# Humour in writing centre consultations

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## ABSTRACT

In especially the context of a writing centre, learning takes place during, and as part of, the conversations between the writing centre consultant and the student. This interaction is an integral part of writing centre research and is the focus of this largely qualitative study, employing a politeness lens. While there is some research on the politeness strategies employed by writing center consultants, there is very little research on the use of humour and its accompanying laughter to enhance rapport and interaction. The use of humour in the context of a writing centre is particularly relevant especially in light of the power dynamics and 'distance' inherent in the student-consultant relationship. This study therefore analysed a corpus of 10 video-recorded and transcribed writing centre consultations through a politeness lens in an effort to fill this gap. Our findings indicate that humour used positively can have positive effects, bridge the gap and create rapport and solidarity in complex relationships. The analysis also demonstrates how humour and laughter as used in the context of a writing centre consultation enhances interaction, creates a more positive learning environment and lessens the stress and anxiety students generally associate with academic writing.

**Keywords**: humour, laughter, writing consultations, writing centre, academic writing, rapport, engagement

# 1. Introduction

Writing centres are accepted globally as structures established to support student writing. Staffed primarily by postgraduate, and in some cases, undergraduate students, writing centres are marketed as safe and non-judgmental spaces that struggling students can turn to for individualised writing support from their peers. However, while writing centres *are* safe and non-judgmental spaces, the relationship between the writing peer/tutor/consultant (we refer to writing tutors as writing consultants but the word 'tutor' is retained when used in the literature quoted) and the student is one a little more complicated. Trimbur (1987:23) addresses this very issue asking, "If I am qualified to tutor, then I am no longer a peer to those I tutor. On the other hand, if I am a peer to my tutees, how can I be qualified to tutor?" These and other similar questions have dominated much of the writing centre literature, with experts questioning the difficulty of this peer-tutor/student relationship (Clark, 1988; Blau, Hall & Straus, 1998; Lunsford, 1991) and in doing so, have alluded to the institutional nature of this relationship (Thonus, 2001). The tutor is primarily a representative of the institution that has awarded and rewarded them for being an excellent writer and student (Trimbur, 1987:24) and as such is inevitably endowed with more power and authority. Writing centres are in actuality 'institutions within institutions' (Zdrojkowski, 2007:3). Despite this, writing consultants work hard to engage the students who visit in the hope of creating better writers (North, 1984), utilising every strategy or tool at their disposal to ensure satisfied clients and successful consultations. One such strategy largely neglected in the writing centre literature is the use of humour to enhance rapport, collaboration, engagement or interaction. We use a bevy of terms here to ensure that we have covered all intended meanings in reference to what writing centre consultants strive for during consultations, and as has been used in the literature.

It is important, at this point to establish what we understand as the difference between humour and laughter. Taylor (2020), in drawing from Webster's Dictionary explains that humour is a mental faculty, the ability to discover, perceive, effectively express, or appreciate the ludicrous, the comical, or the absurdly incongruous, while laughter is a sound; the expression of mirth, joy, or scorn through a chuckle or explosive noise. Thus, while closely related, laughter and humour are not synonyms (Taylor, 2020). For this study, our understanding of humour is that it involves communicating, both verbally in a way that elicits a humourous response and positive affect; for example, a smile, a chuckle or even a 'belly' laugh (Offer, Skead & Seen, 2018: 136). Thus, our analyses and examples focus on verbal humour and its accompanying laughter.

The use of humour as a pedagogical tool has been the focus of numerous studies. It has unfortunately seen limited reference with regard to writing centre consultations. The few studies that do mention humour do so in close relation to laughter, with the main focus on laughter (Thonus, 2002; Zdrojkowski, 2007); as an element of rapport-building (Lehman, Cade & Olney, 2010); a politeness strategy used in writing centre consultations to enhance collaboration and negotiate the difficult peer-tutor relationship (Bell, Arnold & Haddock,

2009); a motivational scaffold (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014); and a politeness strategy that operationalises motivational scaffolding (Mackiewicsz & Thompson, 2013). No study to date has focused specifically on the humour(ous) statements or talk that consultants engage in during the consultation, the purpose or intention of such talk and the possible effect of this (talk) on the student. This study will therefore analyse a corpus of 10 video-recorded and transcribed writing centre consultations through a politeness lens in an effort to fill this gap. The next part of this study will focus briefly of the value of humour as a pedagogical tool, followed by an overview of politeness theory.

## 2. Humour as a pedagogical tool

Various research studies expound the value of humour as a pedagogical tool (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Martin, Phulik-Doris, Larson, Gray & Weir 2003; Garner, 2006; Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010; Hale, 2015; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018; Alatalo & Poutiainen 2016; Lamminpää & Vesterinen 2018; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; Offer, Skead & Sean, 2018). For Kaplan and Pascoe (1977), Garner (2006) and Wanzer, Frymier and Erwin (2010) humour was shown to have positive impacts on students' comprehension, retention and recall. Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) had 508 university students view either a serious lecture or one of three versions of a humorous lecture (humorous examples related to the concepts in the lecture (concept humor), unrelated to the concepts (non-concept humor), or a combination of concept and non-concept example). This was followed by two tests of comprehension and retention. While the first test results did not show significant findings, a re-test 6 weeks later showed that retention of concept humour material was significantly improved. In a much smaller study with 117 undergraduate students, Garner (2006) had similar results. The students who viewed the digitally video-recorded lectures that included a humorous story, example or metaphor "significantly recalled or retained more information about the topic" (2006:179). Garner (2006) concluded that the 'ha-ha' of humor in the classroom may indeed contribute to the 'aha!' of learning from the student (2006: 180). Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin (2010), despite using a different approach in their research, obtained similar results. Participants in their study completed online surveys reporting on an instructor's use of inappropriate and appropriate humor, perceptions of instructor humorousness, and affective learning and learning indicators (2010:1). Their study, framed largely by Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT) found that related humour, an appropriate form of instructional humour, was positively associated with student learning. Importantly the study also reveals that disparaging and offensive humour or inappropriate forms of humour did not correlate with student learning (2010:1). Understanding and defining the various types of humour is thus crucial in determining the value of humour as a pedagogical tool.

Martin *et al* (2003) suggests exactly this in their discussion of humour and its uses. Like Alatalo and Poutiainen (2016), Martin *et al* (2003) emphasises that in order to ensure that humour has

positive psychological and physiological benefits, experts must be aware of the different types of humour. He identified these as:

**Self-enhancing humour**: relatively benign uses of humour to enhance the self;

**Affiliative humour**: to enhance ones relationships with others;

**Aggressive humour**: use of humour to enhance the self at the expense of others; and

**Self-defeating humour**:  use of humour to enhance relationships at the expense of self (Martin *et al* 2003:48).

Affiliative humour would thus be the most appropriate type of humour in educational settings, while Aggressive and Self-Defeating humour are "less desirable and potentially detrimental to psychological well-being" (Martin *et al*, 2003: 70). Affiliative humour is closely associated with cheerfulness, self-esteem, psychological well-being and social intimacy (Martin *et al*, 71). Individuals with high scores on this measure appear to be socially extraverted, cheerful, emotionally stable, and concerned for others (71). Offer, Skead and Seen (2018) refer to this as positive humour, adding that it is humour that is inclusive, appropriate and does no harm (2018:147; Banas et al, 2011). Such humour creates an enjoyable learning environment, improves psychological and psychological well-being, creates a sense of belonging and social connectedness among students and may positively affect students' perceptions of a teacher's credibility (Offer, Skead & Seen, 2018).

These overtly positive benefits of humour validate its use in writing centre consultations where both students and consultants have to navigate a complex and often  difficult relationship. Researchers, such as Gruner (1967), caution, against the overuse of humour  and suggest that there needs to be a balance between humour and teaching in order for teachers to avoid looking 'clownish'. Hale (2016:22) too advises that humour be used cautiously and carefully, and that students are more motivated to learn when they feel that humour use is in their best interests. Humour that 'transgresses social taboos' (27) or that denigrates religion, ethnicity or social status have negative effects and may even constitute a type of bullying (28). Hale's study is particularly relevant, highlighting socio-economic and language issues that speak directly to our context. Like many of our students, Hale's students too (2016) are unprepared for tertiary study, share disparate educational backgrounds and [often] lack the linguistic and social capital needed to process and appreciate humour used during the lecture (24). Humour for these students could become 'another educational hurdle' (25) and have effects that run counter to its intended purpose. In an environment where the power dynamic inevitably affects the interaction between lecturer and student or, in the case of the writing centre, between student and consultant, humour used poorly can worsen this divide. Hale (2016) therefore frames his study in that of face theory, elucidating its appropriateness to study discourse in real-life situations where there is already an imbalance of power.

The research does indicate the value of humour in teaching and learning and in motivating students. If used effectively, it may bridge the gap between lecturer and student, and student and writing centre consultant. Caution must be practiced however to ensure it has positive effects and that is used appropriately. Studies on the use of humour must thus be framed by a

theoretical lens that give clear insight into the dynamics at play when such humour is used. The next section of this paper will provide an overview of face and politeness theory as the lens that we will use in this study.

## 3. Face and politeness theory

The idea of face emanates from Goffman's (1955) theory on the elements of social interaction. According to Goffman (1955:222), every person lives in a world of social interaction involving mediated or face-to-face interaction with other people. Face is the positive public image one seeks to establish in these social interactions (222). Participants therefore have feelings and emotional responses to the face contact with others allow him, as well as responses about the face sustained by the other participant (222). Participants in the *wrong face* or *out of face* lead to feelings of shame and inferiority. On the other hand, when a participant believes that he *is in face*, he feels confident and assured (1955:223). Participants in social interaction across cultures thus do not want to 'lose face', and as a result work hard to 'save face' (Goffman, 1955: 224: Redmond, 2015).

Using Goffman's (1955; 1967) face theory as a basis to understand human interaction, Brown and Levinson (1978) expanded on this theory to encapsulate face, human interaction and politeness. They argue that universal principles underlie the construction of polite utterances, that these are linguistically constructed, and are influenced largely by the 'social characteristics' of the participants (Brown 2015:327). The social factors involved in determining levels of politeness are influenced by power, social distance and rank. Power is the hearer's control over the speaker's actions; social distance relates to the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and hearer, and rank relates to the way in which the face-threatening act (FTA i.e.those acts that by their very nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or speaker (1987:65)) is perceived within the culture (Henningsen, 2018).  If rank is high, social distance is farther and power lower, the speaker is most likely to select more polite forms of FTAs, but if rank is lower, social distance closer and power equal, the speaker is likely to use less polite FTAs (Henningsen, 2018).

Politeness is therefore an expression or attempt by the speaker to soften or 'mitigate' face threats carried by certain FTAs toward the hearer (Mills, 2003) or, more simply, a battery of social skills used to ensure that everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction (William, 1997). Positive face is the need to be approved of or affirmed (Henningsen, 2018); that an individual's self-image be appreciated or approved (Brown & Levinson, 1987), or the want of every member that their wants be desirable to at least some others (1987, 62). Negative face is the want of every "competent adult member that [their] actions be unimpeded by others" (62). In the real world, we understand negative face as the need or desire to do what we want, and we want others to let us do it (Redmond, 2015:6). In the context of a writing centre, we can assume that negative face would be the student wanting their writing to be accepted or approved of by the consultant. The consultant, on the other hand, may suggest that the student restructure their introduction. In so doing, the consultant is engaging in what Brown and Levinson (1987) term face-threatening acts (FTAs)  which can threaten both one's positive face and negative face.

FTAs threaten negative face if they indicate that the speaker does not intend to avoid impeding the hearer's freedom of action (Abdul-Majeed, 2009: 512). Examples of negative FTAs are orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, warnings, offers and promises. FTAs threaten positive face when the hearer does not care about their interlocutor's feelings, wants, or does not want what the other wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These include expressions of disapproval such as insults, accusations or complaints; criticism or disapproval; disagreeing; asking for clarification and evaluations.

Politeness theory provides a typology of five communication options when considering if or how to commit an FTA: bald on record (least polite); positive politeness; negative politeness; off-record, hints or indirect messages (most polite); and finally, to not commit the FTA (Henningsen, 2018). While the most effective way to get one's message across to the hearer would be the least polite option (bald on record), the very social nature of human interaction demands the use of less explicit and therefore more polite means. Positive politeness strategies include attending to the hearer's interests, needs and wants; solidarity and in-group identity markers; being optimistic; including both the speaker and hearer in the activity; offers and promises; exaggerated interest in the hearer; avoiding disagreements; and jokes. Negative politeness strategies include being indirect, using hedges and questions, being pessimistic, minimising imposition and being apologetic, while off-record, the politest option, completely removes the speaker from any potential threat or imposition on the hearer (Henningsen, 2018). Face and politeness theory may therefore be the ideal frame against which to analyse tutor/consultant-talk.

## 4. Methodology

The research methodology underlying the design of this study is largely qualitative and takes a case-study approach within a socio-constructivist ontology where knowledge is socially created through interactions with others. In the context of a writing centre, learning takes place in the conversations between the writing-centre consultant and the student, and is an integral part of writing-centre research.

Data was gathered through video recording 10 writing centre consultations with undergraduate, first-time visitors to the writing centre who sought assistance with their (academic) writing. Because the majority of visitors to our writing centre are first-year students, the 10 videos were selected to reflect this and are a realistic representation of the students who visit us. The tutors represented in this study are also reflective of our cohort of tutors in terms of age, gender, and language. The video data was transcribed by a professional transcription company using the transcription symbols adapted largely from those developed by Gail Jefferson (1984) and verified for correctness by both researchers.

## 5. Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis of the existing research on writing centre consultations was conducted to identify possible coding categories. Three categories were identified: directive or

non-directive; higher-order concerns or lower-order concerns and cognitive or/and affective. Once all the data was coded and cross-checking for coding consistency completed, Atlas.ti 7, a qualitative data analysis program, was used to analyse the coded data and identify recurring themes. This study focused on documents generated for cognitive-affective quotations with a focus specifically on the affect element of this category. Earlier research focused on directive and non-directive strategies (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2021). The coding categories for the affective quotations were determined by looking at the element of affect that the consultant attempted to satisfy in each individual statement/comment, as guided by the literature (see Table 1 below). It must be noted that some of these 'elements' are generally considered unconscious actions on the part of the consultant.

Table 1: Codes for positive politeness strategies

| Strategy | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Standard politeness** | general greetings during consultation openings and closings, evidence of good manners, general etiquette (please, thank you, may I): | *Okay. Good morning I'm R… [?] and what is your name?(Video 00065/00065; Turn 3)* |
| **Encouragement** Babcock et al, 2012; Lehman, Cade& Olney, 2010; McKiewicz & Thompson, 2013. | positive words/phrases to motivate or support the student | *Okay, (name of student). Go and slay this dragon. (Video 0004/0005; Turn 581)* |
| **Concern** Thonus, 2001 McKiewicz & Thompson, 2013; 2014 | to show interest, involvement in the successful completion of the task and/or the consultation; to ensure student satisfaction | <u>*Does that make sense?(Video 0001; Turn 32)*</u> |
| **Solidarity** Thonus, 2001 Lehman, Cade& Olney, 2010; | showing a shared experience; oneness; understanding of student's struggles: | *So, sometimes it's confusing at university, because at school (.) we were not taught to already in the introduction say exactly what we are going to talk about. (Video 0002/0003; Turn 190).* |
| **Jokes** Sherwood, 1993 Bell, Arnold & Haddock, 2009; Lehman, Cade & Olney, 2010 | humorous statements and accompanying laughter | *So that is what we call a run on run on run on (.) sentence. Keep it at <u>one</u>. (laughter) (Video 00064/00065; Turn 515)* |
| **Small talk** Thonus, 2001; Lehman, Cade & Olney, 2010 | talk not related directly to the completion of the task or academic matters in general | *I don't know why law students just write well (Video 00057; Turn 237)* |
| **Praise** Bell, Arnold & Haddock, 2009; Scott, Hockenberry & Miller, 2015 | positive words/phrases showing when evaluating students writing | *You've got good evidence behind what you say (.) and there's clear points.(Video 0006; Turn 165)* |

# 6. Findings

In total across the 10 consultations, we were able to identify 265 quotations that we coded cognitive and affective, thus averaging 26.5 affective statements per 50 minute consultation. The number of quotations per affective element are indicated in the graph below:
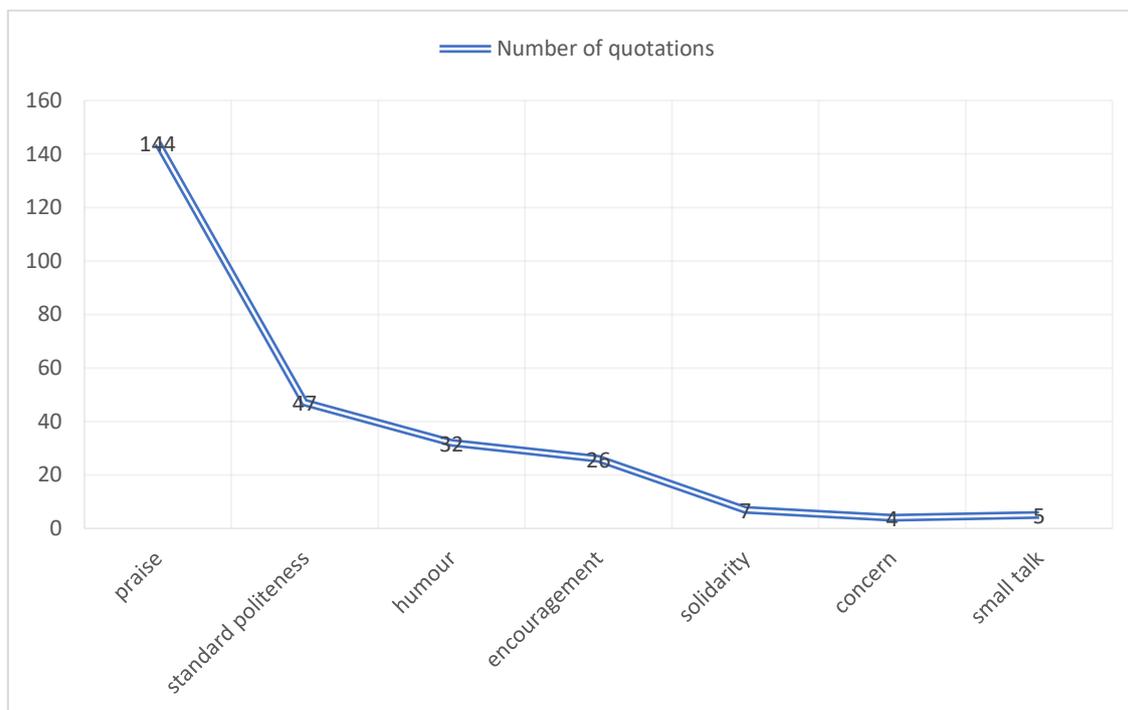


Figure 1: Number of quotations per strategy

Overall, our findings differ on some accounts from some studies mentioned above. For one, unlike Mackiewicz and Thompson's studies (2013; 2014) which identified concern as the most widely used strategy, our study saw praise as the most commonly used strategy. Also, while experts identified aspects of negative politeness, we did not identify the aspects of showing pessimism, minimising imposition and apologising – probably because an important aspect stressed to consultants is to ensure that students feel safe and comfortable during the interaction. While Person, Kreuz, Zwaan and Graesser (1995) indicated that such politeness strategies can negatively affect effective tutoring, we did not find evidence of such. We also observed that our consultants used these strategies carefully, and as a result all messages were clear and unambiguous. Criticism couched in politeness was understood and accepted by the student. Similar to other studies, we found that all talk in the interaction was related directly or indirectly to task completion. In light of the focus of this paper, the following section will expand specifically on the aspect of humour as identified in our analyses.

# 7. Discussion

This part of the paper will then attempt to demonstrate how a close analysis of tutor/consultant-talk using a politeness lens helped us better understand the value of the effect of humour and laughter on writing centre consultations. This focus on humour and laughter is drawn from the fact that it is the one affective element that occurs simultaneously with other affective elements as will be seen below. Interestingly, humour and laughter can be considered both a positive politeness strategy when used to show solidarity or praise a student and a negative politeness strategy when used to mitigate a FTA.

Humour and laughter may not be the elements one would expect to feature in writing centre interactions. Sherwood (1993:4) sums this up when he reminds readers that humour and the laughter it inspires may seem incompatible with the mission of the writing centre because helping people improve their writing is serious business and tutors who resort to humour risk much. But incompatible as it may seem, he states too that we should not disregard the role humour can play in facilitating interactive learning (4). Zdrojkowski (2007), in her study investigating laughter in writing centre consultations, found that tutors used laughter to support students attempts at humour and express empathy and understanding, while students used it to show support for what tutors had said (2007: 171). Thonus (2002; 2008), in attempting to determine what makes a 'successful consultation', identified [single-party, sequenced and simultaneous] laughter as one element (solidarity, affiliative overlaps and small talk were other elements). Laughter as described by conversation analysts (Jefferson, 1984; Thonus, 2002) fills turn slots, serves as a response to previous talk, and acts as a purposeful lead-in to the next talk sequence. In addition, "laughing together is a valued occurrence which can be the product of methodic, coordinated activities" (Thonus, 2002:118).

Research seems to confirm the use of humour as a pedagogical tool of instruction, which lowers the affective filter and stimulates prosocial behaviours (Askildson, 2005). It has a significant role to play in engaging students, improving educational outcomes and increasing enjoyment (Tait, 2015:13) and creates a comfortable classroom atmosphere, a 'safe house' for teaching learning (Gonulal, 2018:156). The excerpts below will therefore attempt to describe the humour and accompanying laughter as has been used by the consultant. Humour and laughter are not specific to one affective element as can be seen below. They have been used when mitigating a face-threatening act (by consultant and student); showing solidarity; praising or encouraging a student; creating rapport or explaining a concept or principle of academic writing.

## Negative politeness strategies

### *Humour and laughter to mitigate a face-threatening act*

In the excerpt below the consultant attempts to encourage the student to paraphrase instead of starting off the introduction with a direct quotation. However, rather than present what could be perceived as criticism by directly telling the student to *not* begin with a direct quote, the consultant utilises the negative politeness strategy of asking a question. While the consultant obviously wants the student to paraphrase, presenting this as a question is an attempt by the consultant to avoid imposing their view on the student and the risk of face-threat to the student is reduced (Maha, 2014). This also allows the student to retain ownership of the text.

**Consultant**: *Why don't you rather um* <u>*paraphrase*</u> *this? Instead of starting with a direct quote.*

**Student:** *Okay (nods)*

**Consultant:** *That's quite unconventional actually   (laughter)*

**Student:**                                                *Okay (laughter)*

In the video still below, the student listens carefully to the 'criticism', looking directly at the consultant. The consultant is advising the student to consider paraphrasing as opposed to a direct quotation. The student nods very briefly but it is difficult to determine her exact reaction to what could be considered a criticism of her writing.



Figure 1: Humour and laughter to mitigate a face-threatening act

The consultant follows this up by describing this as *'unconventional'* – not a word one would generally use to describe someone's writing or writing style. It is the consultants's use of this word that triggers the simultaneous laughter and mitigates what could have been seen as a threat.

Figure 2: Humour and laughter to mitigate a face-threatening act

In another instance in the same consultation the consultant draws the students' attention to the very long, complicated sentences that the student uses, explaining that these long sentences become *'clumsy'*. Once again, the consultants's use of the word '*dodgy*', considered slang, lightens the situation and evokes laughter from both the consultant and the student. While not simultaneous, it could be considered sequenced laughter in which the speaker assesses the utterance as laughable and thus initiates laughter and invites the hearer to participate (Thonus, 2008: 335). In this case, the consultants's reciprocation of this laughter indicates an acceptance of the humour (*dodgy*) and a successful mitigation of the threat.

**Consultant:** *So a good um sentence length is between one and three lines.*

**Student:** *Okay. (nods)*

**Consultant:**     *Okay*     *if it goes over three lines you know (.) it might be getting dodgy (laughter) Okay?*

**Student:**     *Ja. Okay. (laughter).*

There is also evidence of students using humour and laughter to mitigate possible 'losing of face' on their part.

**Consultant:** *It needs a space. Yes. They're not connected to the like you've done here,*

        *just like that*.

**Student:** *Okay.*

**Consultant:** *Ja. (2s) Okay. (consultant reads the document for 4 seconds from 16:42 to 15:46)*

**Student:** *(laughter) Late night typing*.

**Consultant:** *Ja: sometimes these things you know many times my supervisor sends stuff back to me? And I'm like (frowns) I would never write that, you know. I would never-*

In this particular excerpt, the consultant picks up a small technical issue of spacing and draws the student's attention to this. The student's response of '*late night typing*' is their attempt to

save face by offering a possible excuse or explanation for the error. The excuse of '*late night typing*' definitely saves their face by making him sound like a hard-working student 'burning the midnight oil' as opposed to a careless writer.

## Positive politeness strategies

### *Humour and laughter to show solidarity*

In the excerpt below, the consultant shares her struggles with the student in a show of solidarity. The consultant uses humour to share her own struggles but also uses this as an opportunity to encourage the student to use the services of the writing centre. This short exchange includes a number of important hidden elements. Writing centre are staffed by consultantss who are students themselves, yet the institutional positioning of a writing centre complicates this peer-tutor/consultant relationship. Writing tutors therefore have to find creative ways to bridge the divide between being the expert writer that they are seen as by students, and the peer struggling, too, with writing. The consultant's use of humour, laughter and the 'confession' of being a struggling student too, helps bridge this divide.

**Consultant:** *Okay. So (.) I also started studying four years ago. And (.) for my first summary I got 5 out of 10. I felt like (.) so bad. (smiles)*

**Student:** *Wow.*

**Consultant:** *So somebody um (.) directed me to the writing centre and they saved (.) my life and my marriage and... (laughs)*

**Student:** (laughs)

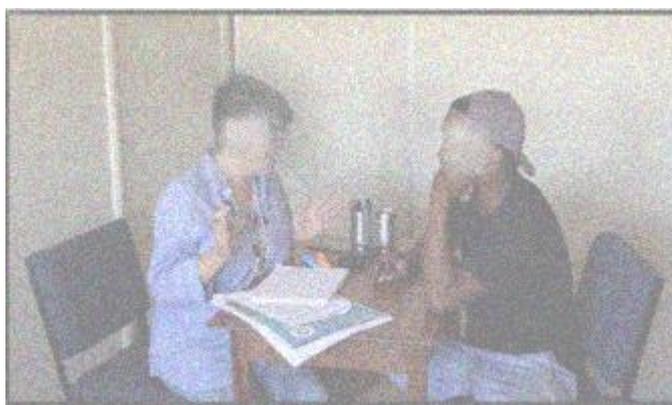**Consultant***: (laughs) = and my academic writing.*

**Student:** *Ja*



Figure  3: Humour and laughter to show solidarity

In the video still above, the consultant has just shared that they were directed to the writing centre as the result of having scored a very low mark for their first summary. The student's response to this is '*wow*' – indicating their surprise that the writing consultant, too, struggles with writing. At this point the student listens carefully to the consultant, their face resting on their hand. The consultant smiles as they share this, and the student though obscured by their hand and the (side) view of the camera can be seen to be smiling too.
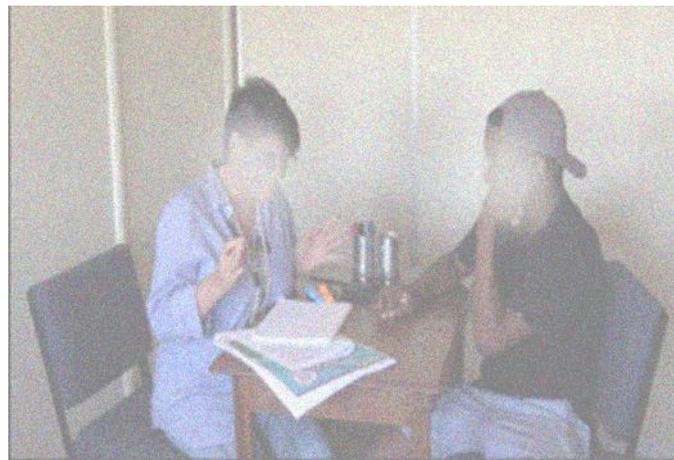


Figure 4: Humour and laughter to show solidarity

In the video still above the consultant has just indicated that that the writing centre has "*saved her life and her marriage*". Once again while the student's response cannot be seen clearly, it is evident in both the transcript and the video. As the student laughs out loud, the student moves back from the table and their elbow, previously resting on the table, is mid-air. Humour once again has been used to share what could be a difficult confession to make, and in so doing, the message to the student is that they is not alone in their quest for (writing) support, or in their struggles with writing. Important too, is how this revelation on the part of the consultant may bridge not just the consultant-peer divide, but what can be considered the divide in age as well. The consultant here is a middle-aged student – this difference in age could affect the way they are seen by the student. Their sharing, and its accompanying humour, however, allows the student to be reminded that the consultant too, is a student.

## Humour and laughter to explain a principle of academic writing

In the following excerpt, the consultant had been reading through the student's text and finds that the ideas seem to be poorly linked. Instead of directly pointing out the error (bald on record), the consultant chooses to use the universal analogy of walking through a forest – something children of all races would be familiar with from the children's stories they would have been read or told. The '*giant*' refers to the gap between ideas, suggesting that the reader cannot cross over or pass this 'hurdle'. The student's laughter is acknowledgment of having

understood the consultant's attempt at humour and their correct response at the end of this excerpt confirms that the humourous analogy was understood.

**Consultant:** *(reads in silence) Okay. Now look at this. Suddenly. I mean we have been walking around through the forest. We have been looking at the birds, hearing the water and it was peaceful and quiet and the flow was there and suddenly (.)*

**Student:** (student and tutor both read the same phrase aloud)

**Consultant:** *Whoops, giant in front of us. (laughter)*

**Student:** (laughter)

**Consultant**: *So how would you now link that (.) paragraph (.) to the first one?*

**Student***: (reads) I would use one of the linking words?*

**Consultant:** *Okay, that's a (.) good start.*

**Student:** *So maybe in addition to (reads aloud)*

**Consultant:** *(throws hands up in the air) Wonderful. Yes.*

In the excerpt below the consultant attempts to explain the need to be specific in one's writing. Instead of being bald-on-record, the consultant applies the negative politeness strategy of asking a question: *Who's 'they'?* The student's incomplete reply shows that they cannot explain effectively. The consultant responds using a show of solidarity too, sharing that they are also guilty of this. Their personal account of 'dad's' response is appreciated in the way it is intended. The humour is shared, the error recognised, and the principle of academic writing explained.

**Consultant:** *Okay? So:, you said: um 'After the definition of violence (.) one would expect there are numerous disadvantages, that they are not wrong. (2s) Who's 'they'?*

**Student:** *The ones  who: (inaudible).  (laughs)*

**Consultant:**    *The people?  (laughs) My dad always (.) um (.) laughed at me when I said: 'They say it's gonna rain tomorrow.' And he's like: 'Who's they?' And I'm like: 'You know, the: (.) the (.) the weather people.' He's like: 'What weather people?' You know? Um.*

**Student:** Ja:. (laughs)

**Consultant***: Okay. 'They' is a bit (.) v:ague. Rather be more specific. U:m. 'Therefore, (.) um theorists um: (.) that (.) say that violence is bad for children are not wrong.' Okay?*

**Student:** *Mm.*

### Humour to create rapport

The following interaction takes place in the first minute of the consultation. The consultant attempts to put the student at ease by using standard politeness and humour. Students do not want to be forced to visit the writing centre – doing so may make them feel inferior to other students and stigmatised. The consultant here, knowing that students could feel this way,

instead uses this to tease the student. The banging of their fist on the desk is done deliberately to make the student laugh and perhaps make light of what could otherwise be an uncomfortable consultation.

**Consultant***: I'm R….. How are you?*

**Student:** *Good? (laughs)*

**Consultant***: I'm glad.*

**Student:** (laughs)

**Consultant:** *>Okay<, so this is your first time?*

**Student:** *Yes:.*

**Consultant:** *And you had to come. You were forced to come. (lightly hits the desk with their fist)*

**Student:** *(laughs) Yes:. (laughs)*

### Humour to show encouragement

In this last excerpt we can see how the tutor attempts to encourage the student using humour, once again using an analogy common to most children's stories (*Go and slay this dragon; Go and save the princess*). The student clearly feels at ease and comfortable enough to generate a new strand of conversation even after the close of the consultation.

**Consultant:** *Okay, (name of student). Go and slay this dragon.*

**Student:** (laughs)

**Consultant:** *Go and save the princess. (laughs)*

**Student:** *Thank you so much for your help. (laughs)*

**Consultant:** *It's a pleasure.*

**Student:** (gets up)

**Consultant:** *And have a wonderful weekend.*

**Student:** *Thanks. It's gonna be nice and hot, apparently.*

In a similar vein, consultants across all consultations used humour and laughter when praising and encouraging students, as well as when explaining a principle of [academic] writing and showing solidarity. Humour was also used to mitigate what would be FTAs. In almost all cases students responded to consultant-talk with laughter or verbal responses accompanied by laughter. As advised by the experts above, the humour used were all related to the text and the students' academic writing needs. In all cases students used affiliative (Martin et al 2003) or positive humour. Our consultants, despite their use of humour, were not at risk of losing credibility or being considered clownish (Hale, 2016). Humourous analogies used can be

considered universal (forests, dragons, princesses) and in a few cases were specifically South African. Students understood and responded positively to these as indicated above, leading us to determine that the humour did not pose an 'educational hurdle' to students (Hale, 2016). Consultants did not use negative humour or 'transgress social taboos'. Humour in all cases were related to the concepts and issues being discussed and were relevant and appropriate. The use of humour in the context of a writing centre is particularly relevant especially in light of the power dynamics and 'distance' inherent in the student-consultant relationship. It has become clear though that humour used positively can have positive effects, bridge the gap and create rapport and solidarity in complex relationships.

This brief exposition has attempted to demonstrate how humour and laughter is used in the context of a writing centre consultation to enhance interaction, create a more positive learning environment and lessen the stress and anxiety students generally associate with academic writing. Having analysed such interactions through the lens of politeness theory allows us to identify strategies that consultants use to engage students, heighten comfort and perhaps close the distance that usually define such relationships.

## 8. Conclusion

This analysis has allowed us to describe and better understand the use of humour in tutor/consultant-talk in a writing centre consultation. We have determined that our consultants utilise similar positive and negative politeness strategies as outlined in the writing centre literature. The use of such strategies, particularly humour and laughter, do have positive effects on the students and relatedly on the interaction.

The real value of this however lies in how this information can be used to train writing centre consultants. The positive effect of such strategies on writing centre interactions is evident in student responses to such attempts at humour, as well as in students use of humour themselves. The concern however, as indicated earlier, is the view that often such humour occurs instantaneously or unconsciously on the part of the consultant, and cannot be planned or prepared for in advance. While this may be so, it would be useful to consultants attention to its use and the positive effects of such use. Equally important would be the need to caution them against overuse and negative uses of humour, both of which could affect the student and the overall consultation negatively. Excerpts as used here, as well as video footage of such interactions could be used as part of tutor/consultant training. A further aspect to consider in future research would be to determine the effects of such humour on students recall, retention and application to other writing.

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