

| JONATHAN JANSEN |

TOP THREE AWARDS

- British Academy Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Transcultural Understanding, 2014
- ASSAf Science-for-Society Gold Medal, 2014
- Excellence in Education Award, Stanford Graduate School of Education, 2015

DEFINING MOMENT

On the first day as a Masters student in the USA, fresh from high-school teaching on the Cape Flats, my new professor at Cornell asked me to review his new manuscript before he sent it out for publication by a top academic publisher. That statement of confidence scared the hell out of me, but it also changed my sense of self forever. Until then, I had no great ambition and a very poor sense of self.

WHAT PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW

The public image of me is of a tough-minded, take-charge leader. Actually, I am a weak leader, I am emotional, I am led and taught by students, and I often change my mind.



THE TALENTED TRANSFORMER

Professor Jonathan Jansen doesn't enjoy being in the media limelight. "I used to, but now I think it's a drag," says the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State (UFS). The reason, he says, is that journalists often get the story wrong, and the wrong idea about him.

"They see me as this tough black guy who is in the spotlight a lot, who is into transformation and controversy." They don't appreciate his vulnerable side, or the aspects of his work that involve being a serious academic and scholar. Yet those aspects are central to Jansen's character.

By his own admission, he is a sensitive man. He takes his scholarly work into education and identity in post-apartheid South Africa very seriously. And despite his talent for delivering pithy media sound bites, he himself does not easily fit inside one. He resents being put in a racial or ideological box, such as 'coloured', 'liberal' or 'radical'. Such simplistic labels, he argues, are unhelpful as they are rooted in South Africa's troubled past.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

As for Jansen's own past, it was a combination of luck and drive that allowed him to rise above his lot. Growing up on the Cape Flats in the 1950s and 60s, he did not have a passion for learning. He ignored his schoolbooks in favour of cycling, swimming and soccer.

"I did not have any ambitions, because nobody else had ambitions where I grew up. I didn't know anyone in my family who went to university. My parents only made it to Standard 8. The best I could hope for, I thought, was to get a job and do as best I could," he says.

Then two things happened that shaped the course of his life. In his mid-teens Jansen caught the eye of the Latin teacher at his school. "He said to me, you pretend you know nothing, but you are actually very smart." This inspired Jansen to do better at school.

At the same time, he met a friend through church, who invited Jansen to study all night at his house. Jansen was happy to come around and sleep,

waiting for his friend's two-hourly food breaks to join in the snacking. But after a few weeks, he thought he would try to study too. The two kept it up throughout high school, and Jansen's grades – and appetite for learning – started to rise.

From his friend and his teacher, Jansen learnt two valuable lessons: The discipline required to succeed and the belief in his own intellectual capacity. "Many people didn't have those interventions, and ended up doing nothing with their lives. I was very lucky," he says.

Armed with his new sense of purpose, Jonathan Jansen applied and was accepted into university, and in 1979 he graduated from the University of the Western Cape with majors in botany and zoology. Aiming to become a science teacher, he then studied for a teaching diploma, which he received from the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 1982. Two years later he received a Bachelor of Education from Unisa in comparative education.

In the late 70s and early 80s he taught at Weston High School in Vredenburg on the West Coast, as well as at Trafalgar High School in Cape Town's District Six. He taught biology, and found he enjoyed it. In particular, he relished teaching children in Grades 10, 11 or 12, an age where he felt he was able to have a lasting influence. It is something he misses to this day, he says.

"By the time young people are at university it's often too late to change how they see themselves and their place in the world. I could go back to teaching kids tomorrow. If you have an impact on a poor kid's life then there's no better job," he says.

MOVE TO ACADEMIA

During the mid-eighties there was a feeling among some prescient folks in South Africa that the country might one day be free. Scholarships were set up with the leadership of people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu to train the black professionals needed to one day run the country when democracy became a reality.

Jansen heard about an opportunity for black South Africans to go abroad and study, and applied. He was in the second or third cohort that went to the USA as part of the Education Opportunities Council Scholarship Programme.

Jansen shipped off to the hallowed halls of Cornell University in New York State to study the cognitive psychology of education. The year was 1985, and Jansen was scared out of his wits. "The American students in my classes sounded like they knew everything. I felt really stupid," he says.

On trembling legs he went to meet his Professor Joe Novak in the legendary education scholar's – surprisingly modest – office. "You must be the man from Africa," Novak said. He then stood up to fetch a manuscript that was due for publication and handed it to Jansen. "I need your comments before I send it to the publishers," he said.

Jansen's jaw dropped. Here was the guru of his field asking a lowly graduate student's opinion on his latest work. Jansen read the manuscript what seemed like a million times. Yet, he didn't understand it. Panicking, he wrote down some comments and dropped it off with Novak's secretary, too scared to meet the professor in person again.

Only later in his life did Jansen understand what Novak had done by asking him to review the paper. The request had not been about testing Jansen's intellect, but making him feel included and valued for his academic contribution. This was a leadership approach that Jansen had not encountered in South Africa, where academic mentors had a tendency to exaggerate the distance between themselves and their students, a form of 'rule by fear'. As an academic mentor later in life, Jansen has tried to emulate the American approach with his own students.

Jansen's Masters degree at Cornell was by no means a walk in the park, however. Jansen still had to show up and work hard. His mentors would lose interest if he didn't. "I was up for the challenge. I slept very little. I discovered my potential and created scholarly habits. Things like being glued to a chair and finishing a book," he says with a laugh.

After graduating from Cornell in 1987 he was offered a doctoral scholarship to do a PhD at Stanford University in California, which he completed in 1991. His thesis was on curriculum transformation in Zimbabwe. The topic of educational reform during regime change would have echoes for his own country's transformation post-1994. He also got involved in university life, and was President of Stanford's African Students Association from 1988 – 89.

RETURN TO SOUTH AFRICA

Jansen enjoyed life in the United States, but there was never any question of remaining there for good. "In my generation, you didn't get a degree for yourself. You knew you had to plough back," he says.

After coming back to South Africa in 1991, he consulted for a short time for an American firm working with anti-apartheid NGOs. He later joined the University of Durban-Westville in KwaZulu-Natal as a Professor teaching curriculum theory, language and learning to undergraduate and postgraduate students. He became interested in the politics and ethics of knowledge.

At this time Jansen was inspired by feminist scholars like Sandra Harding and Evelyn Fox Keller, who made novel arguments, at the time, that since science dominated as it was by men had an inherent androcentric bias. Such theories about the scientific enterprise could be transferred to other types of knowledge, and to questions of racial transformation of South Africa's education system. He ended up contributing to education reform debates in South Africa, as well as to studies for international organisations like the World Bank and the United Nations.

He published his first book, titled *Knowledge and Power: Critical Perspectives across the Disciplines* in 1991, followed by *Implementing Education Policies: The South African Experience*, in 2001 together with Yusuf Sayed at Sussex University in the UK. Many more books were to follow.

In 2000, Jansen was appointed as the first black Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria. He wrote openly about his biography as a teach-

er and leader, and about the challenges that face black scholars in the academy. In his 2005 article *Black Dean: Race, Reconciliation, and the Emotions of Deanship* in the *Harvard Educational Review*, he discussed the tensions facing black leaders at white-dominated institutions, and the challenges of balancing redress with restoration, and reconciliation with social justice.

Jansen's willingness to tackle the most controversial aspects of education in the new South Africa in an accessible way led to invitations to write for the mainstream media. His collection of weekly columns for *The Times* newspaper were published in 2011 under the book title *We Need to Talk* and later in *We Need to Act*. Other general books Jansen has written targeting a non-academic audience include *Great South African Teachers*, written with students Nangamso Koza and Lihumelo Toyana.

His award-winning book *Knowledge in the Blood* (2009) explores how students on coming to school or university already carry 'bitter knowledge' of their racial past from a time before they were even born, and how the education system can deal with this.

BECOMING VICE-CHANCELLOR

In 2009, Jansen hit the headlines when he was appointed as the first black Vice-Chancellor and Rector of UFS, a former bastion of the apartheid state. The year before, a video filmed by four white students at the university humiliating black university employees had shocked the nation and raised new urgent questions about transformation in universities. The prob-

lem seemed very entrenched, and some said Jansen's job was impossible. Jansen tackled the challenge head on. In his inaugural speech he preached forgiveness for the four white students, drawing criticism from many quarters for being 'too soft' on racists, but receiving support from many more. To start with Jansen listened a lot, asking people from all racial and political camps what he could do for them. He pushed through some big reforms – such as the racial integration of university residences – but he did so while welcoming the opinions and voices of everybody in dialogue. After a while, some of the students who had been his most fervent critics were asking to be part of the solution.

Jansen has adopted a hands-on approach to transformation at his university. For six weeks after new students arrive, Jansen himself teaches them the first part of the university's new curriculum, focusing on how to deal with the country's violent past. He still faces a lot of criticism from across South Africa's political and racial divides. "Some in the new black leadership of this country think that I'm too soft on whites, that I'm not radical enough in my transformation work. But people on the other side say that I'm this black troublemaker who has it in for white people by moving too fast with transformation." It is all a matter of perspective, he says.

As for his own future, he isn't too sure yet. He probably will not retire in his current post. He is troubled by the persistently low and sometimes falling educational standards across the country. He would like to take what he has learnt at UFS and take it to the bottom 25% of schools across South Africa's nine provinces. "If we don't change the poorest schools we are in trouble," he says.

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

2017

Legends of South African Science

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), (2017). Legends of South African Science.

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