

'I think we should just accept ... our horrible lowly status': Analysing Teacher-Teacher Talk Within the Context of Community of Practice

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While interaction inside the classroom – *frontstage* discourse – has been a subject of study and has been considered the most significant type of discourse that teachers engage in, I propose that interaction outside the classroom – *backstage* discourse – is equally significant and has not thus far received as much attention as it merits. This paper is concerned with the institutional interaction of English language teachers using a corpus of (currently) over 40,000 words, consisting of a variety of meetings. It will consider the characteristics of the community of practice (CofP) and how membership is realised in language. It looks at the inexplicit nature of the language that teachers use in relation to their practices as indicative of this membership, and how humour is related to the establishment of a shared communicative space, as well as evidence of it. Highlighted also is the creation of this space within the meeting with the construction of in- and out-groups. The paper concludes that reflection not only on our practices within the classroom, but our practices as a professional community opens a new window on our profession as a whole.

doi: 10.2167/la456.0

Keywords: backstage discourse, community of practice, humour, professional discourse, teacher-teacher talk

Introduction

The status of English language teaching (ELT) as a profession has been the subject of much controversy and debate (e.g. Nunan, 2001; O'Keeffe, 2001; Pennington, 1992), as has been what constitutes what teachers 'know' in a professional sense (e.g. Borg, 2003; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Golombek, 1998). While interaction inside the classroom – *frontstage* discourse – has been a subject of study and has been considered the most significant type of discourse that teachers engage in, I propose that interaction outside the classroom – *backstage* discourse – is also significant. Further, it has not thus far received as much attention as it merits, to the detriment of our overall view of the practices of English language teachers as a professional group. This disparity may (arguably) be attributable to the tension between research and practice in ELT, and a tendency to ascribe more validity to research which has direct classroom application; in other words, that has a *frontstage* outcome.

In the literature, somewhere between the highly regulated and formalised *frontstage* and less organised *backstage* lies the area of mediated interaction

which has as its goal the facilitation of professional development (e.g. Edge, 1992, 2002) and reflective practice (e.g. Crandall, 2000; Walsh, 2002, 2003). In Wenger's (1998a: 47) discussion of the notion of practice, he underlines the fact that it includes both the explicit and the tacit. Since the focus of this paper is teachers' practices, it is useful to explore what we understand as the *practices* of English language teachers. In other words, what it is that they do? It goes without saying that there is a vast amount of training literature devoted to the *classroom* practices of teachers, but what kind of professional practices occur outside the classroom? Although teaching may not always be collaborative, most teachers meet and talk together in the course of their working day. In the departments or schools that this paper draws on, meetings are common, if at times unpopular fora, for the discussion not only of what happens in the classroom, but teachers' duties outside of the classroom. It is for this reason that meetings are considered as providing a snapshot of what happens in real time as part of an English language teacher's professional life. This picture includes the margins of practice, what Richards (1996) refers to as 'opening the staff room door'. In some respects, it is a slightly more risky enterprise to turn the research gaze inwards, to view what happens outside the classroom, unrehearsed in the staff room when the 'gloves are off', but it is my contention that it is an enterprise which is wholly justified in light of the type of qualitative insights offered.

Setting and Participants

We look at six teacher meetings, three recorded in each of two different settings: (1) the English department of a public university in México and (2) a private language school in Ireland. The meetings are of varying lengths, ranging from five minutes to just over an hour, averaging at 30 minutes. In all, approximately 3.5 hours of data, or just over 40,000 words, was transcribed and analysed. The principal motivating factor behind the study was an intuition that a lot of professional knowledge is invoked very efficiently in meetings of professional English language teachers. This was coupled with a personal interest in increasing my own awareness of this professional discourse *outside* the classroom. Although these meetings took place in diverse locations, there is a great deal of convergence in the types of topics which are present: pilot courses; assessment and examination; student attendance; administration issues; student motivation; classroom issues; future meetings; professional development, and extra-curricular activities.

The participants in the meetings have different types of qualifications but all have a minimum of three years experience, and have worked together for a minimum of one year. Despite the fact that staff room meetings are 'on record', discourse of this nature is extremely sensitive. The recordings were not made surreptitiously, and participants had full access to the recordings and transcripts as well as control over what was included, and what they preferred to have excised. Despite these provisions for 'ownership' of the data, none of the participants wished to edit the transcripts, and the guarantee of anonymity was sufficient for full consent to be granted. All the participants' names and any institutional references have been changed. The extracts presented in the analysis

sections are taken from meetings which foreground (1) pilot courses, (2) student attendance and (3) placing students according to level.

Frontstage and Backstage Studies

In this paper, the terms frontstage and backstage are used after Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, and applied to this context after Sarangi and Roberts (1999). In the late 1950s, Goffman suggested that interpersonal communication could be characterised in terms of performance. Individuals and groups perform for each other when they meet, their meetings take place on the stage, or frontstage. Their performance is prepared, and previous performances considered and modified backstage (Goffman, 1959). Coates' study of the relation between small talk and subversion in her study of a group of female friends chatting suggests that by conducting their talk backstage, the women are provided with an 'arena where norms can be subverted and challenged and alternative selves explored' (2000: 241), noting that Goffman himself considered women's interaction with other women a particularly good example of the notion of backstage (Coates, 2000: 244). Extending the metaphor to the workplace domain, many studies are explicitly frontstage, for example, examining the institutional talk of lawyers by analysing samples of courtroom discourse. Another type of study might take samples of discourse from lawyer-lawyer interaction, perhaps in an informal meeting to discuss a case, and perhaps we could consider this more or less backstage, as the participants are not on their official workstage.

One of the pitfalls of using the metaphor in the present context is its inherent reflexivity, although the participants are 'off stage', they may still wish to strictly maintain their frontstage identity. In the case of teachers, their frontstage may actually be meeting their colleagues and maintaining a professional identity, while backstage may be their classroom persona. The best solution to this is to consider frontstage studies those that are located in the natural domain of the professional, however arguable this may be, and set these as clear boundaries. For example, the defence lawyer's is the courtroom, the doctor's is the clinic and for the teacher, it is the classroom. In all these cases, a physical location is proposed, even taking into consideration the fact that talk does not have to be 'on site' to be institutional (Drew & Heritage, 1992: 3–4). From this perspective it is evident that most studies have indeed been frontstage studies:

Mainstream discourse analytic studies seem to have identified prototypical sites of investigation. As with the focus on the clinic in medical discourse, there is more focus on courtroom interaction than between lawyer-client interaction outside the courtroom (or lawyer-lawyer talk for that matter); more focus on teacher-pupil interaction inside the classroom rather than what happens outside the classroom (or teacher-teacher talk, for that matter). (Sarangi, 2002: 106)

The focus then is on this 'parenthetical' type of interaction, and the backstage interaction of the teachers is viewed as helping to constitute a community of practice.

Frameworks of Community

When focussing on any type of interaction, it can be illuminating to position it within a viable framework. Perhaps because we can then categorise what is occurring and use the model or framework as a heuristic for future studies of similar interaction, but mainly (in this case at least) to make sense of what is embedded or manifest in the data. Many frameworks of community have been conceptualised and invoked in the study of linguistic groupings, for example, the speech community (e.g. Gumperz, 1962, 1972; Hymes, 1977; Labov, 1972), and the discourse community (e.g. Bizzell, 1987; Cutting, 2000; Swales, 1990). Swales (1988) hypothesised the concept of discourse community as an alternative to speech community and sees it as distinct conceptually and in terms of purpose: 'In some obscure but powerful way, in a speech community, the community creates the discourse, while in a discourse community, the discourse creates the community' (Swales, 1988: 212). The idea of a community of practice was established by Lave and Wenger (1991) in relation to the learning of apprentices, and then much further elaborated by Wenger (1998a). This model is discussed briefly below, and one of its constituent components, *shared repertoire*, isolated as illuminating for the data in this paper.

The community of practice (CofP)

The concept of the CofP has been adopted by some researchers as an alternative to discourse community and speech community in equal measure. It is in some ways more flexible and can be applied to many groupings, social or institutional (for a detailed illustration of relationship between CofP and other frameworks, see Rock, 2005). Novices to the profession, or apprentices, through observation of practices, and participation in gradually more complex activities, progress towards full membership of the profession. It is not only their proficiency with the activities that solidifies their membership, but their understanding of the culture that surrounds the practice (see Paechter, 2003):

From a broadly peripheral perspective, apprentices gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice. This uneven sketch of the enterprise (available if there is legitimate access) might include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to do to become full practitioners. (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 95)

Trainees on ELT courses can be construed as the 'apprentices' within the CofP framework. Before they do their own teaching practice, they observe experienced teachers overtly in language classes. Then, in initial teaching practice, they are in turn observed and given feedback on their performance. (For further discussion of this context see Farr, 2005; Vásquez, 2005; Vásquez & Reppen, this issue.) The present study focuses on teachers who have progressed well beyond this novice stage and are demonstrably full members of the CofP.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) have defined a community of practice as generally 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual

engagement in an endeavour. . . practices emerge in the course of the endeavour'. Wenger (1998b) identifies three criteria that must be met in order for a CofP to be said to exist:

- (1) What it is about – its *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.
- (2) How it functions – *mutual engagement* that binds members together into a social entity.
- (3) What capability it has produced – the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles etc.) that members have developed over time.

In relation to engagement, teachers must routinely cooperate in the workplace. Whether or not this is formalised (regular meetings) or informal (staff room 'chat') is not as important as the fact that the members feel that they are involved in shared practices. This extends on the discourse community idea of shared goals by emphasising shared practices, and by stipulating that the members are mutually engaged. It overcomes the conflict inherent when methods of practice are divergent by suggesting that these practices are not necessarily harmoniously achieved. However, the stipulation remains that ultimately the community must be in agreement as to the essence of the practice. Therefore, an academic community could be seen as being made up of a variety of different communities of practice, for example, the engineering students' community of practice, the French language teachers' community of practice. A group of people from the university who socialise together and use their time together to talk out successes or frustrations at work could also, perhaps, legitimately be called a community of practice. Groups of staff from different language schools in this same way slot into this definition of community of practice, though their micro-practices may be different, their macro-practices converge.

The second criterion suggests that it is necessary for members to gather together to actively pursue their goals, and that the members, as a collective, jointly negotiate these goals. Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999: 175) have highlighted the potential vagueness of the term 'joint goal', and the necessity of honing it. Similar objections were raised with regard to the notion that goals be 'shared' by members of a discourse community (Johns, 1997; Porter, 1986). However, it is my contention that this potential vagueness can be reconciled if we regard the community of English language teachers as existing on a variety of different levels. We could postulate a global ELT CofP which has as its core goal effective teaching, training and research, and a local CofP as having characteristics in common with the global while encompassing its own variations from institution to institution. Similarly, the teaching enterprise, and how far members have to negotiate in the pursuit of this enterprise, may be variable from institution to institution. Decisions may be handed down from a senior member, who may or may not be a member of the CofP, which need to be operationalised by the teachers. An ideal example of this criterion in a school might be a group of teachers who voluntarily gather each week to talk about their experiences as practitioners in general, or who have agreed to discuss their teaching week and reflect upon it collectively, sharing ideas and offering advice or support to each other which may create a relationship of *mutual accountability* amongst the members

(Wenger, 1998a: 77–78). The final component of the CofP, *shared repertoire*, will be discussed in the next section.

Linguistic Repertoire as an Index of Membership: ‘Placing’ Students

The component which appears to offer a rich vein for interpretation from the point of view of this data is the idea of *shared repertoire*. Within shared repertoire Wenger (1998a: 85) includes not only linguistic resources, but also resources ‘like pictures, regular meals, and gestures that have become part of the community’s practice’ (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999: 176). In the case of the groupings of high school students in a study by Eckert, this was evident in the way that the groups identified each other, which was not necessarily a recognition in the way that they talked but also encompassed socially reified artefacts such as the places they chose to stand or sit in the yard, the clothes they wore and the activities they engaged in outside of school (cited by Holmes, 2001). Meyerhoff (2002: 530) suggests that ‘an analysis can focus on the variables that members of a CofP are actively negotiating as currency in their CofP’. For example, Rock (2005) looks at the concept of CofP in relation to the practices of police officers, in particular in relation to one aspect of their work practices, the statement and explanation of the right to silence. I would like to gloss the ritual of the meeting in this light as part of the teachers’ shared repertoire. Meetings are accepted and commonplace for the teachers, and so comprise part of the fabric of their professional lives. The private language school holds both weekly and monthly meetings – the weekly meetings are largely without preamble, while the monthly meetings are more recognisable as meetings in the generic sense with an agenda, a chairperson and minutes being taken to provide a record. Other reified objects within their repertoire are the textbooks and reference books that are used in teaching, lesson plans, classroom observation, feedback on teaching practice and reflective practice. The scope of the global community’s non-linguistic resources is obviously quite wide, and is probably recognisable to most practitioners. However, this section specifically focuses on linguistic resources. In other words, how the teachers in the data talk about themselves, their students and their practices sheds light on the linguistic repertoire of their CofP.

In terms of the data presented here, there is evidence of the shared linguistic repertoire of the global ELT community – jargon which is transparent for those within the community. Table 1 shows a professional word list of such jargon, assembled using *Wordsmith Tools* (Scott, 1999). (It was compiled by generating a general word list, then extracting non-lexical items, and scanning the remainder for words that, even without context, would be unproblematic for professional English language teachers.) But there is also a *local* shared linguistic repertoire, which is apparent only to those within the specific workplace. In the meetings of one of the English departments in the data, located in México, *faltas* (an absence from class), *servicios escolares* (student services) and *permisos* (‘permission’ to be absent for students/teachers) are mentioned even by the non-Spanish-speaking members of staff. Where this localised jargon occurs, it is institution-specific, as above, while the other jargon that is woven into the discourse is

Table 1 The 'global' professional ELT lexicon (50 most frequent content words pertaining to English language teaching)

<i>Professional Lexis word list</i>									
1	Students	11	Course	21	Exams	31	Teachers	41	IELTS
2	Class	12	Pre-inter	22	TOEFL	32	Attendance	42	FC
3	KET	13	Elementary	23	Grammar	33	Fail	43	Progress
4	PET	14	Group	24	Language	34	Tense	44	Score
5	Semester	15	Speaking	25	Inter	35	Advanced	45	Vocabulary
6	Exam	16	Intermediate	26	Materials	36	Prep	46	Aptitude
7	Pass	17	Semesters	27	Meeting	37	Classroom	47	Assessment
8	Classes	18	Business	28	Teach	38	LAB	48	Beginner
9	Certificate	19	Student	29	Teaching	39	Syllabus	49	Resources
10	Level	20	Weak	30	Needs	40	Pronunciation	50	Coursework

profession-specific which Gunnarsson *et al.* (1997: xi–xii) refer to as the interdiscursivity of the professional and institutional aspects of discourse.

When engaged in reflective discussion, teachers have the time and space to discuss classes, students and problems in a detailed way, however, it should be stressed that these teachers are not engaged in *reflective* discussion but are 'getting things done' as expeditiously as possible. This can be seen in an ostensibly basic type of shorthand when referring to the students' ability. Across the data, one of the most typical activities teachers engage in is placing students in specific classes according to their language ability, regularly reviewing whether this placement is appropriate and moving students into different classes when it is not. In training, most teachers are introduced to the metalanguage used to describe learner competence in English, as well as descriptions of level: *beginner*, *elementary*, *pre-intermediate*, *intermediate*, etc. In fact, the teachers in this data just as frequently use *pre-int* and *inter* to refer to the levels 'pre-intermediate' and 'intermediate'. Analysis of the data brought into relief what appears to be vague evaluative language used to describe the students' ability in English, whether collectively or individually. This language was identified through detailed reading of the transcripts. While non-specific language such as *fine* (*he seemed fine for the speaking*) and *okay* (*he's okay in there for speaking*) were expected in terms of simple agreement, what appears to be quite restricted lexis, simple binary opposites, describing ability also became apparent: see Figure 1.

These oblique terms are not, perhaps, unusual and may well be fairly explicit – for *experienced* teachers, that is. All the teachers in this study have at least three years' experience, and have worked together for a minimum of one year. Hence, what is most interesting about the data is that though this way of evaluating is on the surface non-specific, it causes no schism in the discourse, and its unproblematic ratification helps the meetings to flow naturally. The following extract, which exemplifies this flow, is taken from one of the weekly meetings from the private language school in Ireland. These meetings are principally to discuss student placement, though other administrative business may

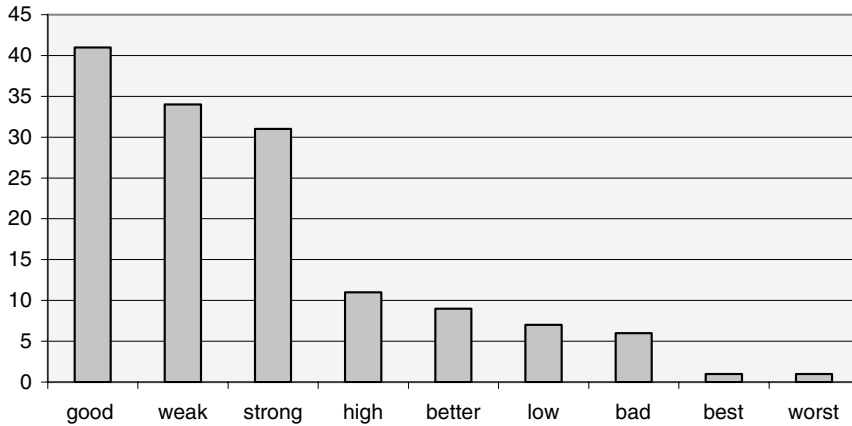


Figure 1 Frequency of lexis to describe students' ability/level (y-axis values represent raw scores for word frequency from corpus of c. 40,000)

also be introduced. Here, the teachers are discussing a student who has joined the class fairly recently (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

Extract 1

Jane: He's not strong.

Tracy: Now he's he's weak in it you know.

Jane: Hm.

Tracy: The others would be all stronger than him.

Mike: Ali? I had him on Friday.

Tracy: Yeah did how did you find him he'd be weak now in that class.

Anne: Yeah I would then I'd suggest maybe.

Mike: Switch.

Anne: Swapping the two of them.

All the speakers have taught the student, and are in agreement about his level of ability. This is seen in the way that they echo one another's assessments – *He's not strong/he's weak in it you know* – and the swift resolution of the 'problem' of what should happen now (he will switch places with a student in a lower class, who is ready to move up). The student is assessed both as an individual learner and vis-à-vis how he 'fits' into a pre-intermediate class – *he'd be weak now in that class* – so, the notion that he is 'weak' is presented in relative terms. All this is achieved despite the fact the exchange is rapid, and we can also see how they solicit each other's opinion in order to ratify, and therefore legitimise, the resolution. Arguably, this shows how important it is for them to work as a cohort and highlights the mutual accountability which is thus created. The efficiency with which this is achieved is due in no small part to what the teachers understand each ability evaluation label to encompass. Extract 2 also displays this efficiency; the teachers are discussing a student in an intermediate class:

Extract 2

Susan: What do you think of Manuel?

Paul: Manuel's quite good.

Susan: He is isn't he yeah.

Another characteristic of the language used to evaluate the students, which is highlighted in bold type above (and in Extract 3 below), is the use of boosters and downtoners (*a little/bit, fairly, quite, very, really, too*), which add further shades of meaning to the adjectives. The teachers also expand on these assessments. In some cases, a negative evaluation will be followed up with extra information as can be seen in the following extract:

Extract 3

Anne: . . . actually I'm a bit worried about Lucia Esposito though.

Paul: Yeah.

Anne: She's been there a couple of weeks but she's+

Paul: Yeah she's pretty bad alright.

Anne: Yeah.

Paul: She's barely keeping up with the rest in grammar and her spoken is definitely awful.

Anne: Yeah.

Paul signals his agreement and endorses their evaluation with an elaboration of what *pretty bad* represents for them, and why they are worried about her in the class. On the whole, however, there are few examples of this type of elaboration in the data. While students can be evaluated individually or as a member of a class with the aim of making the class as homogenous as possible, another strategy that the teachers use is to assess students is to compare their abilities with a student who is deemed to be appropriately placed, as can be seen in the following extract:

Extract 4

Kate: No the new girl you were saying was really good like Maria.

Susan: Well yeah do you think? She's very good isn't she?

Kate: She is yeah. Move her up.

Susan: Definitely yeah.

Kate: Well able to hold her own in the class.

Susan: Well able yeah. Yeah.

This extract also has similar characteristics to Extract 1 in that Susan solicits Kate's opinion and in the way that they echo the mutually ratified assessment. However, the teachers do not seem to refer to the students only in terms of what they can 'do' with English – in evaluation, aspects of the students' personalities which are considered relevant may also be called upon, for example, a student who was potentially ready for the next level is held back because she is not *confident*, and another, although she is *eager to move on, holds them* [the class] *back a little bit*. Frequently, students are referred to as *nice*, although these personal evaluations may also be negative; one student is referred to as *a bit moody*

and *limited as far as personality goes*. But these are not irrelevant or superfluous evaluations – experienced teachers realise that the personalities of the students in the classroom can seriously affect its dynamic.

What is most striking about the way that this element of the business of teaching is done is that it relies exclusively on each of the teachers having access to the shared linguistic repertoire of the workplace, and being able to understand what *good* means, how this differs from *really good* and how to place a student who is *kind of weak*. The exact provenance and explicit description of what this knowledge, in fact, comprises is a problematic matter. At least part of it can be reasonably supposed to have been inputted in training, however their operationalisation of this knowledge, where the teachers in this workplace are concerned, has developed during their time in the school. Where Cambridge ESOL examination classes are concerned, ability is defined according to whether or not the students are capable of taking and passing the examination itself. On a more general level, ability appears to be considered as more commensurate with whether the students can deal with the material in the coursebook, and how they compare with the rest of the group. Therefore, although the language used in the meetings to evaluate seems limited and unhelpfully non-specific, clearly, its relative simplicity belies the rather complex nature of the shared professional knowledge that is invoked. Only a full member of both the local and global CoffP can navigate this discourse and collaborate in its construction, and it is the issue of membership which is discussed in the following section in relation to the way that one interactional tool, humour, is used to demarcate membership of this CoffP.

Humour in the Workplace Context: Creating In-Groups and Out-Groups

Humour has been acknowledged, within organisational studies, to yield great insight into group cohesion, cultural values and social ranking in the workplace (Duncan, 1982). Vinton has even suggested that gaining mastery of how humour is used in a particular workplace has implications for the successful or unsuccessful socialisation of new employees (1989: 151). This clearly has echoes of induction into a community of practice. Holmes and Marra (2002a) have articulated the potential of humour research to penetrate the substance of workplace culture, by looking in particular at the frequency, type and style of instances of humour in the workplace. Although humour is multifunctional, Holmes and Marra (2002b: 70) distinguish between *reinforcing humour* and *subversive humour*. These are based on sociolinguistic and critical discourse analysis distinctions between solidarity and power. The main focus of reinforcing humour is connected to solidarity and the maintenance of friendly collegial relations but can also maintain or reinforce existing power relations. Subversive humour is used to challenge the existing status quo, and can be viewed as a discreet weapon available to those who are not in power. This conceptualisation of humour is very useful as a tool to explore the notion of social space, how it is created and how the in-group defines itself. O’Keeffe (2003) highlights the subtlety with which this self-definition is achieved interactionally, that it is perhaps by underlining

what the in-group *is not* that a sense of what *it is* can be arrived at. In the following extract, Helen is reporting on what she did during a pilot course that she, two other teachers and the Head of Department (HoD) have developed and taught on. There are ten teachers present at the meeting in total, six of whom were not involved in the pilot course. Helen is, in effect, presenting her report to them.

Extract 5

Helen: And then just worked at consolidating the English that they already had so didn't didn't introduce a lot of new material did a lot of speaking practice. Quite a lot of writing reading the other one.
<\$E> laughter <\\$E>

The source of the humour here is, on an obvious level, that all trained English language teachers would be familiar with the 'four skills' – reading, writing, listening, speaking – and therefore can interpret what 'the other one' is. On a deeper level, as Helen is reporting on a pilot course that was assigned to only three teachers, she is clearly trying to downplay the specialised work involved in putting it together, to re-establish solidarity and reassert her place as part of the teaching cohort as a whole, the *in-group*, as opposed to an 'elite' subgroup (i.e. those chosen by the HoD to pilot these courses). It is also important to Peter, the HoD, to establish and ensure his own membership of this in-group as Extract 6 illustrates.

Extract 6

Peter: And eh basically what I worked with them was the <name of publisher> book on teaching computers to students and it's about as dry as you could probably get. You know it's very hard to get make oscilloscopes and analogue systems sound very very interesting
<\$E> laughter <\\$E> eh related to kind of typical to eh to academic texts and the language they had problems with invariably was language from ordinary English or everyday English you know. So em I'm glad <\$X> tis | it is <\\$X> over <\$E> laughter <\\$E>
I'm sure they are too.

The laughter that follows his comment on trying to make oscilloscopes and analogue systems sound interesting is supportive and empathetic, and Peter is clearly representing himself as a teacher just like the others, and focussing on his solidarity with the group, rather than the power differential resulting from his higher status in the department. Evidently, though the in-group is implicit, interactional work is necessary in order to construct and reconstruct it in real time, and to maintain one's membership of it.

There is also evidence of how the teachers regard their role within the organisation of the school or university. This weekly meeting to discuss student progress is interrupted by the senior administrator. She needs to see certain students regarding the fact they have still not purchased a textbook from the school although this is compulsory.

Extract 7 (Rachel is the senior administrator)

Rachel: They need to come down to buy the book. That's how you solve the problem of making sure everybody buys it. So like it or not that's how we're going to deal with it. Em. Tommy and Seán.

Anne: Oooh
<\$E> laughter <\\$E>

Tommy: Scary yeah.

One of the teachers suggests that this is unfair, as the students have paid for these classes and could, possibly, share a book with another student until they get it. The administrator responds with an unequivocal *like it or not that's how we're going to deal with it*, and as the tension is now palpable, and further disagreement possible, another teacher (Anne) handles the situation with humour, thus allowing the business of the meeting to continue. The humour in this case performs two distinct but crucial functions: it allows the meeting to move forward, but it can also be interpreted as subtly reinforcing the teachers' sense of belonging to an in-group which rejects the 'economic' aspect of ELT as extraneous to the 'business' of teaching. This subversive humour is used to challenge the existing status quo, and can be viewed as a subtle weapon available to those who are not in power. It is not always a very explicit challenge and therefore the risks involved in invoking it are minimal. This type of humour is quite frequent in the data, most frequently manifested as quips or jocular abuse. Quips are 'short, sometimes witty, and often ironic comments about the ongoing action, or the topic under discussion' (Holmes & Marra, 2002b: 75), while jocular abuse 'involves an insult or a negative put-down remark aimed at someone present' (Holmes & Marra, 2002b: 77).

Extract 8

Julia: I don't know <\$G2> what to say.

Peter: <\$G?> very quickly.

Barry: Just say something and we can all argue then.

Kate: Right.
<\$E> laughter <\\$E>

Peter: We'll all go against it.
<\$E> laughter <\\$E>

Meetings were not very popular within the department, according to one department member because they were 'interminable and solved nothing'.¹ Although this quip breaks the ice, a necessary component to the meeting, it can be interpreted on another, more subversive level also. The implication is that no matter what Julia says, the rest of the group will argue with her, and this provokes knowing laughter, and is supported by Peter's comment that whatever she says everyone will *go against it*. This subversive humour is directed *by* a member of the group *against* the group itself, and its aim is to (not too subtly) use inclusive terms such as *we* and *us* to criticise the machinations of the group. It is also possible that this speaker is only nominally including himself as part of the group whose fault he highlights; perhaps his comment is intended to distance himself from such ineffectiveness. Subversive humour can also be directed at an

individual, or the organisation as a whole. Humour which is directed against the organisation in this data is indicative of a 'them versus us' dynamic and in this case constructs both the other departments in the university and the students as out-groups. This construction is possible only because the in-group is implicit. English was a compulsory subject in the university for all of the students, but while they could fail the whole year if they failed any one of the other academic subjects, there were no consequences if they failed English:

Extract 9

Jack: Yes but we don't have the power to throw anybody out what I mean is we haven't been given that kind of clout we don't have that status in the university if they fail calculus they're out if they fail English they just continue.

Sam: Yeah.

Jack: So <E> laughs <E> so I think we should just accept that our horrible lowly status and.
<E> general laughter <E>

Barry: We're the poor cousins.

Jack: Yeah and we know that.

In this extract, there is a repetition of the idea of the teachers' negative position within the organisation in the recasting of the idea of lack of 'power', lack of 'clout' and the repetition of the word 'status', and the emphasis on 'we'. This cooperation in the construction of themselves as the out-group in relation to the rest of the university, as a corollary (evident in the knowing laughter), creates the in-group.

The echoing of 'we' and the co-construction of identity evident in the extract can equally be seen as a compensation strategy, a salve for the perceived lack of status and a rebellion against it and is thus a highly salient function of the in-group at a deeper level.²

I would argue that this humour is also therapeutic. At the end of a long meeting, during which the perennial problem of student attendance is being discussed, along with the excuses that students give for not coming to class, it serves to lighten the mood, re-establish collegiality and focus on the fact that it is 'only work':

Extract 10

Jack: They have to get their hair done or go to the dentist.
<E> General laughter <E>.

Sam: It's a grey area.

Gillian: But we get paid anyway.
<E> prolonged laughter <E>.

In Richards' study (1996: 220), humour was so prevalent a feature of interaction that any deviation from this 'norm' needed to be 'overtly signalled'. Also highlighted was the interactive construction of humour 'as a mechanism of participation' (Richards, 1996), and this feature is certainly borne out in the present study. Although humour is a 'multifunctional resource' (Holmes & Stubbe,

2003: 109), one major way for the teachers to use it is to establish the social space they share, and implicitly define who they are and what their attitude is to the work they do. It is at once a means of subversion, a way of distinguishing the boundaries between what activities in the organisation concern them, and a way of venting their frustrations with uncooperative students in a way that is legitimate, acceptable and non-threatening.

Conclusions

As has been discussed, mastery of the shared repertoire, linguistic and non-linguistic, is a signal of full membership of the CofP, whether local or global. In this study, the teachers' membership of the community is particularly evident in the language that they use to talk about their students and the high level of implicit knowledge this language 'contains'. This can be construed as a feature of a collegial, collaborative workplace, but is, at a more fundamental level, consistent with the existence of a core level of knowledge for a member of the professional teaching community. At a local level, the interactional work that is done to create shared social space is highly significant – manifested here in their multifaceted use of humour – in elaborating how the teachers position themselves in the organisation. This leads to a greater appreciation of how practitioners conceptualise what it is that they do. The idea of the CofP is undoubtedly one that has significant purchase for the discourse analyst or corpus linguist, particularly in terms of operationalising a seemingly all-encompassing notion such as shared repertoire. This is not to be reductive – each workplace is unique in itself, but I would suggest that the meetings, the topics the teachers discuss and the interactional strategies they employ though not of course prototypical, are at the very least not unusual. During the process of identifying humour in the transcripts, and establishing what the language of evaluation meant, many language teachers read the transcripts, and all the experienced teachers commented on some aspect of the discourse that they found familiar, and the problems and issues that the teachers refer to as they discuss their practices had a high level of recognition. This could not happen without the existence of a core shared repertoire for the global members of the ELT community of practice.

When professional communication 'works', it is seamless and provides a realistic picture of what language teachers do in their professional lives. This is an aspect that has been hitherto relatively neglected in the research literature. It deserves much more attention, because it takes the focus off what teachers *should* be doing, and instead looks at what they actually *do*. Schools are organisations and trainees should be sensitised to this as part of their training and as a natural adjunct to technical knowledge. Newly qualified teachers are often subject to a 'rude awakening' when they leave the safe and structured confines of their respective degrees and certificates and start work in a new school. The transition to this new environment, in most cases, requires skills such as lesson planning and student placement to be 'internalised' quite swiftly. More staff room research and reflection not only on our practices within the classroom, but our practices as a professional community, could open a new window on our profession as a whole, and provide the materials necessary to this important aspect of teacher development.

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Notes

1. The three meetings from the university English department in México were recorded while the researcher was a teacher working in the department. This afforded the reflexivity of being both participant and participant observer - hence the qualitative information given here, which was noted while the teachers were gathering for the meeting.
2. My thanks to one of the reviewers of this article for making this observation.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

- <\$E> ... <\\$E> Extra-linguistic feature e.g. laughter.
- <\$X> ... <\\$X> Non-standard contractions.
- <\$G?> ... <\$G2> Uncertain or unintelligible utterances where the number of syllables cannot be guessed. Where the number of syllables can be discerned, this number is marked, e.g. <\$G2> denotes two intelligible syllables.
- + Interrupted utterance.