

Toolbox Talk for students

Construction Banter



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help learners recognise the difference between shared humour and behaviour that humiliates, isolates or repeatedly targets somebody and feel more confident responding or supporting someone else.

Imagine a group of people laughing together during a break. One person is always the subject of the joke. They laugh as well, so everyone assumes they are fine with it but afterwards they become quiet and move away from the group. Would you call that banter because people were laughing or could something else be happening? Sometimes people laugh because something is genuinely funny. Sometimes they laugh because they feel uncomfortable, do not know how to respond or worry that objecting will make them an even bigger target.

Why It Matters

Humour can be a positive part of college, apprenticeships and construction. It can help people relax, build friendships and get through a demanding day. The problem is that the word “banter” can sometimes be used to excuse comments or behaviour that are hurtful. Intention matters but so does impact. Somebody may not have intended to cause harm, yet the other person can still feel embarrassed, isolated or unsafe. The line is more likely to have been crossed when the jokes are always aimed at the same person, continue after they have asked for them to stop or involve something personal that they cannot easily change. Learners and apprentices may feel pressure to laugh along because they are new and want to fit in. They might worry that speaking up will make them look sensitive or damage an opportunity. When people feel unable to say that something is not okay, it can affect confidence, attendance, concentration and whether they feel that they belong.

What It Can Look Like

Banter can become harmful when somebody is repeatedly given a nickname they dislike, mocked for making a mistake or humiliated in front of the group.



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It could involve comments about appearance, background, race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability, mental health, family circumstances or lack of experience. It can also happen online. A photograph or video might be shared without permission, somebody may become the target of a group chat or a private mistake could be turned into a meme.

A common warning sign is that everybody is laughing except the person at the centre of it. They may become quiet, avoid certain people, stop joining breaks or make excuses not to attend. They might also laugh along and insist they are fine because admitting otherwise feels risky. If somebody says, “Leave it out” changes the subject, looks uncomfortable or repeatedly tries to walk away, that response should be respected.

Not every joke, disagreement or awkward comment is bullying. People sometimes misjudge a situation and get something wrong. What matters is whether they listen, apologise and change their behaviour or dismiss the other person and continue.

What Can Help

Before joining in, ask yourself a few simple questions. Is everybody part of the joke or is one person being used for everyone else’s entertainment? Has the person shown that they are uncomfortable? Is it personal, repeated or likely to leave them feeling smaller afterwards? If the humour depends on somebody feeling humiliated, it has probably stopped being harmless.

If a comment is aimed at you, you have the right to set a boundary. You could say, “I’m not comfortable with that” “Leave that one out” or “It was funny once, but it needs to stop now.”



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You do not have to laugh to make everybody else comfortable. If it continues, keep a note of what happened and speak to somebody you trust, such as a tutor, lecturer, apprenticeship adviser, supervisor or safeguarding lead. Asking for support is not overreacting.

If you witness it, avoid adding another laugh, comment or share. You could interrupt with, “That’s enough” change the direction of the conversation or check in with the person privately afterwards. Try saying “I noticed what happened earlier. Are you alright?” Do not pressure them to report it but let them know you are willing to support them.

If somebody tells you that your joke crossed a line, try to listen rather than immediately defending yourself. Saying, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realise how that was affecting you,” is more useful than insisting it was only banter. A genuine apology is followed by different behaviour.

Preparing for Life in Construction

Construction teams often rely on humour and strong working relationships. Good banter can help people feel included and make difficult days easier. Those relationships work best when people trust that their boundaries will be respected. On site, people need to communicate clearly, ask questions and speak up about safety. Someone who is regularly humiliated may become reluctant to admit they are unsure or report a mistake. Knowing when to stop, apologising when you get it wrong and supporting somebody who is being targeted all contribute to a safer and more respectful team.



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Discussion Questions

- What is the difference between laughing with somebody and laughing at them?
- What signs might suggest that someone is uncomfortable even if they are laughing?
- How could somebody who notices it respond without making the situation worse?

Takeaway Message

Banter should be something everyone involved can enjoy. If the same person is repeatedly embarrassed, excluded or expected to tolerate comments they have asked to stop, the line has been crossed. You do not have to remove humour from the room. You simply need to pay attention to who is enjoying it, respect people's boundaries and take responsibility when a joke causes harm.

Action

Use one simple rule this week: before joining in with a joke about somebody else, ask yourself, "Are they genuinely part of this or are they being made into the joke?" If you are unsure, do not add to it.



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