Class Clowns: Talking Out of Turn with an Orientation Toward Humor

Abstract
The classroom is a primary site for children to learn accommodation to cultural practices and norms, but also for them to develop strategies for disruption and humor while avoiding sanctions. Although the teacher has the power in the elementary classroom, there are twenty or so prospective disruptors and all sorts of possible disruptions with humorous potential at various different points in the interaction. In our paper, we investigate disruptive humor in the first six years of school from the perspective of the pupil adjusting to the restrictions and possibilities of the system, rather than from the usual perspective of the teacher, who wants to control classroom behavior. We explore recorded classroom interaction to determine the types of humorous disruptions and their interactional effects, showing how pupils adjust to the conventions of classroom behavior, but also how they test the system for humorous purposes. We argue that humorous disruptions often function to assert individual identity or to create a particular class personality in the otherwise faceless group orientation of the elementary classroom.

Keywords
Disruption, elementary classroom, humor, identity, interaction.

1. Introduction
In this paper we explore the forms and functions of disruptive humor in the elementary classroom. On the basis of twenty hours of recordings from first through sixth grade classrooms, we investigate how such humorous disruptions arise, how they are handled, and what they accomplish interactionally, e.g. commenting on classroom process, mocking the teacher, impressing classmates, and asserting individual identity into the otherwise faceless group orientation of classroom interaction.
Although there is a growing body of literature on how teachers use humor in the classroom, there is next to nothing in the literature about disruptions (for humor) in classroom interaction, except advice to teachers on dealing with unruly children. Classroom talk is a primary form of interaction for young people five days a week and a primary process of socialization, humor is an important part of this process, and the role of pupils in creating humor deserves attention in its own right. Research on classroom humor finds generally positive effects. Ziv (1996), and more recently Egan (2005) regard humor as facilitating creativity and imagination. A statistically significant finding was that humorous incidents may be fleeting, but had a positive effect over time (Korobkin 1988) and there are student reports in the literature of increased learning due to humor (Wanzer & Frymier 1999). Moreover, writers on classroom humor regularly recommend telling jokes (e.g. Sudol 1981; Inman, 1991), though some warn against the aggressive tendencies of sexist jokes (e.g. Weaver & Cotrell 1987). In a large college study by White (2001), using survey methods with 365 university teachers and 206 university students, attending 65 institutions, teachers and students expressed similar opinions on uses of humor that were viewed as appropriate. Both groups opposed using humor to embarrass students, intimidate or retaliate. But there is still little systematic research addressing the influence of humor instigated by pupils in elementary schools. At a time when bodies of knowledge have grown substantially and technology has become a vehicle for learning, the facilitative role of humor in learning looms ever larger. Moreover, world-stress events, such as terrorism, student hostility and antagonisms, bullying, anger, and depression, all visible in classrooms, behove us to look more closely at the potentially positive effects of humor in the elementary classroom.

Teachers educating a classroom of students are engaged in a “theatrical performance,” in the terms proposed by Goffman (1959). The teacher must present a public identity through a performance that will capture an audience. Goffman defines “performance” as follows:

A “performance” may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. (1959: 15)

In the Goffman model of human interaction as a drama, humor can be used to guide and control the impression students have of the teacher and the impression and expectations teachers have of their students. But teachers do more than construct an individual identity in the classroom: they also create a classroom atmosphere more or less conducive to humor and to the presentation of individual personalities. Teachers differ in the amount and kinds of humor they initiate, the kinds of humor they allow or encourage humor by pupils, and how they respond in humorous ways to humorous and non-humorous classroom situations. All of these
factors enter into the sort of personality a teacher constructs and the sort of classroom interaction she fosters.

At the same time, members of a class are constructing their own individual identities within the whole class and within its sub-groups. Humor of various types offers a valuable tool in identity construction for pupils as well as for teachers. Moreover, teachers routinely report that each class has a particular personality as a whole. Part of this personality consists of a particular style of humor, first among the individual pupils themselves, second between pupils and the teacher, and third within the whole classroom community. In the present study, we seek to describe the sorts of humor pupils use to express themselves in the classroom and to understand the ways that teachers of elementary school children tolerate or encourage humor by pupils, including how they join in humorous interactions and use them for pedagogical purposes.

Especially in the early years of elementary school, children sometimes “talk out of turn,” because they momentarily forget the rules of appropriate classroom behavior; they also engage in whispering and chatting, as described in Jones and Thornborrow (2004); but these kinds of talk just count as minor disturbances in an otherwise well-organized floor. By contrast, a “class clown” baldly disrupts the ongoing activity with an orientation toward humor either in direct response to the teacher or interrupting in a voice loud enough to be heard by the whole class. In spite of reprisals from the teacher, class clowns continue to disrupt class with their attempts at humor. Of course, teacher responses also help construct a particular classroom atmosphere and a particular personality for the teacher as well.

In older literature on classroom interaction, the focus is on teacher talk rather than on pupil talk, and minor disruptions and humor receive scant attention. Thus, e.g., in Edwards and Furlong (1978) there are some excellent illustrations of disruptions to be funny by pupils, but they warrant no comment from the authors, who are interested in other issues. For instance, on their page 92, one finds:

T: Do you know that I bet you that in two weeks’ time, we’ll come back in here when we’re doing another booklet and I bet you I have to say to somebody, “You didn’t read the booklet, did you?” Now can you all remember that?
P: Yes, sir.
T: I bet tuppence that there’s somebody in this room in two weeks who has tried to do the questions without looking at the book.
P: Tenpence, sir.
T: No, I’m not rich. Tuppence.

Edwards and Furlong offer no discussion of the teacher’s (presumably sarcastic) proposal of a wager, or pupil’s attempt at humor by pretending to take the wager seriously and upping the ante, or the teacher’s (potentially serious) but perhaps also jocular rejection of the higher sum to extend the exchange. With no
authorial comment, there’s too little to go on in the transcript to be sure. Passages like this are indicative of a particular humor style on the part of the teacher. Teachers must construct a particular identity in the classroom for pupils to orient on, and humor of various kinds offers teachers an important resource in this process. Notice that this passage illustrates an instance of a teacher using sarcasm to mock certain students or at least typical student behaviors, something both teachers and students report finding objectionable, but again there was no comment on this form of humor.

One even finds examples of one pupil openly mocking another in an attempt at clearly aggressive humor (from Edwards & Furlong 1978: 131)–a phenomenon which did not occur in our data at all–with the teacher clearly and emphatically rejecting the humor:

T: Stephen, come and show the people on the map where you think we’re going to find the plain, if it’s going from south-east to north-west . . .

((Stephen moves over to the overhead projector.))

P: Where has it got to be?

T: South-east to north-west. ((Pause.))

P2: Come on, Steve.

T: Shut up, Michael. ((Pause.)) Point to south-east on the map.

Edwards and Furlong again make no mention of the disruption or teacher’s handling of it as such, concerned, as they are, with other matters. Again there is no discussion of the effects of this sort of humor on classroom interaction.

In this paper, we explicitly investigate how such humorous disruptions arise, how they are handled, and what they accomplish interactionally. We believe we need careful study of real data to describe these classroom behaviors and their effects. Teachers have all kinds of intuitions about which kids disrupt, how objectionable they are, what their reactions should be and so on, but we can hardly expect teachers to have a very analytical sense about disruptions or even about their (standard) responses.

2. Data, recording, transcription

The data used for the present study were recorded at an American elementary school on a military installation in south-western Germany in a first and a third grade class over a space of two years. The most recent recordings were made in December, 2003. On average, there are about sixteen pupils in each class, of which 70% are girls and 30% are boys. The majority of the pupils are white, some of them are black and even fewer are Hispanic. The teachers and pupils are all monolingual American English speakers. Due to the influence of the military on
the situation of the families, this particular school experiences a greater fluctuation than other elementary schools. The recordings comprise the lessons of three female teachers, in which they were teaching different subjects. Most of the examples included here are taken from math lessons. The excerpts cited are from lessons transcribed according to the conventions summarized at the end of this paper.

3. Exclamations and byplay

Classroom discourse can be considered as three-partied in terms of Goffman (1981), whose participation framework suggests that one participant of a conversation is framed as addressee and the other(s) as hearer(s). Thus, hearers have an equally active co-participant role comparable to the role of the current speaker. The remaining persons present during a conversation are positioned as ratified side participants who can engage in byplay, crossplay and sideplay and open up a complex conversational floor simultaneous yet subordinate to the main floor which is managed by a ratified speaker and principal addressed participant(s) (Goodwin 1997: 77-78). In other analyses of classroom interaction, surprising as it may seem, the occurrences of apparently salient pupil moves are not commented upon. By contrast, the role of the teacher and her efforts in controlling the talk in the classroom are focused on exclusively. Furthermore, whenever student talk is considered a central phenomenon in linguistic theory, the perspective remains restricted to self-selections showing a potential to be performed on the main floor, instead of including a study of the lively sub-floor.

Pupils may produce brief vocalizations directed primarily at a single addressee or group of pupils near them with no orientation toward humor as such and no intention of actually disrupting the flow of classroom interaction. Among such utterances we distinguish exclamations, which are largely self-directed expressions of affect, reflecting personal frustrations (oh, no!), successes (I got one) and the like, from byplay, which involves comments on the interaction in progress, not intended to be overheard by the person holding the floor (following Goffman 1981), as in Ron’s reaction “cool” to the teacher’s description in a third grade math lesson below:

Teacher: . . . what a factor is.
you need to know what that means.
it’s the number.
o[kay?]
Ron: [cool!]
Teacher: any?
FACtor.
Multiplied times zero…
This passage illustrates the typical case where byplay is either not registered by or at least not explicitly reacted to by the person holding the floor - here, of course, the teacher. Ron registers his apparent pleasure at learning what a factor is in mathematics without disruptive effect and without diverting the teacher’s attention from the lesson in progress.

Byplay may have a humorous orientation but elicit no reaction either from classmates nearby or from the teacher, as in the following example from a third grade math lesson. As the teacher prepares to begin a new set of questions, she reflects more to herself than to the class, “we’ll do an easy one,” whereupon Rita immediately offers what seems to be a jocularly intended “two times two” as an example. The teacher overhears or ignores this non-serious suggestion and goes ahead with her lesson.

Teacher: uhmm,
we’ll do an easy one=
Rita: =two times two
Teacher: let’s say
it was five times eight that you did,
okay?

Since the teacher is speaking more or less aside, not addressing the class as such, she can presumably take Rita’s suggested funny example “two times two” as non-disruptive, if indeed she hears it as a discrete comment at all, so that she can ignore it with impunity.

Even when two or more classmates engage in byplay together, it may have little real disruptive effect and elicit no response from the teacher. In the passage below from a third grade math class, two pupils both register their agreement with the answer to a problem with a characteristic drawled “yess,” apparently signaling that they had the same answer.

Teacher: … Mackenzie?
Mac: =one hundred and sixty-seven?= 
Teacher: =one hundred and sixty-seven.
Ed: =”ah: yess”=
Ron: =”yess”=
Ed: =”yess” …
Teacher: okay.
and then in the next three problems . . .

Ed and Ron quietly indicate that they both had the correct answer for the math problem being discussed in a non-disruptive way, and they elicit no response from the teacher. In any case, these moves primarily have a self-praising function in that
the pupils want to make explicit to the other participants in the classroom that they
solved a problem successfully. In terms of their position in the interaction, it is
significant that they always occur at the closing juncture of an exchange. Almost
invariably, they follow the teacher evaluation move. In our data, this sort of quiet,
positive byplay generally goes unnoticed. In fact, its constant occurrence is simply
ignored. Although the relative loudness of the hissing sound undoubtedly must be
perceived by the teacher, she never reprimands pupils for such utterances nor does
she comment upon them in any way. Thus, the teacher implicitly ratifies them as
acceptable rather than as disruptive.

Exclamations may also be ignored, so long as they are not overly loud.
Exclamations are largely self-directed in any case, and they may be heard as more
or less involuntary expressions of affect. In an initial example, again involving Rita
during a third grade math lesson, the exclamation is woven seamlessly into the
teacher’s talk, and it goes unremarked.

Teacher: …okay. (1.0)
       if you counted these UP
       you would come up with twelve.
Rita:  m-hm ((approvingly))
Teacher: three?
       four, five, six…

Even if the teacher registers Rita’s quiet exclamation, she may take it as
conducive to understanding for the whole class, since it signals both understanding
and approval.

Of course, louder exclamations sometimes attract the attention of the teacher
and elicit reprimands, as in the next example. In this passage from a third grade
math lesson, the teacher has given the solution to a problem for one pupil, and has
begun to answer a question for another, when Kelly blurts out “I did two.” The
teacher reacts to this byplay as if to a blatant disruption.

Teacher: that’s uh
       that’s fine.
       you have,
       you have TWO:
       you have six in [each column.]
Scott:  [uhm, Miss] Matthews what page?=
Teacher: ((to Scot)): =hm?
Kelly:  I did two==
Scott:  =what page=
Teacher: =Kelly.
       please, don’t talk out.
       okay
Kelly may feel that Scott has already interrupted the lesson with his question as to what page they are on, and she may thus feel justified in saying what she said. Nevertheless, the teacher makes quite a show of reprimanding Kelly for this seemingly innocent remark.

Finally, the teacher may respond to an exclamation in a positive, humorous way. In the exchange below from a first grade math lesson, the teacher responds to Deandra’s exclamation “oh no” as to a cry for help. She comes to Deandra’s side to see what she has written on her board, and sympathetically repeats her “oh no.”

Teacher: everybody’s ready yet?
  I don’t see your hand up.
Deandra: h…
  oh [no.]
Teacher: [oh no:-] H. …
  ((laughing, checking Deandra’s board))
Jason:  ((laughing)) I forgot some number- h[sss.]
Teacher: ((to Jason)) okay.
  that’s all right. . . .

Though Deandra is apparently expressing frustration, the teacher introduces humor through repetition of her exclamation “oh no,” and this lightens the mood for the whole interaction—as evidenced by Jason’s laughing admission that he “forgot some numbers.” Especially in the early years of school, kids need to express their feelings in hopes of a sympathetic reaction from classmates or from the teacher. Good teachers respond to this need, sometimes employing humor to ameliorate frustration as well.

Both byplay and exclamations may introduce humor in the classroom, but they may simply supply a vent for emotions and an expression of an individual personality in an otherwise impersonal classroom. Either way, they may go unnoticed or they may elicit negative responses in the form of reprimands and reminders not to “talk out.” By contrast, teachers may integrate positive comments into the ongoing interaction, and they may respond to negative exclamations in humorous ways to alleviate the stress of the classroom.

4. Humorous classroom disruptions
A comparison of naturally-occurring conversation and classroom talk has shown that in formal settings such as in classrooms, “turn-taking procedures may approximate conversational or at least ‘quasi-conversational modes’” (Drew & Heritage 1992: 28), so that the boundaries between institutional talk—like any verbal exchange between professionals and lay persons—and naturally-occurring conversation appear not to be clear-cut but rather “permeable and uncertain” (Drew & Heritage 1992: 28). On the whole, it can be said that classroom talk, despite the large number of participants, appears to be more orderly than naturally-occurring conversation because “most utterances are completed, and most speakers seem to know their lines and to recognize their turn to speak” (Edwards & Furlong 1979: 14). However, transcriptions of classroom talk do not necessarily have to look like play scripts as Edwards and Furlong (1979: 14) suggest. Our data show that all kinds of linguistic phenomena, including humor, can occur within the educational “microcosm of basic social and personal relationships” (Stubbs 1976: 151) inherent in classrooms. Participants can, for example, (more or less) successfully attempt to gain the floor with an orientation toward humor, resulting in interruptive stretches of overlapping talk that are then either followed by reprimands or by an absence of depreciating comments. Obviously, within the “bloomin’, buzzin’ confusion of the classroom,” as Stubbs (1976: 151) puts it, any talk can occur, which has often been claimed to give the impression of chaos. But, as van Lier (1988: 47) points out, identification of chaos can only be established via reference to an underlying regular structure that is definitely accounted for in descriptions of classroom talk. Once pupils learn the regular recurrent structures of classroom interaction, they can exploit them at strategic points for humor.

The most salient difference between conversation and teacher-student interaction is that, in the classroom, the right for the distribution of talk is not shared equally. Many researchers, such as Flanders (1970), Edwards and Furlong (1979), van Lier (1988, 2004), to name just a few, argue that talk control appears to reside unilaterally in the teacher, who has the right to talk first, last, and most. Furthermore, she appears to decide who speaks to whom about what and she also seems to control the transfer of speakership by allocating turns at speaking. This gives rise to the assumption of a particular exchange structure operating in educational settings, as described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975): their central concept of the teaching exchange consists of a minimal interactive unit of up-to-three-part sequences, namely: Teacher Initiation – Pupil Response – Teacher Feedback, schematically I-R-F, as in the exchange below from a first grade math lesson:

Teacher: it’s a HALF? I
Or is this a WHOLE.=
Pupils: =who:le.= R
Teacher: =it’s a WHO:LE. F
This exchange demonstrates that only one participant initiates the I-R-F exchange, typically the teacher. As shown above, the teacher elicits pupils’ responses by asking a question to which she knows the answer. This kind of question has therefore regularly been labelled test question or pseudo question (Stubbs 1983), or known information question (Nassaji & Wells 1999). In the above example the question is directed to any possible next speaker in the class, thus triggering a collective response on the part of the pupils. In the third move the teacher takes up the pupils’ one-word reply. She embeds it in a whole sentence and thus implicitly characterizes it as correct and desired.

Apart from signaling that teachers speak before and after pupil contributions – though not after each one as Edwards and Furlong (1979: 17), for example, claim – the sequence also shows a rapid succession of the moves with no gap and no overlap. In regular cases, as van Lier (2004) states, “the pupil turn is sandwiched between the two teacher turns.” In short, an initiation predicts a following response that is by itself triggered by a preceding initiation. A follow-up move then functions to close the exchange. Initiations and responses are therefore symmetrically related and can be considered adjacent while the follow-up move stands somewhat removed from the adjacency pair and – due to the fact that it is absent at times – cannot be considered adjacent to the response move. The I-R-F exchange pattern provides a stock resource for the disruptive creation of humor by pupils.

Indeed, the I-R-F exchange seems to be the most common pattern of classroom discourse at all grade levels (cf. Cazden 1988: 29). However, in order to analyze classroom talk, a large variety of moves surrounding the plain I-R-F has to be taken into consideration as well, and this may at times distort the orderliness of the picture. The following excerpt illustrates the context of the basic three-part exchange discussed above and provides a basis for a close analysis, which at the same time highlights some exemplary problems of the plain I-R-F theory when put into practice:

1. Teacher: 'kay.
   I don’t think you need to write right now?
2.          so look up here, please?
3. ((a transparent chip in the shape of a circle is lying on the overhead projector))
4.          is this a HALF?
5.          or is this a WHOLE.=
6. Class:  =who:le= 
7. Teacher: =it’s a WHO:LE. ...
8. ((high-pitched voice)) HOW many-
9.          halves would I need to make a whole.
10.        raise your hand if you can tell me.
11. Amy?
12. Amy: Two?
13. Teacher: let’s see if she’s right.
14. One?
15. ((putting up chips in the shape of half circles))
16. Several pupils: two...
17. Teacher: two.=
18. Kelly ((high-pitched)): =O:-?[^RR].
19. Teacher: [so if] I take ONE away
20. what do I have LEFT.
21. Rebecca?= =wu!
22. Jordan: well, a half?==that’s right
23. Rebecca: so I have ONE HALF.
24. Teacher: I have ONE HALF.
25. ((Teacher takes one half away))
26. ((Teacher takes one half away))
27. ((Jordan talking to his neighbor)) Jordan?
28. are your eyes on me?
29. ‘kay.
30. so I have ONE HALF.
31. ((Teacher mixes her plastic chips again))
32. (3.0)

Looking at this sequence in detail, it becomes clear that describing classroom exchanges solely in terms of I-R-F is not sufficient. First of all, while lines 5-8 certainly do comprise an I-R-F sequence, they are preceded and followed by additional moves by the teacher. Thus, there are several mechanisms at work which are employed by both teachers and students in order to achieve a successful interaction and to prevent it from breaking down. On the one hand, the teacher has to construct her turn in clearly recognizable ways for the students to perceive her intended goal. On the other hand, the pupils have to infer the meaning of the teacher moves, so that they are able to serve the teacher’s needs and to cooperate in the pursuit of their common goal, the advancement of the lesson.

On the whole, highly complex mechanisms are involved in the turn-taking system operating in teacher-student-interaction. In particular, teachers have at their disposal a huge variety of possible models for the construction of their own turns as well as for the employment and placement of their turn-allocation and turn-seizing procedures. Pupils are then confronted not only with tasks such as the recognition of turn-constructional units and their completion points, but also with the necessity to identify intra-turn moves, in order to make their own contributions at appropriate transition relevance places.

In the following, we offer a line-by-line analysis of the above example. The beginning of this new unit of talk is marked off by the discourse marker “kay” (l.1), followed by two imperative moves that are disguised via embedding, a
Technique often preferred to plain commands and commonly used in formal situations (cf. Sinclair & Brazil 1982: 78). These imperative moves serve to control non-verbal behavior and attract the pupils’ attention. Only after every participant is on line with the teacher, does the teacher elicit a verbal response from the pupils who answer collectively. With the uptake and emphasis of the correct pupil reply in the teacher follow-up turn by means of extension and prosodic stress, the sequence is complete. What follows next is interesting in various respects: a second initiation occurs immediately within the very same turn, to trigger a further triplet. However, the initiation move is not followed adjacently by a student response; instead, the teacher utters a disciplinary directive, requiring the large number of possible next speakers to bid for the next turn by raising their hands. This directive not only reduces the possibilities of pupil self-selection, but also invokes the one-at-a-time rule by assuring an absence of simultaneous talk. At the same time, the teacher explicitly draws attention to the rules of verbal behavior typically operating in educational settings. Consequently, the “pupils are in competition for the floor for a short period of time” (Larrue & Trognon 1993: 189) until the teacher allocates the speaking turn to one pupil, in the above example to Amy, thus avoiding further competition as well as the frequent overlaps that otherwise follow. The use of the pupil’s name can be seen as both a turn-allocational device and a further initiation within the very same sequence. “Amy” (l.12) in a way recycles the previously asked question, and this means that the actual initiation is delayed by the intervening request for bids. Amy’s response is then used as an uptake by the teacher, who addresses the whole group in order to jointly find out whether Amy is right. “Let’s see if she’s right” (l.14) can be considered either as another initiation, giving the impression that the feedback move is absent, or as a plain evaluation move. It clearly unites features of both. On the one hand, “let’s” as it is used here is an “imperative in syntactic disguise,” which gives the utterance the character of a suggestion (cf. Sinclair & Brazil 1982: 78), namely to perform the act together, and thus functions to initiate another exchange allocating the turn to both teacher and pupils. On the other hand, “see if she’s right” means that teacher and pupils are required to collaborate in order to convert this utterance into an evaluation of Amy’s response. Therefore, line 14 fulfils two tasks. It is again evident, as in lines 5-6, that the aim of the initiation is the group as a whole, because the teacher signals in her next initiation move that she is inviting any participant—if not all—to chime in.

The paralinguistic cues employed to display her aim are threefold: first, the vowel is elongated; second, intonation rises towards the end of the utterance; and third, the utterance is followed by a significant silence clearly intended as a gap in which speaker change is desired. The pupils interpret her efforts correctly and provide the missing second part of the answer, which is then repeated by the teacher in order to emphasize its accuracy. Lines 15-18 could thus be interpreted as
a joint enterprise in the pursuit of an evaluation to Amy’s response. As soon as the third exchange is completed, Kelly takes the opportunity to self-select in order to introduce a further response, but she is ignored by the teacher, who goes on with yet another initiation, this time introduced by the discourse marker “so” (l.20). Lines 20-21 comprise the initiation moves that first request a new piece of information within the current line of mathematical reasoning and then designate Rebecca as next speaker. Jordan’s latched utterance “wu” (l.23) is not clearly classifiable in terms of I-R-F as it does not show Jordan’s intention. One may speculate that “wu” signals the pupil’s attentive listenership and that he is bidding for the floor, although it has just been allocated to Rebecca. A closer analysis of similar structures in the data reveals in fact that such devices are employed by pupils on a regular basis and can be seen as minimal turn-seizing attempts, potentially disruptive and humorous. Rebecca’s somewhat hesitant response preceded by the verbal filler “well,” then heralds the teacher’s paired feedback moves. After acknowledging the pupil reply via the assessment token “that’s right” (l.25), the teacher extends her answer by means of embedding it in a complete sentence and uttering the relevant items with overloudness. Lines 28-30 illustrate how Jordan’s talk to his neighbor is considered interruptive enough to trigger a teacher sanction in the form of a side sequence, in which the pupil’s attention is drawn to the ongoing processes of the lesson up front. The teacher commands Jordan’s attention by introducing her turn with a vocative, “are your eyes on me?” (l.29) This initiation is grammatically interesting, because it represents a question that is neither a known-information nor a negotiatory-information request. Instead it functions as an imperative for Jordan to pay attention. As such, it counts as a role-sanctioning utterance of the kind recurrently employed by teachers for the purpose of exercising control over the amount of byplay as a form of “subordinate communication” in particular (Goffman 1981: 133-134). “Kay” in l.30 then closes down the side sequence and thus implies that the one-at-a-time rule is restored. It simultaneously sets up the next utterance, which is not a new sequence, but a verbatim repetition of the previous feedback move (from l.26) introduced by “so.” At this point, the interactional sequence is complete, and this is marked by the long gap of three seconds.

It is also interesting to see what transpires following the gap. Kelly takes advantage of the pause to self-select and think aloud about the foregoing interaction. Her initiation is taken up by the teacher who explicitly encourages Kelly to “keep going” (l.40):

33. (3.0) 33. Kelly: that’s
34. two-H
35. two:?
36. o=
37. Teacher: =two?
38. what.
39. keep going?
40. Kelly: TWO ONES.
41. Teacher ((surprised)): TWO ONES
42. for what.=
43. Rich: =no.
44. Kelly: [that-]=
45. Jordan: [two] equal(ing) halves.=
46. Kelly
   ((very high-pitched voice)): =no:?
47. I meant-
48. if one whole piece ().
49. and there’s one chamber LEFT?
50. Teacher: okay?
51. so that’s right?
52. so there’s one?
53. PAIR
54. (to Jordan)) can you write that down?
55. Jordan ((annoyed)): I’ll start to in a SECOND.
56. Teacher: ((nodding towards Amy, who had been raising her hand))
57. Amy: one half.
58. Teacher: so it’s one half.
59. (4.0)

Despite Kelly’s self-selection in lines 34-37, she receives no reprimand, probably because her contribution is topically related. Instead, her attempt to gain the floor is overheard by the teacher, who subsequently allocates the floor to her. This trails off into another sequence of 26 lines of discussion on halves and wholes showing features very similar to the thirty-three line sequence analyzed above. However, lines 44-47 deserve special attention. Despite Kelly’s engagement in dyadic talk with the teacher, both Richard and Jordan disrupt without being reprimanded by the teacher, who seems to appreciate their participation in the common pursuit of the problem-solving and, thus, the advancement of the lesson.

As we listened for variations on the basic interactional patterns, we kept hearing disruptions (for humor). Then we started listening for identity displays, gender and power relationships with the aim of classification of the distinct disruptions. In another example from a first grade class below, Kathy seems not to intend a real disruption, though the teacher reacts to her comment rather pointedly.

Teacher: okay. (1.5)
you could color IN,
and you can use your markers.
Kathy: do I have to do it neatly?
Teacher: {(annoyed)} of COURSE you have to do it neatly.

Kathy’s question is doubly disruptive, first, in that it comes at a juncture when no talk is expected at all and, second, in that it suggests an inappropriate course of action for the other pupils. Perhaps the question receives such a strong negative response, because it is heard as an attempt at humor, but certainly also because of this doubly disruptive character and its suggestion that kids should never intentionally produce sloppy work.

In a second example from a first grade math lesson, the disruptive pupil does seem to be trying to be funny. Here the teacher is walking from one table to the next, checking work, when Quentin speaks up disruptively.

Teacher: okay.
table two?
Quentin: {(high pitch, mouth full of chips)}
don’t forget table five.
Teacher: excuse me?
Quentin: hhh
Teacher: ah::, table THREE?

In this excerpt, a class clown inserts a comment into an ongoing activity where no talk from pupils is expected, and the comment draws attention to the disruptive pupil and away from the activity. Not surprisingly, the teacher produces a direct reprimand.

In another example from a third grade math lesson, a different pupil disrupts with an orientation to humor.

Teacher: mount up
your
uhm=
Peter: =flippies?==
Teacher: =counters
Ken: =uhu

Here the pupil produces a jocular completion of the teacher’s ongoing turn, latched directly onto a hesitation marker. The teacher simply completes the utterance correctly, latching unto the insertion with no further reaction.

Especially daring class clowns even give “smart” answers directly to teacher questions. This sort of behavior disrupts the regular Initiation-Response-Feedback pattern characteristic of classroom interaction, according to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), McHoul (1978) and others, as described above. Moreover, since the
attention of the class is presumably focused on such exchanges, improper responses within them loom large, and they potentially undermine the control of the teacher.

Teacher: four plus four plus FOUR?
   Peter?
Peter: twelve?
Teacher: THREE times four.
Peter: twelve?
Teacher: can you turn that around?
Peter: yes?
Teacher: to what?
Peter: twelve?
Pupils: [{laughter}]
Teacher: [how could you turn three times four around?] {looking at Peter}
   Peter: three?
   four times three?
   Teacher: right.

Due to the subversive nature of this overt disruption of a classroom exchange pattern and the laughter it elicits, we might expect a clearer teacher reprimand here, but all kinds of ancillary factors and extenuating circumstances affect negative teacher reactions in such cases.

The last four examples all count as disruptions because they violate normal classroom interaction patterns. The last three count as examples of humorous disruptions as well.

We even find cases where a class clown mocks teacher talk explicitly, as in the next excerpt where Katie responds in the teacher’s slot and in her voice just before she can respond herself.

Wendy: I put “YES” even if you turn that por- problem around, it would still be the same [product.]
Katie ((commenting like teacher)): [YEAH.] [that’s right]
Teacher: [that’s right] that’s right

Here Katie is apparently trying to be funny, and seems to be mocking the teacher - or at least a recurrent teacher behavior - but despite the disruption and the mocking tone, there is no negative teacher reaction.

Teachers may comment on pupils’ disruptive behavior in an ironic way as in the next extract from a first grade class, where the pupils are supposed to count down the numbers they have been ordering on the overhead projector. As soon as the teacher encourages the class to speak up by saying “can’t hear you,” Jeff takes
her by her word to introduce an exaggerated performance. His performance goes unsanctioned until the teacher in the end ironically thanks him for it.

Teacher: so let’s COUNT DOWN. ...
   [ninety-eight?]  
Class:   "[ninety-eight?]"
Teacher: ninety?]  
Class:   "[ninety?]"
Teacher: [eighty?]  
Class:   "[eighty?]"
Teacher: [fifty-nine?]  
Class:   "[fifty-nine?]"
Teacher: [fifty-three?]  
Class:   "[fifty-three?]"
((very hesitantly)) "fifty-two?"  
Teacher: [FORTY->THREE<?]  
Class:   ["forty-three"]  
Teacher: >can’t HEAR YOU<?  
Class:   [thirty-ni:ne?]  
Jeff ((with rising loudness)): [thirty-NI:NE?]  
Teacher: [thirty-eight?]  
Class:   [thirty-eight?]  
Jeff:   [THIRTY-EIGHT?]  
Teacher: [thirty-five]  
Class:   [thirty-five]  
Jeff:   [THIRTY-FIVE]  
Teacher: [thirty]  
Class:   [thirty]  
Jeff:   [THIRTY]  
Teacher: [twenty-four]  
Class:   [twenty-four]  
Jeff:   [TWENTY-FOUR]  
Teacher: [seventeen]  
Class:   [seventeen]  
Jeff:   [SEVENTEEN]  
Teacher: [seven]  
Class:   [seven]  
Jeff:   [SEVEN]  
Teacher: [zero].  
Class:   [zero].  
Jeff:   [ZE:RO:].=  
Teacher: =super, thank [you, Jeff.]
Quite some time later during the same math lesson, the teacher’s utterance “let’s say the numbers together” again triggers an over-eager participation on the part of Jeff.

Class: [seventy-seven]
Jeff: [SEVENTY-SEVEN]
Class: [eighty-six]
Jeff: [SE- ((even more loudly)) EIGHTY-SIX]
Class: [ninety-nine]
Amy: [NINETY-NINE]
Jeff: [NINETY-NINE]=
Teacher: ((laughingly)): =Jeff had his Wheaties this morning.
((several pupils laughing))

The teacher again joins in Jeff’s (and later Amy’s) humorous game instead of reprimanding them for disruptive behavior. She thus comments not what he says but how he says it. Her ironic remark about Jeff’s energy breakfast in a way characterizes his performance as inappropriate but welcome at the same time, because it relaxes the otherwise rigid classroom situation. As a consequence, several pupils engage in laughter.

Teachers may sometimes simply have no ready response to disruptive humor, as in the excerpt from a third grade math class below, where one pupil produces a pun, which clearly interrupts the activity in progress, but receives no reprimand.

“Stars & Stripes” is the name of the military newspaper familiar on the military base, but is also a name for the American flag. Dilon puns on this ambiguity, pretending to understand “Stars & Stripes” as a reference to the flag rather than the newspaper.

(Third Grade Math: class has been working on arrays; classroom quite noisy)

Teacher ((over the noise)): I’ve been trying to collect different flyers and things like that, that come in “Stars & Stripes” and whatever (2.5)
I want to do some math problems
Dilon: >on a flag?<
Rayna ((laughing)): <ON A FLA:G.>
Teacher: No? (1.9)
Um

Dilon’s joke elicits an appreciative laughing repetition from classmate Rayna, but the teacher seems at a loss as to how to reply. Perhaps the teacher is herself genuinely amused and views the humor here as a case of positive disruption.
In the next passage, from a first grade science lesson, the teacher clearly plays along with a disruptive joke, apparently drawn in by its pure playfulness. They are discussing the parts of a turtle, when Anessa suggests the term “rocks.” This seems to amuse Jordan, who then laughingly suggests the rhyming “socks.” The teacher joins in the play with a little rhyme “They’re not rocks? They’re not socks,” eliciting copious laughter from the whole class.

Teacher:  
Now that we have that, what are these SCALES up here called on this turtle.

Jenny:  
Uh:, plates?

Teacher:  
Plates?

Yes?

Teacher:  
(Another) word?

Anessa:  
Rocks?

Teacher:  
No?

Jordan (laughingly):  
Socks!

Teacher:  
They’re not rocks? They’re not socks?

Class:  
(((laughter)))

Teacher:  
Look on your paper?

((to Ryan)) Yes?

Ryan:  
A shell

Teacher:  
It is a shell?

They’re called SCUTES.

Several pupils ((amazed)): Scutes

Especially in the early years of school, teachers are well advised to follow the example here, and to turn disruptions into moments of playful interaction for the whole class. Certainly for some teachers, humor—even the momentarily disruptive humor of a class clown—may represent a contribution to the sort of classroom interaction they try to mold. After all, humor can stimulate mental flexibility and creativity during otherwise repetitive, dull classroom activities. Humor may add energy and help build rapport in a potentially faceless group.

Teachers may affiliate with the class clown by joining in the laughter or producing a cohesive (humorous) follow up, as in the previous passage, just as they may disaffiliate by explicitly reprimanding the class clown, as in this final excerpt.

A teaching style we found fruitful for these kinds of inclusion of jocular utterances is the turn-allocation to the whole group. Due to the fact that the floor is open to any possible next speaker, more pupils take the opportunity to self-select and join in. This goes along with the finding that humorous contributions tend to be spontaneous utterances as they lack hesitation markers. This means that pupils, even five- to six-year-olds, don’t need any planning time to produce an utterance at any given point in a conversation. We also looked at the transitions between the turns. Interestingly, kids of that age group are already able to recognize possible
turn completion points at which they can legitimately join in. While doing so, it is noteworthy that students obey the “one-at-a-time” rule by not overlapping the current speaker’s utterance in almost all cases of pupil self-selections. Despite the first grade teacher’s fast talk, which is virtually interruption-proof, pupils still find ways to get a word in. Remarkably, their contributions occur largely around TRPs. Nonetheless, at times, overlap is accounted for due to either self-selections by more than one speaker or the fact that teachers continue after a slight pause, which then results in accidental overlap. In fact, this suggests that pupils in first grade have already fully acquired the turn-taking system and that they are able to project possible completion points. In case they do interrupt the teacher’s talk, this can be seen as an effect of their eagerness to gain the floor in order to signal their attention. Sometimes contributions might be seen as violations of the turn-taking rules of both “one-at-a-time” and TRP. In educational settings, however, it is concluded that such occurrences should rather be considered as collaborative speech style and, as such, not as a violation of the rule (cf. Adger 2001). Nevertheless, the teacher feels the need to produce a sanction as soon as these occurrences become too disruptive or persistent.

In spite of reprisals from the teacher, class clowns continue to disrupt class with their attempts at humor. Of course, class clowns are constructing a particular identity, opposed to the teacher’s pet or the quiet pupil, but teacher attitudes and responses also help construct a particular atmosphere in the classroom as well as a particular personality for the teacher. Further, classmates sometimes affiliate with the class clown, continuing the disruption cohesively, laughing out loud or laughing sotto voce (but visible to classmates), though they may also disaffiliate, by initiating a counter move or simply ignoring the disruption. The class clown creates humor and fun for the whole class at the personal risk of punishment, and the other pupils may appreciate this and play along.

5. Conclusion

Although the teacher has the power in the elementary classroom, there are twenty or so potential disruptors and, as we have seen, all sorts of possible disruptions at various different points in the interaction. In addition, many disruptions are by-play communicated only to a sub-group within the class, which the teacher cannot hear accurately. Much extraneous talk simply counts as “chatting” and hence as unobjectionable at most times. A teacher may put down a particular disturbance (by a certain kid), and let a second (similar) one go unremarked. The teacher may even join in and make pedagogical use of the disruption. And, since some disruptions are (intentionally) funny, teachers may be
genuinely amused and simply join in the fun for a moment before re-establishing order.

But what is the distribution of different types of disruptions across age groups? And how do teacher (and classmate) reactions vary across age groups? How does a particular kid get a reputation as unruly or as a class clown? What sorts of disruptions are perceived as more/most objectionable? We need a careful study of real data to answer these questions. Teachers have all kinds of intuitions about which kids disrupt, how objectionable they are, what their reactions should be and so on, but we can hardly expect teachers to have a very analytical sense about disruptions or even about their (standard) responses.

5.1. Humor identity

If we adopt the perspective of the humorously disruptive children, we can ask why they disrupt and why they use humor. Apparently they hope to express their particular identity as separate from the rest of the class. The focus on identity leads us to look at gender differences. Are boys really more disruptive or funny than girls? Or are they disruptive and funny in different ways? What are disruptive girls and boys trying to express? And how does humor fit in? Disruptive comments often function to assert individual identity into otherwise faceless group orientation of classroom alienation. Lots of disruptions contain direct references to I, me or express individual evaluations: {yawn}, cool, self-directed oh, no. Others baldly mock the learning process, with its “question-answer-feedback” structure, or even the teacher herself in an attempt to assert a rebel (but humorous) identity.

Another set of unresearched questions concerns the value of humor in the classroom. How much and which kinds of humor are really disruptive? Do the positive aspects of humor–its infusion of playfulness, creativity and flexibility, along with its potential to enhance rapport among the pupils and between the teacher and pupils–balance out its disruptive effects? We need to reassess the role of classroom clowning, seeing both its positive influence and its disruptive effects.

We use humor to construct an identity in interaction in all kinds of ways. We are known for using humor to avoid conflict, for our off-beat sense of humor, or our penchant for making really “bad” puns or for telling really “dirty” jokes (no matter who is listening). This may even include disrupting class to act as a class clown rather than striving to be a teacher’s pet in elementary school.

A humor identity is not the same as a sense of humor, if, indeed, we could ever define the latter. Sense of humor would include the kinds of humor a person enjoys in films, in books, on the web, who tells, recalls, appreciates certain kinds of jokes, who engages in certain kinds of conversational humor–including customary joking relationships with certain other people. Thus, we exhibit a specific sense of humor
through the websites we access and the materials we download, but we do not construct a humor identity until we forward downloaded jokes to others or tell them the next day at lunch (in mixed company, with the boss around, etc.). While we have a sense of humor, we construct a humor identity in particular contexts, presenting a personality as, e.g. a class clown, a witty letter writer, a boss with “a sense of humor,” in relation to subordinates, a person who uses humor to defuse aggression rather than to attack others (or vice versa). There may not be any definable “sense of humor”, but we can demonstrate the construction of humor identity in concrete contexts. Indeed, the notion of humor identity provides a “constructive” way of getting beyond the old notion of sense of humor.

Transcription Conventions

She’s out. Period shows falling tone in the preceding element.
Oh yeah? Question mark shows rising tone in the preceding element.
nine, ten Comma indicates a level, continuing intonation.
DAMN Capitals show heavy stress or indicate that speech is louder than the surrounding discourse.
“dearest” Utterances spoken more softly than the surrounding discourse are framed by degree signs.
says “Oh” Double quotes mark speech set off by a shift in the speaker’s voice.
(2.0) Numbers in parentheses indicate timed pauses.
“” A truncated ellipsis is used to indicate pauses of one-half second or less.
… An ellipsis is used to indicate a pause of more than a half-second.
ha:rd The colon indicates the prolonging of the prior sound or syllable.
<no way> Angle brackets pointing outward denote words or phrases that are spoken more slowly than the surrounding discourse.
>watch out< Angle brackets pointing inward denote words or phrases spoken more quickly than the surrounding discourse.
bu- but A single dash indicates a cut-off with a glottal stop.
[why] her? Square brackets on successive lines mark the beginning and the end of an overlapping talk.
and= Equals signs on successive lines show latching
=then between turns.
Clearly audible breath sounds are indicated with a capital \(H\).

Inhalations are denoted with a period, followed by a small \(h\). Longer inhalations are depicted with multiple \(hs\) as in \(hhh\).

Exhalations are denoted with a small \(h\) (without a preceding period). A longer exhalation is denoted by multiple \(hs\).

In the case that utterances cannot be transcribed with certainty, empty parentheses are employed. If there is a likely interpretation, the questionable words appear within the parentheses.

Aspects of the utterance, such as whispers, coughing, and laughter are indicated with double parentheses.

References


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