

Quality Education News

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Dear Supporter of Quality Education



Mac Davis



Charles Dickens

Is it hard to be truly humble?

Mac Davis wrote a tongue-in cheek song about how hard it is to be a humble person. The chorus of the song is:

*Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
'Cause I get better lookin' every day
To know me is to love me
I must be a hell of a man
Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
But I'm doing the best that I can.*

In total contrast is the Uriah Heep character in Charles Dickens' book, *David Copperfield*. Uriah Heep is a grotesque evil person who displays fawning mock humility. In the novel, Heep describes his schooling in a foundation school for boys. The boys are taught a different type of humility. Of the school Heep says, "... they taught us a great deal of umbleness ... we was to be umble to this person, and umble to that; and to pull off our caps here and to make bows there; and always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters."

Schools talk about values that they wish to instil into their students. Values such as respect and kindness are often cited. Yet a value such as humility is rarely mentioned. I think that it's a value that deserves more attention. Confucius, the Chinese philosopher and teacher, says of humility:

Humility is the solid foundation of all virtues.

Humility can be understood in three ways. The first way is negative and is one of false humility. This is reflected in the mock humility in Mac Davis' song as well as Uriah Heep's words in *David Copperfield*.

A second understanding of humility is that of humiliation. This negative humility includes being embarrassed or shamed. Those in power use humility to subjugate and oppress others. The humiliated are abused while the humiliators grip tightly on to their superior position. They demand that those below them stay strictly in line and be quiet in the name of humility (Van Tongeren 2022:2). At a country level we can see this being done in dictatorships such as those of China, Iran, North Korea and Russia.

Sadly, this second form of humility can be seen in certain schools and education departments. Those in leadership positions demand uncritical compliance to their diktats. Their one-liner guidelines to all below them are: Be totally obedient. Be aware that your professional input is not wanted.

Fortunately there's a third form of humility but it's positive in tone. The humility is neither of being humiliated nor one of an inflated sense of self. It's a humility that's open. It looks at oneself and others with a sense of self-worth and respect.

Ways of displaying positive humility are:

Type of humility	Focus	Experience	Expression
Relational humility	People	In relationships	Being other-oriented and checking one's ego
Intellectual humility	Ideas	Around ideas	Being open to new insights and seeking learning
Cultural humility	Ways of life	In our interactions with others from different cultures	Learning from others and not viewing one's own culture as superior
Existential humility	Ultimate questions	Feeling small relative to nature/ the universe/ God	Feeling grateful to something larger than oneself

(Acknowledgement: Van Tongeren 2022: 14)

Imagine that we're able to take a snapshot picture of school leadership and management the South African situation. What would we see? Yes, there are a number of schools – both in the private and public sectors – that provide caring, nurturing and progressive quality education. Overall however, how could we describe the education system? Is the word "dysfunctional" an apt descriptor?

Education experts pour out a cornucopia of scenarios to right the wrongs in dysfunctional schools and education departments. Different countries offer different sets of values that, if implemented, would effect improvements. Yet there are values that are seldom mentioned. One of those values is humility.

Dysfunctional schools and education systems can improve themselves. Having more money to manage education isn't the best solution (although it's a definite nice-to-have resource). Certain core values can make the difference. One of them is humility. When true humility is applied daily, the humiliating label of being seen as "dysfunctional" can be ripped up and binned.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

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HUMILITY

helps keep you mentally and physically healthy

Nobody knows you better than yourself. Part of being humble in a positive way, is to accurately assess yourself. Others might think that they can fully describe your character and your personality. That's not true. A single example – if you're employed by someone – is when you have a performance review. The assessor describes your areas of strength as well as those that could need more attention. You know that no matter how intuitive the assessor might be, that person hasn't been able to describe you with pinpoint accuracy.

A humble person is open about personal strengths and shortfalls. The person acknowledges areas for growth. When a mistake is made, the blame is put where it belongs. There's no fragile snowflake ego that needs protection from critical comments. Although the humble person listens to the evaluations, there's a refusal to unquestioningly accept those assessments. Be an attentive listener. Yet the accurate final evaluation should be an internal one; it should be made within the person's own mind. When the personal assessment is honest, the person has a sense of security and self-knowledge.

According to Van Tongeren, there are advantages to having self-knowledge. Six are:

1 Gives us autonomy

We can make our own choices based on what we think is in our best interests. We don't slavishly follow the advice of others. An example is that of a family where both parents are university graduates. They'd like their three teenagers to also have a university education.

One evening the family had a round-table discussion about the children's careers. Mutual respectful listening prevailed. The two daughters wanted to have a tertiary education. The son wanted to carry on with his own part-time computer business that he had started in Grade 10. Today all the children have successful careers in their areas of choice. The parents had given their children autonomy.

2 Allows us to know our limits and set boundaries

With the family mentioned above, the three children knew their differing academic limits. When you're humble, you're not ashamed of knowing what you can and cannot do. There's no shame in saying that you don't know something. You're willing to ask for help. You're comfortable in your own skin.

3 We set realistic goals

This third advantage of humility is that we're more likely to set goals that we know we can achieve rather than goals chosen by others. We're not doing what others would like us to do but rather what we're capable of doing.

4 Encourages personal growth

When we know who we really are, we're open to improving our learning. Feedback is welcomed. Our ego isn't deflated when we ask for help. The mindset is one of accepting that we're on a path of continual emotional, mental and physical growth.

5 We grow in self-compassion

As we understand ourselves better, we become more gentle on ourselves. We don't mentally trash ourselves when we make mistakes. We accept that there will be failures with some of our efforts. Compassion isn't only something that we give to others. It's something we give to ourselves too.

6 We handle stress better

As we get to know ourselves better, we manage our lives in ways that help keep stress levels down. We can recognise the symptoms of too much stress and know how to reduce it. Research has shown that humble people are better able to handle stress. Humble people are usually calmer in times of turmoil. They're willing to adapt and bend to the situations.



Aesop's fable of the oak tree and the reeds

A proud oak grew upon the banks of a stream. For a full hundred years it had withstood the buffeting of the winds but one day there came a violent storm. The great oak fell with a mighty crash into the swollen river and was carried down towards the sea.

Later the oak tree came to rest on the shore where some reeds were growing. The tree was amazed to see the reeds standing upright.

"How ever did you manage to weather that terrible storm?" the oak asked. "I have stood up against many a storm but this one was too strong for me."

"That's just it," replied the reed. "All these years you have stubbornly pitted your great strength against the wind. You were too proud to yield a little. I, on the other hand, knowing my weakness, just bend and let the wind blow over me without trying to resist it. The harder the wind blows, the more I humble myself. So here I am!"

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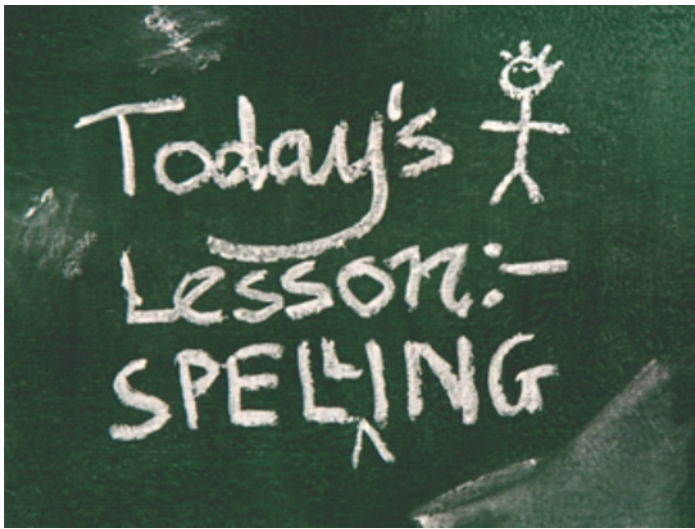
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Intellectual humility in the classroom

Classrooms are spaces to encourage students to learn as much as they can – but also to recognise what they do not yet know.

Emily Brower



Have you ever had the bad luck of being taught by an intellectually arrogant teacher? The teacher regards itself as a fount of knowledge overflowing and wisdom of immense depth. Such a teacher has all the answers. All that's expected of the pupil is to uncritically absorb what's taught and regurgitate it at exam time. Critical thinking is discouraged. The teacher's worldview isn't for questioning. A cardinal classroom crime is to correct the teacher should there be any errors of fact or opinion.

Sadly, those types of teachers aren't extinct. For the unfortunate children in their classrooms, there are likely to be moments of crushing humiliation. Make mistakes and you'll be verbally or physically assaulted. (Even in the 2020s, there are teachers who are charged by the South African Council for Educators for thrashing and physically harming pupils.) In those classrooms, intellectual ability is the most-valued achievement. High achievers are a source of immense pride to the teachers. Academic achievers are deified; mortals of lower academic ability are tolerated.

In contrast, if the teacher is intellectually humble, a different classroom "vibe" or atmosphere is created. The teacher doesn't claim to be a "know-it-all". Rather, the child and the teacher are both learners. The child is encouraged to share knowledge from what's being learnt from personal reading, research and the use of smart technology.

The teacher who's intellectually humble, creates a classroom where the children know that it's OK not to know the right answer. It's OK to disagree (in a respectful manner, of course!) with the teacher and classmates. Questions are welcomed. In fact, they are encouraged. Creative, "out-of-box" thinking and zany ideas are welcome.

Yet the intellectually humble teacher won't tolerate two types of classroom behaviour. The first is mock laughter. The second is ridicule. The efforts and discussion inputs of all are to be respected.

Vicky Zakrzewski states that in a classroom imbued with a sense of intellectual humility, the students move from "me" to "we". Students recognise that their beliefs or understanding of subject matter may be faulty. The students accept their limitations without feeling defensive or threatened. As a result, the students are open to the differing viewpoints of peers and the teacher. In such a classroom, everyone feels comfortable in changing their thinking based on what they've learnt from each other.

An intellectually humble learning environment helps create an energised and happy classroom. Everyone's growing together. Excellent effort is equally valued to that of exceptional academic ability.

Intellectual humility brings out the best in ourselves and those with whom we interact.

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Intellectual Humility

A Virtue between Two Vices

Values own beliefs too little

Overly attentive to own weaknesses; oblivious to own strengths

Intellectual Servility

Pursuing intellectual good for their own sake

Intellectual Humility

Values own beliefs too much

Overly attentive to own strengths; oblivious to own weaknesses

Intellectual Arrogance

Source: Liberationist/Dr. Ian Church

Intellectual humility in the staffroom

Virtually all staffrooms have at least a few dominant personalities. When they speak, everyone listens. Often, they're the folk who have everyone laughing as they share funny classroom anecdotes. Dominant personalities come to the fore if there's a need to make important decisions. Their opinions seem to carry extra weight.

The dominant person should be cautious when using this character trait. Telling colleagues an amusing story and adding a sense of fun to the teachers' day are good for staffroom morale. Yet there are times – if the person isn't careful – that displays of dominance can trample over the opinions of others. In their forceful and persuasive manner, opinions expressed in a dominant way can hold sway. Colleagues demur to their opinions and uncritically might accept their viewpoints.

Peacocking could be a negative side displayed by the dominant personality. The person flaunts their knowledge and skills. They draw attention to beautiful and magnificent talents in a “look-at-me” manner. This self-aggrandisement is the opposite of intellectual humility. The arrogant peacock needs to have feathers plucked out.

How can we get intellectual humility to permeate the staffroom? Van Tongeren warns that we should avoid the pitfall of **group polarisation**. Ideally, the staffroom should reflect a wide range of political and societal thinking. Little progressive change is made if everyone has identical ideological thinking and similar cultural backgrounds. Aim to have a staffroom that reflects diverse cultures and different viewpoints.

A second pitfall to avoid is **group think**. When there are dominant personalities and directive leaders, there's an inclination to “go with the flow”. Staff members might have different opinions but hold back on their opinions. Encourage the expression of divergent viewpoints. Avoid making decisions on the basis that there isn't sufficient time to thoroughly interrogate issues. Find the time.

System justification is a third pitfall to be wary of if we want intellectual humility to underpin decision-making. In system justification, we “begin to internalise the norms of a particular setting” into our thinking. It means that what we see is what we accept. If the school has, for example, traditions that go back decades, there could be staff members who assert that there is no need to make any changes. The traditions have stood the test of time.

Traditionalists ask the question: Why change if everything looks OK? The progressive teacher asks a different question: Is there a need to change or tweak a tradition?

Humble intelligence doesn't try to justify the present system. Rather, it humbly yet confidently tries to make the present system better.

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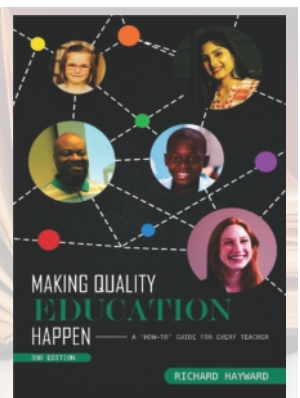


A FREE READ

There's a 20% free read on the Amazon and Smashwords sites of Richard Hayward's book, *Making Quality Education happen – a “how-to” guide for every teacher*.

Karen Walstra has done an interview done with him about the book. It's on the SAQI site at www.saqi.co.za On the home page, click “Quality in Education Programme”.

This third edition is on sale at Takealot for R 200. Amazon sells the kindle format for \$ 8.04 and the paperback colour format for \$ 16.99. Smashwords sells the e-book format for \$ 6.99.



Always learning

Having intellectual humility includes being a lifelong learner. SACE (South African Council for Educators) has a range of programmes for educators. Included in their endorsed programmes are workshops done by SAQI. If you'd like details of those done by SAQI, go to their site at www.saqi.co.za - Click on “Quality in Education Programme”. More information can be obtained from Richard Hayward, the facilitator. His contact details are rpdhayward@yahoo.com and 011 888 3262.