

# FA-SILLY-TATORS!

EXPLORING HUMOUR IN NON-FORMAL  
EDUCATION AND YOUTH PROJECTS

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# Why this manual?

**This is the outcome of a seminar in Vienna in 2019.** Non-formal education can seem pretty silly: We make participants run around a room and shout the sounds of animals. We make them pretend like they are ninjas or space aliens in order to energize them in the morning. But even though we all use humour, when we coordinate volunteering projects, run youth exchanges or facilitate seminars – we almost never stop for a moment and reflect deeply on what that actually means. This seminar was a space for this reflection. By experiencing non-formal education methods such as drawing challenges, speed dating, brainstorming techniques, and silent discussion, the participants of the seminar “Fa-silly-tators!” got to explore humour and jokes. They learned and exchanged methods and best practices on how to use humour to empower youth and marginalized groups, how to do humour from a feminist/antiracist/queer/etc. lens, when to use humour, and how to deal with conflicts around it.

## **The project had the following objectives:**

- Understand how laughter can support learning
- Reflect on humour in connection to team building and a seminar group owning the space that they are working in
- Exchange (the silliest) energizers and point out sexism, racism, or other stereotypes in energizers
- Identify conflicts around humour, e.g. when it comes to humour in relation to stereotypes and marginalized groups
- Reflect on the challenges and potentials of intercultural humour in creating an intercultural team as well as awareness of Europe among young people
- Understand the importance of finding the right timing for humour
- Discuss how humour can be used to create a safe learning and exchanging space as well as destroying it
- Come up with certain rules and conclusions about humour in NFE that in the future will help us and others identify whether a joke, game, etc. they were using was timely and appropriate or not
- Create guidelines for youth workers and NFE practitioners for the usage of humour in NFE
- Networking between organizations and networks

# Humour for group formation

**A classic model of group dynamics: Tuckman's 4 stages.** Team building as a process can be described with "Tuckman's stages of group development." The model is based on the four following stages: Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing. Teams will experience each stage in order to build trust and perform collaboratively. Hence, it is not advisable to skip a stage, such as avoiding conflicts in the Storming phase. In international seminars, trainings, and youth exchanges it is crucial to pay strong attention to team building from the first moment and observe the group and its developments in detail at every step of the project.

**Humour is a double-edged sword when working with groups.** Humour can play a key role in all stages of teams and the activities that are done in these stages. It can create disruption or overcome conflicts, create learning, or an environment in which young people cannot concentrate on learning, divide or connect a group.

**Humour is connected to power.** In order to use humour in a group or a team, all members of the group should feel safe and respected. Joking and making fun can be problematic when it involves stereotypes and power structures. It can be perceived as racist, sexist, or discriminatory in any way. It is important to take the existing power structures in (your) society into consideration when we speak about humour and safe spaces. Think about the possible power structures in your group or team and how you could include all members, even the ones with less power and privilege in society.

**Does the joke really land with everyone in a group?** In international exchange projects (such as international volunteering projects, youth exchanges, or seminars), it is important to understand that most people will not be speaking their native language, so jokes could be lost in translation. Jokes might also be perceived as funny in some cultural settings or for some groups in society, whereas they might not work in other contexts/settings. People might feel excluded from a group if they are never "in" on the jokes.

**Inside jokes are great (usually)!** "Inside jokes" give a "we" feeling to a group as a whole, as it is a symbol of belonging for people in their interests and tasks. As a facilitator, it is hard to create these inside jokes yourself, but you can support their development.

**Group Agreements give safety.** One possible method to establish a “safe space” is to make a “Group Agreement,” in which all participants agree on common rules of behavior, and talk about what kind of humour the group wants to have and which one is inappropriate.

**Facilitators should observe humour.** As a facilitator, you do not only have the responsibility to use humour in a conscious way that benefits a group in their learning and feel safe and well. You also have the responsibility to observe which other jokes are being made and how people feel about them. Observe, intervene and support when you see a conflict potentially bubbling up.

## Humour and conflicts

**Humour is a bomb.** Conflicts and disagreements are an inevitable and necessary part of all relationships - one-to-one relationships, small groups of friends, family, or a big international group. Dealing with and solving conflicts is important to strengthen the bond and connections. Humour and a playful attitude are like a bomb with huge potential: it can help either lighten the tension and restore a sense of community or the opposite.

**Humour can be destructive or constructive in conflict situations.** When humour is used in a destructive way, it can lead to an explosion of the conflict. For example, the same joke could be funny in one moment and destructive in another: when the people get the feeling that they are not taken seriously. There is really a thin line between challenge and destruction. A constructive way of humour in conflict situations could be when it reunites opponents in conflicts through laughter.

**Some topics are not okay to be joked about.** Rape jokes for instance are problematic because they belittle the victims of sexual abuse and they can trigger people in a group in their own experiences of abuse.

## Laughter fuels learning

**Humour is a good way to maintain a healthy learning environment.** Laughter improves not only our physical health, for example, it boosts our immune system,

increasing the number of white and red blood cells and giving us relief from physical pain, also improves our mental health. We are able to relax, lose tension and fight depressive moments. With a healthy brain, we are able to focus better and we can memorize things for a longer period of time. Laughter increases the level of dopamine and oxytocin, which helps us boost our long-term memory and goal-oriented motivation. It also trains the grey matter that improves the transport of information.

**Humour increases the attention span.** Through humour, we can catch the attention of people, which helps us focus and learn better. It also helps to bring up serious topics that might be uncomfortable to discuss. *In her movie Nanette*, comedian Hannah Gadsby focuses on hard and serious topics like abuse and harassment. She first uses humour to introduce us to the topic and then she starts talking about them in a serious way.

**Memes for learning!** A meme is an item of culture or a popular behavior that is passed on via images or videos, usually accompanied by a small piece of text. These images and videos are often altered in a creative or humorous way and spread online, e.g. on social media. In non-formal education, memes can be a perfect tool for integrating humor into the learning process. Memes can combine units of knowledge with jokes and humor to keep the participants engaged e.g. by encouraging them to create their own memes related to the discussed topics. Combining memes with complex, project-based work integrate new knowledge and offer a new perspective to approach different topics.

- You can generate easily own memes e. g. at: <http://memebetter.com/generator>
- All different apps in app stores offer these functions, e.g. MemeCreator.

## How to be funny

**Timing!** Making a joke about a critical situation when the critical situation is still ongoing, can be hazardous. Sometimes it is easier to dissociate a joke if it is further back in time. An example of making a badly timed joke is when a person is angry - sometimes trying to make them laugh can lead to an explosion.

**Context!** Things that need to be considered when you are thinking about a joke would be the culture, the kind of audience you have for the joke, the norms in the room, the knowledge, and the attitudes. A cultural difference would affect the way of understanding or perceiving a joke. If you don't understand the context of a group

very well yet, it might be a good idea not to start off with provocative humour.

**Think about your own position!** If a joke targets a specific group, it is important to think about your own relation to this group. Are you yourself part of the group you make fun of or not? Are you white and you want to make a joke about black people? Then think about how through colonialism and racism, white Europeans for centuries have structurally discriminated, oppressed, killed, and excluded black people from positions of power. Is your joke still appropriate, given this position? When you make a joke, try putting yourself in the shoes of the target. If someone gets offended, address the situation and be open to learn, and do not repeat the same mistake. This is especially important, if the one making the joke has a higher power position in the context, like a teacher or a facilitator.

**Target the powerful instead of the marginalized!** Making jokes about marginalized groups (women, LGBTI, black people, people of color, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, homeless people, people not fitting into beauty standards, etc.) can oppress these groups. Privileged groups have used (and still use) some humor to disempower non-privileged groups. It is much funnier to turn the power structure on its head and to instead make fun of groups with privilege and power.

**Tension and release of tension!** In order to make a joke more effective, it can be advisable to build up to it. Make the room feel tense before, only to release the tension with a joke. This gives your humour a sort of rhythm.

**Surprise, weirdness, and incongruity!** Do or say something unexpected, break a norm that can be broken. The video "[Tea and Consent](#)" does a weird comparison in a very educational and funny way: it compares consent to drinking a cup of tea.

**Exaggeration!** Making something very big, much bigger than it obviously is, or very small, much smaller than it obviously is, can be perceived as funny.

## Stereotypes in humour

A stereotype is a generalization about the characteristics of a specific group or culture. There might be some truth to a stereotype, but they do not show the whole picture, they dismiss the individual and don't really allow for facts. They can be discriminatory against certain groups, they can be annoying if people constantly reinforce stereotypes about groups that you belong to – and they can be funny.

**Very common in our projects.** In intercultural settings like volunteering projects and youth exchanges, stereotypes about nationalities, genders and other groups might arise very fast.

**Are stereotypes fun?** Lots of people find stereotypes useful in humour: They are easy to visualize and access, they create an easy target, they create an identity on those affected, they might include some kind of truth and could make something visible that is otherwise hidden – and they can create group cohesion among those not affected by the stereotype.

**The danger of stereotypes.** However, stereotypes, even when meant in a funny way, can also easily insult and hurt the other person, create anger, marginalize specific groups, create conflict in the group, prevent team building, banalize cultures, can be seen as mocking, and leave out other aspects of personality. They reduce an individual to the stereotype itself.

## Energizers

**What's that?** Energizers are used in seminars, youth exchanges, volunteering projects, trainings, etc. with the aim of enhancing the energy level of the participants, reinforcing group dynamics, creating fun, and having a good time together. Basically, they are short (5 minutes) activities in between sessions, at the beginning of the day, or after breaks. A marginal, but typical phenomenon is that often inside jokes arise from an energizer game.

**Do I need to take part in this?** The energizer by definition is dedicated to the whole group, participants however have the freedom not to take part in it. They can stay in the room, and step out of the circle. You may invite them to participate in a different way by taking pictures or leading the next energizer etc.

**Look who is in your group.** It helps to know your group so that the energizer will be successful. You could take into consideration what age group you work with, and what is the background of the group. It is especially important to observe whether you have participants that are not comfortable with loud noises or being touched. Be aware of the physical and mental limits and abilities of the participants and choose or adjust the energizer to the group to be suitable for everybody.

**Competition is not always fun.** Either energizer can be competitive games with the



aim of winning or cooperative games. It should ideally be inclusive, so there is no real losing and everyone feels part of the cheer in the end.

**We recommend the Crazy Banana!** Here you can see an example of an energizer that was also done during our seminar and lead to an insider joke:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UakWo5KJWjA>