

# A humanising pedagogy: Getting beneath the rhetoric

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*In this article, the authors situate and make an argument for a humanising pedagogy in response to the legacy of a dehumanising past in South Africa. They describe the inquiry into a humanising pedagogy by means of mining stories of living and learning in South Africa. The authors explain how the meanings and praxis of a humanising pedagogy unfold as the story of the work unfolds. One result of the work has been a working collection of "Statements of awareness" that are authentic and significant, though still evolving, which frame a humanising pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** Humanising pedagogy, humanising praxis, narrative inquiry, liberatory education, emancipatory methodology

## Introduction

South Africa's societal legacy of disempowerment and dehumanisation, particularly within education contexts, is long and in critical need of repair. Despite years of struggle, and solidarity of the majority of its citizens that resulted in the transition to a more democratic political order in South Africa, the educational arena remains a battlefield, in which the struggle to build voice, agency and community continues. Beyond the rhetoric of describing and analysing that struggle, a powerful praxis related to citizenship and social justice within the contextual realities of South African education is required. We believe a humanising pedagogy is one such form of praxis.

## Literature review

Freire (1993:43) asserts: "Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility, but also as a historical reality". Both the historical and the contemporary realities in education related to South Africa's dehumanising past and present, in education across several contexts, have been well documented and analysed (Alexander, 2002; Chisholm, 2004; Jansen, 2009; Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005; Soudien, 2012).

What stands out as a central issue in relation to this dehumanisation is its presence in education, from schools to institutions of higher education. Educational researchers have explored the nature and impact of policy changes in the South African educational arena. Some examples include regular changes in curricula, which include the importation of educational philosophies and practices that are not aligned with the contextual realities in South African schools, as well as the background and material conditions faced by the majority of South African teachers (Jansen & Christie, 1999; Chisholm, Motala & Vally, 1998). These policy changes have also impacted on pedagogical engagements which have resulted in classrooms in which teachers are unable to interpret the curricula or what is expected of them in terms of teaching and learning and their roles as teachers (Jansen & Christie, 1999; Harley *et al.*, 2000:). Power relationships within these settings have also been impacted: those between schools and departmental authorities, between teachers and students/learners, in issues of language use, and among students themselves (Jansen, 2009; McKinney, 2007). What emerges from this substantial and growing body of literature is evidence of the manner in which the legacy of dehumanisation has been absorbed, wittingly and unwittingly, into relationships within educational arenas which mirror and depict hierarchies of power, cultures of compliance, fear, as well as the suppression and loss of voice.

This article focuses, in particular, on this last aspect. The issue which we seek to address and consider to be at the heart of work of a humanising pedagogy is to re-centre and restore voice as a key characteristic of what it means to be human. Within the context of South Africa and the African continent, the power of voice, story, and oral tradition is particularly pertinent. For example, Gyekye (1995:10) speaks to its significance in the transmission of African philosophical ideas, where “traditional African philosophy is not a written philosophy. Such ideas were embodied in proverbs, aphorisms, or fragments ...”. We argue that marginalisation and loss of voice is one aspect of dehumanisation that requires attention if we rethink the purposes of education and its importance to what a humanising pedagogy means in terms of theory and action.

The act of ‘rethinking’ requires that we analyse what has contributed to the features outlined earlier as evidence of a legacy of dehumanisation. Connell (2007) argues that the notion of ‘agency’ be evaluated critically. He makes an important and paradoxical point that we “recognise the *agency* involved in colonial dispossession, military dictatorship and neoliberal restructuring alike” (Connell 2007:216, italics in original). In other words, both the fact and forms of the ‘agency’ of oppressive regimes have to be taken into full account, as they have implications for the ways in which both the theoretical and the practical issues of citizenship and social justice, and indeed the practice of humanising pedagogies, are conceptualised and addressed. Such agency needs to be countered by a citizenry that feels its own agency to speak back to these powers.

One such conceptualisation is Odora-Hoppers & Richards’s (2011:1) challenge to higher education to “rethink thinking” and to examine its “current default drive of knowledge production, accompanied by the deep exclusionary practices inherent in it”. In other words, they speak to the specific conditions in South African society and the roots of apartheid, where “the combined dispossession, the forced metamorphoses of entire societies, the transformation of the native’s mind ... were packaged as common bruises to be redressed through shallow ameliorative measures” (Odora-Hoppers & Richards, 2011:2). How does one create the conditions to reverse those exclusionary practices, to get beyond the “shallow ameliorative measures” to tap into the deep wells of knowledge and experience that reside in those who have been marginalised through a history of dispossession and various forms of oppression? We propose a humanising pedagogy as one mode of redress.

In counterpoint to the agency of dispossession, as depicted by Connell, Francis and Le Roux (2012) advocate for the agency of “social actors” – those ‘ordinary’ people who we enlisted in our humanising pedagogy investigation. They make the point that “social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency, as well as a sense of responsibility towards and with others, their society and the broader world” (Francis & Le Roux, 2012:16). In the context of education, Ayers (1998) exhorts educators to attend to what makes us human. He writes that “teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles” (Ayers, 1998:xvii).

The relationship of the individual ‘social actor’ to society invokes the intersection between citizenship and social justice. Lister (1997:3) defines citizenship very simply as “the relationship between individuals and the state and between individual citizens within [the] community”. If these relationships have been fraught with and characterised by systemic injustice, as has been the case in South Africa, then this has necessarily damaged and distorted conceptions of citizenship. The pursuit of social justice becomes an imperative and driver, as citizens strive both to be fully recognised and to have their right to belong fully to that society restored. The concept of ‘restorative justice’ (Braithwaite, 2004) is particularly relevant in this regard. Restorative justice focuses on repairing the harm done to survivors of injustice, and emphasizes the participation of those most directly involved and affected.

Towards this end, we argue that deliberative action is required to undo or counter the agency and impact of a dehumanising and socially unjust past, perpetuated in many respects in current socio-political and educational contexts. This action is necessary in order to restore a full sense of both individual and collective humanity, and to re-centre and reclaim voice. We regard a humanising pedagogy as part of that

deliberative action, with a particular focus on re-storying voice and owning the knowledge that comes with that restoration.

In the remainder of this article, we provide an account of a project that sought to get beneath the theoretical and rhetorical explications of a humanising pedagogy, most frequently espoused and referenced within the field of critical pedagogy (see, for example, Leistyna, Woodrum & Sherblom, 1996). Critiques of these theoretical and rhetorical positions as impenetrable and exclusionary (Ellsworth, 1992), deeply western and homogenising (Grande, 2004), and ‘ethnocentric and Eurocentric’ in their pedagogical perspectives (Hao, 2011), exist. Jansen (2009) recognises the contribution of critical theory, but points to its limitations “in post-conflict situations for making sense of troubled knowledge and for transforming those who carry the burden of such knowledge” (Jansen, 2009:256). We seek to bring an African sensibility to the issues of a humanising pedagogy and to ground our understanding in the clear language of story and people’s daily experiences.

The following question informed the work described in this article: How do we get beneath the rhetoric to the praxis of a humanising pedagogy? What does it look and feel like? What does it require of us in the context of teaching and learning environments and interactions?

## Methodology

The effort to uncover the essential experience of a humanising pedagogy started out as a staff development project rather than research. Nonetheless, our story-gathering methods were based in hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative, which respectively value lived experience and voice. These approaches provided a fertile ground in which a theory of a humanising pedagogy could take root. We describe our methodological rationale, frameworks and process at some length, as they were, in fact, part and parcel of the project itself.

Van Manen (1990:9) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as “the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. ... [It] asks ‘What is this or that kind of experience like?’”<sup>1</sup> Patton (1990:69) writes that phenomenology asks, ‘What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon [a humanising pedagogy] for these people [learners and teachers in South Africa]?’ He points out that the data are both particular in their detail and unique to each individual person, but they also hold within them an essential aspect of the phenomenon. In listening to multiple stories, we were, as Van Manen notes, able to bracket, analyse, and compare the experiences of different people “to identify the essences of the phenomenon ...” (Van Manen, 1990:70). It was these essences that we explored, and from which we hoped to build both theory and practice (praxis) of a humanising pedagogy grounded in a storied South African experience.

The use of narrative is a methodological device that allows us “to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us” (Van Manen, 1990:116), in our case a humanising pedagogy. Van Manen (1990:116) suggests that narrative connotes “things unpublished”, “things not given out”. Given the silencing and fear coupled with oppression and poverty, many of the stories that were told may not have been previously “published” or “given out”, at least in diverse company. It is important to note that we sought to gather narratives that would be useful not primarily to academics but to those people who were telling their stories.

We gathered participants’ stories, using a methodology developed by Patricia Carini (2000; 2001) and her colleagues: a process of descriptive inquiry<sup>2</sup> called ‘recollections’. For this project, we asked for the recollections of humanising and dehumanising learning experiences. According to Carini (2001), the intention of the use of recollections is a deeply human one. She writes in her book of essays, *Starting strong*,

*I rely on the animating power of story to connect your story with mine, and both of ours to larger public stories, stories of the era, stories of the race, stories of loss and sorrow, stories of hope and fulfilment, stories of human degradation and destructiveness, stories of human strength in the overcoming of stunning blows of fate; in sum, stories of how humanness happens in the making, unmaking, and remaking of it (Carini, 2001:2).*

It was deeply important to us that humanness and humanising remain at the heart of both the stories and our process for gathering them. These recollections were told and heard in various communities of learning (described in more detail later), and we were committed to creating compassionate communities of inquiry that would share the hard work of extracting meaning from the narrated experiences and listening with open hearts. It was hoped that such communities would not only learn from each other and feel the power of one another's stories, but also serve as evolving spaces where loss, sorrow, hope, fulfilment, strength and weakness could be safely shared. The process of recollections seemed perfectly aligned with these intentions.

The process of sharing recollections of humanising, dehumanising, and healing learning experiences began with prompts. The aim was to generate details sufficiently vibrant and personal to remain in the minds of the group over time, something that a more abstract list of, say, "characteristics of a humanising pedagogy" could not do. The prompt for a humanising learning experience read as follows:

*Think of a time when you as a learner felt supported, expanded, and made more fully yourself ... when you drew upon your capacities and stretched them in ways that took you to a new place where you felt more powerful and capable as a result. This can be a learning experience that happened either in or out of school. Your recollection may or may not have a teacher or other learners in it. The most powerful recollections are those that are full of details. Rather than telling a general kind of learning story (e.g. my grandmother taught me to cook), tell about a particular time when she taught you to cook a particular dish with note taken of the details of the experience: the setting, the utensils, the smells, the colours, the feel of the tools and ingredients in your hands, the emotions evoked, the steps taken.*

As time went on, we moved to the telling of dehumanising stories in the Hub<sup>3</sup>. As we began to recognise the existence of broader, invisible forces (the political, historical, and social "force fields") that lie beneath some of these stories, the prompt shifted slightly to hint at these:

*Think of a time when you as a learner felt unsupported, diminished, made small, or invisible. A learning experience that caused you to question or doubt who you are, where you were made to feel inadequate or stupid as a result. As with the account of a humanising learning experience above, this can be a learning experience that happened either in or out of school. Your recollection may or may not have a teacher or other learners in it. The most powerful recollections are those that are full of details. Rather than telling a general kind of learning story, think of specific details – what happened step-by-step, how it made you feel, the context in which it all happened, from the physical context to relational and political elements if they were a part of your experience.*

## Settings and participants

In contrast to other studies that have gathered data from South African students, (Rohleder *et al.*, 2008) the participants in this project included students, University staff such as academics, leadership, administrative support staff and teachers in both urban and rural contexts. In addition, the work is unique as it took place not in course modules but in various forums within and outside the University. In all, stories were told in fifteen different forums, all associated with the University in different ways. The forums included: the Humanising Pedagogy Hub (HP Hub), a humanising pedagogy study group, which included teachers and children from three different intermediate-phase schools, a Law Faculty forum, the Faculty of Education Teaching and Learning Committee, three curriculum development groups within the Faculty of Education, a Faculty of Education administrative staff retreat, and four professional development 'tutor' forums (see Table 1). Nearly 300 stories were told. While not all stories were heard by everyone, and only 25 were recorded, in every case everyone had a voice. Every person had the opportunity to tell his/her story (participants could pass if they so chose). It is important to note that, in the speaking, they created a platform from which to be more present to each other's stories. In this instance, Carini's (2001:2) words bear repeating: "I rely on the animating power of story to connect your story with mine, and both of ours to larger public stories, stories of the era ..."

The HP Hub formed the nexus of our work and it is on this that we will concentrate. It met every other week for an hour beginning on 1 April 2011 until 30 November of that year. (It continues to meet but is in the process of regrouping to determine the best way forward.) At the beginning of the 2011 academic year we sent an invitation to all staff and students at the University to apply for a place in the newly forming Humanising Pedagogy Hub. We were “seeking participants from across the university – lecturers, deans, and students – interested in participating in an inquiry group to explore the philosophical and practical dimensions of a ‘humanising pedagogy’” (extract from electronic invitation, March 2011). We received approximately 30 applications and selected a total of 15 (not including ourselves). Our selection was based on a desire for broad representation across disciplines and Faculties, staff and students, gender and “race”.<sup>4</sup> We regarded 17 as a manageable size, given what we were setting out to do. Although there were more than enough applicants in the pool, they were predominantly White females, and we actively recruited additional Black members, primarily from the Faculty of Education. We also ensured that there was a gender balance within the group. Among the applicants there were approximately half a dozen students from whom we selected four.

## Data collection and analysis

The ‘data’ we collected were stories of humanising, dehumanising, and healing learning experiences. In the HP Hub, we also gathered stories of practice that recounted how the work within the Hub was affecting our teaching practice. Stories were told in segments of no longer than six minutes. As the stories were shared (across all groups), Rodgers asked participants to listen both to the story and to the embedded themes that could portray what a humanising pedagogy might entail. She also listened carefully for these themes. It is important to note that she unconditionally accepted the value of each story to our shared task. As some stories elicited discomfort, revulsion, and pain, or were slightly removed from the issue at hand, it was essential to be fully present to each teller, and to see and affirm his/her humanness and experience. The space was an intentional one of what Keet, Zinn and Porteus (2009) refer to as “mutual vulnerability” and it needed safeguarding. As facilitator, Rodgers tried as much as possible to embody the notion of a humanising pedagogy, even as we were unearthing what that might be. We believed that this kind of alignment and integrity were essential in our work, or it risked failure.

As we generated the themes that emerged from our stories, we (particularly those of us in the Hub) grouped them into categories, much as a qualitative researcher would. Rodgers created “maps” of these general categories, referencing both the particulars of the stories and their tellers. In subsequent meetings of the Hub, we revisited these maps, adding to and revising them. In addition, Rodgers revised the maps according to the stories she heard in the other venues, sharing the stories and changes with the members of the Hub as the year unfolded. Thus, the themes generated by the stories were constantly revised and refined. For example, in the initial gathering of stories, elements of context – e.g., a lack of resources in Black schools, the challenge of learning in a second language – went unnamed in the stories themselves. In time, the fact that these matters were taken for granted and went unnamed became an important finding. Again, it is important to note that these revisions were as much for the growth of the understanding of the participants as they were in developing ‘findings’ for the purposes of research. All Hub sessions were digitally recorded and notes were taken by a scribe. In the other forums, stories that were volunteered to be shared in front of the entire group were recorded. Approximately 25 stories were recorded and are currently in the process of being transcribed. In addition, Rodgers kept a reflective journal after each Hub meeting and after meetings in the other forums.

## Leadership roles

The roles played by each of us were distinct. As Dean of the Faculty of Education, Zinn needed to have a bird’s eye view of the positioning of all stakeholders. This included the University’s imperative to take the lead in the project of realising a humanising pedagogy across the University, as reflected in its Vision 2020 Strategic Plan [2010]). An awareness of the historical, political, social, and economic threads that wove through the humanising pedagogy work was also central. Although Rodgers facilitated all the sessions,

the planning and debriefing were done collaboratively, with Zinn filling the role of sounding board and boundary-setter, simultaneously affirming and being conscious of the imperatives present.

Rodgers, a Fulbright scholar from the University of Albany in New York, who was at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) for the 2011 academic year, facilitated all 18 sessions. She understood the incorporation of a humanising pedagogy into both the NMMU's Vision 2020 Strategic Plan and its new Teaching and Learning Policy, and came to NMMU expressly to work with the Faculty of Education on the development of a humanising pedagogy.

## Limitations

Issues of race, role, language, and institutional history complicate this work. Zinn is a so-called 'Coloured' South African woman academic and activist in the apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Rodgers is a White American from a relatively privileged background. In addition, each of us, Zinn as Dean and Rodgers as a visiting Fulbright Scholar, embodied the authority and deference that those roles can call forth. While none of the stories were forced, participants always had the option to remain silent, whether they felt that freedom or not must be left open to examination. Finally, language remains a factor that must be taken into account. English is a first language for both of us, although Zinn is also fluent in Afrikaans, but English was a second language to a vast majority of the participants, both Black and White, and it is likely that their stories underwent translation and may, therefore, have been told at a distance from their essential spirit. In addition, NMMU, as a former all-White Afrikaans-language university, was at one time hostile to many of those who now told their stories within its walls. Each of these factors – race, role, language, and institutional history – must necessarily be part of one's understanding of the stories.

## Findings

We now present Thandi's (a pseudonym) story. Thandi is a middle-aged Black woman, university staff member and member of the Humanizing Pedagogy Hub. We chose this story as it represents many of the stories we heard from participants, and not only Black participants. It contains humanising and dehumanising as well as healing aspects.

*My story happened at the age of 14. I grew up with my granny and my parents were working here and had no time to look after us. My granny was very poor; we were poor. I was at a village school and every student at standard 6 had to pay 50 cents for examination in November. I had to pay this to write exams and my granny did not have it. I went to school that day depressed because I knew it was the last day for this 5 shillings (50 cents). Teachers were not in classes. They were all in one room compiling alphabetically the names of students that were going to write the exam. All the children in class were excited because they were going to write the exam in November. And they were talking about their future, what they were going to learn at secondary school, and all those things. And I left the class because I was depressed. I went to a corner in the schoolyard. There was a big tree and I ended up lying under this tree, and I ended up sleeping because I was depressed and I was afraid of a future without education. In my sleep I was shocked by the children running to me and shouting [in isiXhosa] 'Simfumene! Simfumene'!, ('We've got her, we've got her!'). They dragged me to the teacher. The teacher had arrived in the class and asked where I was and they found me, and the teacher could see I was very depressed. He made me sit down and tell him my story. I told him that ... I was not going to write. He listened and listened and took me out of the class to a big room where lady teachers were compiling this alphabetical list. When he entered with me, they said, 'Don't tell us that B. is going to be in this list'. My surname ... starts with B and they were in the J's and H's and they did not want to start the list from the beginning. And one of the lady teachers came to me and 'klapped' [smacked] me and I fell, dizzy. And then the teacher paid my 50 cents and he told me to go back to class. I went to class and I was so depressed and disappointed and embarrassed, but I told myself that I am going to learn. The teacher has given me an opportunity and I grabbed it with both hands. At secondary he followed me and checked my work all the time, and I did not want to*

*disappoint him. To me, humanising pedagogy is one in which academics are aware and they address this social economic background of the students in class. If it were not for that teacher I wouldn't be here now. And that is why every time in my classrooms I always make sure I am aware of what my students bring to class – their backgrounds and everything they bring to class so that I could address it. That is my story. (T.B. 15 April 2011)<sup>5</sup>*

The themes in this story reflect many of those in other stories told. Poverty, lack of access to resources, despair and hope, depression, resilience, the power of being seen, relationship and mutual vulnerability, as well as an awareness of teaching as a political act, were common. We address each of these and discuss how each informs us about the praxis of a humanising pedagogy.

Poverty deprived Thandi of 5 shillings needed to take the examination. It thwarted her access to education and, as she notes, she was “afraid of a future without education”. In essence, a lack of resources threatened to deprive her of her own humanness and her right to inscribe herself on the world. This is captured in her image of her classmates, “talking about their future, what they were going to learn at secondary school, and all those things”. “All those things” represented the dream of a life of value. The desire to secure such a life for herself is palpable in Thandi’s story: “I told myself that I *am* going to learn”, and she “grabbed [the opportunity that her teacher offered her] with both hands”. Despite what is often the deadening experience of school, for Thandi, there was a deeply held knowledge that without it she would be sacrificing her very self. To regard teaching and learning (pedagogy) as humanising acts is to view them not as tasks set out by government, not as curricula to be ‘covered’, not as steps leading merely to more school, but as a shared endeavour leading to a meaningful life in which the value of each learner and teacher adds value to the world.

The feelings of depression resulting from the prospect of hopelessness and exclusion are responses to the dehumanising circumstances of poverty, racism, neglect, scorn, and low expectations. Thandi’s story, however, also reflects resilience, getting up after she was literally and figuratively beaten down; she overcame her feelings of depression, disappointment, and embarrassment that caused her to retreat under the tree. The deep humanness evident in her determination to learn also reveals her strength and human capacity. Human strength and capacity are things we can count on in learners. We can trust that, as human beings, our learners are resilient, and have strengths and a great capacity to learn. What this means in terms of a humanising pedagogy is that we come into the classroom with respect for what students already know, with curiosity about what that might be, with trust that given the opportunity, they will show us. This means that we must learn to know students, what they know, and create challenges that meet them at the edge of their knowing.

The relationship between learner and teacher is central to Thandi’s story. In our work in all the groups, participants named this relational aspect as the most critical dimension of a humanising pedagogy. What we hear in Thandi’s story is that her teacher rescued her from the financial crisis of the moment *and* saw in her something worth following and caring for. In turn, Thandi *felt* seen, recognised, acknowledged, valued, and supported not merely once but over and over again. He saw in her something that she may not yet have seen in herself, and this caused her to want not to disappoint either him or, ultimately, herself. At the same time, although Thandi did not name it, the teacher risked his own position, resisting and acting in defiance of the judgment of the teacher who had beaten Thandi, choosing what he regarded as the rights of a child over the authority of a colleague. We have identified the mutual vulnerability, whereby both Thandi and her teacher risked exposure and failure, as another dimension of a humanising pedagogy.

In fact, the relational dimension of a humanising pedagogy extends beyond one teacher and one student and points to community and, beyond that, to the interconnectedness of all human beings. While Thandi’s story emphasises person-to-person relationships, we also came to understand that learners’ evolving relationship with the world – with society as well as with the natural world – is critical to their humanness.

Finally, Thandi’s story has a strong political dimension. According to Freire (2005:129), “[Teachers] have much to teach through the example of fighting for the fundamental changes we need, of fighting against authoritarianism and in favour of democracy”. The teacher’s acts of finding her, paying for her

examination, and finally “following” and “checking” her throughout her schooling were political acts and not merely acts of kindness. Freire (2005:129) notes:

*Let’s repeat, then, that the educator is a politician. In consequence, it is absolutely necessary that educators act in a way consistent with their choice—which is political—and furthermore that educators be ever more scientifically competent, which teaches them how important it is to know the concrete world in which their students live, the culture in which their students’ language, syntax, semantics, and accent are found in action, in which certain habits, likes, beliefs, fears, desires are formed that are not necessarily easily accepted in the teachers’ own worlds.*

The power of the example of Thandi’s teacher is thus “paid forward” and becomes not an act between two people, but a gradual changing of society. “[T]hat’s why”, she says, “every time in my classrooms I always make sure I am aware of what my students bring to class – their backgrounds and everything they bring to class so that I could address it”. Freire declares that acts of those like Thandi and Thandi’s teacher, who dare to take even the smallest steps toward social justice, are “radical” (Freire, 2005:104). “We are”, he writes, “political militants because we are teachers” (Freire, 2005:104). Ultimately, as we say in our statements about a humanising pedagogy “a humanising pedagogy reaches toward a just and democratic society”. (See Addendum).

## Discussion

In considering what makes this work, both the process of gathering stories and the contents of these stories, significant, we return to notions of agency, voice, and community as well as the central role of awareness, mutual vulnerability, love, and the role that story played.

The themes identified in Thandi’s story were both new to participants and deeply familiar. By creating a space for their stories of humanising and dehumanising learning experiences, especially a space within the academy, they perceived that their own knowledge was recognised, valued, and legitimised. Some regarded their knowledge, namely *ubuntu* and *namaste*, co-opted by what they perceived as White people wrapping their practices in Western language – “humanising pedagogy”. It is fair to say that when the themes were pulled from their stories, they were not new themes, but familiar themes of vulnerability, appreciation, physical and emotional pain, interdependence, caring, humiliation, joy, worry, and love. Through the process of gathering themes we collectively named the essential and enduring elements present in their everyday experience. Such “naming”, according to Freire (1970/1993:88), is a powerful and humanising act:

*To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namer as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection [praxis]. (Italics in original).*

Places such as family, community, and Church were often mentioned as places that embodied these themes. Conceptions of God, love, and acceptance were part of an existing frame of knowledge. And it was through these frames that they often made sense of a humanising pedagogy. But naming them affirmed their value and gave them permission to trust what they knew. To observe that these themes could also live in the context of school (and the academy), and that they, as teachers, could reflect and act upon them (praxis) with the same power of agency *in* school as they did *out* of school, was to be affirmed in acting from that knowledge. Suddenly theirs was not only relevant but essential knowledge. So, indeed, a humanising pedagogy may have been a new phrase, but it was not a new concept. They were able to rely on their own sense-making, their own knowledge, and they could be *agents of change*. And participants did report changes, not necessarily in what or how they taught (these are the next steps in our work), but in their way of being and interacting in the classroom. For participants, story was the vehicle for *voice*. Their voices became valuable, political, cogent, and expert, powerfully rooted in their own experience.

A third element at play in our work was *community*. The stories told in all our sessions were told and listened to in community. We found that community formed in two places, namely in the moment of telling, the room where the stories were shared, and in memory. Once we heard each other’s stories,



we also carried them with us. We not only had ‘a’ voice, we had access to the strength and wisdom of a community of voices.

These three elements – voice, agency, and community –enlarged through story, were keys to transformation in both the individual and the collective. They are not the whole of a humanising pedagogy, but provide ground for further inquiry and work on practice – praxis. The Statements of Awareness we developed point the way to some of this work (see Addendum) .

Students also need to become a part of this same practice. Inquiring *with* students into their learning, and into the things that support and hinder, that are relevant and irrelevant to that learning, and listening with genuine curiosity and respect to their experiences as learners in our classes is another forum for inquiry. Such dialogue implicates our teaching and makes us vulnerable, but it also creates a space for us to grow *with* students. Our power can then become power *with* rather than power *over*.

## Conclusion

This work is not without its challenges. The challenges are substantial, especially when we examine a humanising pedagogy as a national project. Our work at this point is at the level of the University and the neighbouring communities.

Perhaps our biggest challenge, even at a local level, is sustaining the work in the Hub and elsewhere over time. At this point, with the Statements of Awareness in place, the sustaining work is located in *praxis*, where the Statements meet the realities of practice. The imperative of inquiry, which lies at the nexus of these two universes, where the evolution of a humanising pedagogy also lives, cries out for leadership, a second challenge. Without clear-sighted champions for this work, it can easily slide beneath the demands of the everyday exigencies of the University and schools. The fact that NMMU has formally embraced a humanising pedagogy at both the University and Faculty level is critical. But there is also the need for a daily kind of leadership to organise meetings, to ‘hold the whole’, and to keep the vision of a humanising pedagogy alive in both theory and practice. The humanising pedagogy project is as fragile – and as strong – as those who embrace it. It is, therefore, essential that it be as widely distributed as possible without losing its key purpose.

Voice, agency, and community all depend on a sense of belonging. Together, these elements comprise the task of citizenship, a citizenship that engages all of what it means to be human. Only when these ideas and consequent practices are kept central, can there be social justice.

## Endnotes

1. Hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of experience, whereas phenomenology refers to the “facts” of experience that are interpreted.
2. In this instance, descriptive inquiry is understood as “that part of reflection that focuses on the active searching for and gathering of evidence in the service of a thoughtful analysis and intelligent action for the purposes of growth in the context of an evolving democracy” (Rodgers, 2010, p. 49).
3. A “hub” was a formally sanctioned entity that served as a staff-led forum within the Faculty of Education where members could explore pertinent issues in particular areas of interest.
4. We put the term in quotation marks to show that we believe there is only one human race, that we recognise the term as a social construct, but do not understand that to mean different “races” exists as a valid signifier of difference between human beings
5. When we asked T.B. to clarify what had happened when she was “klapped” by the teacher, she added the following details via an email: “That was not all, she grabbed a cane and beat me up while I was rolling on the floor. When I got a chance to stand up I started to run towards the door but the teacher who brought me there, and who was watching disapprovingly after payment of the 50 cents, grabbed me and I felt safer. Brushing myself and still crying I was told by the teacher to go to the classroom.

I was very embarrassed because other children could just see that something had happened to me” (1 June 2012).

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## Statements of awareness of a humanising pedagogy

1. *Students' **humanity** – its existence and expansion – is at the heart of a humanising pedagogy.* All students and all teachers are human beings and equal in their humanity. We are all in the process of becoming. The purposes of education are to extend this humanity through opportunities for creativity, imagination, and interaction with others and the world.
2. *Teaching is a **political act**.* Classroom and school environments as well as political and social contexts are always in play. They impact learning and can restrict or enhance learning. *Teaching (students and teachers and schools) also has the power to impact these contexts.* Ultimately, a humanising pedagogy reaches toward a just and democratic society. It, therefore, requires interaction among learners and between learners and the world.
3. *Teaching requires **awareness**: listening closely, being **present**, communicating, and paying attention.* Teaching requires work on oneself. Awareness of prejudices and limiting assumptions about what is possible frees up space for learners to be fully present, which frees the teacher as well. Teaching requires the teacher to be fully present, to attend, and to communicate openly, which is easier when there is room for the teacher's real self.
4. *Ubuntu, connectedness, **relationship**, and community – feeling a part of something larger than oneself is central to the purposes of education.* Teaching and learning happen in relationship – with oneself, with others, and with the world. Learning extends beyond the self to include the other, and the natural world, where there is mutual vulnerability and mutual change. Education is for the sake not only of the individual but of the community, the nation, and the world. We are all connected to each other and to the planet. Learning requires **hope** for a future that includes oneself.
5. *Learning requires teachers and learners to have a **respect** for, a genuine **interest** in and curiosity about themselves as learners and the act of learning.* A learner is not knowable except through what they do and create that comes from who they are. Teaching is a process of discovery about learners and their learning. Without genuine interest in who the students might be and respect for them as human beings, doors to discovery will be closed.
6. *Learners need to be recognised, **appreciated**, acknowledged, and seen.* As human beings, all learners and teachers benefit from appreciation of who they are and the capacities they possess. These must be *seen* in order to be appreciated and acknowledged.
7. *Space and a safe space for student voice/student self, the teacher's genuine voice/teacher self must be created.* Without a safe space, the self, like a snail, pulls back into its shell. Without the presence of the student's self, little learning will happen. Without the presence of the teacher's self, relationship will not flourish, fear will dominate teaching, and joy will be absent.
8. *Teaching and learning are **courageous** acts of discovery.* They require one to **enquire**/move into what feels like someone else's non-sense, relinquishing one's own "sense", and temporarily suspending one's own identity. They require the courage to own one's questions, create one's own knowledge, and connect that knowledge to other knowledge. They require self-expression and vulnerability. They require interaction with others and with the world outside the classroom.

*Teaching and learning require **health** (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) and **freedom from fear**.* Basic human needs must be met before learning can flourish.