK”. Not wishing to work towards them was tantamount to expressing a desire not to develop. In serious mode such a sentiment was unacceptable. Using humour enabled candidates to challenge this model from a point of safety.

Tutors in all three organisations made the management standards the principal point of reference for all workshops. They repeatedly deferred to the NVQ, directed queries to it and used it as a point of reference. In this exchange in SupermarketCo an element of mockery entered the discussion; the group were focusing on unit 1 and their tutor had just read out performance criterion 1.2 (d) *Maintenance frequency and*

*the use of equipment conform to the recommended schedules and procedures* and had started to suggest how the group might comply with it:

Tutor: The evidence is just substantiating what you say. Are you aware of the regulations for PCs? Looking at the screen? Taking breaks?

Steve: Do you follow them?

Richard: You switch it on at ten to eight, you switch it off when you go home. In between you stare at it.

Here, two interpretations of reality are juxtaposed and the humour comes as the group switches unexpectedly between them. So the ‘official’ recommendations that guidelines are followed, sentiments with which candidates might be expected to agree, are ‘de-railed’ by Steve and Richard’s mockery. In practice, workplace pressures led to official regulations being neglected (as Harry Dent ironically noted, “if you want to take this to the ‘nth’ degree, you’ll see that the only place in this organisation that’s been ergonomically built is the Health and Safety unit”) and the candidates were aware of this. Steve and Richard’s exchange served two main purposes. Firstly, by publicly voicing the shared (and risky) knowledge that corners were cut and that not all regulations were complied with, in a context where non-threatening regulations were being discussed, they reinforced the group’s common identity. This less than perfect maintenance was something with which they could all identify and doing this in defiance of the benchmarks they were continually being reminded of, emphasised the boundary of the group, ‘real’ against ‘textbook’. Secondly, and relatedly, it challenged the naïve and legalistic interpretation of the world contained in the ‘management standards’, celebrating instead the ‘commonsensical’ activities that replaced mechanistic compliance.

Each of these elements takes advantage of the educationally distinctive nature of the NVQ programmes. As with Fox's (1990) students, these NVQ candidates were in the unusual position of being more familiar with their work than the tutor ostensibly hired to 'teach' them. Moreover, the qualification for which they were assembling evidence was supposed to describe the work they were doing. When it did not, these gaps were fair game for the humorists. Performance criterion 6.1 (b), for example, was almost universally jeered. It demanded that *Achievement of the objective is practicable within the set period given other work commitments*. As one PrivatPLC manager said, "None of us are going to meet that one!"

Candidates could also use humour to articulate criticisms in comparative safety. Jokes, as 'unreal' and 'playful' asides, may be retrospectively interpreted (Linstead, 1985). This meant that humorists could challenge the model safely. If the group (and the tutor) accepted the challenge positively and laughed, they would gain the social and emotional rewards of a successful joker (Goodchilds, 1972); if anyone took the challenge seriously or found the sentiment offensive, the humorist could defuse the situation by protesting that they were "only joking". As Kahn (1989:p. 55) points out:

By joking we can simultaneously make a statement and withdraw it from serious consideration. Such "hedging of bets" allows organisation members to negotiate systems in which one key to success is to attach oneself to the desirable and detach oneself from the undesirable. Because humorous statements offer the listener the opportunity to take them seriously or not, they also let those making them either take or avoid responsibility for them. If the truth of a humorous statement is welcome, the person making it usually seeks to be held accountable for it; if the truth is unwelcome, the humour distances that person from responsibility for the statement.

Paradoxically, even in ConstructionCo and SupermarketCo where senior personnel staff voiced their reservations about the NVQ openly, it was important for the candidates to comply with the standards when in 'serious mode'. Even if the training was publicly acknowledged as flawed it seemed that 'getting the job done' was important.

This was even more critical in PrivatPLC where, both publicly and privately, the tutor accepted the NVQ standards unquestioningly. The candidates praised most highly were those who produced evidence and anyone who questioned any element of the course was rapidly corrected. This view of the occupational standards was compounded by the power relationship between the group and the tutor. While both ConstructionCo and SupermarketCo brought in external consultants to act as tutors, in PrivatPLC the group was led by a higher-ranking manager who had a degree of authority over the candidates for the duration of the course (for a consideration of the different power-relationships that exist between trainers and adult learners see Al-Maskati and Thomas, 1995; Salisbury and Murcott, 1992). This authority was most clearly visible when one candidate, Ian Jordain, voiced criticisms without cushioning them with humour.

PrivatPLC's Awarding Body (the institution which validated their NVQs) stipulated that the company should have regular meetings with it to review progress at which both candidates and tutors were represented. Ian Jordain was chosen to attend the first meeting and, unsure of his status there, spent most of the time listening. When invited to contribute by one of the Awarding Body's representatives, he suggested

that the course's initial residential week might be productively lengthened, given the information that candidates had to assimilate on it, and told the committee of the confusion caused by the personnel department posting incorrect joining instructions to several attendees. His comments were duly noted. At the next workshop, when he gave a brief report to his fellow candidates on that meeting, the tutor criticised him in front of the group for mentioning the confusion and commenting on the length of the course. She continued this criticism with him privately in their one-to-one session that afternoon. Yet his comments had been comparatively mild and set in the context of a general statement of satisfaction. In the light of this, it was unlikely that any more fundamental challenge would have been welcomed.

Presenting challenges in the guise of jokes (even when only thinly veiled), was much more acceptable. One afternoon, when the tutor was conducting one-to-one sessions in another room and the group were brainstorming possible sources of evidence onto a flip chart, John Robson, annoyed at a particularly poorly worded performance criterion complained that:

These are not well-expressed - I mean they're telling us to submit evidence and they can't even write this properly.

At the flip-chart, Alan Senior wrote "CRAP" under the offending element's number. Elsewhere, challenges might be disguised as compliance and in SupermarketCo the tutors would even co-operate in mocking humorous exchanges. Here, Richard Blackwood and the tutor subvert the standards' interpretation of reality by conforming to it:

Tutor: [Reads 6.1(c)] *"Objectives are explained in sufficient detail and in a manner and at a level and pace*

*appropriate to all the relevant individuals.”* In other words -

Richard: - if they're duffers -

Tutor: - yeah, if they're thick, say it slowly. Which is a very long way of saying you communicate effectively.

Richard: So you get a witness testimony that says “I'm thick so Richard speaks slowly in words of one syllable”.

Tutor: So say, I sat down with him for an hour and left him with this and include the instructions and here's a photo of him going into my office-

Richard: - focus on the clock on the wall -

Tutor: - looking perplexed and a photo coming out -

Richard: - looking even more perplexed.

Again, two realities are juxtaposed in a commonsensical appeal against the textbook interpretation of events.

One candidate, David Beasley, a very senior engineer and British Standards Inspector from ConstructionCo, even turned his portfolio of evidence into a private challenge. Having worked with numerous bureaucratic quality assurance systems he disapproved of the format of the qualification but this disapproval did not take the form of open resistance. Instead, he submitted material that met the letter of the criteria, though not their spirit including a witness testimony on his counselling skills (three lines long and revealing nothing about either the counselling process or the underlying problem) or revealed the problematic nature of the audit process (an account of a building site where the documentation was flawless but the scaffolding dangerous). For David submitting such a portfolio was a way of reassuring himself that he was not

conforming to a system of assessment with which he disagreed without ever running the risk of being criticised for not taking the assessment process seriously.

The sentiments expressed in each of these instances are all highly critical of the model of managerial work contained in the NVQ. It is depicted as naïve, legalistic and poorly written. Yet each of these complaints is diluted and defused by being delivered through the vehicle of humour and few are articulated in ‘serious’ mode. Significantly too, when constructing their jokes, the candidates’ humour actively celebrates their own organisations and their own ways of managing, consistently depicting them as better (more ‘real’) than that presented in the NVQ. Throughout these challenges it seems that the last court of appeal, claimed by both the NVQ developers and the candidates, is the world of the ‘practical manager’. NVQs’ attraction rests largely in their professed representation of workplace ‘realities’; similarly, this humour lays claim to the same arena and it is through this ‘more practical than thou’ attitude that the managers can celebrate their pride in the ‘real’ way to manage against the cumbersome bureaucracy of the standards.

### **Evidence of competence and learning to cope**

While the comic potential of ‘idealised’ job descriptions was readily exploitable, the real, functional discrepancies between the official model and candidates’ work was a genuine cause for concern and this mis-match often resulted in problems with ‘evidence’. Proof of competence was generally submitted in the form of a portfolio and the portfolios themselves comprised, often, very copious amounts of formal, photocopied material. Thus, a major candidate concern, even in ‘serious’ mode, was

the way in which evidence might be produced for areas that were (at best) a marginal part of their responsibilities and (at worst) bore no relationship at all to their jobs, it being a central tenet of the NVQ system that evidence submitted should reflect 'real' work, rather than simulations. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that the NVQ not only prescribed the activities that should constitute managerial work, it also suggested how these might be performed. This meant that, even when certain activities did form a normal part of a manager's work, if the individual candidates (or their organisations) did not follow the NVQ model, they could not pass the NVQ. Such a lack of 'competence' was difficult for candidates to admit to in 'serious' mode. While managers might celebrate the 'practicality' and 'reality' of their own, informal ways of working with their colleagues, admitting to these shortcuts in their portfolios was generally considered unacceptable. Officially, the illusion that practice matched the NVQ benchmarks must be preserved.

Linstead (1985), in his study of the ELS Amalgamated Bakeries, stresses the dissonance between the formal, legalistic (and often legal) interpretation of the conditions employees were deemed to work under and the actual conditions that prevailed. The management, while issuing targets that forced workers to bend or break safety rules, must never officially acknowledge that such rules are broken. Similarly, (though far less physically dangerously) the managers in ConstructionCo, SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC all worked under pressure. Faced with intensified workloads and tough deadlines, most cut corners to hit the targets and all said that they freely admitted this to their bosses (most of whom were reportedly working under similar constraints). However, because the NVQ was seen as 'official best

practice' then, at least as far as the portfolio was concerned, candidates must, at a minimum, create the illusion of compliance.

For most candidates, this compliance with the standards was not illusory and, where practice failed to match the benchmarks, genuine efforts were made to change. Such a genuine change in practice was, as was noted above, what was hoped for when NVQs were devised. But, because the behaviours prescribed in the qualifications often failed to describe the work the candidates were engaged in, these changes were not always particularly constructive. Producing evidence for an NVQ demanded high levels of documentation, formalising practices and auditing behaviour. All three organisations witnessed a sudden increase in the levels of paperwork exchanged. Attempts to conform to the standards resulted in 'staged' events and artificial formalisation more often than they resulted in improvements to traditional ways of getting things done. This was problematic. In serious mode it was unwelcome to admit to being torn between unhelpful bureaucratisation and the benchmarks of 'best practice'. In humorous mode this dilemma provided a rich seam of mockery.

Formalisation, and an increasing awareness that the mundane could provide NVQ proofs, was one target for jokes. In 'humorous' mode a recurrent source of fun was the opportunities for evidence offered by everyday interventions and sins of omission and commission were highlighted in this way. One manager who tripped over another's briefcase pointed out the breach of the Health and Safety legislation the briefcase owner had committed and suggested that the group write the incident up for their portfolios. Any candidate explaining something to their fellows or claiming experience of an unusual event would find themselves the centre of a chorus of "well,

you've proved that, haven't you?" and "would you like me to do a witness testimony?" exaggerating for comic effect the genuine increase in documentation common to all three organisations. It was nonsensical to suggest that short chats or tripping over a briefcase could prove individual competence against any given unit, but asking colleagues to record these instances formally effectively parodied the increased incidence of record keeping.

When collecting evidence, candidates were often faced with a dilemma when the demands of their NVQ assessors for authenticated proofs clashed with the need to manage well. Pat Walker explored some of the problems inherent in evidencing performance criterion 7.4 (c) *Potential and actual conflicts between staff are identified promptly and actions are taken to deal with them as soon as practicable* and, after an unsatisfactory discussion in which the group agreed that proving this would be difficult, she summarised their difficulties as, "so the moral is remember to plug the video in before the conflict starts". Two real problems, the need to minimise conflict and the need to produce evidence, are the two conflictual aims. Pat's suggestion of combining them is amusing because it presents as a solution something that would exactly answer the candidates' difficulties while at the same time being totally impractical. This humour has succeeded by inverting the rules governing 'normal' workplace behaviour. Success is re-defined.

Alternatively, instead of parodying the forms they were filling out, managers would parody the actions underlying those forms as Andrew Dormer of SupermarketCo did when he suggested taking the tutor's advice one step further:

Tutor: Be sensitive. If people start to see your counselling as something for your NVQ - but I had a case recently where someone sacked someone and then got a witness testimony on how professionally they'd done it.

Andrew: Yeah, but they only sacked them to get the NVQ!

In PrivatPLC element 7.3 (f) *Where there are disagreements efforts are made to avoid damaging the relationship with the immediate manager* presented one candidate with an interesting dilemma:

Jane: But I've never had that - I'll have to go out and fight with him now, then get him to sign something to say that we did that.

These jokes operated on two levels. Superficially they were funny because they diametrically opposed the course's official objectives. The NVQ had been intended to be a developmental exercise primarily aimed at improving each candidates' performance at work and it was that rationale that should be the guiding factor behind whether managers should alter their approach to work. Indeed, SupermarketCo's tutors regularly urged their group not to change their behaviour just for the sake of the qualification. Claiming that the core values of the exercise should be re-ordered so that working towards the certificate took priority over, and could be used to distort, performance back in the workplace subverted these aims.

But the humour went deeper than that. These statements were also funny because they exaggerated and exposed what actually happened. NVQ candidates in this study genuinely altered their work practices in order to gather evidence for the qualification; systems were formalised, meetings held and documented, memos written and witness testimonies requested. The suggestion that this behaviour be

extended to making others redundant or fighting with their line managers was simply a comic exaggeration of existing practice. By stating these ‘truths’ in ‘humorous’ mode and exaggerating them for effect, candidates could challenge this without confronting it. The opportunity for retrospective interpretation (and *re*interpretation), and the deliberate ambiguity inherent in the jokes, meant that the risks that might attend an admission that work had changed for the worse, were defused. Moreover, the group’s laughter offered reassurance to the joker that they were not alone in changing their work to suit the standards.

In marked contrast, improvements that were felt to be positive were freely shared with the group in ‘serious’ mode. In Hyland’s phrase, these qualifications are “doomed to succeed” (1994:234): praise is inflated and criticism suppressed or rendered ambiguous. In private, candidates would admit to doubts, in public they were rarely so open. Indeed, even admitting to *not developing* was a public embarrassment. In part this can be attributed to the individualisation of success and failure within NVQs (Raggatt and Williams, 1996). Most of the advocates of this system argue that, because of the emphasis on outcomes (evidence of competence) rather than process (training courses or apprenticeships) individual candidates can truly ‘take ownership’ of their own training. They are at liberty to define their own training needs, dictate the speed at which they qualify and focus attention on the areas they need to work on most (Jessup, 1991). In practice this freedom is heavily restricted. The actions candidates are required to assess their competence against are laid out in detail in the NVQ standards and individuals can exercise no choice here. Nonetheless, the onus of responsibility remains firmly located on the individual candidate. Whatever the

constraints, they are perceived as at liberty to 'own' the qualification process and (by implication) at fault when they fail.

### **Learning to cope**

It should be remembered that these candidates were in the process of being judged. Their abilities in the workplace (literally, their competence) was being measured and, since managerial work relies on the impression of performance as much as on performance itself (Heller, 1972; 1996) all were reluctant to be found wanting. This was another reason for using humour since direct criticisms of the qualification might convince auditors that the critic was making excuses for failure, demonstrating a reluctance to develop, or revealing that they were not truly engaged in managerial work.

Given the individualisation of blame and the guilt felt by candidates who had not developed it is hardly surprising that non-completion, work returned marked 'not yet competent' and obvious discrepancies between a candidate's job description and the model of managerial work prescribed by the NVQ resulted in a great deal of stress. As the courses continued it became apparent that some candidates, regardless of ability or commitment, would be unable to complete their portfolios because their jobs failed to conform to that described by the qualification. This had two separate (but related) implications. Firstly, since enrolment on, and achieving this qualification was widely seen as a good career move by candidates, failing to attain the certificate was a poor one. Secondly NVQs assess 'competence' and candidates who do not complete their portfolios or provide insufficient evidence are deemed 'not

yet competent'. Given that links to 'real' workplaces are emphasised in this process, these people are effectively being publicly considered 'not yet competent' at their jobs.

The use of humour as a coping strategy has been well documented (Kahn, 1989; Collinson, 1988; Bradney, 1957). Joking can help to 'reframe' a problem, to put it into perspective and reduce its importance, it can be used by the humorist to distance themselves from genuinely troublesome and emotive issues and it can be used to construct a cheerful façade. Because joking about something involves partially disengaging from it, it can also facilitate the sharing of problems with work colleagues (as opposed to friends) for, just as outright confrontation may need to be disguised with humour to make it acceptable in the working environment, so those struggling to cope with problems may need to present them as less troubling than they really are. Essentially humour is used to conceal, defuse or distance the group from negative emotions.

Ironically, to distance themselves from their emotions through jokes, candidates often exaggerated those emotions for comic effect. Richard Blackwood, persuaded by his tutor to lay claim to line management responsibility for the people who covered for him when he was on holiday, found that, when the assessor returned the unit, they were convinced that he had a team but not that he developed that team in their roles and had marked him 'not yet competent'. Workplace competence is an emotive subject (and a highly prized attribute) and Richard was genuinely shaken to be 'officially' graded 'not yet competent'. To him it seemed to raise questions about his ability to do the rest of his work. However, this sentiment was a difficult one to

voice, so Richard's wry comment was, "I'm incompetent, apparently", distorting the result to secure sympathy and present himself as an amusing manager who could cope.

Similarly, Pat Walker in PrivatPLC also experienced difficulties generating evidence since her work as a training manager failed to conform to the NVQ's requirements. During one workshop, when another member of her workshop group, aware of her difficulties, asked how she was getting on, she replied, in a mock, high-pitched voice:

Yes, I'm finding it all very difficult indeed and I'd rather not talk about it now thank you. I'm perfectly happy sitting here and having a breakdown. I'll just carry on taking the minutes "Breakdown, breakdown, breakdown...."

However, for the individuals concerned, these displays of bravado were seldom translated into a real triumph over obstacles. They preserved personal pride and dignity in public, but made it no easier to confront the problematic issues. Perhaps, by distancing these difficulties they even perpetuated them. Pat later admitted privately that she spent many of her free evenings at home poring over the NVQ material and trying, with increasing desperation, to think of ways of providing evidence. Such evenings generally ended in tears. Eventually, despite pressure from the tutor and help from her peers, she withdrew from the NVQ.

## **Conclusions and discussion**

As these three case studies have demonstrated, exploring the content of jokes and the use made of humour can provide useful information. The candidates' witticisms

highlight the bureaucratic nature of evidencing 'competence', draw out the discrepancies between the model of managerial work put forward in the qualification and the work managers actually do, and show how patently ridiculous events could be employed to satisfy the performance criteria. In this, they were doing no more than unconsciously (or consciously) paraphrasing in humorous terms many of the 'serious' criticisms of competence based learning (see, for example, Marsh and Holmes, 1990; Smithers, 1993). Humour may be an unusual source of evidence, but it provides valuable reinforcement for many more solemn methods. As Kahn argues (1989:46):

Each statement contains its own truths. If we attend to these statements, and piece together their various truths from clues within the contexts of their expression, we can tap into a rich source of information for understanding the dynamics of individual and group life in organisations.

But the humour went further than that. It allowed candidates the freedom of the court jester, in that they were able to articulate criticism with impunity; it set in abeyance the 'serious' organisational concern with 'getting things done' so that these criticisms would not be acted on; and it offered a glimpse into part of the rich confusion of frames of reference through which these managers made sense of their activities.

These are important points. Organisations are politicised arenas (Jackall, 1988) and since managerial work may be hard to assess quantitatively, managers may be more vulnerable than other occupational groups to being judged on the impression they create on others, the extent to which they are known and the degree to which they conform to organisational norms (Dalton, 1966; Barnard, 1962). In such an environment, open criticism is unwelcome.

Equally, most of the managers in this study had little desire to subvert practice in their own organisations. They enjoyed the work they did and valued the organisations they worked for. Even out of serious mode they celebrated their institutions. The candidates in this study made jokes about the NVQ because it was a safe way of expressing criticism. But they also made jokes about the NVQ because they had no desire to express their criticism as an open challenge.

Much of the existing literature on humour stresses its ambiguity and shows how this facilitates misbehaviour and resistance, protecting jokers from the institutional recrimination that would follow 'serious' criticism. Such protection was certainly an advantage here. But humour's ambiguity also allowed individual managers to criticise without labelling themselves as 'critics'. The candidates in these three organisations were not (and were anxious not to appear to be) 'docile bodies'. They valued their capacity for agency but did not intend their challenges to be seen as 'resistance'. An expression of antagonism that was contained exactly suited the jokers who were, after all, willing participants in the NVQ process. The qualification that they were working towards was, at once, an opportunity for advancement, an attempt to develop their managerial skills, a source of anxiety and frustration, a symbol that they were valued by their organisations, a cumbersome bureaucratic audit, a chance to meet colleagues away from the immediate work environment and scant reflection of (or help towards) the work they were actually engaged in. Humour, as well as being pleasurable in and of itself, helped the managers to negotiate these complexities without committing them to one single interpretation of events. Collinson's (1994) observation that resistance and consent are not polarised and that each contains elements of the other is particularly relevant here. Focusing on

only one of these ‘truths’ oversimplifies and distorts the complex multiplicity of ‘realities’ experienced by the candidates. Attempting to capture and record all of them, concurrently, is necessarily fraught. The advantage of humour as an analytical tool is that it relies on the existence and articulation of each of these.

Significantly, only two effective critics emerged from this process (one at SupermarketCo and one at ConstructionCo) and neither were humourists. Both were very senior managers, both had attended the workshops and courses diligently, both had laughed at the ‘NVQ-jokes’ without initiating any or responding in kind and both successfully completed the qualification. Once they had done so, each provided top management with a carefully reasoned and severe condemnation of the NVQ. To both the jokes had been social pleasantries which made the workshops enjoyable. They did not need humour to cope with their own lack of success and neither drew on humour to address the qualification’s shortcomings.

This is not to argue that humour may not be used to resist (see Taylor and Bain, 2001 for an extremely effective example of this) rather, that ambiguity is an integral part of humour itself as well as the way it is received. As Collinson (1988) observes, humorous exchanges contain “elements of resistance and control, creativity and destructiveness”. And Linstead notes that (1985:p. 762):

To view humour as completely subversive fails to account for its apparent incapacity to change organisations or social institutions, to dismiss it as a mere frivolity underestimates its enormous symbolic power.

Humour can also provide a source of organisational stability, offering arguments in favour of conformity (Barsoux, 1993; Malone, 1980; Duncan, 1982) and it can be

used to articulate far more fundamental reasons for discontent than any expressed here (Dolgoplova, 1982; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). Successful interpretation and translation of these exchanges (assuming such activities to be possible) relies on an understanding of the context in which the humour occurs, and attempting such an exercise may help to stimulate that understanding. Given humour's potential to illuminate and sensitise the researcher to the environment of the 'researched' it is hard not to commend the study of joking as a 'serious' research method. Moreover, to understand the jokes themselves, to find the parodies, ironies and incongruities comic, the researcher must be familiar with both frames of reference used. As Koestler (1964) argues, much comedic force comes from unexpectedly juxtaposing two internally consistent but incompatible frames of reference. So here to appreciate and explain the NVQ jokes we must understand the qualifications themselves, the candidates, their ambitions and the 'real' work being done. Conveying these in a form as economic as a joke is a valuable tool for researchers.

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