

Where the Hens Come to Roost: How the Functionality of a Staff Room is Subverted by Teachers to a Space of Conviviality

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Introduction

In our present modern society, the socio-economic system is often characterised as being geared toward maximum profit. Its success is dependent on the ability of specialized institutions to maximize efficiency and innovation. Many anthropological studies have been focussed on these modern work spaces and new managerial techniques within big business environments. However, one field where there has been relatively little study when it comes to these issues is the establishment of schools as such institutions. Teachers nowadays must absorb the corporate ideals of flexibility and self-management within the workspace and at home in order to keep up with the ever-changing needs of a society in flux. This is visible in the instructional strategies developing in European formal education where teachers are increasingly required to design their own curriculum. These changes not only affect the behaviour of teachers within their educating role in the classroom but also more generally their role as social actors, interacting with one another within the working environment.

What I am particularly focussing on in my ethnography is how these circumstances are dealt with in the space of the teacher's lounge, which by definition is a casual space within the working environment. Focussing on my second day of fieldwork, using the methods of observation and conversation, I aimed to answer the question of 'How the functionality of the staff room is subverted by the teachers to a space of conviviality?'. My analysis of the data I collected during my fieldwork will assimilate Anthropological theories regarding construction of space, liminality and exchange including some comparisons with the dynamics of the porters' lounge or 'buckie' described in Nigel Rapport's account of the Constance Hospital (2009). Through this ethnography I hope to show the ingenuity with which the faculty of the elementary school 'de Klimop' was able to creatively adapt to the new situation in which they must work.

Setting the scene

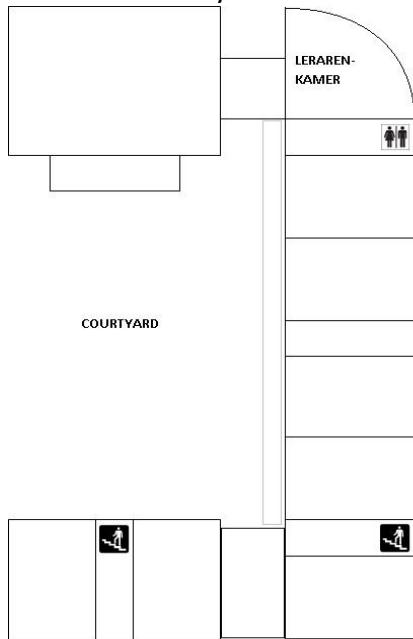
When walking through the open courtyard of 'de Klimop' elementary school on the 31st of March at 8:30 in the morning for my first day of fieldwork, I was immediately confronted with the flurry of activity all around me as children and teachers began to arrive for another day of learning (figures 1 & 2). I followed the small white plaques marked 'Lerarenkamer' to the small corner room where my next few days would be spent. The hustle and bustle of the outer courtyard wasn't cut off upon entering the building but it extended straight into the staff room itself, with teachers running in and out, stopping to make some copies, have a quick chat with one of their colleagues, or to drink a last minute cup of coffee before heading out to shepherd the students off to their first classes starting at 9:00 sharp. The room was organised around a long oval table that could be broken up into sections (figure 3) with on one side a kitchen unit and notice board (figure 4), and on the other a work station and a rack of arts-and-crafts magazines (figure 5). Light poured in from the large windows offer a view of the playground and open rural landscape of Schepdaal beyond.

1. Courtyard of De Klimop in Schepdaal

Taken on 26/04/2011 at 10:38 am by Miriam De Mulder



2. Plan of de Klimop
Drawn by Annelies Van de Ven



3. Centre of the staff room
Taken on 04/04/2011 at 14:26 by Annelies Van de Ven



4. Kitchen unit in the staff room

Taken on 31/03/2011 at 12:41 by Annelies Van de Ven



5. Work station in the staff room

Taken on 31/03/2011 at 12:41 by Annelies Van de Ven



Designing the teacher's lounge: 'Eerst alles op een rijtje zetten dan'

On my second day in the field, I was able to get the full story on the development of the lounge from the ex-principal Raymond, who was present in 1985, when the school first started planning the new building, and was involved in every aspect of its design. I had e-mailed him the previous day to organise an interview during the morning classes about how the room had acquired its current arrangement. At this time the break room was usually quite empty so I could do little observation and I had already drawn up sketches and taken photos the day before. When he entered the room at about 10:15 in his trainers and an old

baseball cap with 'De Klimop: Gemeenteschool Schepdaal' emblazoned on the front of it, I could tell immediately that he felt right at home. Having just gotten a cup of freshly brewed coffee, he sat down next to me at the end of the table and I described my project to him, explaining that I was interested in the development of the staff room and how the space had initially been planned to be used. After listening attentively to my explanation he simply said: 'Eerst alles op een rijtje zetten dan' (Lets first set the facts straight). He proceeded to give me a precise chronological run-through of the construction phases of the new school building, from requesting the construction permit in the 1980s, to installing the final piece of furniture in 2000.

The conversation became more interesting for me when we got onto questions of the design of the space as pertaining to its functionality as a break room within a working environment. He surprised me by claiming that the room had originally been conceived, not as a 'lounge' but purely as a work area that could be used by the teachers for staff meetings and as an administrative space to be used during recess and free periods, to avoid an overcrowding of the general office upstairs where the principal and secretary were located. Only in the late 1980s, when a female teacher became part of the delegated design team did the idea for a full kitchen unit really get incorporated and was the room transformed to its current form. Taking another swig from his mug, he stretched out, looked around the room and smiled, seemingly quite content with the finished product of his long years of work for the school. He then took his last sip of coffee and went to rinse out his cup, indicating to me that our conversation had come to an end. His final remark to me, before heading out the door was 'ja, ons juffen hebben het hier wel gezellig gemaakt' which translates to 'yup, our teachers (female) have definitely made themselves feel at home here', and from what I observed throughout the rest of the day, he couldn't have been more right.

He that would have eggs must endure the cackling of hens

I didn't have long to ponder on my conversation with Raymond as only a few minutes after he left the bell rang and the sound of cavorting children started to fill the hallway. This signalled to me that it was 10:40, time for the start of morning recess. I had

still not grown accustomed to the loud screeching noise the bell made and was frantically scrambling to get my notebook back out as the teachers started to walk in. The first two to enter, cheerily chatting away, were Kaat 1 and Veerle, each with a piece of fruit in hand. After having poured themselves a cup of coffee, they sat at the far end of the table, leaving a few seats between them and me, and started to discuss weekend plans. Soon more teachers began to trickle in, each entering with a short greeting, firmly closing the door behind them, cutting off the lounge from the children playing in the courtyard just outside. When most teachers had taken their seats and their packed snacks had been consumed, the attention quickly turned to the five bags of chocolate eggs at the centre of the table. As it was only 3 weeks to Easter various teachers had provided a daily supply of mini Easter eggs for the group to share. The day before Frederique had taken it upon herself to bring along a large assortment proportioned to everyone's favourite types of chocolate: a bag of white for Inge and Jo, praliné for Kaat 1, etc. The bags had been gradually slimming down throughout the past two days, with some teachers, like Carine, often stealthily stealing an egg every now and then when they were convinced no-one was watching. Jo was far less concerned with the general opinion on her chocolate eating habits and was now taking the time to assess the contents of each bag, discussing the specific qualities of each flavour with Inge who had just popped a second white chocolate egg in her mouth. Ultimately as the bell rang she opted for a dark chocolate ganache egg from Milka, quickly grabbing two more caramel eggs as she left her seat, cheerfully chirping 'en een paar om mee te nemen' (and a few for the road).

This offering of eggs was part of a general potluck exchange of tasty treats and objects, brought in from home for all sorts of occasions, that the group could interact with. Even the newspaper clipping sprawled out on the table could be seen as part of the assemblage of material objects bringing the group together. These pieces of material culture were much more than just something to keep the group busy during the break, they were often responsible for determining the discussion topics of the group and they made a statement about the person who brought them in and the nature of their relation to the group. As an outsider, I found myself categorizing people according to who brought eggs and how they consumed them. I could immediately tell, for example, that Carine was a less

well established member of the friendship group, as she would only take an egg when everyone else was out. Inge and Kaat 1 on the other hand could often be seen happily sharing a larger egg after they had finished their fruit, complimenting Frederique on her excellent taste in chocolate. These chocolate eggs then became a total social phenomenon in the Maussian sense (1990). They establish the group as a community of reciprocal exchange, each member trusting that ultimately they would get back what they gave. This egalitarianism also shows the group's ultimate desire to establish positive lasting relations with one another, especially evident in Frederique's offerings that were specifically tailored to the favourites of each teacher. Even I found that at the end of my fieldwork, in order to thank everyone and leave a good impression, the appropriate thing to do seemed to be to go and buy a bag of Easter eggs to share. Participating in this established potlatch custom made me feel more at home within the group, establishing my identity as one of them.

Birds of a feather flock together

Later that day, lunchtime commenced in much the same way and as I looked around the room I noticed that everyone seemed to be much in the same configuration as the breaks before, sitting with the same group of people, talking about the same range of subjects. Sitting at the end of the table furthest from the work station, which served as a constant reminder of the original function of the room, were the younger teachers with Kaat 1, Veerle, Inge and Jo in the centre of the conversation. Beyond them the more experienced staff members such as Hilde, Magda and Lu were discussing matters of the workplace such as class schedules and permission forms for excursions. They were clearly more aligned with the original intent of the room, which had been evident in Raymond's description of its design, and the more traditional notion of 'the office as a place of work' Those who were less accepted within the group often remained at the periphery, exemplified most clearly in Carine who frequently went home during the breaks. Unsurprisingly, the men of the group were poorly represented, and at this time the only one present was Michael. He had immediately asked to be passed the newspaper when he came in and took to reading in solitude at the far end of the table. The male teachers had the tendency to make themselves scarce during breaks, and often decided to stay in their

classrooms. In a sense it reminded me of the configuration of a dinner table, with the father figure at the head of the table, the mother hard at work fulfilling her domestic role and the children chattering away at the other end.

We already discussed how the teachers used material culture to create group bonds and organise their personal relations beyond the confines of work. Here their 'proxemics' (Hall 1963) or tendency to group together in certain ways can be seen as another way in which they familiarized the space in a structural sense. Their physical distance in this situation was directly correlated with their social distance and subsequently the levels of intimacy between them. In order to fully appropriate the lounge, they had created their own microcosmic family, within this privileged space cut off from the rest of the school grounds. In this sense they are adhering to Levi Strauss' ideas of structural thinking in which each unit of any group only acquires a determined identity in relation or opposition to the other units within the system (1969). This is seen in the dichotomy between genders and age groups, but also how they placed themselves as opposed to the working area. Much like the outer 'buckie' of the Rapport's account of Constance hospital, the space of the lounge was ambivalent, but by removing themselves from the work tools the teachers are able to keep the space of the lounge as their own inner sanctum (2009: 7-9). The impetus they felt to construct the space as such, away from home, can be compared to the organisation of space in the Central Asian Yurt where the nomadic peoples make their home within the space by arranging everyday objects, such as cleaning and hunting supplies, within it according to their own socio-cultural categories of male-female and traditional-modern (Humphrey 1974). People were also included in this structuring and in Stephanie Bunn's description of a Kyrgyz banquet (2009) we see that similarly to the staff lounge, one could tell the relations between people and their perceived relative status' by the place in which they were seated. In this sense there is a 'domesticating, personalizing, subverting parodying the strict classificatory practice' inherent in modern working environments (Rapport 2009: 146). The space thus becomes more than simply structure in which teachers can grab a coffee or make photocopies, it is a resource for establishing relationships that extend further than just that of vaguely acquainted colleagues.

Lunchtime liminality

After everyone had finished off their sandwiches, the conversation at the centre of the table quickly came to dominate the soundscape. As I zoned back in from my anthropological contemplations on spatial structure and shuffled closer I learned that, not very surprisingly, the topic being discussed was Kaat 1's pregnancy. This topic along with Inge's upcoming wedding, shopping, vacation destinations, the weather and family life had been the main subject of conversation in the teacher's lounge. Kaat 1 had even made a poster, which now hung on the notice board, on which the other staff members could fill in their predictions for the new child. As the conversation went on, the older teachers started to chime in, giving advice on good paediatricians and the best brands of baby food. It was at this point that Frederique entered the room, immediately making herself known by declaring 'dat is hier net een kiekenkot met al jullie gekakel, ik kon het van buiten al horen', which translates to 'It's like a chicken coop in here with all your chatter, I could hear you from outside'. This elicited a laugh from all the teachers and conversation continued with her joining in. It was this chirpy atmosphere that the principal Luc walked into when he entered the room for his lunchtime meeting. If anyone noticed his entrance they did nothing to acknowledge it, and after awkwardly standing at the head of the table for a few minutes, he tapped his fist on the table and called for attention. His behaviour seemed discomfited when I thought back to the ease with which Raymond had moved around the space earlier. After a few more minutes of tapping, clearing his throat and a series of hushing motions, the room finally quieted down and he began to describe the issue at hand: a student's parents had phoned in because their son was being bullied. His patronizing tone, aloof composure and proper vocabulary stood in opposition to the informality of the earlier conversation. The orderliness of the meeting did not last long, and soon the break room was full of separate discussions. Luc gave up his attempt, mumbling a quick 'dat is dan geregeld' (well that's sorted) as he left the room.

This encounter demonstrates the tension within modern institutions of the quaternary sector between creativity and organisation, described by economic theorist Florida (2004: 22). By separating the teachers' lounge from the central administration office, the teachers gained more autonomy. Luc had to come to *their* space for the meeting. By

applying 'soft control' management (Florida 2004: 13) based on self-organisation and peer pressure, Luc had created a situation where the traditional hierarchical system came to be resisted and subverted (Kaul, Kohn & Tucker 2010). This ties in with wider anthropological notions of liminality discussed in by Victor Turner (1969). In this case, the coffee break can be seen as a ritual of everyday life during which the space of the teachers' lounge and those present within it acquire a marginal status between their status at work and their status at home (often as mothers and wives). This then creates a *communitas* in which the rigorous hierarchies and divisions of work and home temporarily do not apply. As in Rapport's 'buckie', there was 'slippage, a flexibility regarding the status of the' room (2009: 105). In this space, the young female teachers such as Frederique, normally seen as being on the bottom rung of the ladder take charge, with older and male members of staff being relegated to the outskirts. This ritual is tolerated as it reinforces the group's cohesiveness and encourages more efficiency during working hours. In this in-between space, the teachers jovially interacted with one another, creating a distinctly homely atmosphere where close relationships could be established differently from the cordial interactions expected in the rest of the work space.

Conclusion

Through the egalitarian sharing of goods, the configuration of a regular arrangement of propinquity and enforcement of a sense of liminal *communitas*, the staff of the Klimop were able to creatively subvert the original conception of the teachers' lounge as a place of work. This familiarization was however not completely homogeneous, with more marginal members of the group, such as the veterans and male teachers, finding it harder to find their place in the space and join in the informal clique established by the majority of young female staff. Nevertheless, all the teachers shared a distinct bond beyond that of mere colleagues, creating a leisurely oasis for themselves within what seemed at times a desert of endless assignments to grade and parent-teacher meetings to attend. In their familial behaviour towards one another during recess, often being openly solicitous, they were able to categorize one another and the space in which they interacted as one of leisure and relaxed domesticity.

In writing up this project I have had the opportunity to explore the more practical sides of ethnography, discovering both the merits and difficulties to using my own social encounters as a basis for anthropological knowledge. At first I found it hard to find my footing in the group, often being ignored by the teachers, who seemed to regard me as 'matter out of place', and becoming frustrated at my inability to direct the break time conversations towards the topic of my project. Looking back now, however, I feel that through my one-on-one engagement with the 'subjects' of my study, I was able to get a better grip on the social narratives they had constructed, and that had truly become incorporated into their coterie.

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Appendix

1. Index of teaching and administrative staff at the Klimop:



Source: <http://www.deklimop.be/>

Raymond: Ex-principal, resigned in 2008 (male)

Luc: New principal, used to teach 5th grade (male)

Lu: Secretary (female)

Carine: Teacher for 1st grade (female)

Veerle: Teacher for 1st grade, married to Eric (female)

Kaat 1: Teacher for 2nd grade, pregnant (female)

Hilde: Teacher for 2nd grade (female)

Jo: Teacher for 3rd grade (female)

Reinout: Teacher for 3rd grade (male)

Anne: Teacher for 4th grade (female)

Stefanie: Teacher for 4th grade (female)

Inge: Teacher for 5th grade, engaged (female)

Frederique: Teacher for 5th grade (female)

Kaat 2: Teacher for 6th grade (female)

Eric: Teacher for 6th grade, married to Veerle (male)

Magda: Special education Needs coordinator (female)

Miriam: Part-time remedial and catholic religion teacher, my mother (female)

Helena: Part-time catholic religion teacher , was not present on the days of my fieldwork (female)

Eva: Part-time ethics teacher, was not present on the days of my fieldwork (female)

Michaël: Part-time physical education teacher (male)

2. Class schedule:

09:00 – 10:40 2 classes

10:40 – 11:00 morning break

11:00 – 12:10 2 half-classes

12:10 – 13:10 lunch

13:10 – 14:50 2 classes

14:50 – 15:10 afternoon break

15:10 – 16:00 1 class

3. Website: <http://www.deklimop.be/welkom.htm>