

# TAU3 - INSTITUTIONAL PROJECT REPORT



**JULY 2021 – JULY 2022**

**INDIVIDUAL INSTITUTIONAL PROJECT REPORT**

**PROJECT TITLE**

**Online learning, teaching and assessment strategies: catering for diverse needs of Education undergraduate students.**

**THE AIM OF THE PROJECT**

The aim of my project was to ascertain the online learning, teaching and assessment strategies that lecturers use to accommodate the needs of a diverse student population within a Faculty of Education's undergraduate programmes in humanising, socially just and inclusive ways.

**PROCESSES / METHODS**

To conduct this project, I drew from the principles of the Humanising Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), because I acknowledge that as much as the students that we teach come with histories, knowledges and realities, we too as lecturers have experiences of being teachers and as such come to the learning and teaching space with histories, knowledges and realities (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013). In addition, I acknowledge that my colleagues are the bearers of their experiences of teaching their students and as such together we set out to understand our practices informed by the principles of Inclusive Education, which amongst others, view the diversity of students in all its forms as an asset to their teaching and their students' learning (Sathy & Hogan, 2019). I also drew from the principles of Social justice because I believe that one must first "be" as that informs what s/he thinks and or does. I therefore believe that as lecturers we must create learning and teaching environments that acknowledges existing barriers to students learning and break those down as we allow all our students to have access to what we teach and to ultimately succeed. It is with this in mind that lecturers were expected to reflect on whether they facilitated the engagement of all their students in humanising, inclusive and socially just ways.

## **How did I engage the lecturers?**

To start my project, I recruited colleagues from the three undergraduate departments within the Faculty of Education namely, Primary School Education: *Foundation Phase*, Primary School Education: *Intermediate Phase* and Secondary School Education: *Senior Phase and Further Education and Training*. Two of these departments are based in Summerstrand South Campus and one is in the Missionvale Campus of the Nelson Mandela University.

My initial plan was to follow an action research approach which includes generating data in cycles. Work commitments and time constraints hindered me from using this approach. Instead, I approached lecturers within the faculty to engage in an open dialogue session (Samaras, 2011) followed up by semi-structured interviews to identified colleagues across all three undergraduate programmes. The open dialogue and the interviews allowed me to draw on the lived experiences of the lecturers through the process of self-reflection. It (self-reflection) allowed the participants to look back on their past and to assess their present teaching and assessment practices and to think about what could be done going forward.

## **What emerged from the engagements?**

What emerged from the open dialogue was how different disciplines approach their teaching and assessment practices and it became clear that a blanket approach cannot be adopted as what works for one discipline might not work for the other for example, what works in the Languages does not always work in Mathematics. We reached a common understanding that strategies used to teach and assess depend on the discipline and as such, the choice of online platforms depend to a large extent on the different disciplines.

The open dialogue also shed light to the need for an open discussion so as to gain a deeper and common understanding of the application of a humanising inclusive and socially just teaching, learning and assessment strategies. How these manifest in real teaching and assessment activities that we use during the contact sessions and when we give students assessment activities. Some of the responses revealed that colleagues are not sure if their practices are humanising and or socially just. The clarification of these constructs through reading, and more presentations by experts in

the fields of Humanising Pedagogy, Inclusive Education and Social Justice from a teaching point of view should be the point of departure.

What emerged from the interviews were some of the issues that lecturers identified as social justice issues, including practices viewed as humanising and how they addressed them in their teaching and assessment practices.

In view of the fact that our student population is diverse with diverse educational backgrounds, a need to scaffold learning and assessment was said to be of vital importance. Lecturers shared the structured support they offer their students through giving them, for example, clear and written instructions and through guiding them, for example, by means of marking rubrics, so that they understand what is expected of them when given learning and assessment tasks.

During 2020-2021 the use of bilingual tutors became a necessity as students received less exposure to English because most of those who did not qualify for funding opted to learn from home and not on campus. The role of the lecturer in identifying the at-risk students that needed academic and emotional support became more important as the risk of failing and/or dropping out due to academic and emotional factors rose because of the covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic demanded more caring (than before) and understanding from the lecturers.

The platform used mostly by Language lecturers to engage students is whatsapp. Whatsapp was also highlighted as a means to monitor students' presence in the virtual classroom as most of them joined the lectures on TEAMS and kept quiet such that it was difficult for the lecturer to ascertain if they were all still in the lecture. To give a voice to the invisible lecturer, Whatsapp voice notes were used to give feedback to some of the assessment tasks. Students as well were encouraged to use voice notes instead of written messages. This was said to be one of the ways of humanising the online space.

Most lecturers started making their presentations short to make them accessible to the students and to save data. The use of Moodle (the official institutional learning management system) was seen as more inclusive as it is free and therefore students saved on data and more importantly were able to go back and access learning materials deposited on Moodle. Of importance was the application of rules consistently especially as they apply to missing tests and submission dates. Even so, the

uniqueness of cases was taken into consideration and as such the approach used was not a one size fit all.

## **ACHIEVEMENT AND CHALLENGES**

Conducting this project gave me an opportunity to think more and deep about what is taking place in the teaching and learning spaces of the lecturers within the undergraduate programmes. As the Head of a Department, I also got an opportunity to reflect on my role as an academic leader and what my contribution could be in the transformation agenda on my institution. I also believe that I have succeeded in making TAU known and raising colleagues' curiosity and motivation to be part of the Fellowship in the future,

The main challenge I can highlight is time. Academics are busy and finding time that suits everybody was a challenge. This is one of the reasons I did not manage to recruit many volunteers to join my project. Another barrier is the number of colleagues that are busy with M and D studies in the Faculty. These colleagues are focussing on finishing their studies and in most cases do not respond to calls outside of their goal to finish their studies. Many of these colleagues are submitting end of this year and they will hopefully be part of the next cohort of the TAU programme.

## **REFERENCES:**

Del Carmen Salazar, M. (2013). "A humanizing pedagogy: Reinventing the principles and practice of education as a journey toward liberation." *Review of Research in Education* 37(1): 121–148.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Samaras, A.P. (2011). *Self-study teacher research: improving your practice through collaborative enquiry* (EBL version). Retrieved from <http://www.aut.eblib.com.au>.

Sathy, V. & Hogan, K.A. (2019). How to make your teaching more inclusive. Retrieved from : [https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719\\_inclusive\\_teaching](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_inclusive_teaching)