# Jaap Bos, Peter Zomer

## Humorous Learning, Dialogical Uses of Humor in Training Situations

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

JAAP BOS
Utrecht University, the Netherlands
PETER ZOMER
Zomer and Cornelissen consultancy

# HUMOROUS LEARNING. DIALOGICAL USES OF HUMOR IN TRAINING SITUATIONS

## ABSTRACT

This article explores an activity observed predominantly in training situations: humorous encounters that imply some form of learning. Humorous learning is a specific form of engagement in which contradicting or opposing voices are incorporated into the systm of I-positions of the actor through the use of humour. This technique is presented here as a collective contradiction solving mode that allows the student to learn to reposition himself in the field. The article discusses data from a case study in which a training session involving multiple trainees and three trainers was evaluated. The sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed; a discursive analysis of two transcripts is presented and discussed. What makes humorous learning singular is that it allows participants to distance themselves from an immediate situation while it simultaneously creates a window of opportunity in which new, unforeseen possibilities arise.

**Key words**: Humour, learning, I-positions, training, contradiction, discursive analysis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of managerial practices, training situations have traditionally been understood from a cognitive viewpoint, that is, from the perspective of individual actors who have to adapt their  information processing apparatuses to current issues or problems so as to learn to improve their output. Thus, the degree to which trainees successfully apply in their jobs the skills gained in training situations, is referred to as "positive transfer of training" (Baldwin & Ford, 1980), and the dimensions in the training and work situation that contribute to positive and negative transfer are considered "facilitating" and "inhibiting" factors (Broad and Newstrom, 1992). And although transfer is regarded as the preferred outcome of training, the literature acknowledges that perhaps only as little as 20% of what is trained is actually applied in the job, and that "positive transfer" accounts for only a small portion of what people actually learn (Foxon, 1993; Gielen, 1995). In other

words, "learning" during training consists in fact of much more than just acquiring existing ideas, techniques and methods. This has raised the question of whether we ought to study training processes differently and focus on actual work floor processes (see: Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström, 2003).

It was, of course, Vygotsky (1931/1981), who first emphasized that learning is mediated: we learn on a social plane first, and then internalize these processes on a psychological plane, where what is established socially becomes "knowledge". Many authors drew from his work the conclusion that study of learning processes must start with explorations of the interactions between actors, and seek to understand how language is used to negotiate meaning in relation to others, resulting in what is called "distributed knowledge" (Cole and Engeström, 1993).

Precisely this quality of negotiating positions in the realm of the social is underscored in the dialogical approach of Hermans and others (Hermans and Kempen, 1993; Hermans, 2002; 2003), from which we shall adopt some key notions in our explorations here, in order to deepen our understanding of learning in training situations. Borrowing from Bakhtin's idea of "polyphony" or multi-voicedness and William James' considerations on the self, the dialogical approach proposes the term "I-positions" to describe those embodied subject positions that one may assume in discourse vis-á-vis others. Subjectivity in dialogical theory is therefore a matter of discursive positioning, and is neither private nor exclusively psychological, but rather a "collective discursive construct". This allows for a more dynamic and open notion of "self", one that negates the socially isolated individual agent of cognitive psychology (we ignore for the moment the issue of how much agency and cultural determinism is implied in the concept of the dialogical self, but we return to this briefly in the last section of our paper).

Therefore, what people do when they "position themselves" (and others), is to weigh, contrast and/or develop existing discourses and define for themselves (and others) a location, or rather a number of locations, therein. Essentially, then, "positioning" is coming into existence by giving voice to discourse – again and again. Oftentimes, these positions have not been identified or recognized yet, they are still "under construction", and therefore, the result is always a (set of) temporary "I-positions" which may be relatively stable or unstable – that is way each individual constantly seeks a balance between being and becoming.

The question of "how to become what one is", to use Nietzsche's famous dictum, is the one which we shall devote our attention to. We shall consider learning as an engagement with social others or cultural artefacts to attain particular kinds of transformations (De Haan, 2002), and shall restrict ourselves to those processes or practices in which particular aspects are contested and the learner is invited to reconsider his position. Using a dialogical approach, we thus focus on processes of transformation and negotiation within training situations, particularly in the face of contradictory or demanding information. In the remainder of this contribution we shall first explore the problem of negotiating "I-positions", and pay attention to the problem of contradiction within these positions. Next, we briefly describe the setting we have studied and outline two cases therein. Subsequently, we discuss the use of humour as a specific discursive strategy with the help of a number of

excerpts from the cases in which humorous strategies play a key role. We conclude our paper with a discussion of the question whether "humorous learning" is at all different from "serious learning".

## 2. NEGOTIATING I-POSITIONS

Let us begin with a scene from the award winning film *Das Leben der Anderen* (Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), in which a student at the East-German spy academy in Berlin recounts to his fellow students a joke about Erich Honecker, the infamous party leader of the German Democratic Republic. The joke essentially ridicules the official perception of East Germany, which glorifies the republic, and sets it against the unofficial (Western) perception of it, which sees it as a repressive system. While the student is in the middle of the joke he discovers that a higher officer at the academy is listening to. Instead of reprimanding the student, however, the officer encourages him to continue, since he "probably knows the joke anyway". So, reluctantly, the student carries on. When he's finished, the officer says: "Good. Now give me your name and rank. Surely you understand that you have just ruined your career." As the student turns pale, the officer continues, smilingly: "A joke! That was also a joke".[1]

If that last joke was more than a sadistic display of authority, but a lesson in disguise, then what did the student learn here? The officer communicated two separate messages, we believe, which almost contradict one another, yet constitute the essence of "humorous learning". The first message simply says that, from an ideological point of view, there is a proper or correct representation and an incorrect or improper (counter-revolutionary) representation of the state. Joking about Honecker clearly falls under the last category. In brief, even as a joke, what the officer said to the student should be understood first of all as a fairly straightforward form of disciplining. But if that is the case, then why he did not say so directly? Why did he let the student finish his narrative and used a joke of his own to intervene? Here we might speculate that the officer recognized only too well the subversive power of jokes not to counter it with an authoritative interdiction, but instead chose to attack it at its own level. The effect, at any rate, is that by doing so, he communicates a second message, which is that a true spy should stand above the dichotomy of proper vs. improper representation. A spy must not only recognize, but in fact be able to play with ideologically correct representations – which is, after all, exactly what the officer did. Interestingly, the officer thus urges the student to obey the law and at the same time not to do so. However, the second message not merely contradicts but in fact surpasses the first

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[1] Here is the joke as told by the student (in our wording): It's a sunny day, Honecker opens the window and says to the sun: "Good-morning, dear sun, how are you?" The sun say: "Good morning dear Erich, how are you?" In the afternoon the same pattern repeats itself, but in the evening, when Honecker wants to say good-night to the sun, the sun doesn't reply. "Why don't you say something", Honecker asks, and the sun says: "Bugger off, I'm in the West now". The joke actually does belong to a body of standard "East-German gags" which circulated at the time (see www.ossiwitze.de).

one, constituting what might be called an order of learning: one must understand a demarcation first before one can criticize it.

We discuss this joke because it allows us to open up an exploration of the problem of learning (and more specifically "humorous learning") as a practice of positioning. How do individuals succeed in integrating or incorporating various, sometimes contradictory, perspectives within their own "dialogical self" (see Hermans, 2001)? If, as in this case, the message of the teacher is ambiguous or self-contradictory, how can it be incorporated to constitute a coherent self? Indeed, how do people manage to transcend their own perspectives?

In his imaginative contribution on forms of dialogical relations, Valsiner (2002) addresses the question of how to achieve and maintain I-positions. He discusses some of the most important ways in which positioning may lead to both stable and unstable constructions, such as, for example, dominating, expropriating or ventriloquating other voices into one's own self. "Ventriloquation", to halt for a moment at a technique that can be found predominantly in teacher-learner situations, consists of speaking through the voice of the other. The voice of the other is incorporated into one's own but remains identifiable as such. It is the other who now speaks through you. Valsiner aptly dubbed this a "parasitic position", because one voice becomes active in the body of another. The voice of the other may be someone's actual voice, such as, typically, a teacher's, who prohibits or demands something. But it may also be the voice of a generalized other, such as "school" or "parenthood", which tells you what is good or not good. The notion of ventriloquation resembles the classical Freudian conception of conscience (in which the voice of the parent is incorporated into the ego and reified as super-ego) and was used in a more metaphorical sense by psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi to describe the process of unconsciously giving voice to one's anxieties (see Stanton, 1991, p. 100).

While in psychodynamic theory, contradictory voices collide at a conscious level to constitute a coherent message at an unconscious one, what is interesting from our perspective is that in the technique of ventriloquation, two seemingly contradictory voices may combine and unite into a single expression as if they were compatible. Thus, for example, the parent may have taught the child that stealing is bad, but the child, who has chosen to steal, says: "Stealing is bad, but for me it's good".

Is this a stable construction? It can be one, if the voice of the other resides inside the self undisputed, perhaps as an abstract meta-voice that can be ignored or neutralized ("I steal to survive so the law doesn't apply to me, therefore, even if stealing is bad, I can steal and still remain an honest person, at least to myself"[2]). But it will result in an unstable position if the two voices openly clash with one another. Let us take as an example the case where one person says to another: "I love you" and the other replies: "I do not love you". The two voices result in

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[2] One is reminded here of Bob Dylan's famous song line: "To live outside the law, you must be honest" (*Absolutely Sweet Marie*, 1966); a self-contradictory statement that somehow appears perfectly acceptable or even logical.

the following position: "I love her, but she doesn't love me", which is obviously a problematic construction that cannot endure. The speaker must come to terms with the conflicting voices, by either convincing himself that she will love him in the future ("She doesn't realize that she loves me" – a typical theme in movies), or else change his own claim, saying, for example: "I love her even though she doesn't love me, that's just the kind of person I am".

In both cases, however, one will need to re-state one's I-position. But the self is a lazy problem solver, says Valsiner (2002, p. 261), suggesting that people prefer to retain established positions and accept some degree of ambiguity over radical change. Indeed, perhaps I can find a way of living with the fact that I love her while she doesn't love me back. But even if I can, she may not. In some situations, therefore, the contradiction between voices that constitute I-positions simply cannot be ignored, and we are urgently invited to rearrange our position.

This, of course, is typical for most training situations, where others comment on our performance, inviting us to learn, albeit in a relatively safe context. Thus, for example, if a trainer criticizes a trainee for not being assertive enough, saying: "If you don't ask, you'll never know, do you?", he not merely points to an inadequacy, but also to other ways of doing things; it's a request to change, and it cannot be ignored.

In training sessions, it is not uncommon to find that the various voices find themselves in open contradiction, disrupting the process of "co-construction" of identities. Traditionally, contradiction has always been underscored as an important dimension in the furtherance of individual skills (e.g. Piaget, 1980), but in interaction, these disruptive moments of contradiction are potentially face-threatening situations that demand some kind of reparation (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is interesting, therefore, that from a dialogical point of view, we can combine both perspectives together and understand contradiction as functional precisely because it exerts pressure; not only on the individual, though, but also on the social. It is through contradiction that the process of positioning may assume new directions, allowing to create different, perhaps unforeseen I-positions. We are reminded here of the observation by Fairclough (1992) that it is in the tension between confrontation and reparation that the possibility of change occurs.

So how to respond to these contradictions that urgently "invite us to learn"? We've already seen that it is possible to arrange and rearrange the various voices to the effect that they constitute a (new) coherent I-position, in which at least part of the contradiction is resolved. In the case of training situation, discursive repositioning may result in the unconditional acceptance of critique, allowing the voice of the other to dominate one's discourse. But as a consequence, one's own voice will be drowned out. Of course the very opposite may occur as well, when the voice of critique is completely denied, and one insists on maintaining "independence".

In reality, however, in training situations people rarely respond in such a radical way, and more often attempt to negotiate a position "somewhere in between". Yet especially in the face of contradiction, this is quite a challenge. And it is here that humor enters the picture, as one of the strategies that can be used to both accept

and deny critique. Before we turn to humor, however, we briefly outline the setting that we have studied, and the two cases we shall discuss.

### 3. TWO CASE STUDIES

In the winter of 2006-7, telecommunication corporation Vodafone sent 12 of its junior managers to a 10 days training programme. The purpose of this course was to train managerial communication through role playing. A part of the programme was focused on job evaluation, low-performance assessment and absenteeism, issues considered by the company as among the most difficult topics for managers to deal with.

Training sessions were led by three trainers. Peter, the second author of this paper and a professional trainer, had the final responsibility for the training course. Jeremy, a professional actor and trainer, was present during most sessions. Finally, Miriam, an internal trainer of the company, was present during some of the sessions. All sessions took place in a formal training setting outside the work location.

Typically, sessions would consist of role-plays wherein participants faced an opponent, played by Jeremy. These role-plays were followed by post-performance evaluations. We concentrate on the evaluation sessions only, where learning strategies and learning objectives become manifest during the interactions. We've video-recorded and transcribed these sessions and present excerpts from them here. We present our data as they occur in their natural context, retaining as much as possible of the original formulations, albeit in translation.[3]

Our material comprises of 10 separate sessions with 9 managers. From these 10 sessions, we select two that display a different dynamic, namely those of "Hector" and "Paul". Both cases will be briefly described below in general terms (note that all names are pseudonyms, except Peter's, the trainer and co-author of this paper).

### 3.1. CASE 1

Hector is a 44-year-old manager of one the IT-departments in the company; he supervises 12 employees. Hector started with the observation that he had been "running around in the same circles all the time", and that he had not been able get his message across, despite the fact that he talked a lot. This caused several comments from other participants who often talked through one another. Many were highly critical of Hector's performance, with one going as far as saying that there "had been in effect no communication". Jeremy and Peter too joined in this criticism, saying that "there was no dialogue" and "it was a one-sided dialogue".

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[3]A note on the transcriptions should perhaps be added here. While we transcribed and faithfully translated all remarks made by the participants and did not attempt to smoothen the structure of their sentences, we have, however, omitted most paralinguistic aspects of speech, such as emphasis, overlapping turns, prolonged syllables, stutter etc. Two exceptions to this rule: (1) observations by the researchers, completions and or uncertain readings are in brackets, and (2) speaker's use of voices of others (real or imaginary) are in internal quotation marks (' ').

About halfway through the session Hector was invited by Peter to formulate what he had learned so far, but Hector seemed at a loss and only succeeded in articulating a very jumbled conclusion:

71. Peter: "In other words, to conclude, what insights do you gain from this?"
72. Hector: "Yes, well, ah..."
73. Peter: "At this moment in time." [bends through his knees to reach the same level as Hector, who is seated]
74. Hector [stuttering]: "To mirror what you're saying to me, is actually like, you know, the moment you get the attention, ah, that he's listening to you, that's when you should hit the nail on its head, that's when I should very concretely the things that one has prepared well..."
[Excerpt 1: Hector, turns 71 to 74]

The missing of a verb in the last part of the turn 74 is perhaps illustrative of the lack of initiative on Hector's part during the second half of the session, it certainly became increasingly more difficult for him to take an active part in the conversation, and he oftentimes found Peter and Jeremy discussing his performance without involving him. Hector's last 9 turns comprise of no more than single utterances ("Yes", "Hm", "Right"), confirming what Peter and Jeremy said, mostly in a soft tone and accompanied by a somewhat wry and seemingly confused smile. Adding to the confusion is the fact that this session had a false ending, when Peter said: "Let's have someone else [have a turn], so you can digest it" (see excerpt 6), to which Jeremy wished to add "one small observation", which turned into a further exploration of a metaphor that he had used earlier in that session, namely that Hector should dig deeper into the motives of the other "as if he were peeling a banana".

### 3.2. CASE 2

Slightly older then Hector, Paul is a 45-year-old manager who manages one of the staff departments higher up in the organization. During role play, Paul had trained assessment interviews on absenteeism with a fictional employee called "Alice" (played by Jeremy) who had reported absent without being actually ill. Paul started the evaluation session in a similar vein as Hector, claiming that he felt "uncomfortable". However, he attributed his confusion to the fact that the case seemed not clear: he "didn't have a clue what the issues were about". He thought the case was "not like it's a significant problem".

The first part of the session is largely a conversation between Paul and Miriam, discussing the "severity" of the case, with Paul explaining that he doesn't want to be "pushy", while the middle part seems much less focused. The last phase of this conversation commences when Peter asks Paul what, specifically, he has learned from all this, and Paul responds by saying that he has learned to be a little bit less task oriented (see excerpt 2). This then triggers a long exchange between Peter and Paul which ends with Peter suggesting that he, together with Jeremy,

exercise the role play once more except in reversed roles, a proposal with which Paul agrees.

>    99. Peter (trainer): "Paul, what do you specifically learn from this?"
>    100. Paul (trainee): "Ah, well to be less task oriented indeed, because I was bothered by the fact that I just sat there, you know [bends over] and well the goal was obviously to lower absenteeism and I was bothered by that last sentence [in the role play description] if that wouldn't have been in there [the script] I think I would have been more laid back, and ah, ah, more sincere because you know it struck me but yes it's the goal and then this absenteeism [leans back, inaudible]."

[Excerpt 2: Paul, 99-100]

Contrasting the two cases, it appears that Hector had lost, or perhaps never gained control over the construction of his I-position, and left it to others, in particular the authoritative voices, to do it for him. Paul, on the other hand, remained in control throughout the entire session.

But these differences between various degrees of control should not be identified with personal strategies; we have to remember that the dialogical self is not private property, but the product of collective effort. This, of course does not exclude "agency", it merely puts agents' exclusive defining power with regard to their I-positions in perspective. In the case of Hector, we find that various voices "invaded" his "I-space" but were never assimilated into a coherent Self. Instead, these voices were allowed to exercise contradiction and opposition without interruption. In the case of Paul, various opposing voices were swiftly assimilated constituting a much more coherent self. Still, the question remains what accounts for these different styles or ways of dealing with opposing voices. The answer, we believe, lies partly in how humor is used.

### 4. HUMOR

There are many ways of dealing with contradiction, but only humor has the ability to "clear the air" between hostile parties and to restore peace and re-establish contact at the same time (see: Holmes and Marra, 2002). Humor, to paraphrase Erving Goffman (1959), gives the speaker the right to deny that he meant anything by his comment, and the listener the right to act as if nothing has been conveyed, while the result is that both might feel that some degree of concurrence is reached. Humor, and especially ironic humor, thus has the capability to unite or connect what is separate or even contradictory (Berger, 1997, Zijderveld, 1983). Interestingly, therefore, humor can be used to both subvert and maintain existing relations, in particular power relations (see Taylor and Bain, 2003).

The function of humor in the workplace has long been recognized as an important, though not always comprehensible factor (see Collinson, 1988). Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) propose that spontaneous humour (in contradistinction to standardized jokes) originates in disjunctions in serious discourse and serve as a means of sorting out the paradoxes and ambiguities of organisational life.

Following up this lead, let us consider the excerpt where humor plays a key role during one such moment of disruption in a discourse that was until then quite serious:

41. Jeremy: "Right, but did you ask why I wanted that?"
42. Paul: "No, I didn't ask."
43. Jeremy: "Why didn't you?"
44. Paul: "Well, actually I thought your answer was kind of ah ah plausible [smiles, looks at trainer, raises eyebrow]."
45. Jeremy: "Ah [smiles, looks at Miriam]."
    (Laughter)
    [Excerpt 3: Paul, turns 41 to 45]

Why this exchange produced a smile on Jeremy's face and triggered full blown laughter in the audience is not immediately clear. In order to fully understand the humorous dimension of the situation, we need to clarify some of the most important implicit aspects.

During the training situation, Jeremy played the role of a female employee who had been on sick leave without being actually ill. Paul played the manager who had to assess the employee. When he asked the employee why she had been on sick leave, he was offered an "excuse" but he did not pursue the matter. Now he's being confronted with this: why he did not pursue, although the excuse was obviously weak. Because, Paul explains, he found it "plausible".

On the surface it seems as if Paul simply denies that there might be a problem when he calls a weak excuse "plausible". But that is not very funny. So what triggered the laughter? A clue can be found when we look at the end of the exchange and we note that Jeremy doesn't look at Paul, but at Miriam. This is significant when we realize that it is her position which was implicated by the remark, not his.

Miriam, as we explained above, is a trainer who works for the company. In fact, she designed a training programme which explicitly targets absenteeism such as displayed in this "case". The role-play used during Paul's session was actually based on her training programme. Therefore, by calling "Alice's" non-functional behaviour "plausible", Paul in fact dismissed her programme as useful, or at the very least criticized her method.

Realizing the subversive element in the remark, Jeremy looks at her, smilingly, expecting, perhaps, a sharp retort. The audience too picks up the subversion of authority, and the laughter that follows must at least partly be understood as an acknowledgement of this rebellious act. This makes Paul's subversive joke also a potentially face-threatening act, as Paul himself no doubt realizes, because he gives multiple non-verbal (smiling, raising of eyebrow) and prosodic (hesitation) signals to "take it lightly". All of these signs are recognized "repair mechanisms".

If the humorous remark subverts authority on the one hand, disrupting the relations between the participants and the flow of the conversation, it creates at the same time the illusion that speaker and listener are in actual accord, and safeguards thereby the continuation of the conversation.

Use of humor can thus serve to maintain the relations between people while it threatens to disturb them at the same time. If we are to rephrase this in dialogical terms, we find that use of humor points to an interesting aspect in the construction of I-positions. From the example we have examined, we conclude that Paul resists not so much the authorities as such, but the designated direction his I-position is taking, namely one where the voice of the organisation needs to be incorporated. By humorously distancing himself from the situation, Paul is not trying to evade the issue of critique, but is playing with the critique. This humorous or playful comment on the authoritative voices must be read as a form of negotiating or weighing various positions. Dialogically speaking, we understand the use of humor as a strategic maneuver in a positioning process that enables the speakers to deal with contradictory voices. Exactly how humor contributes to positioning will be the subject of the analysis below.

## 5. HUMOROUS LEARNING

Earlier we defined "learning" as the engagement with social others or cultural artefacts to attain particular kinds of transformations. Our interest is especially in how this articulates itself moving from one (fixed) position to the next (unfixed) position through the process of "discursive positioning", during which different voices are weighed, compared, explored and finally incorporated into one's self. What is the function of humor here? How does humor contribute to learning?

We understand humorous learning as those specific forms of engagement in which contradictory voices are incorporated in the system of I-positions (self) through the use of specific discursive techniques. To put it simply: humorous learning is dealing with contradictions that cannot be ignored, by transforming the contradictions into a laughing matter.

For this definition to have any practical value, we shall have to define both humor and contradiction. For our purpose we rely on a relatively non-controversial definition of humor proposed by Fry (1963) and others, and shall consider all interactions as "humorous" when (a) they deliberately rely on or exploit illogical, absurd and impossible discursive constructions, and (b) may lead to laughter. Laughter is therefore not the only and even not the necessary criterion, although it gives a good indication of the use of humor (smiling can be a further indication). This definition includes unintentionally "comical" interactions invoked by a mistake or slip of the tongue so long as someone points out the "funny" aspect, but it excludes all other unintentional mistakes, even when people laugh at it. Contradiction, our second operational concept, is understood as the articulation of opposing positions of voices. A contradiction can arise between people or between groups of people, but also within one person's viewpoint (between one's present and earlier position). It can furthermore involve a conflict between institutional values and group values or personal values etc. In other words, contradiction may be perceived at several analytical levels. For contradiction to be identified, one needs some intimate knowledge of the social and cultural (institutional / organizational) situation.

Since this is a "dialogical definition", its application cannot by definition be limited to single utterances, but require at least two exchanges in a sequence, in

which again at least two parties are involved. In short: not all interactions that result in laughter, and not all interactions in which positions clash are instances of "humorous learning", but only those in which positions clash in a deliberately comical way, enabling the participants of the interaction to incorporate the differences into their selves.

What we wish to explore in this section are various forms of humorous learning which we found in the two sets of data that we have studied. We shall limit our discussion to an exploration of three different interactions here which point to different functions.

## 5.1. INTERACTION 1.

Our first example comes from Paul's session, somewhere towards the end of it, and consists of the articulation of two contradictory positions. Trainee Paul and trainer Miriam discuss Paul's goals. Paul says his goal is to "understand things" (turn 105), which makes Miriam ask the the question whether "one excludes the other" (turn 106). This is a somewhat cryptic formulation for saying that his goal of understanding things is "one thing", and that there is "another goal", which is to do things. The implication here is that this last position is the company's as well as her position. So Paul is now directly confronted with a contradiction, with two opposing "voices", his own and hers, and he is invited to revise his position to the effect that he includes the "other goal" too.

How does he respond to this "invitation to learn"? His answer is that the two goals normally should not exclude one another, except that in his case they do (turn 107). This is illogical and therefore comical, and indeed, it triggers laughter:

104. Miriam: "What goal had you ah, what goal did you want to formulate?"
105. Paul: "Well actually, more informative, how it all ah ah embraces and like understand, how it, how it all connects."
106. Miriam: "Does one exclude the other?"
107. Paul: "Ah, not really, but the funny thing is in my case it does [laughs]."
108. Miriam [starts to laugh]: "Yes, but…"
109. Paul: "That, yes, that's the point really."
110: Peter: "It's a matter of emphasis isn't it?"
111. Paul: "Yes."
112. Peter: "And as long as you don't shift that emphasis you'll always be one-sided in your approach, being too task oriented."
113. Paul [looks at Miriam]: "Yes, yes, yes."
[Excerpt 4: Paul, turns 104 to 113]

Here, then, we have a clear illustration of a humorous technique, but is it also a humorous learning? It is not too difficult to see how the use of humor resolves the tension that was accumulating between Paul and Miriam. While Miriam suggested that Paul adjust his perspective so as to include the voice of the organization (embodied in her voice), Paul attempted to resolve the contradiction without giving in: Yes you're right, but no I won't change my position.

Next, in turns 108 and 109, Paul and Miriam exchange two unfinished sentences. It is as if they feel embarrassed and do not know how to continue, which would suggest that the use of humor failed to attain its goal. It is interesting to see, therefore, that in the turn 110 Peter picks up the thread when he says: "It's a matter of emphasis, isn't it?" This remark reveals how the humorous dimension in this interaction has opened the door to a new understanding after all, because in the next turns we find that Peter articulates a "lesson" which is both different from what Miriam tried to get across and yet does preclude a re-articulation of Paul's position. The notion that in order to avoid "getting stuck in a task oriented approach", Paul should allow "degrees of emphasis", suggests that he can retain his own viewpoints and still meet the organization's demands. This lesson is accepted by Paul in the turn 113, even though his "yeses" are expressed in a rather thoughtful manner, suggesting that he still has to digest it a bit more.

## 5.2. INTERACTION 2.

In our second example we discuss how not a humorous clash between the voice of someone else with one's own, but a contradiction in the voice of the other can help accept critique. The following excerpt is located early in Hector's session, where the discussion focused on the question of how Hector should anticipate a "low performer" (played by Jeremy), who is apparently difficult to stop in conversation. The issue is discussed in turns 29 to 33, when Hector mentions how he at one point said "we stop", so as to create an opportunity for himself to get a say, but finds that he still could not get his message across. In turn 34 Jeremy intervenes, explaining that that is the moment when he should "score", i.e. push through, get the other to listen. Others in the audience support this "interpretation". It is important to note, furthermore, that the "he" Hector and Jeremy talk about in turns 31, 33 and 37 to 39 is actually Jeremy himself, or rather: the character played by him as actor.

29. Hector: "Yes, I do think that at such a moment when I say 'we stop', precisely because we're going so fast, precisely because of what I say."
30. Jeremy: "Yes."
31. Hector: "That's when he's holding his breath a little longer you know."
32. Jeremy: "Yes."
33. Hector: "He's playing it perfectly as far as I'm concerned, that's how he is [looks at Peter] so…"
34. Jeremy: "So at these moments, that's when you'd have to score [Nelly nods]."
35. Emmy: "Hmhm"
36. Jonathan: "Exactly."
37. Hector: "Except he…"
38. Peter: "He doesn't?"
39. Jeremy: "He doesn't, ah, he's, he, I think, yes, when he's quiet, yes? And you're happy that he is, I can understand."

(Hector laughs, point to Jeremy, slaps his knee as if the other just made a good joke)

[Excerpt 5: Hector, turns 29 to 39]

The remark in turn 39 is perceived as "humorous" by Hector, who laughs and slaps his knee. Again we ask: what is funny here, and, more specifically, how does it contribute to learning?

Jeremy's remark in turn 39 should be understood as a play of contrasting voices, in a most literal sense of the word. First he gives voice to a "low performer", who is giving Hector little chance to interrupt, and then he himself comments on this person in his voice as a trainer. It is quite obvious that the humorous moment is located there where Jeremy criticizes himself, saying that he understands that the other, Hector, is happy when he (the actor) shuts up. That creates an absurd contradiction between the "he" who doesn't give Hector a chance, and the he who does.

By articulating the "comical aspect" of this situation, again a moment of "humorous learning" is constituted. Humour permits Hector to distance himself from the hostile "low performer", whom he could not master. Moreover, this "low performer" and the "understanding teacher" prove to be the same person, so that Hector is also reconciled with his trainer. A situation is thus created in which the participants acknowledge that Hector has failed, but the failure is not (entirely) his fault, but at least partly also the "impossible low performer's". This insight rearticulates his position as not completely hopeless: there is room for potential development.

### 5.3. INTERACTION 3.

Our last example again comes from Hector's session, appearing near the end of it, when he is strongly criticized by the two trainers. The use of humor basically builds on the same theme as in the previous example, except that it does so in a much more elaborate or complex way. And perhaps because of this complexity, we shall see that humor is much less successful as a learning strategy here.

112. Peter: "Yes, but you're not open at all to the other because you don't ask anything, you see, 'Do you recognize that', for example, is a question that could help you."
113. Hector: "Yes (takes notebook and makes notes)."
114. Peter: "'Am I crazy or what' you know? Or 'I'd like to hear your side of the story' or 'I don't have this thought for nothing, now I'd like to hear from you how you think about it'."
115. Jeremy: "Yes 'I want to understand you'."
116. Peter: "Yes, 'Why don't you explain it' makes you understand how others see things."
117. Hector (softly): "Yes [puts down his pen]."
118. Peter: "And the other is you in this case isn't it, so why not make it more personal."

119. Hector: "Yes."
120. Peter: "So that's a whole lot of things all at once isn't it?"
121. Hector (puffing): "Pfew (laughs)"
122. Peter: "So let's have someone else [have a turn], so you can digest it and ah you can have another turn later."
[Excerpt 6: Hector, 112-120]

This excerpt is interesting for a number of reasons. One is that it clearly illustrates how a multitude of voices comment on one another at different levels. Thus, in turn 112 and again in 116, Peter criticizes Hector using his voice as a trainer saying: "You're not open to others because you don't ask anything".

Here the teacher and student positions quite obviously clash. The message of the teacher is that the student needs to learn to be more open because he must understand the other. This is accepted by Hector in line 113, when he not only verbally acknowledges Peter's message but also picks up a notebook and makes notes, as if to underline the importance of the message.

However, in the same turns Peter does something else, which is interesting from a dialogical point of view. He uses an imaginary voice, namely the voice that Hector could have used, to exactly articulate the things he might have said but did not say: "Do you recognize that?" and "I'd like to hear your side of the story".

We have used specific quotation marks here (' ') to distinguish the imaginary voice from the speaker's own voice. This is a somewhat artificial way of marking what in reality, however, is no less obvious, because there is no doubt that listeners were perfectly aware of whose voice belongs to whom. When in turn 115 for example Jeremy supports Peter he uses the very same approach, articulating in a similar fashion the imaginary voice of Hector: "I want to understand you" – that is Hector speaking, or rather not speaking.

This multitude of voices results in a number of contradictions, instead of only one. We limit our discussion to the two most important ones: the contradiction between the position of the teachers and the position of the student on the one hand, and the contradiction between the imaginary and the actual student on the other.

To start with the latter, note that the "lesson" about not being open was clear enough and by and large already accepted by Hector when the teachers chose to add another dimension to the situation. When they articulated the student's imaginary voice, they in all probability aimed to help Hector incorporate the message even better, but it seems as if they achieved the opposite result. Because now the student faced the almost impossible task to incorporate a voice that belonged to him but wasn't actually his. The perhaps symbolic gesture of him putting down his pen in turn 117 seems illustrative for Hector's failure to accomplish this task. He's giving up.

It is the slightly humorous remark in turn 120 ("That's a whole lot of things all at once") that allows Hector to "take a break". Relieved he blows off steam: "Pfew". But this humorous moment doesn't point to an opening in discourse, it doesn't allow Hector to rearticulate his position yet. For that to happen, it should

be Hector himself who articulates how in the future he will respond. However, since Peter and Jeremy had done precisely this, the student was left "speechless". It is significant, therefore, that immediately afterwards Peter suggests to discontinue the session and give someone else a turn. At this point however Jeremy wished to add "one more thing", which, as we noted earlier, in fact developed into a whole new discussion, which also failed to involve Hector.

It now becomes clear why the participants felt that the session was "unfinished": the contradictions which had been built up were neither resolved nor transformed into something new. And so, even though the use of humor did allow Hector to distance himself temporarily from the immediate situation, it did not result in "humorous learning": no new position was built. This is not to say, of course, that at a later moment in time a similar confrontation could not result in a rearticulation of positions after all, it only failed to do so in this particular interaction.

In conclusion, let us sum up our findings so far. First, we note that various forms of "humorous learning" are used to resolve contradictions at various levels. Here we found that contradictions within the self of the learner, between the voices of the teacher and the learner, and between the voices of the teachers became object of humorous play. We've also hinted at other levels of contradiction, notably those where background (institutional) voices clash with foreground (articulated) voices. A further exploration of these clashes would put humorous learning in a broader perspective and include cultural aspects, which we have largely excluded from our analysis. Secondly, we observe that humorous learning proceeds according to fairly distinctive stages. Typically, during the first phase a contradiction is constructed or articulated, which, during a second phase is briefly explored when the pressure of contradiction builds up, to finally result in a humorous intervention in the third phase, in which the conflict is rearticulated, enabling, if successfully applied, the student to move to a next position.

Does humorous learning always have to go through these phases in this order? Not necessarily. The exploration phase may be skipped, or may even follow the intervention phase; the introduction of the contradiction may be implicitly referred to, and, finally, the humorous intervention may equally be implicit or tacit, as a result of which the interaction may perhaps become a simple joke, rather than an instance of humorous learning. Or, in other words, the dividing line between joke and humorous learning is not so clear-cut as one might wish. Finally, we emphasize that humorous learning is a collective process, which is neither driven specifically by either student or teacher, nor carried out with a specific purpose. Rather it is a process that seems to rely on possibilities that open up in discourse.

## 6. HUMOROUS LEARNING REVISITED: CONCLUSIONS

Humorous learning as a contradiction solving mode that allows the student to "learn", not any given piece of knowledge, but rather how to position himself/herself in a given field of social and professional relations, is a contingent process. It depends on characteristics of the discourse in which it is located, the social circumstances of the  situation, as well as on one's personal ability to manipulate discourse, because clearly some of us use words better than others. But even so,

cultural and organizational constraints determine the margins within which one can negotiate one's position.

In our case, obviously the entire discursive situation was favourable for humorous learning to arise. Its specific purpose was, after all, to evaluate and examine performances of the trainee. This would almost by definition reduce these types of interactions to learning situations, and the position of one to that of a trainee or learner, and that of the other to a trainer or expert. Almost anything one would say during these evaluation sessions would have to be understood as "instructive" and "educational", including humorous remarks. Then in what sense is humorous learning different from non-humorous learning, and in what sense is humorous learning singular? We discuss here two aspects of this question.

First, the capability of humor to suggest is only surpassed by intricate literary techniques, such as metaphors and comparisons, but in contradistinction to these techniques, humor remains mundane, almost immediately accessible. On the other hand, the content of a humorous remark is very difficult, perhaps even impossible to pinpoint exactly; its very existence is based on ambiguity and contingency. This makes humorous learning a much more open process in comparison to formal learning, where specific learning objectives may be defined and exercised relatively irrespective of its context. In addition, humorous learning evades exact content. It can and often does subvert such content, and yet at the same time is capable of suggesting coherence, unity. This makes it a potentially very successful albeit very fragile strategy which has a much bigger impact on the participants involved, in comparison to formal learning arrangements, precisely because the participants are personally involved in the situation; their "faces" are immediately at risk.

Humorous learning is the resolution of a tension. The tension builds up first, and then results, through humor, in a rearrangement of conditions. The potential importance of humor for dialogical self theory is in its ability to deal with interpersonal relations in a manner that is not exclusively cognitive but rather re-introduces the bodily dimension of human communication in a Bakhtinian sense: if we laugh, we laugh with our body and become aware of the fact that we have one (see Bakhtin, 1984). Humor heavily relies on intonation, articulation and other expressive means that situate the body in an interpersonal space (see Morris, 1984). Thus, at one point during Hector's session, Peter concluded from Jeremy's body language that he was eager to say something. He said: "I see you're moving in your chair?" This question, perceived both as an invitation to speak and a comment on the other, instantly caused laughter.

Analysis of humor, and in particular humorous learning, may therefore prove helpful in carrying the study of dialogical self further. Initially, teacher and student, trainer and trainee, expert and novice co-construct a situation that allows contradictory positions to be articulated. However, as soon as contradiction is articulated, the tension that results from this contradiction needs to be resolved. Now, while various discursive (as well as non-discursive) techniques successfully deal with this tension, we claim that humor has the rare ability to allow for a spontaneous rearticulation of positions in which not only tension between positions but also part of the contradiction is resolved. Humor opens a new field of opportunities for

learning, even though neither all instances of learning are humorous, nor need – as our last example made clear–all instances of humor result in learning.

Second, we've called humorous learning a collaborative process, but does this mean that learner and teacher construct a shared reality in a learning situation, or that in a given shared reality they construct a learning situation? Stemplewska-Żakowicz (2006) approached this question partially when she asked whether a shared reality is the result of an inner dialogue between various I-positions, or the other way round: a shared reality must be accomplished before an inner dialogue can occur in the first place. For our discussion, we need to know how much of shared reality we have to assume before a negotiation within this reality can take place and new positions can be accomplished.

It seems reasonable, we believe, to state that some degree of "sameness" (common ground) must be articulated or assumed by all parties before any conversation can take place. Thus, one must speak the same language, have an idea of which cultural assumptions must be taken for granted and which may be subjected to negotiation, share a basic idea of conversational politeness, etc., before any conversation can take place. But would one have to know or be made aware of the fact that a particular conversation takes place within a "didactic mode" before learning can take place? In other words: can we learn without knowing that we learn, or must we be aware of it? Barresi (2002, p. 247) seems to suggest that the latter is indeed the case when he says that "each and every time that an individual engages in reflective valuations from the points of view of self and others, the person engaged in this enterprise has his or her own current consciousness, and its associated sense of self, as the source and ultimate arbiter of the alternative characters that it creates as well as the voices that it gives to these characters. There is no way to move outside of the situated consciousness of the present speaker/knower".

The consequence of this is that conversation not only presupposes a minimum of shared reality in the background, but also a minimal degree of "situated consciousness". Now the interesting problem arises because, supposedly, learning changes these conditions. How is that possible? To escape from the confinements of the immediate self is indeed the challenge for anyone who is learning, yet we have to have some sense of situated consciousness in order to learn.

What makes "humorous learning" singular is that it can distance the participants in conversation from the immediate conversational conventions and situated knowledge not by laying down new conditions, but by not doing so. Through humor, we accept that the present conditions no longer hold, even if we do not know what the new conditions will be. It is this uncertainty that will enable participants to open up a new window of opportunities which they use to create new states of situated consciousness.

The consequences of this for training practices are interesting. First, we observe that we have not moved away in any radical sense from the pretensions of achieving "transfer". The goal is still a development of training skills which trainees learn to apply in their everyday work environment. However, transfer implies in our approach a shift in emphasis from individual to collective processes. And within

these processes of co-construction, the importance of open-ended positioning in the face of confrontation and contradiction between (and within) the various parties involved is underlined, while at the same time, some kind of agreed-upon learning environment must be maintained in order to safeguard the facilitation of transfer.

To summarize our position here, we should stress that humorous learning consist in the collective effort of teacher and pupil to construct contradictions between I-positions that challenge the dialogical self and result, through the use of specific discursive techniques, in the construction of new and unforeseen positions. These positions escape (some of) the confines that keep the learner back from developing further while the effort demands that the shared reality within which learning takes place remain largely unchallenged.

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