

International Day of Democracy: The Contribution of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network

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The Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) network is a global transdisciplinary fellowship of concerned academics, practitioners, activists, artists, and others who collaborate in a spirit of mutual support to understand the complex dynamics of dignity and humiliation (see humiliationstudies.org). We wish to stimulate systemic change—globally and locally—to open space for mutual respect and esteem to take root and grow, thus ending humiliating practices and breaking cycles of humiliation throughout the world.

We are currently around 1,000 personally invited members, and our website is being accessed by between 20,000 and 40,000 people from more than 180 countries per year since its inception in 2003.

In 2011, we launched our World Dignity University initiative (worlddignityuniversity.org) and our publishing house

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Dignity Press, which has published many books since 2012 (dignitypress.org).

We organise two conferences per year and have held more than 20 conferences all around the world since 2003. We gather for one conference at a different global location each year, which has led us to Paris, Berlin, Costa Rica, China, Norway, Hawai'i, Istanbul, New Zealand, and most recently South Africa. Then we come together a second time each December for our Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict at Columbia University in New York City, with Morton Deutsch as our honorary convener.

We welcome all readers of the *Global Education Magazine* to join us in our next Workshop in New York City, 5–6 December 2013, see www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/annualmeeting/22.php.

We suggest that education based on *equal dignity* and realised through *right relationships* (mutually dignifying relationships) is not only a promising approach to interrupting cycles of humiliation; it may be a path to learning that will help humankind survive on this planet (Hartling, 2003 and 2010; Lindner, 2003).

Human relationships are rapidly changing in the world today. Human rights ideals mark a historic relational transformation of human engagement. In most parts of the world, the past millennia were characterised by the relentless ranking of human worthiness in relationships or what Riane Eisler (1988) calls the *dominator model* of society. Today, human rights ideals and global information sharing have changed the game of human relating. The dominator model is no longer feasible, even for dominators, particularly since it is now combined with today's unlimited power of destruction.

Humankind is beginning to see the value of respecting all people as equal in worthiness. All around the world, we

observe how people attempt to move toward *partnership* and *non-domination* (Pettit, 1997). “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” this is the first sentence of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 (United Nations, 2007, p. 5). In the context of human rights ideals, humiliation is any form of forced denigration of any person or group that denies or damages their equality in dignity. Thus, humiliation is a transgression of the rightful expectation that one’s basic human rights will be respected and protected.

Education plays a crucial role in facilitating the transformation from traditional ranked honour-based arrangements of relationships—relationships that secured privileges of a few at the expense of many—to the new dignity-based arrangements that acknowledge and nurture the equal worth for all people. Learning institutions can help people understand that movement toward equal dignity may coincide with people becoming highly conscious of indignities—humiliations—inflicted either intentionally by direct mistreatment, or unwittingly through outdated practices, or systemically through obsolete social frames.

In the English language, prior to 1757, the verb “to humiliate” had a prosocial meaning. It was generally accepted that superiors showed subordinates their proper place in the social order by exposing them to humiliation, which ranged from rigid hierarchical seating orders to beating and torturing. It is in an English encyclopaedia in 1757, that for the first time, the meaning of the verb to humiliate describes our modern understanding of humiliation as an antisocial violation of a person’s dignity (W. I. Miller, 1993). In this new context, subordinates no longer experience feelings of humiliation as a rightful consequence for those who fail to behave and live

humbly in accordance with their lower social status. Rather, today humiliation is experienced as an undeserved and unjust violation of dignity—a profound relational violation—that must be redressed.

All around the world, subordinates who formerly accepted humiliation quietly are now rebelling against their assigned subservient status in the social order. Humankind as a whole is in the process of moving from traditional arrangements of ranked honour to a new vision of human dignity nourished by right relationships.

As human rights ideals are increasingly understood and manifested around the globe, we must come to understand that humiliation in its many forms—for example, disrespect, denigration, derision, dehumanisation—becomes a much more powerful force to break down relationships than ever before (Lindner, 2006). Based on 20 years of global research, humiliation could be aptly understood as a *nuclear bomb of emotions* in the twenty-first century (Hartling, Lindner, Spalthoff, & Britton, 2013; Lindner, Hartling, & Spalthoff, 2012).

Learning institutions are in the best position to help people navigate this historic transition, especially the dangerous relational waters of humiliation. Education is the most logical vehicle for developing research and action that cultivate right relationships. Transformative education has the power to gradually disarm, defuse, and prevent the dynamics of humiliation.

However, so far, many of today's learning institutions are not necessarily the best cultivators of right relationships. They are largely organised in rigid hierarchies in which knowledge primarily trickles from the top down. Furthermore, many learning institutions promote self-serving individual achievement and cutthroat competition over long-term

sustainable collaboration and creativity. Even more troubling is the growing influence of economic, corporate, and other interests that turn inclusivity, independent research, and academic freedom into endangered species (Brooks, 2011). In other words, too many institutions, educational and otherwise, are—at their core—replete with policies and practices that induce and intensify feelings of humiliation. Yet it doesn't have to be this way.

From its inception, the HumanDHS network has dedicated itself to forging a new path to knowledge and learning. Defying pressures to conform to conventional images of a not-for-profit learning organisation, HumanDHS has made the goal of cultivating right relationships—mutually dignifying relationships—its highest learning priority. For the last decade the members of HumanDHS have gradually shaped a mutually supportive learning community designed to foster the growth and development of all involved. This is a system in which equal dignity is wired into the infrastructure of learning and practice. The HumanDHS network is organised to be dignifying by design.

It is clear that humankind is moving through dramatic relational changes, as well as facing dire political, economic and environmental challenges to our existence. To develop the vital knowledge we need to address these daunting challenges, perhaps our ways of thinking about learning and higher education also need to change. We need to create mutually supportive, humiliation-free global systems of learning that bring teachers and learners together in equal dignity. If we are to survive as a human species, we must develop learning systems that encourage everyone's best contributions of knowledge and wisdom. The world needs new models of learning that dignify the lives of all people, learning that

dignifies our relationships with each other and our relationship with a fragile planet.

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