Success: The Views of Marginalized Adult Learners in a Radical Humanities Program

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Abstract: In marked contrast to an increasingly instrumental view of lifelong learning, there is a program in Canada that reflects the earlier social justice leanings of lifelong learning. This program, often referred to as the Clemente Program or Humanities 101, offers low-income, marginalized people free access to university-level humanities courses. This paper explores student accounts of their learning journeys in one Canadian Clemente Program with a particular focus on how they describe their perception of their success in this program. Analysis reveals that student’s initial descriptions of success swim against the tide of the “upskilling” and the quantifiable benchmark rhetoric associated with the instrumental view of lifelong learning, echoing many of the notions of success in earlier lifelong learning programs that focused on civic engagement and critical inquiry.

Background and Theoretical Context
Lifelong learning in Canada has significantly narrowed its focus over the past three decades. In earlier years it captured activities and agendas that “included social, community and social justice visions and worked to strengthen local communities” (Cruiskshank, 2007, p. 33). Now its focus is predominantly linked with economic advancement. As Canada engages in the New Economy there is a push for individuals to continuously “up skill” in order remain competitive within the workforce. As this instrumental view of lifelong learning dominates Canadian government policy, adults who have already been sidelined in the education system and who are without stable connections to the labour market find it almost impossible to access these requisite “upskilling” programs. “The OCED (2002) noted the unequal participation opportunities for different groups to participate in adult education and stressed the need to address this gap for marginalized groups such as Aboriginal populations, the working poor and those with restricted literacy capabilities” (Rubenson & Walker, 2006, p. 183). Programs for this identified gap of disenfranchised adult learners are often short-term basic training programs offer a pathway into jobs with small hope for advancement that do little to reduce poverty.

As we further consider who is being displaced by the increasingly instrumental view of lifelong learning, a significant link can be made to those learners who fall under the category of non-traditional adult learners. However, this category seems to vary widely according to context, country, institution, policy, demographic and enrolment profile. Still, common qualities have emerged. In the Report on Learning in Canada 07: Post-Secondary Education in Canada Strategies for Success, non-traditional learners were linked with groups under-represented in the post-secondary sector: “older adults, recent immigrants, people with disabilities and Aboriginal people” (p. 7) and “students from low-income families” (p. 12). Similarly, in the UK, non-traditional learners were connected to issues of access. A UK report focused on widening access since 1977 and classified the non-traditional student as one who is “underrepresented” in their access to higher education: “people with disabilities, people from working-class backgrounds
and poorer localities, Bangladeshi women and African-Caribbean men” (Bowl 2001, p. 142). Therefore, although subject to differing interpretations, we conclude that the term non-traditional students usually refers to “socially or educationally disadvantaged sections of the population… those from working class backgrounds, particular ethnic minority groups, immigrants, and, in the past, frequently women. While in the framework of the life-cycle discourse, it tends to relate to older or adult students with a vocational training and work experience background, or other students with unconventional educational biographies” (Scheutze & Slowey 2002, p. 312-313).

A compelling question then emerges: how do we as a society engage non-traditional adult learners so they have both access and a right to learning opportunities that not only involve instrumental “upskilling,” but a range of other post-secondary education and adult education opportunities? In marked contrast to an increasingly instrumental view of lifelong learning, there is a program in Canada that reflects the earlier social justice leanings of lifelong learning. Designed to be deeply transformative, this program, often referred to as the Clemente Program or Humanities 101, offers low-income, marginalized people free access to university-level humanities courses. The program chooses liberal education to address a significant power differential within society as liberal arts education is connected with power and privilege and is seen as the domain of the privileged, whereas vocational training is often viewed as the route for disenfranchised adults to become legitimate citizens. While vocational training is important, as Clemente Program founder Earl Shorris (2000) and early and present day thinkers in adult and higher education point out, by itself vocational training does not encourage learners to reach their full potential (Cunningham (1993); Freire (2000); Lindeman (1961); Hutchins (1953)). Rather, the humanities provide students the reflective space necessary to become fully engaged citizens.

While the goal of the Clemente Program is to foster within its students a new sense of citizenship and a lifelong commitment to learning, when students first apply to the program, they typically are unable to articulate any goals because they feel they have no right to access education or they lack the ability to succeed. However, even midway through one course in the program, many students find themselves identifying as learners, shaping learning goals. This paper explores student accounts of their learning journeys in one Canadian Clemente Program with a particular focus on how they describe their perception of their success in this program.

**Research Methodology**
A large scale case study research project entitled *Providing Access to Transformative Learning for Non-Traditional Adult Learners: A Study of the Clemente Program as a Model for Lifelong Learning* examines themes of barriers and motivators; community based learning; and outcomes, with a particular focus on a target group of non-traditional adult learners. Non-traditional adult learners, for the purpose of the study, are defined as economically marginalized learners who have previously had difficulty accessing post-secondary learning for a variety of material and non-material reasons. These particular non-traditional adult learners are involved in one of the three iterations of the Clemente Program across Canada that we studied. Case study methodology was chosen for its rich description and heuristic value (Yin, 1994). As a case study inquiry, the larger study gathered data through a survey instrument for students within the three selected Canadian Clemente Programs, document analysis, and individual interviews with a variety of participants within each of the programs. This portion of the research reports on the findings elicited from semi-structured interviews with students from one of the Canadian programs: *Storefront 101* in Calgary, Alberta. The audio-taped and transcribed interviews with 15 students focused on their understandings of the vision and purpose of the program; their
experiences in the program; barriers and supports associated with their learning journeys; the program’s impact; and their understanding of success.

Findings
Prior to exploring the student learning journeys and descriptors of success, it is important to first contextualize their responses by briefly presenting a profile of these students and describing the Storefront 101 program.

Storefront 101, Calgary, AB

Storefront 101 was launched in 2003 as a community-based collaborative. Claire Dorian Chapman, a community social worker with the City of Calgary, was inspired by the success of Shorris’ Clemente Course and the first Canadian iteration, Humanities 101, which was launched at the University of British Columbia in 1998. Initially the Storefront 101 collaborative included The Mustard Seed, a non-profit Christian humanitarian agency providing services for the homeless, street people of Calgary; Community and Neighbourhood Services; Athabasca University (AU); University of Calgary (UC); and Alberta Human Resources and Employment, with pilot funding supplied by the Calgary Community Adult Learning Association (CCALA). By 2004, AU and UC were less involved and two private post-secondary institutions had been added to the partnership: St. Mary’s University College, a Catholic liberal arts post-secondary institution; and Alliance University College/Nazarene University College (now Ambrose University College), a private, faith-based university college. The Mustard Seed provided the administrative and organizational framework and support for the program and administered the budget, which was funded through a variety of community and corporate sponsors. As well, a half-time paid program coordinator was responsible for marketing, student recruitment and liaison, and daily operational aspects associated with running Storefront 101. Students registered through St. Mary’s University College, attended weekly evening classes at Ambrose University College, and weekly tutorials, that both began with a free hot meal, at the Mustard Seed for a 13 week semester. Students were full members of the learning community at St. Mary’s, with access to the rights and privileges of St. Mary’s students, including library consortium and facilities access, and support services. Students were free to select their course for university credit or could audit the course and receive a certificate of completion. St. Mary’s University College has welcomed Storefront 101 graduates into its formal post-secondary programs and degrees and a general agreement exists with other universities for recognizing the academic status of Storefront 101 courses. Practical supports are offered at no cost for students and include all course reading materials, bus tickets, supper prior to each class and tutorial session. Instructors are paid a small honorarium and tutors serve as volunteers.

Student Profile

The semi-structured interviews with students in the Storefront 101 program showed considerable material and non-material challenges for these non-traditional adult learners. Material barriers included the following:

- Lack of resources: childcare, tuition, books, computer, bus tickets
- Inadequate housing: unstable housing (shelter, homelessness, transitional housing, threat of eviction)
- Poor health: inadequate food, medical care, medicine, chronic illness and/or disability, both physical and mental-health related
Unemployment or underwaged jobs

Yet, while the material barriers often interfered with students pursuing further education, it was the non-material barriers that seemed most formidable. When faced with both material and non-material barriers, students gave up entirely in believing they could access education. A sample of non-material barriers included:

- Fear, anxiety, and a belief that education was “not for them,” that they were “too stupid:” “here are all these strange people I don’t know;” “I just didn’t have faith in myself...I had learned helplessness”; “all I wanted to do is run.”
- Complicated processes of application and admission: “I had no idea where to start. I didn’t even know who to ask.”
- Educational gaps that created academic deficits: how to read, interpret, research, write essays, study
- Previous trauma can lead to students being easily triggered by content or context: “I’ve had so many unsafe places.”
- Addiction or substance abuse issues interfere with students’ ability to cope and process information: “I counted every bar on the way here.”
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities
- Inability or unwillingness to ask for help: “Sometimes I don’t ask for help until the situation is critical and I’m ready to quit school”
- Tendency to isolate when feeling threatened or frightened: “I was super-sensitive to everything. I rarely talked to anybody.”
- Boundary issues: “I trusted nobody but I did everything anybody told me to.”
- Previous trauma: war, violence, bullying, residential school, separation from family

It was not only negative or challenging life events that presented barriers to students’ learning, but also internalized messages of lack or prohibition. Finally, education could not be disentangled from the rest of students’ lives; over and over again students connected past life experiences with their past and current capacities to learn.

Student Learning Journeys and Success Described

Despite a multitude of barriers, students entered the programs hoping to learn. Students’ journeys through the program and beyond were anything but smooth and predictable. Because students were facing both material and non-material barriers to learning and because their senses of selves were highly invested in succeeding in the program, even as they often expected to fail, frequently their entry into the program was charged with emotion and expectation: both positive and negative. Yet fairly quickly, the learning community became a profoundly important space for many of the students. When one student’s mother died, the only place she wanted to be was in class, where “I knew what the desk was for”: the supportive classroom environment provided more stability than she had had in years and provided a firm counterpoint to the trauma and crisis in her family. Students displayed a hunger for learning and a capacity to support each other and to grow themselves. Student shifts ranged from a growing confidence and ability to speak up in class to gradually changing perceptions of self and firmly held beliefs and internal messages.

While there was much to celebrate in the change students underwent through the Storefront 101 program, we wanted to see how the students perceived their success. Did they see their learning journey and gradually increasing level of confidence as success or did they define their success against more external and societal measures such as a) a passing grade and/or certificate from a program; b) transition to post-secondary education programs; or c) transition to
other training or education programs. While some of the student responses did reflect typical next steps planning in an educational journey, several of their descriptions of success, particularly early indicators, spoke to being able to navigate and feel comfortable in their new learning situation. This was understandable since many of these learners had not been a part of a formal learning situation for many years. Here are some of their descriptors:

**Engagement in the process of learning.**

- “I've made it, I've successfully challenged myself, and for me when it comes to success or to be successful, I was, I've never been raised, never raised or been taught that. As far as success for me, in my life is more or less challenging myself. I know, I should be thinking, you know, how to be a successful person out there in, in my field or area. I just, I don't know how to be that. I mean, in me, I'm a simple person, I'm very humanistic kind of person, {pause}. I care about people, you know, I don't, I'm still trying to learn how to care about myself and to take care of myself. It's been a long journey, but it's getting, it's coming around.”
- “It is just the satisfaction of learning something and you know, just feeling that you've got something valuable.”
- “Well, I can probably write better now. It helps me to sort of realize that there are deadlines in life, like if you want to hold down a good job you sort of have to have deadlines and that’s the case here.”

As many of the students began to feel secure in this learning environment and saw themselves as learners, there was a perceptible shift in notions of success that included increased in engagement in the world around them and possibilities for future learning and expanding horizons:

**Seeing new possibilities.**

- “Hopefully I can just meet some of my goals of making, like having a career and teaching or working with elderly people, and even if I could go back and use it, go and try and get a certificate, and something like that, you know I’d say that I found something here in Canada.”
- “I might take another course depending on what’s offered. But the big thing is that this has led me to the art thing. So I’m going to take the art lessons, the painting. And it has led me to knowing a little more about how I should write a book. I might take another writing course if I need it after this, but it will lead to my book.”
- “I’m hoping to one day work with abused children and so that’s very, very dear to my heart and it’s something that will give me a lot of growth.”

*Storefront 101* is the only program in Canada that offers the possibility an introductory university credit and as some of the students received an introductory university credit, they saw a passing grade as a signal that they might be able to take the next step to formal post-secondary education.

- “That means applying myself to the work at hand; doing it and doing it successfully. I like a B average at least, for myself. I don’t always reach that, at least not this year. That’s my goal. I don’t have to be an A student … I think we need to, if we plan on going to University, at some point we have to learn to apply ourselves to the work at hand.”
• “Well, it helps me get credit, first of all. Second of all, it’s something to be proud of. Like, if you notice the ceremony at the end of the course, you actually get clothed in a robe and a hat, I believe. It makes you feel good because of the fanfare about it. The celebration sort of makes it into a big deal.”

• “The instructor said that I would do really well if I pursued post-secondary education. I pondered that. I can’t afford to go back to school without assistance and so I checked into government policies about applying if you have been bankrupt. Discovering that doing the research was important and discovering that I had a reasonable chance of getting a loan made me realize yeah, I could apply.”

Discussion

Analysis reveals that student’s initial descriptions of success swim against the tide of the “upskilling” and the quantifiable benchmark rhetoric associated with the instrumental view of lifelong learning, echoing many of the notions of success in earlier lifelong learning programs that focused on civic engagement and critical inquiry. Students’ learning journeys and notions of success, especially in the initial stages, reflect iterative and internal qualitative notions of success. Each student’s learning journey and in turn their view of success is unique and evolves depending on his or her particular constellation of life experiences, assets, and challenges. As well what is most essential is not the end product, a particular set of facts, skills, or knowledges. Rather, the process is most important: gaining insight into oneself, learning to open up to dialogue, becoming aware of oneself in relation to others in society. Transformative humanities programs for the marginalized require an entirely different philosophy and praxis than found in instrumental or vocational learning. These programs do not promise an end to material poverty; they do, however, promise an end to internal poverty. Through radical transformative learning, students can become more engaged and can move away from the margins into a more active citizenship and, in a paradoxical fashion, may ultimately evaluate their success in quantifiable external measures.

References


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