This issue of New Community (NC) gathers a diverse group of educators who share a concern about the dehumanising nature of modern education systems; we take the dehumanisation of education as a given, allowing the authors to explore how we can re-humanise (rather than simply abandon or abolish) education systems and institutions. However, it is important to set some backdrop for their creative contributions.

Rethinking the notion of humanising

If we are to consider how we can re-humanise education, it is – firstly – worth pondering the actual notion of humanising. What does ‘humanising’ mean? We might speak of humanising beings that we traditionally classify as not human, such as animals, or computer beings. In the rise of our new post-human world, it seems humans are now taken to be just as susceptible to falling in love with their operating systems as they are with their poodles (Jonze 2014). But to speak of humanising the lives of beings that we already take for granted as human, well, that may strike us odd, illogical. Yet it is precisely this kind of talk that we often catch ourselves in the act of making. When directed to our own human being, what does the notion of humanising mean?

One philosophical understanding that I think is helpful for our purposes can be found in the work of Heidegger (2016). True to form, he uses a puzzling word, ‘dis-humanising’, to describe the habitual way we explain ‘all beings’, including our own (125). When we inquire into human beings, we tend to rely on ‘terms’ that are fixed, factual, corresponding to what we can plainly find to be objectively true, or ‘correct’, about a person (125). Yes, it is true that today, I weigh a certain amount of kilograms, my driver’s license attests to my correct date of birth, I am legally married, biologically, I have 3 dependent children, and so on. It would also be correct to say that I am currently employed as a university educator at a particular institution, that I earn a certain amount of monthly income, that I have certain education qualifications, that I have ‘x’ number of students in the course I am responsible for...

But how useful is this manner of description for illuminating not ‘what’ but ‘how’ a person is, a discernible way of being that belongs to them? There is much that we can tell about people via propositions that, if checked, might turn out to be true. But how far do these truths go in portraying ‘my’ unique being and experiences? If we follow Heidegger’s thinking, factual assertions do not humanise because they cannot convey a person’s cultivated ‘own way’ of doing and being something. Indeed, as my own ways of educating take shape, of parenting, laughing, learning, of being in the world, they may well be recognisable, but they are simultaneously unique, un-replicable and irreplaceable.

So, in the light of this insight, we can tentatively say that humanising means avoiding the snares of ‘dis-humanisation’, and finding new ‘terms’ with which we can understand and relate with one another. Such an understanding may involve releasing others and our selves toward possibilities of being.

This, I hesitate to suggest, seems to be a vein of Heidegger’s description of the phenomenon of dis-humanising. And it is this idea I find deeply challenging as an educator and as a person today. For example, Todres, Galvin and Holloway (2009) pick up this philosophical approach to contend that humanising practice should involve attending to the irreplaceable ‘uniqueness’ of each person, rather than going along with a dis-humanising trend that relates to people as a homogenous group (71).

This brings to mind a doctor friend of mine who once mentioned how, within his hospital workplace, he challenged a discursive practice of referring to patients in terms of bed numbers (‘Bed 13 needs a script’). In the shared busyness of providing care, my friend told me how he resolved that...
whenever a colleague referred him to a patient in such dis-humanising terms, he decided to gently counter, ‘Do you mean Mr Jones?’ And with this, my friend’s own way of being a doctor in that world began to take shape. I wonder about the influence of this seemingly insignificant inflection in the human encounters that are to this day unfolding.

But humanising cultural practices are no simple task. I am currently working as a university course coordinator. I am expected to support the participation of over 200 students, across 3 campuses. I am faced with the dis-humanising nature of my work every time I forget, or give up trying to learn, a student’s name; every time I am expected to measure the quality of a person’s unique work in numerical terms, and so it goes on.

For now, we only name these tensions, holding them open. I encourage readers of the papers in this issue to listen out for ways that may help them, and others, to resist the snares of dis-humanising in their shared practice worlds, reclaiming different ways through which ontological ground can be cleared for the differing being, story and wisdom of each person.

Calling out dehumanising aspects of education

If we are to consider how we can re-humanise education, we should hold no illusions about what we are up against. Much has already been written that alerts us to the damaging and dehumanising forces within education systems. There is a growing body of literature critiquing intersecting practices, processes and mechanisms that have come to pervade education scenes in Australia and beyond. For some exposés of the dehumanising trends in education, I recommend reading the work of Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (too many works to reference here); Irish social equality scholar Kathleen Lynch and colleagues (Lynch 2010, 2014; Lynch, Grummell & Devine 2012; Lynch, Lyons & Cantillon 2007); American-Canadian cultural critic Henry Giroux (2002, 2014); Australian socio-legal scholar Margaret Thornton and colleagues (2014); American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) and Norwegian educationalist Anders Breidlid (2013).

Along with the wreck of bureaucratism, these scholars interrogate neoliberalism, managerialism, professionalism, marketism, technologism, monopolism, authoritarianism and other dehumanising ‘-isms’ that are running havoc in educational contexts. Furthermore, a concern can also be heard about the dehumanising exertion of Western epistemologies, ontologies, pedagogies and research methodologies. For example, Breidlid (2013) reveals how this hegemony leads to the tragic silencing and relegating of Indigenous and subalternt ways of knowing, teaching and researching. Here I have only noted some key historical-cultural dynamics that these writers analyse in depth. Making head and tail of each of these facets is a worthwhile endeavour.

Recalling lived experiences of being in education systems

If we are to consider how we can re-humanise education, it is important that we pay attention to lived experiences of dehumanising education systems and structures. In my research work (Spier, forthcoming), I seek to understand people’s everyday experiences of being involved in formal educational worlds. A common theme that has emerged is the dehumanising effects of people’s experiences amidst institutional education. Fellow educators and students have told me many (previously untold) stories about their experiences. These stories often convey hidden wounds that appear to remain open for a person, sometimes years and even decades on.

For example, the following experiential story was lived and written by Lucy (pseudonym), a mature-aged tertiary student, about an early schooling experience. The story emerged during a narrative pedagogy workshop I facilitated in early 2014 on participatory praxis for a group of student counsellors and youth workers.¹ What the following text cannot convey is the tonality and mood in which it was read aloud by its author, Lucy, to those of us gathered that day to hear it.

When I was in Year Three, mid-1960s, Term Two, I was told by my class teacher that I was no longer in her class, and I was to go into the Year Two class. I didn’t know why. I didn’t know anyone. End of Term Three we were told that all Year Three students were to go into one classroom. I felt excited to be back where I belonged with my friends. The two Year Three Teachers and the Head Master came into the class. We were told to listen for our name, which the Head Master read from a list. When he finished reading the list he said that those students who had passed Year Three. He then said to stand up if your name hadn’t been called. I was one of five students who stood up thinking he had forgotten to put my name on the list. He asked each of us our name and then told everyone we had failed Grade Three. I felt really stupid because I didn’t realise that I could fail. I didn’t realise that kids could fail. The bell rang and the class ran outside, excited because now they were Year Four students and they could play on the new outdoor play equipment. I stood on the sidelines and started to cry. I was angry because the Head Master made me cry and I didn’t have any friends.

Through my research and teaching practice, contemplating experiences like Lucy’s has shown me how our own buried stories of being in education systems, so often authoritarian, can continue to influence ‘how we are’ being and becoming as counsellors, youth workers, educators, community development workers, theologians, and parents, or whatever it is that we are projecting ourselves to be in the world.
Even though narrating and dialogueing our life experiences of education settings may be a fruitful process for all of us, the same systems that have oppressed us make it hard to pause and retreat from our busyness to engage in collective storytelling and the shared search for meanings. Drawing out our stories for critical interpretive dialogue takes time and care. Yet it remains essential that we struggle for spaces to meditate on how our formative experiences are already influencing our taken-for-granted ways of practice with others.

My design of the workshop in which I guided Lucy and her peers to create and work with their own experiential narratives, was informed by an interpretive tradition of ‘narrative pedagogy’ developed and practiced by Nancy Diekelmann and others (Diekelmann 2003; Ironside 2007; Le Fevre 2011; van Manen, McClelland & Phihal 2007) and the theme for the workshop came from my prior wrestling with a passage in Paulo Freire’s (2000/1970:154-155) classic text. In it, Freire suggests that if we are reared in homes, schools and universities that reflect normative pyramid-like structures, then we will inevitably, albeit inadvertently, reproduce these structures in our own professional ways of being. He writes:

Internalising parental [and teacher] authority through the rigid relationship structure emphasised by the school [and universities etc.], these young people tend when they become professionals (because of the very fear of freedom instilled by these relationships) to repeat the rigid patterns in which they were miseducated. This phenomenon, in addition to their class position, perhaps explains why so many professionals adhere to anti-dialogical action. Whatever the specialty that brings them into contact with the people, they are almost unshakably convinced that it is their mission to ‘give’ the latter their knowledge and techniques. They see themselves as ‘promoters’ of the people. Their programmes of action (which might have been prescribed by any good theorist of oppressive action) include their own objectives, their own convictions, and their own preoccupations. They do not listen to the people, but instead plan to teach them how to ‘cast off’ the laziness which creates underdevelopment’. To these professionals, it seems absurd to consider the necessity of respecting the ‘view of the world’ held by the people. The professionals are the ones with a ‘world view’. They regard as equally absurd the affirmation that one must necessarily consult the people when organising the programme content of educational action. They feel that the ignorance of the people is so complete that they are unfit for anything except to receive the teachings of the professionals (154-155).

This passage drew me to reflect on my own experiences and helped me to think about how such experiences of dehumanising education structures may have imparted to me anti-dialogical and authoritarian modes of deciding and relating with others as an educator and as a father (traditionally seen as the ‘head of the household’) of three young children.

Moreover, my reading of Freire provoked me to rethink my pedagogy as an educator involved in the university education of pre-service professionals (mostly social workers, youth workers, psychologists, counsellors). As someone who had fallen into the norm of dealing in prescribed theoretical and practice frameworks, I began to wonder how I could work within the parameters of the higher education system to engender spaces for students to work with their ‘already-there’ formative life experiences. Could this form part of what education is for? And it was this thinking that compelled me to design and facilitate a narrative-based learning workshop.

Following the narrative workshop, I asked Lucy and the other students to work with their stories in a reflective paper, looking for shared themes across their stories and possible implications for their professional practice. After this process, I conducted a conversational interview with Lucy about her experiences of this narrative-based workshop and subsequent reflective process. This is an extract from what she conveyed to me:

The day after…. there was a sense of safety when I went from your workshop to [another] lecture. Suddenly, it was safe again. The lecturer was up there explaining this is what we’re going to do, here are your notes, you can follow the PowerPoint, this is the bit we are talking about right now… I was, right, this is what I have to think about… It’s like we need that strong facilitator always, somebody who directs the empty room.

But in your intensive, I didn’t know where we were going. It is not what I am used to. I’m used to the old-fashioned this is how it’s going to be, this is what you’re going to learn today. That whole PowerPoint stuff feels safe. Without it: chaos… It pulled the rug out from under me. But I’m so glad I went through it. There’s nothing wrong with going through chaos.

After having learned it, it’s one of the best units of studies I’ve done. It’s opened up a new way of being a counsellor. In my work, I go to school and I’m supporting students with a disability. I’m supporting students as a learner, but also trying to be a counsellor and listen to people’s stories. You look at kids with disabilities - how do you counsel someone that can’t communicate with verbal language? You have to listen.

From this conversation with Lucy, I realised the importance of taking greater care in future to prepare students (who are accustomed to conventional passive modes of learning) before launching into what I may see as more humanising pedagogies. Yet, I also saw
how releasing students to co-inquire into their own prior experiences of human phenomena (e.g. dehumanising and humanising kinds of education) is transformative. Indeed, it can help students and teachers to uncover more humane ways of being in their own lives and practice. Lucy’s story reveals her inner struggle that led her into a different way of being, of listening to the students whom she was already working with as a school counsellor. Perhaps Lucy’s story shows us that the road toward re-humanising education, in order to lead us forward into new possibilities, may first circle us backward to an encounter with our own forgotten dehumanising experiences.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time
(T.S. Eliot, 1963:208)

Crafting visions for humanising education

If we are to consider how we can re-humanise education practices and systems, it is important that we clarify what we mean by the word ‘humanisation’. For Soltis (1991), humanising education refers to any counteraction that pushes back against dominant forces that we noted earlier, such as the bureaucratisation and homogenisation of modern formal education. There are numerous initiatives that people are already making that make their educational worlds more humane (I recall a former colleague who resolved to bring back the traditional lunch hour in his tertiary education workplace).

For others like Freire, education can be said to be humanising when it animates rather than smothers the lively process of becoming more fully human (Roberts 2000:1). This process is predicated on ‘critical, dialogical and praxical’ modes of educating (2000:1). However, such assertions spring from deeper ontological ideas about what it means to exist as a ‘full’ or ‘whole’ human being. Thus, any idea or enterprise directed toward the so-called humanisation of education is based upon taken-for-granted understandings of what it is to be human. Indeed, it was from Freire’s inner wrestling with the question of the meaning of being human that his influential revision came into view, a vision for the re-humanisation of traditional education. We can find traces of his ontological thinking in expressions like: ‘To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it’ (2000/1970:88). This is an ontological assertion that emerged from Freire’s cultivation of what Heidegger (1968) called a ‘craft of thinking’, a directionality of thinking that moves us toward uncovering essential meanings of being human. Such a craft of thinking is meditative rather calculative (Heidegger 1966), the kind of thinking Freire concerned himself with. What can this craft of thinking lead us to?

For us, taking up the craft of philosophical thinking can lead us to ontological insights from which we can see new possibilities for humanising education that might not be sighted otherwise. Let us consider briefly the example cited above: Freire’s idea that being human means to name and change our world. Building from this base understanding, we can recognise how humanising an educational world might entail enabling all of its inhabitants, in one way or another, to be part of the endless naming, changing and shaping of their educational worlds.

Such a notion, when put into action, might be profound. Consider the routine acts of writing (naming) and redeveloping (changing) curricula, still so often left to those with institutional ‘authority’ and ‘expertise’. In following Freire’s thought, humanising an educational world might require paying careful attention to the voices of the people that have been silenced from curriculum design processes and consider the implications of the absence of those people (Ruitenberg 2011:34). A humanising process for developing curriculum might ask

how it can give place to, or would be undone by, the arrival of new ideas — for new ideas do not necessarily sit comfortably in the existing home of the curriculum … In order to truly give place to this idea, one must be open to the changes this arrival will make, for example, to the focus on individual leaders, inventors, and authors in the curriculum, and on students’ individual achievements. (2011:34)

The point here is not so much to advocate for this specific area for change, but to illustrate how the (largely shunned) craft of ontological thinking (about what it means to be human in education contexts) can illuminate new and practical ways of humanising education processes for the sake of those for whom education systems are originally built.

An excellent example of the kind of framework for humanising practice that can be carved through the craft of ontological thinking can be found in the work of Todres, Galvin and Holloway (2009). A danger, however, is to import their framework (specifically carved to help humanise healthcare systems and practices) into our own educational situations. Instead, I wonder whether the greater challenge for us is to learn for ourselves how to abide in the kind of applied ontological thinking that they, and the likes of Freire, exhibit. Ontological thinking is a craft that everyone can cultivate and utilise, a craft through which the world can be transformed and rendered more humane.

I encourage readers to engage with the papers in this issue with an eye to discern implicit ontological ideas about what it means to be human, the question that calls us to deeper thinking and stirs practical visions for the re-humanising of education.
Inviting critiques of ‘humanisation’

If we are to consider how we can re-humanise education practices and systems, it is important that we are open to critiques of ‘humanising’ discourses. It is unwise, I think, to ignore the possibilities of what I call a ‘tyranny of humanisation’ in modern educational workplaces. This means welcoming conflicting perspectives, however disconcerting, that present us with serious questions about how the language and ideals of ‘humanising’ education settings can be hijacked by employers to coerce educators, staff and students into playing along, unwittingly, with their own further exploitation and dehumanisation.

This perspective gives us the healthy dose of scepticism needed to negotiate the recent tide of top-down strategies that may appear, on the surface, to be about ‘humanising’ modern educational organisations. Here, I am referring to the broader trends that have been co-opted by most education organisations, such as flexible employment options, work teams, corporate childcare, community engagement programs, social-environmental responsibility initiatives and ‘opportunities’ (or directives) for staff to be involved in everything from strategic planning to deciding what colour to paint the new toilets in. A conflict perspective helps us engage with these measures with a level of precaution, considering the possibility that they may be camouflaged attempts to further conceal the bottom-line capitalist goals of education providers (Henslin, Possamai, & Possamai-Inesedy 2014:175-177). In an increasingly competitive marketplace, these schemes can be viewed as slippery tentacles of the rulers and elites of education factories, flexing to preserve an inherent reliance upon the exploitation and efficiency of the workers. I am concerned that if we lend too much credence to such perspectives, it can crush our spirits.

Is it time to move on?

As educators committed to working within these systems for the sake of humanistic education, the question for us then becomes whether modern education institutions can still be homes where humanistic learning can happen? By extension, can education institutions still be homes for us?

Are we kidding ourselves to think that it is still possible to engender humanistic education in workplaces like modern universities, which have expanded into overgrown organisations that operate to ‘churn out’ large numbers of students, and which commoditise the very experience of humanising scholarship? To help us tackle such questions, Gadamer’s (1992) writings on education give us two hopeful criteria.

Firstly, we are not kidding ourselves insofar as our institutions at least still recruit and accommodate people who comport with the traditional ideal of education - that education is about something more than merely ‘training to become an expert’ (Misgeld & Nicholson in Gadamer 1992:xi). Secondly, we are not kidding ourselves so long as our institutions still give ground for the promotion of ‘education as a form of life, a form of cultivation of the person’ (1992:xi).

Today it seems that these essential hopes, long held by many of my friends and mentors, have nearly been snuffed out. I am talking about tireless educators who have gifted so much of their lives to promoting the humanistic education of others. They have come to be seen as ‘redundant’ by many powers that be in their employing institutions. With this reality comes increasing uncertainty, not only for them but also for ‘early career’ educators and researchers such as myself. Can we teach in modern education institutions with authenticity? Are we denying our own humanity by submitting ourselves to the conditions of neoliberal systems?

Ultimately, each educator must arrive at his or her own answer to these questions, but Gadamer’s criteria may help in this process. We may need to prepare ourselves for some looming blackouts. Then again, perhaps out of the darkness a brighter way, to a better future may emerge? Perhaps a better future might involve a return to medieval times, when education institutions were created to serve guilds of freelance scholars and students, rather than the other way around (Byrd 2001). Can we fathom a renaissance of sorts, reclaiming an education that is once again synonymous with people rather than with an unquestioned permanence of institutions? Given that every organisation is human-made and remade, we must plant seeds and expressions of hope. This is what calls us back to engage with a hopeful stance. And it is this existential hope that permeates every paper in this issue, as it does each and every one of us.

No human can look into the future except as always hoping. North of the future—always beyond any justified expectation concerning what comes next—that is how we humans live. (Gadamer 1992:76)
Expressions of hope

Each paper in this issue can be interpreted as an expression of hope toward re-humanising education, the first seven articles focusing on education in different schooling contexts.

The first article by Michael Leunig gives us hope that, despite self-defeating education systems, people can still engage in a lifelong and tenacious struggle for their own learning, cultivating their lives with sensitivity and compassion for others.

The article by Bindi MacGill and Faye Blanch conveys hope that Australian schools (postcolonial sites of oppression) can be remade into ‘safe places’ for Indigenous students. The impetus for this hope is an Indigenous ethics of care, a process that occurs within relational borderlands between education staff and Indigenous students.

The following three articles, by Asher Hirsch and Chris Maylea, Suha Alikhan and Sally Morgan respectively, take up a potentially more hopeful stance toward Australian universities and schools being made more humane and responsive to the experiences and learning of refugee and asylum seeker students, in contradistinction to the (worsening) punitive attitude inherent in the Australian Government’s (and the major opposition party’s) policies.

Tim Moore’s article offers hope that alternative schooling experiences can help liberate affluent young people from an obscure form of oppression inherent with living in high-income consumer contexts.

The article by Andrew Bills and Jenni Cook leads us to ‘second chances’ for marginalised senior secondary students within a regional community, chances to re-engage with learning through humanising relationships.

Glenn Abblitt’s article follows his ethical scrutiny of Australian school-led ‘immersion’ trips; interestingly, his questioning does not bring him to reject this strategy of global social justice education. Rather, it seems to be heading him in a more hopeful direction, inquiring into a better process that de-centres learning needs of immersants and centres genuine needs of host communities.

The final four articles move us out of the schooling context. In the article by Mayela Reyes and Rodrigo Sánchez, we are reminded that ‘for every war and every battle fought, there was a group of people resisting and advocating for peace’. While hope is waning in our public (nation-state) museums to mediate these histories of non-violent resistance for us, Mayela and Rodrigo are hopeful in possible ‘counterpublics’ (Fraser 1990), for example, the Australian Living Peace Museum (ALPM).

Joanna Hubbard, in her article about her community development education work with Baptist churches, reveals a hope that faith groups can be empowered to attune more to goodness and giftedness in their local communities, rather than to needs and deficiencies.

In Peter Willis’ final paper, we encounter his experiences as a member in an informal learning group who engage in ‘practice story exchanges’, an alternative form of education that is guided by a shared hope for a more humane society.

We conclude with several informational news articles from across the world, additional examples and instances of the same struggles in – and of attempted alternatives to – the educational institutions and systems now being dominated by neoliberal discourses and imposed practices, not only but especially in English speaking countries across the world.

Do these papers move toward a shared hope? Whether advocating for better and more humanistic programs, systems, institutions, pedagogical approaches or relational programs, perhaps what runs at the heart of this issue is a kindred hope that education can mean more for people than what it does presently (Karrow 2016:232), a hope that education can go beyond the limits of instrumental and economic precursors.

References and further reading


I gained ethics approval (from the Tabor Adelaide Ethics Committee on 14 May 2014) to attain signed consent from the workshop participants to use their stories and workshop evaluations for research purposes and publications.