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Why skills anticipation in African VET systems needs to be decolonized: The wide-spread use and limited value of occupational standards and competency-based qualifications

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Humanising Online Pedagogy Through Asynchronous Discussion Forums: An Analysis of Student Dialogic Interactions at a South African University

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Abstract
Humanising pedagogy has been a focus of recent research as more universities move to online and blended models of instruction. Online learning has been linked to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and depersonalisation of the learning experience for many students. In South Africa, the shift to online instruction took place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and recent student movements that brought attention to how the country's violent history resulted in structural inequalities in terms of race and class that affect learning environments. Thus, humanising pedagogy also meant recognising and addressing how students' contextual challenges might affect their feelings of connection in the learning environment. In this article, we present a case study of a first-year course at a South African university where we used online discussion forums that required students to engage with weekly forum tasks. Through thematic content analysis of students' dialogic responses on these forum tasks, we demonstrate how the tasks facilitated humanising pedagogy by allowing students to use their authentic voices, to form social connections, and to reflect their affective and personal experiences. We argue that interactive, asynchronous online forums can be effective tools to facilitate humanising online pedagogy when these forums are designed in ways that encourage dialogic learning, use content that is relevant to students' contexts, and give students agency by allowing them to select texts for discussion and share their diverse perspectives. Our analysis also showed limitations to forum discussions which include students echoing responses and instances of silencing and unsupportive group dynamics.

Keywords: Online learning, forum discussions, humanising pedagogy, critical dialogic pedagogy

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In March 2020, South Africa went into a hard lockdown due to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic, with people confined to their homes except for meeting essential needs like buying groceries or seeking medical care. During this phase of the lockdown, all institutions of higher learning in the country moved to online teaching and learning in what became known as emergency remote teaching (ERT), a form of online education where curricula that had originally been designed for face-to-face instruction are rapidly transferred to the online space due to emergency conditions (Hodges et al., 2020). In light of this sudden move online, a number of challenges arose for students, particularly in the South African context which is marked by inequality and a long history of racial and cultural oppression that still affects learning environments in complex ways. The issue of isolation has been noted in many contexts of online learning, a feeling heightened by the social distancing that was required to limit the spread of the coronavirus (see Harris et al., 2021; Fouche & Andrews, 2022; Parker et al., 2021). Specifically, Parker et al. (2021) noted that online learning can feel "dehumanizing" (p. 119) due to students missing a sense of "closeness between themselves and others in the learning environment" (p.126). This is contrasted with a humanising pedagogy which can "maintain [a] sense of human presence" (p.120) even in the often-isolating online learning environment.

Humanising pedagogy has been explored by many scholars (for example, Fataar, 2016; Zinn et al., 2016; Kajee, 2021; Mendelowitz et al., 2022), and common themes emerge in literature on humanising pedagogy, including a focus on pedagogical strategies that can facilitate "learning communit[ies], engagement, collaboration, belonging, connection, interactive social learning, social presence, identity building, [and] personalized learning" (Parker et al., 2021, p. 120). In South Africa, humanising pedagogy is viewed as a way to acknowledge and challenge the legacy of oppressive systems like apartheid and the impact of inequality on education. This includes recognising and addressing how students might be denied forms of access to education due structural and social factors (Fataar, 2016). In this article, we engage with a "humanizing pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 173). We explore a case study of how we reconceptualised pedagogy and worked to humanise a first-year online course at a South African university during ERT through the use of dialogic asynchronous online forums. We use the methodology of thematic content analysis to explore students' interactions on these forums, and to identify how the forums enabled and restricted aspects of humanising the online learning environment. While many students still expressed severe challenges during online learning, we argue that the elements of humanising pedagogy we observed in these forum interactions can act as a foundation for more effective learning in online courses, particularly in contexts like South Africa where many students often do not have the resources to engage in synchronous online interactions. However, we argue that these forums need to be carefully designed to provide contextually-relevant forms of humanising pedagogy, which involves tapping into the diversity of resources, experiences and perspectives of students through meaningful dialogic engagement.

The South African Higher Education Context

In understanding the complexity of online learning, it is useful to first explore the dynamics of higher education in South Africa. The history of colonialism and the system of apartheid, which legislated the racist oppression and exploitation of Black people and other racial groups to the benefit of the minority white population, still impacts educational settings today. Most Black students are the first in their families to have access to tertiary education

(Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021) and many do not speak English as their home language; however, English is the language of instruction at most institutions of higher learning. In addition, the fact that well-resourced universities were often classified as "whites only" during apartheid means that these spaces still carry symbolic and structural elements of colonialism and apartheid. This is demonstrated in the fact that despite positive changes in demographics in recent years, a disproportionate number of academic staff are still white in South Africa (Breetzke & Hedding, 2018) and the rate of student demographic transformation at some universities has been incredibly slow (Carolissen, 2022).

The 2015 and 2016 #RhodesMustFall movement shone a light on not only the symbols of oppression like statues and names of buildings, but also the myriad ways that Black students continue to be violated and excluded on university campuses in South Africa (Khan, 2017). The subsequent #FeesMustFall student movement focused on the fact that the cost of tertiary education had skyrocketed, financially excluding students from low-income backgrounds. Students demanded fee-free education, since in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, education could be a pathway for Black people to uplift themselves and their families out of poverty (Griffiths, 2019). In light of these recent student movements and the tensions they exposed in higher education spaces, the pandemic and move to ERT was an additional strain on vulnerable students that required targeted and contextually-relevant interventions. A humanising pedagogy, like we worked to institute in the course under discussion, must be cognisant of the social and educational context in order to enable "a pedagogy that engages the full and ever evolving humanity of people" (Fataar, 2016, p. 20).

Challenges of Online Teaching and Learning During ERT

Many challenges around teaching and learning emerged during ERT in South Africa, including a lack of time for preparation of online courses due to the abrupt shift to online learning during the pandemic, constrained resources like information and communication technologies (ICT) or internet access, and insufficient institutional support for staff and students to adapt to the functionality of online learning management systems (LMSs) (Fouche & Andrews, 2022; Jaggars, 2021). These challenges added to the personal, emotional and financial hardship that many students were already experiencing. Higher education institutions made efforts to provide emotional and technological support to students, but they were only able to reach a limited number of students (Jaggars, 2021).

Students living in rural areas were particularly disadvantaged during the move to online learning, as they face a range of structural constraints and poor basic service delivery in their home areas, such as "electricity supply that is inconsistent and [internet or mobile] network coverage that is poor" (Hedding et al., 2020, p. 1). Many students had home environments that were unconducive to online learning due to overcrowded homes, insufficient learning spaces and a lack of privacy; in addition, the fact that the lockdown required school-aged children to remain at home also meant that some students were tasked with more childcare and other household tasks (Fouche & Andrews, 2022). Students and staff also experienced emotional challenges due to fear, stress, and the death or illness of friends and family because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022). Thus, while the move to online learning was necessary to limit the spread of the Coronavirus, it exacerbated existing problems in the South African higher education system.

As a response, we employed online discussion forums as a space for students to engage in critical dialogue. Online forums are message boards where discussions can take place (Kaur, 2011). It provides a space for learning, engagement, and interaction to occur without meeting face-to-face, even if members are logged on at different times (Kaur, 2011).On an online forum such as those we made use of in our LMS, members of the course site can post and respond to one another by posting messages, images and voice notes, and use the "like" function to show agreement with a post. A growing body of research has shown that online forums have the potential to enhance learning outcomes (Abawajy & Kim, 2011; Kadagidze, 2014; Gleason, 2020; Tomic et al., 2020; Mendelowitz et al., 2022). Abawajy and Kim (2011, p. 696) also add that "discussion forums offer a unique opportunity where some of the most important learning such as engagement in learning task, deeper levels of understanding, increased metacognition, increased motivation and divergent thinking can happen." However, this can only occur if the students engage in constructive dialogue and are receptive to peer learning.

Humanising Pedagogy

A humanising pedagogy recognises that "[e]ducation is, or it should be, person-centred" (Devis-Rosenthal & Clark, 2020, p. 3), and that in addition to learning outcomes one should acknowledge and foreground emotions, identities and personal experiences in pedagogy, including aspects of sociocultural and economic diversity (cf. Maistry, 2015; Fataar, 2016). A humanising pedagogy creates a sense of social connectedness in learning environments that might be isolating or alienating (cf. Harris et al., 2021). As suggested by Zinn et al. (2016) our pedagogy "needed to take into account who the [student] was, and where they were coming from in terms of their prior knowledge and assets—for example, background, languages, contextual, and experiential knowledges—as key aspects of practicing a humanising pedagogy" (73). This highlights that a humanising pedagogy empowers students to have agency in their learning, it amplifies and respects student voice, and it is linked to "emotions, care and compassion [as well as] mutual vulnerability and social justice" (73).

In South African research, humanising pedagogy is conceptualised as a means to deepen engagement and strengthen learning by focusing on structural and psychosocial dimensions and contexts, and simultaneously valuing students' knowledges, identities, and diverse experiences and forms of agentic participation in their learning (Fataar, 2016; Zinn et al, 2016; Zembylas, 2018). Fataar (2016, p. 19) notes that humanising pedagogy requires a recognition of the "social-subjective" dimensions of students, where their "life knowledges" are valued and meaningfully engaged, and "knowledge is participative and generative, not simply consumed." We recognise the community of inquiry framework as a model for social learning which understands educational experiences as influenced by social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). While this model is significant in many approaches to humanising pedagogy, it does not adequately centre the diversity of students and their contexts and how these might impact on the educational experience, and unlike the approach to humanising pedagogy outlined by many South African researchers, it does not have a central focus on social justice or critical pedagogy. Garrison et al. (2000, p. 94) define social presence in the community of inquiry model as "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used." They furthermore note that indicators of social

presence are "emotional expression – emoticons, autobiographical narratives; open communication – risk-free expression, acknowledging others, being encouraging; group cohesion – encouraging collaboration, helping, and supporting" (102).

While this definition addresses the basic conditions of how students can practise agency, form supportive communities, and assert themselves as "real" people in the learning environment, it does not fully consider questions of unequal access and how identities, histories, conflict, and diverse personal experiences that students bring to the online environment are significant in learning processes. Through the design of our online forums, we encouraged dialogic interaction between students and established spaces for them to capitalise on their existing resources and repertoires to provide epistemological access. We also draw on Freire's (2003) concept of re-humanisation which positions students at the centre of their learning by valuing prior knowledge, resources, and diverse identities.

Our conceptualisation of humanising pedagogy through critical dialogic engagement highlights how human interaction, personal identities, emotion, cognition, and pedagogical design intertwine to shape learning. This is important for theory and practice in unequal contexts like South Africa as it is responsive to the conflict, histories, political realities, and "messiness" of interactions in these contexts. We see this messiness as demonstrated in the uncontainable, unpredictable, and deeply personal engagements that at times took place in the forums, or what Zinn calls the "daily reality of conflicting views and perspectives, informed by diverse histories and lived experiences" (Zinn et al., 2016, 73). In our data, we illustrate dialogic interactions that stemmed from the humanising pedagogy we employed in the course. We illustrate how students alternate between personal and critical engagement as a result of the way we structured our forum tasks to promote critical dialogic engagement.

Humanising Pedagogy Through Critical Dialogic Interaction

Critical dialogic theory is centred around using dialogue to socially construct meaning, affirm the social worlds of students, and critique and produce authentic texts. Bakhtin (1984) and Freire (1993) both place emphasis on the role of dialogue in education. Bakhtin problematises the linear sequence of information and knowledge being passed down from teacher to student, explaining: "…truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110). Freire's (1993) notion of dialogic pedagogy emphasises the mutual learning amongst those in dialogue in a learning environment. A critical dialogic framework recognises learning as a collaborative, dialogic, and social journey of inquiry and critique.

Veloria and Boyes-Watson (2014) advocate for life experiences to be valued within academic spaces through dialogic engagement as it creates a sense of value, voice, and understanding for students which offers them access to capitalise on a wide range of resources that is often ignored in academic spaces. They argue for educators to broaden the scope of what constitutes knowledge within academic spaces because only through dialogue are we capable of understanding who students are and bridge gaps of difference of "age, race, socioeconomic status [,] educational level, [and] epistemological orientation" (72).

We found that the online forums enabled "[s]tudents [to] have dialogues with texts, with self and others [peers and lecturers]". In addition, in responding to texts and peers on the forum,

they draw on their identities, their socio-cultural contexts, and affect. Through this process of multiple dialogues students gain access to disciplinary knowledge and reconfigured knowledges" (Mendelowitz et al., 2022, p. 25). However, merely providing the space for forum discussions is insufficient to promote critical dialogic engagement, or to engage with the social justice element of humanising pedagogy that we argue for. Our data suggest that dialogic engagement was most effective when it was encouraged in the structure of forum questions, and authentic engagement was strengthened when contextually relevant materials were used and when students were asked to bring materials for discussion that were meaningful to their everyday experiences.

Methodology

Our study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How do online forum discussions facilitate a humanising pedagogy by fostering social, emotional, and critical academic interactions during learning?
2. What are the affordances and limitations of using online discussion forums to humanise online pedagogy?

Context

The data for this article were collected from the online forum discussions for the English 1 Media Stories course in 2020. This course was the first English I course to take place during ERT. Students only had one month of teaching and learning on campus before South Africa went into a hard lockdown. Since they were first-year students with limited social and academic engagement at university, these students required more support and guidance during the shift online.

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, where the current case study was conducted, is a relatively well-resourced university in an urban setting. However, the student body is diverse, and many students who stay at university residences usually live in rural or other poorly resourced areas. While the university loaned laptops to thousands of staff and students early in the pandemic, there were sometimes delays in receiving the devices, and the number of students in need of ICT support still outweighed the supply of equipment. Many students at our institution thus made use of cell phones to do online lessons or shared devices with family members or others in their communities (Fouche & Andrews, 2022), and this led to struggles with completing synchronous online lessons and tasks. In addition, mobile data is often prohibitively expensive for students, and despite the university providing some data, this was also subject to delays or was at times shared with others in students' household so that it became insufficient for online learning for many. As a response to the connectivity and ICT constraints students faced, the university mandated that lecturers design undergraduate courses to have low demands on data, and live video lectures were discouraged. Our English I course, Media Stories, only included short videos and mostly provided lessons in the form of text and static images.

One of our major concerns with asynchronous online learning was that it could be isolating for students to not interact with instructors or fellow students in synchronous fashion, and Harris et al. (2021) explain that live, synchronous lessons are effective formats to challenge isolation as they "can offer students important access to personal connectivity and interactivity"

(116). However, due to our context, synchronous lessons were not feasible, and instead we were forced to be innovative in including features in our course that could tap into the affordances of synchronous interactions while remaining asynchronous. We introduced asynchronous forum discussions in an effort to humanise our online course and create a space for dialogic interaction, as well as to be cognizant and responsive to the context we worked in. The forum tasks were assigned each week to ensure regular engagement, since, as argued by Woodcock (2009, p. 101) "[s]uccessful online courses include features that scaffold time management, pacing of work, timely completion of tasks, the use of appropriate learning strategies, and a student's sense of the ability to succeed." Research has also suggested that online forums can be "highly student-centered, democratic, and free of institutionalized patterns" (House-Peters et al., 2019, p. 93), adding to a sense of autonomy in learning.

Participants

A total of 327 students were registered for the English 1 Media Stories course, which is a compulsory course for students in the Bachelor of Education program majoring in English Studies. To encourage more familiarity between forum members and make the online space inviting for dialogic interaction, we arranged the class into ten groups of between 32-33 students. Arranging the class in smaller groups creates a safe online learning environment that facilitates academic success in higher education by establishing a space for community building (Shea et al. 2006). We randomly selected three of the ten forum groups for analysis to have a manageable amount of data for this article.

Students were asked for consent to use their forum responses for research purposes, and only 17 students from the three selected groups who provided explicit consent were included in this study. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality, and any identifying details of individual students were removed from the discussion of the data. Excerpts have been lightly edited for clarity, but we took care to preserve the voices of students as far as possible to demonstrate aspects of humanising pedagogy. We draw on Bakhtin (1984) and Thesen's (2013) conception of voice as "dialogic and multiple… We want our voices to carry ideas across spaces and to reach receptive readers with whom we establish a relationship" (Mendelowitz et al, 2022, p. 24).

Data Analysis

We chose the method of thematic content analysis to show the strategies students used in their online interactions and how these reflected the affordances and limitations of the type of humanising pedagogy we employed. Content analysis is "a systematic coding and categorizing approach used for exploring large amounts of textual information unobtrusively to determine trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures and discourses of communication" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400). In thematic content analysis, the codes generated in the process of content analysis are organised into themes in order to offer meaningful lenses to understand large quantities of data. Two of the authors who were the instructors on the course were involved in organising and coding the data. The process involved reading through each individual post across the three groups that students submitted every week for the course. Sections of the original posts and the thread responses by peers were coded according to categories that included personal, social, and critical academic resources that were

employed in each interaction, as well as the tone and style of responses. The coding was checked and verified by all authors of this article.

Based on the codes generated, we identified three relevant themes under which we discuss our data: i) *echo chambers versus diverse perspectives;* ii) *unsupportive group dynamics and silencing of peers;* and iii) *engaging with personal identity and affect*.

For the course, we set up the forum discussions to be task-oriented to ensure academic engagement with course content, and we did not limit students to a particular length or number of posts to encourage ongoing learning throughout the week, as new posts were frequently added due to the asynchronous nature of the forums. We also included topics, themes, and content that provide epistemic access and scope for personal engagement and reflection to humanise the online space. Some of the weekly topics included: the role of the media during the Covid-19 pandemic, political news stories in South Africa, language choices and positioning, and sharing and engaging with news headlines and news photographs. Most of the tasks required students to respond to one another's posts to share differing perspectives or to offer feedback on their classmates' analyses. This strategy ensured some level of interaction, although follow-up discussions on these exchanges were rare.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present and analyse data from the weekly online forums under the three identified themes. We explore the affordances and limitations of humanising pedagogy that we identified in our data in relation to the theoretical and conceptual framework outlined above. Under each of the themes, we also reflect on the ways that our approach to humanising pedagogy was effective in promoting critical dialogic engagement that led to deeper learning.

Echo Chambers Versus Diverse Perspectives

While there was generally a lack of inter-student communication beyond the mandated one or two responses in some tasks, there were moments of prolonged engagement and multiple responses to some students' posts that emerged in the forums. Inter-student engagement was generally lower in the earlier weeks of the course across groups, possibly indicating a lack of confidence with the academic discourse required in the course, and the fact that students were still struggling to employ their authentic voices in the online learning space. However, one group shared multiple posts in response to a question from the student Thabiso in an early forum task, providing encouraging statements, affirmation, and additional ideas, as illustrated in the extended exchanges below:

> **Thabiso:** Since we all have different social positions and ideologies when reading media texts. Is there a wrong way of understanding the messages conveyed by the media and is it possible for one ideology to outweigh the others?
>
> **Melissa:** Hi Thabiso, Great question - I would like to give my opinion, and that is that I do not believe that there is a wrong way of understanding a message, of course depending on the context. […] as a democratic state here in SA [South Africa], I would never want to believe that one ideology should outweigh another unless it is for the good of all the citizens in that country.

> **Ayanda:** Hi Thabiso I also agree with you, because as people we are different and sometimes we expect different things. The reason might be the differences in culture or society beliefs that influence the way we understand the messages conveyed by media.
>
> **Munir:** Hello Thabiso. Great question, I would not say that it is wrong on its own, because that is each individual's capacity. One thing that can be a solution is that everybody can enrich themselves with correct ways of interpreting the media, a way in which no one side is biased, things are mentioned as is.

Devis-Rosenthal and Clark (2020, p. 8) emphasise that respect for diverse opinions is an important component of humanising pedagogy, and this is evident in the original post by Thabiso as he begins by saying "we all have different social positions and ideologies when reading media texts." This is an indication that he is aware of the diverse ideologies and backgrounds that exist for students in the group. Indicating this upfront creates a welcoming space for students to engage with the question, no matter what their perspective is. The tone of curiosity and acceptance in Thabiso's question could have influenced the high level of engagement on the post. This reflects the character of online forums being potentially "democratic" spaces (House-Peters et al., 2019, p. 93) where a multiplicity of voices is encouraged as long as these voices maintain the tone of respect.

Within the post, Thabiso asks his question "Is there a wrong way of understanding the messages conveyed by the media and is it possible for one ideology to outweigh the others?" as a form of "sense making" (Devis-Rosenthal and Clark, 2020) showing how forums can be powerful tools for epistemic access to work with difficult course content (Mendelowitz et al, 2022). Criticality is evident in his question, as it relates to power relations and social inequalities by considering whose ideology is more powerful. We specifically designed the forum task to engage students' critical thinking about media texts in contexts, asking them to answer questions about the role of media, how context shapes understanding of media texts, and our relationship with the media we consume. Students were then also asked to respond to and critique at least one other student's answers. This task structure was an effort to humanise the online learning environment by prompting students to recognise the potential for "conflicting views and perspectives" (Zinn et al., 2016, p. 73) and to engage in dialogic learning through creating the space to challenge social power structures through online conversations. Thabiso's question shows an awareness of differing "social-subjective" realities (Fataar, 2016, p.19) and how news might reproduce dominant ideologies that serve to oppress and marginalise some identities or perspectives.

However, the responses that Thabiso receives from his peers lack critical engagement and do not explore the possibility of power differentials in relation to competing ideologies. These students do not consider dominant and non-dominant ideologies that exist in society even though this question creates an opportunity to critically engage with the topic and to share more personal or context-specific ideas, and the desire to foster "group cohesion" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94) through a supportive community of inquiry might have stunted critical engagement. While there seems to be a diversity of perspectives and voices presented, the answers might still be "safe" and students might not be willing to challenge one another or voice controversial opinions in the forums. Effectively, it becomes an echo chamber, defined as an environment "in which the

opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes" (Cinelli et al., 2021, p. 1). This might reflect a significant disadvantage of online forums where the element of criticality becomes secondary to the drive to create supportive and friendly learning environment and reinforce dominant perspectives. This interaction seems to have been an instance where intervention or further probing by the course facilitator could have strengthened the level of critical engagement, particularly in pointing to diverse "life knowledges" (Fataar, 2016, p. 19), but the large student numbers in the course meant that the facilitators could not read or respond to all of the forum posts each week during ERT.

Another forum dynamic that sparked extended engagement occurred when some students demonstrated misunderstandings of the course content, and other students stepped in to correct them. This demonstrates how understanding is enabled through lengthy responses, and multiple students were able to share their perspectives and learn from their peers. The lengthier exchanges enabled more criticality in the way students engaged and allowed them to claim their own academic voices (Mendelowitz et al., 2022). Many of these posts also demonstrate the aspect of agency (Devis-Rosenthal and Clark, 2020, p. 8), a factor closely linked to social presence as defined by Garrison et al. (2000) in their community of inquiry model. Students recognise that they can shape the discourse in the forum and that their knowledge and perspectives are valid, an important part of authentic dialogic learning (Bakhtin, 1984; Freire, 1993) and humanising pedagogy where "knowledge is participative and generative, not simply consumed" (Fataar, 2016, p.19).

A thread in the week 1 forum task involved eight students, and each of them added some disagreement or support to the answers of their peers. The original post in this example is by the student Pule, and many other students responded to him. The theme of the task drew on the role of the media during the Covid-19 pandemic; therefore, the heavy engagement could be due to a link between personal and academic lives, as students were engaging academically with a topic that affected their lives in multiple ways, and they also attempt to rectify Pule's misunderstanding of how media texts function across modes and genres. Some of the responses to Pule are illustrated below.

> **Pule:** The role of the media is to create an awareness of this global pandemic to those who are not affect by it and how they can help to prevent the spread. The news does not change when it is conveyed from newspapers to TV because the TVs and newspapers all convey the same massage which is to prevent the spreading out of the pandemic.[…]
>
> **Tamara:** I disagree somewhat to your answer, I think that the news changes, depending on what you look at and depending on the author of the specific information you are viewing.
>
> **Fortunate:** and to add to your answer […], i also think the role of media in this global pandemic is to create a way for people to access information and also act as a link between the events of reality and the receivers of information which is us the people whom consume this information.
>
> **Sally:** I agree with Tamara that news changes depending on what you look at and on the author of the specific information you viewing but I also agree with you Pule that news sometimes don't change it's just that the television adds some information that the newspaper did not cover

Many students who participated in this exchange had clearly read all the responses that came before theirs and took those earlier responses into account when providing their perspectives, as Fortunate and Sally show awareness of what Tamara had posted before them. This demonstrates a complex interactional structure where students might be participating at various points of an ongoing discussion at different times. The tone of these exchanges is also much less playful, friendly or informal than many other interactions on the forum, such as many interactions where students used emoticons or informal greetings. There were some supportive statements, for example Tamara's "I disagree somewhat", indicating that Pule was perhaps on the right track with some of his thinking, and Fortunate also challenges Pule through the qualifier "to add to your answer". This qualifier indicates that students recognise that negative feedback might be unpleasant to receive, but the students still want to help Pule correct some misunderstandings and attempt to make the online forum a pleasant and non-judgmental space, a form of strengthening social cohesion and respecting the affective dimensions of learning (Devis-Rosenthal & Clark, 2020; Parker et al., 2021) while maintaining critical dialogic engagement. Students in this example draw on one another as resources and learn through peer feedback, an affordance of online forums highlighted by Kaur (2011) and Tomic et al. (2020).

While there is no indication from Pule that he had read the replies and developed his thinking through the community on the forum, it is evident that the other students who participated in the thread were actively engaging and testing out their own understanding of the course content, and as this is a public forum, other students in the group are also able to benefit from reading this exchange of ideas. However, the discussion still feels decontextualised and does not adequately engage with the sociocultural dimensions which are important in the type of humanising pedagogy we worked to enact in this course (see Maistry, 2015; Fataar, 2016). For example, students do not question why Pule and Tamara might have had such different reactions to media based on their cultural, linguistic or economic backgrounds, or based on the types of media they were exposed to in their everyday lives.

While these reactions were all from early in the course, and the forum tasks progressively became more direct in asking students to engage with their identities and environments, an intervention from the facilitator might have deepened the engagement. For example, students could be asked to reflect on the types of media they regularly engage with, and how these might differ from their classmates in terms of language, content, style or function. This intervention might have helped to further the humanising pedagogy through encouraging reflection on unequal access to particular forms of media in the South African context, thus more closely aligning with "a pedagogy that engages the full and ever evolving humanity of people" (Fataar, 2016, p. 20).

Unsupportive Group Dynamics and Silencing of Peers

A sense of social cohesion and support was not established in all instances. Some struggled to engage effectively with their peers which affected participation, engagement and group dynamics. Some students used a form of critical questioning that might have been alienating for other students, especially in light of historical inequalities in South Africa. An example is shown below. One student, Lindiwe, posts her ideas about a news article discussing a case of corruption in South Africa. Lindiwe's opinion of the article is a fairly simplistic reflection of the story's facts with a focus on the way that media can affect the sense of justice experienced by readers in exposing corruption. Another student, Melissa, responds to Lindiwe:

Melissa: Hi Lindiwe,

I have 2 questions relating to your answers above. 1. What makes you feel that this article would bring a reader peace and justice? Would the reader not be angry or upset? If you were reading this at the time it was published, would you feel at peace? 2. Is it the medias responsibility to bring justice? They can most definitely rally the masses and cause pressure but I do not believe that it is their duty to bring justice, hence the reason no answer to what will happen next was written, very little opinion was given in this report, its intention was to expose the corruption.

I agree with your first statement in the linkage between the image and the title, and the uncovering of the truths to the public, I would just like to get an idea of your thoughts because mine were so very different.

Best of luck for the rest of the week :)

Melissa uses a questioning approach in an attempt to understand the reasoning behind Lindiwe's response which could be read to indicate her willingness to understand different perspectives. However, she poses a question and immediately gives her own firm opinion without creating a supportive space for Lindiwe to re-engage. This comes across as dismissive of Lindiwe's original post, showing little support or affirmation of diverse perspectives.

It is evident that Melissa establishes "agency" (Devis-Rosenthal and Clark, 2020, p. 8) and asserts her identity in her response to Lindiwe. Melissa also shows that she might be open to engage in critical dialogue with Lindiwe (Mendelowitz et al., 2022), where she is able to challenge her groupmate and resist the tendency seen in many other threads to simply become echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021). Melissa is one of the most dominant students in her group and her approach and agency is mimicked by other students in the group who draw on Melissa's direct questioning style and authoritative tone when they join the conversation.

It is important to note that "dialogue is shaped by how the speaker imagines the addressee" (Mendelowitz et al., 2022, p. 24) and a speaker's persona on online forums is partly shaped by their linguistic choices and tone which can establish power relations or reinforce existing unequal relations. Thus, the response might have stifled discussion and limited critical engagement from Lindiwe as her sense of belonging (Devis-Rosenthal and Clark, 2020, p. 7) on the forum might have been compromised, and she might have experienced this thread to be a space where her perspective and voice were not respected. Unspoken in this interaction is the fact that Melissa is white and Lindiwe is Black, and in the context of the history of oppression in South Africa, these racial dynamics still impact online discussions, particularly since students are able to post profile pictures on the LMS or might be "read" in racial ways based on their names, linguistic repertoires or styles of interaction. The fact that Lindiwe responds to many other students, but avoids responding to Melissa even though she is directly addressed by her multiple times in later forum discussions, might show how interpersonal dynamics impact on the nature of interactions in the shared online space. These conflicts arise in many learning environments, and are part of the "messiness" that we discussed when characterising an authentic humanising pedagogy that recognises "diverse histories and lived experiences" (Zinn et al., 2016, p. 73).

While the large number of weekly posts from students meant that the facilitators were unable to pick up on these dynamics at the time they occurred, an effective humanising pedagogy

would not shy away from addressing moments that reflect broader social realities. In the example, Melissa seemingly assumes that Lindiwe shares her own political orientation and reaction to the events described in the article, while in reality Lindiwe might have offered a vastly different perspective if engaged in a more respectful or curious way. The fact that these dynamics emerged in the forum shows the potential for the forum tasks to work within a humanising pedagogy when contextually-relevant topics are used as the basis for dialogue, but it also shows how tone and affect might stifle engagement. An intervention from the facilitator, in line with humanising pedagogy, might have asked the students to reflect on how political affiliation, exposure to different media, or dynamics of race and culture might have impacted on the way they read the story differently.

Engaging with Personal Identity and Affect

The forums often became a space for students to share their own anxieties, challenges or personal perspectives in indirect ways. Students could share common ground on how the media had been creating fear or panic in their lives during the pandemic. Therefore, they could create a link between their personal and academic lives, making learning a more meaningful experience that incorporated multiple dimensions of their lives (Devis-Rosenthal and Clark, 2020; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014).

In the threads below, students draw on their shared experiences and need for hope to establish a space where they felt able to discuss emotions in relation to the content of the task. As the weeks progressed, students also became more familiar with one another and this would show in the patterns of engagement, as students showed more familiarity with those they responded to. This created a sense of community in the groups analysed. Many of our students are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and the history of apartheid in South Africa means that Black people still often suffer systemic oppression. Students' voices were clear in their advocacy roles when this was not necessarily asked for in the questions, demonstrating that students were using the course content to consider their own lives and societies and the social effects of the pandemic they were witnessing in the communities around them. This also links to Fataar's (2016, p. 19) framework of humanising pedagogy, as students were given the space to express their "social-subjective" realities.

One of the richest forum tasks in relation to the way that students could bring of themselves to the online interactive space was the task in Week 5 of the course, where students could select any image from a news story that they wanted to discuss in the forum. While this task was very broad and students were not restricted in terms of their image selection, the vast majority of the images selected by students focused on three main themes. We interpreted this narrow range of themes in students' image selection as telling of how they bring their personal experiences to the forums, as they use the online space to indirectly voice the affective and sociocultural dimensions of their lives. The first theme is police violence, and many images of uniformed police with weapons or enacting violence were included in the forum discussions across the three groups. During the lockdown in South Africa, police violence was prevalent, and South Africa generally has alarmingly high rates of police violence, especially in impoverished communities. The second theme is poverty and how this affects people's everyday lives and their ability to ensure that they can take protective measures against the spread of Covid-19. Students generally expressed a great deal of sympathy for those who were living in impoverished

communities through their discussions of the images they selected. The third theme was the fear and uncertainty around reopening schools during the easing of lockdown restrictions. As the students were all pursuing degrees in Education, their future careers in schools would naturally be significant to them, and they reflected this through news stories that focused on school environments.

In one group, the student Sheldon posts an image depicting police monitoring an impoverished Black community during lockdown. The responses focus on the fact that the only group depicted in the image are Black people, reflecting an awareness of the unequal social impact of lockdowns and disease. One response reads:

> **Fortunate:** the image you provided positions me to think and feel sad towards the Black community, as they are the ones included in the image. i thus think the image might have been cropped a bit as some parts might have been cut out from the image, like perhaps there could've been white people cropped so as to make the headline more about Black people being the ones suffering from the Covid 19. […] if i could ask, is the headline of that image about Black people?

Only Black students responded to Sheldon's image, perhaps signaling a personal awareness of racism and how this is reproduced through media. Fortunate specifically explains that he feels "sad" at viewing the image, and questions whether there might have been ideological reasons for representing the community in the particular way the image does. Students thus clearly intermingle criticality and their understanding of course content, such as the concept of cropping that Fortunate refers to, with their affective dimensions and sociocultural awareness. They indicate a desire for social justice in the way that images are selected to represent particular communities and empathise and identify with those who are oppressed.

An example from the theme of police brutality shows the emotionally charged nature of students' forum responses, even when they spoke in abstract or generalised terms and did not personalise feelings of anger, despair or frustration. The student Kim posted a picture of protesters with a sign reading "I can't breathe" in reference to the police killing of George Floyd in the U.S., and explained:

> **Kim:** The picture above positions the reader to feel as if he or she is too taking part within the march for George Floyd, strong feelings such as hate and anger towards the police that stood and watched as a white male sent George to his death. […]
>
> **Tumisang:** Black people are tired of not being treated equally as white people and this is the time that black lives matters must be taken into consideration. […]

The dialogue that occurs between Kim and Tumisang illustrate their frustration with police brutality and racism against Black people. This shows a heightened sense of criticality and how the online space became humanised over the period of five weeks as each week the students demonstrate a greater willingness to engage with affect and to reflect on their "life knowledge" (Fataar, 2016, p. 19), as Tumisang relates broader frustrations around racism to this media story about the U.S.

Dialogue was significant in week 5 as the task involved critical analysis of images and language use in the media, while drawing on course content and an extended range of personal and social resources. As Mendelowitz et al., 2023, p. 54) explain, "[d]ialogism extends way beyond a conversation between two or more people. It refers to multiple dynamic interactions with the self, with others and with texts and cultural resources". The dialogue in week 5 draws on aspects of social presence in terms of putting forth personal views, discussing the news story as a group and drawing on news media and one another as cultural resources when trying to make sense of the stories and images. The online learning environment became a space to express a holistic form of voice that melds the personal and academic dimensions. This promotes epistemic access as students navigate between their personal lives and academic engagement, recognising that their life experiences can also be valued as forms of knowledge in a dialogic learning environment. Deeper forms of engagement become possible by creating the space for this type of critical dialogue, and through our task design that asked students to bring their own texts for discussion, a humanising pedagogy was enabled as students relied on their cultural resources to consider how the course content interacted with their lived realities (Veloria and Boyes-Watson, 2014).

Discussion

Online pedagogy has become increasingly prevalent in higher education settings, and this mode was effective to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. We implemented the use of asynchronous forum discussions in our first-year English course to meet the needs of our students and to eliminate feelings of isolated learning in an attempt to humanise the online learning space. In developing an approach for humanising pedagogy that incorporated the community of inquiry model as well as the social justice imperative advocated by South African researchers (Garrison et al., 2000; Fataar, 2016; Zinn et al, 2016; Zembylas, 2018), we implemented an intervention that included three components -: we designed tasks in ways that encouraged critical dialogue through the use of online forums, used content that enabled students to draw on and reflect on their diverse contexts, and enabled students to select texts that were important to them for online discussion. This article explored the dialogic interactions between students on the online forums, and through thematic content analysis, we argue that the humanising elements were able to enrich students' learning experiences and foster dynamic forms of engagement on the forums as the tasks encouraged students to engage using their authentic voices, incorporating both the personal and academic dimensions and promoting diverse perspectives.

Writing as a form of dialogic interaction enables intertextual histories and cultural resources and repertoires to surface (Mendelowitz et al., 2023). In comparison to contact learning, the weekly forum responses offered students time and space to think deeply, research, reflect and edit their work before posting it online, which resulted in many rich responses and well-developed discussions (Kaur, 2011; Tomic et al., 2020). The permanence and visibility of the written mode and online forums allowed students opportunities to revisit and continue conversations over time. This allowed for broader and more complex dynamics of interaction, such as students asking and responding to tangential questions within particular forums, or students creating long threads of responses that demonstrated an understanding that the audience of their work included not only the person that they were replying to, but potentially also

included the course facilitators and every other student assigned to their forum group. In some lengthy threads, students clearly took into consideration multiple earlier comments from other students as they formed their responses. These layered webs of interactions enabled forms of dialogic engagement that would not have been possible if students were simply completing tasks in isolation, and demonstrate a more organic, humanising online learning environment enabled by asynchronous forums.

The forum discussion groups established an academic learning community amongst students who participated in the course. It resulted in student engagement with content and one another in ways that were predominantly collaborative, affective and supportive, and the discussions we analysed indicate that students were actively working to better understand the topics in the course through these dialogues. The tone and style of responses played a role in how others responded and seemed to be a factor in whether students returned to the discussions. Friendly responses that showed a willingness to listen and learn from others created a positive group dynamic which encouraged dialogic interaction amongst the students, while overly-critical or authoritative responses seemed to discourage future engagement. Methods of ensuring supportive engagement, while not compromising criticality, could be an important topic for further research.

As the weeks progressed and the group members became familiar with one another, students responded more critically to the tasks and used a greater understanding of concepts from the course when responding to one another, which indicated the development of students' academic voices and greater agency. The online forums were student-centred, with limited input from the instructors, which encouraged autonomy where students took it upon themselves to assist one another and rectify misunderstandings by peers. The affordance of safety created by the online mode resulted in a high number of students responding to the tasks, with a much greater range of voices contributing than we experienced during face-to-face classroom interactions.

The weekly online forum tasks indirectly offered scope to draw on students' personal lives and current issues. Many students used the forums as a space to express concern, sympathise and support one another's fears and frustrations about issues that they were experiencing. Students could rely on cultural resources including their own experiences or emotions, and bring their own texts for discussion, which allowed for a greater diversity in the types of "life knowledges" (Fataar, 2016, p. 19) that were engaged. We argue that this is an important aspect of humanising pedagogy which must be considered in diverse and unequal contexts like South Africa, and in analysing our data, we identified instances where these interactions allowed for greater epistemic access and deepened engagement by students recognising that their knowledge, perspectives and resources were valuable (Zinn et al., 2016).

One major limitation of the forums was that students rarely revisited the forums to follow up on responses, and we could not track how many of the responses each student had read. Therefore, we cannot attribute the success of the course solely to the forum tasks or to the intervention we outline in this article. While the purpose of the forums was to alleviate isolated learning and to humanise the online space, including a focus on social justice, a lack of responses

could have been isolating in its own way. Future research could explore the effectiveness of more facilitator engagement, particularly if more resources are available to facilitators.

Conclusion

Online pedagogy has become increasingly prevalent in higher education settings, and this mode was effective to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. We implemented the use of asynchronous forum discussions in our first-year English course to meet the needs of our students and to eliminate feelings of isolated learning in an attempt to humanise the online learning space. In developing an approach for humanising pedagogy that incorporated the community of inquiry model as well as the social justice imperative advocated by South African researchers (Garrison et al., 2000; Fataar, 2016; Zinn et al, 2016; Zembylas, 2018), we implemented an intervention that included three components -: we designed tasks in ways that encouraged critical dialogue through the use of online forums, used content that enabled students to draw on and reflect on their diverse contexts, and enabled students to select texts that were important to them for online discussion. This article explored the dialogic interactions between students on the online forums, and through thematic content analysis, we argue that the humanising elements were able to enrich students' learning experiences and foster dynamic forms of engagement on the forums as the tasks encouraged students to engage using their authentic voices, incorporating both the personal and academic dimensions and promoting diverse perspectives.

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Online forum discussions can be an effective way of facilitating a humanising pedagogy, but for this space to be humanising, careful attention must be paid to the design of tasks and the content students are asked to engage with. As more institutions worldwide move to blended learning, a humanising pedagogical approach can enable a supportive learning environment that values academic success, integrates students' existing resources and respects their authentic voices.

Declarations

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The authors assert that approval was obtained from an ethics review board (IRB) at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

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