Storefront 101: Intuitive Connections to the Traditions and Practices Of Adult Education: Theorizing from the Literature

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Abstract
The Clemente Program is a course based in the humanities, which is offered to low-income, disenfranchised individuals in numerous urban centres in North America and abroad. Calgary’s iteration, based on the “Clemente” approach, is entitled Storefront. The following is a reflective review of the philosophical perspective of the “Clemente” founder, Earl Shorris, and the resulting program through the lens of adult education’s social justice roots.

Introduction
Earl Shorris launches his presentation to twenty potential applicants for his newly developed humanities course directed toward the poor and disenfranchised in New York City by stating:

“You’ve been cheated. Rich people learn the humanities; you didn’t. The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you. I think the humanities are one of the ways to become political … if you want real power, legitimate power, the kind that comes from the people and belongs to the people, you must understand politics. The humanities will help.” (Shorris, 1997, p. 6)

Since this inaugural course in New York, the “Clemente Course” has been launched in numerous centers across the United States, Canada, Australia and Mexico. The course is named after the Roberto Clemente family guidance centre in lower Manhattan, a facility that provides counselling to poor people in their own language and in their own community. In Calgary, we are within our second year of the Clemente Course for the humanities where courses in disciplines including history, art, philosophy, literature and political science are offered to low-income, disenfranchised individuals. The goal of the program, locally called “Storefront 101,” is to foster a new sense of citizenship and lifelong commitment to learning. All expenses, such as books, the meal, transit fares and childcare, if applicable, are covered by the program’s sponsors. One of the students, a mother of five, who has taken two courses in the program and has since returned to full-time studies at a post-secondary institution says that she had always dreamed of going to university but found the “paperwork and the finances overwhelming. But when we started this course, I instantly felt like we fit in. We were like kin. We were people who might have missed opportunities in their life, who were dealing with issues like poverty or addictions, but we had this thirst for learning” (Morton, 2003, p. 1).
In creating the first program seven years ago, Earl Shorris did not claim to have adult education experience either as an academic or as a practitioner. And yet, as I read his book (Shorris, 2000), Riches for the poor: The clemente course in the humanities, or see first hand the approach and the impact of such a program here in Calgary, I cannot help but see both a theoretical grounding that reflects the historical and philosophical roots of adult education and the tenets of supportive and effective adult learning processes. The following is a reflective review of the philosophical perspective of the program’s founder and the resulting program through the lens of adult education’s social justice roots.

Earl Shorris as an Adult Educator

Shorris started down the path in creating the Clemente Program, not as an adult educator, but as a journalist. Already a well-known author and a contributing editor at Harper’s magazine, he had been researching and writing a book on the nature of poverty in America. As part of his ongoing research, he went to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility to learn about a program that staff and inmates had developed which dealt with family violence. He wanted to see how their ideas fit with what he had learned about poverty. In summary, Shorris began to realize that numerous forces such as hunger, police and abuse, among many others, exert themselves on the poor, “making up a surround of force which it seems they cannot escape. [He began] to understand that this was what kept the poor from being political and that the absence of politics in their lives was what kept them poor” (Shorris, 1997, p. 1). When he referred to political activity he meant activity with other people at every level, “from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city-state” (p. 1).

While at the correctional facility, he met Vincée Walker, an inmate and asked her, “Why do you think people are poor?” In her response, she told Shorris that the children needed to be taught the “moral life of downtown” by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts and lectures. Shorris was confused and could not see how a museum could push poverty away; much less connect to political life. In further conversation, he began to realize that something had happened to her. She had undergone a radical transformation because with no job, and no money, and as a prisoner, she had learned to reflect. “It became clear when she spoke of ‘the moral life of downtown’ she meant the humanities, the study of human constructs and concerns” (Shorris, 1997, p. 3). Through this life changing conversation, Vincée Walker made Shorris understand the connection between humanities, reflection and entrance into the political life. And so the Clemente Program and a passionate adult educator were born.

Shorris, as the central driving force behind the launch of the program, is a unique adult education program planner who has a clear agenda for his program. Rothwell and Cookson (1997) in prompting programs planners to develop their own working philosophy ask the question: “What is the overall purpose of lifelong education and program planning? In short, why is program planning worth doing?” (p. 70). I believe that if Shorris were to answer this question, his response would reflect two philosophical orientations within adult education; specifically he would see liberal adult education as a vehicle for radical change within our society. Briefly, liberal adult
education has its historical roots in the philosophical theories of the classical Greek philosophers and the emphasis in this tradition is upon “liberal learning, organized knowledge, and the development of the intellectual powers of the mind” (Elias & Merriam, 1980, p. 8). Radical adult education seeks “social, political, and economic change in society … lifelong education becomes part of a campaign to install an agenda of change” (Rothwell and Cookson, 1997, p. 80). The following discussion illuminates how Shorris, the Clemente Program and the local Storefront 101 program have woven together liberal education and radical education both in its philosophical orientation and practice.

**Links Between The Philosophical Roots of the Clemente Program and Adult Education Discourse**

The local iteration of the Clemente Program, Storefront 101, is grounded in the following philosophical statement:

> We all possess unlimited potential as public, political and moral beings and we have place in public life. The radical nature of the humanities with its emphasis on philosophy, art, literature, history, logic, debate, critical thinking and politic of freedom and public life is the best guide available to in realizing our potential as individuals and our role in society. The study of these disciplines is powerful and liberating.

> The Program seeks to question the inequitable distribution of knowledge and culture in our society, and to make it accessible to those people who are deprived of it, and thus of their place is public citizens. Storefront 101 will make all its students rich in understanding. (Storefront working committee notes, 2004)

Shorris, while being profoundly transformed in his conversation with Walker regarding the value of the humanities, had already believed in the value of a liberal education under the influence of Robert Hutchins. Hutchins became president of the University of Chicago at the age of thirty and during his tenure as president, from 1945 to 1951, he instituted many innovative ideas, based on his belief that liberal education (another term for an education in the humanities) was the best way for people to think for themselves about fundamental issues. While Hutchins is associated with the liberal education philosophical tradition (Elias & Merriam, 1980, p. 27), he, like Shorris, also saw liberal education as a means toward a political agenda. Specifically, he understood the link between positions of power and influence within our society and access to study of the humanities. Liberal education was the education of rulers. It was the education of those who had leisure. “These students are a kind of democratic version of an aristocracy” (Shorris, 2000, p. 197). Hutchins wished to dissolve the exclusivity of the liberal education, feeling that in a true learning society, everyone would have access,
which in turn would have an impact on the political power within our society. “Democracy and industry, far from making liberal education irrelevant, make it indispensable and possible for all people... if liberal education is the education that rulers ought to have, and this I say has never been denied, then every ruler, that is every citizen should have a liberal education” (Hutchins, 1953, p. 8). Freire also understood the link between power and education and in conversation with Ira Shore he explains; “it is society which shapes education according to the interests of those who have power … the main task for systematic education is to reproduce the dominant education (Shore & Freire, 1987, p. 36).

A central criticism of utilizing the study of the humanities as moving toward radical political change is that it is a body of knowledge that is based on the “cultural imperialism of dead white European males” (Shorris, 2000, p. 105) and it does not appear to be relevant to the life experience of student within the program. And yet, students the in Storefront 101 Program who studied the history of Southern Alberta could make connections to their own experiences. In addition, this course brought them into the Glenbow, the major Calgary museum, where they were toured around and shown archives that connected to their studies. While these students could have visited this museum on their own, the museum did not feel relevant or accessible to them, until they began this program. Storefront 101 has also taken them to public and university libraries, plays and concerts. Shorris (2000) argues that “the answers arrived at by philosophers differ from time to time and place to place, but the questions … have always been the same: What can I know? How shall I live? What may I hope? And what is man?” (p. 106). He also acknowledges that courses that take place in other parts of the world will chose their great philosophers, their poets, and their history, but again the questions are universal.

The humanities as a radical body of knowledge and providing a path out of poverty for the disenfranchised within a society challenges the instrumental view of adult education which believes that the disenfranchised in our society need a new set of skills, specifically vocational skills in order to become citizens of society. While vocational training is important, it does not encourage us to reach our full potential, something with which early thinkers in adult and higher education, as well as Shorris, concur. Livingstone (1945), as he acknowledged the importance of vocational and technical training states that, “the complete man must be something more than a mere breadwinner and must have something besides the knowledge necessary to earn his living. He must have also the education which will give him the chance of developing the gifts and faculties of human nature and becoming a full human being … that was the meaning of a liberal education” (p. 3). Lindeman (1961) also sees this approach, not vocational education, as the central purpose of adult education. “Adult education more accurately defined begins where vocational education leaves off. Its purpose is to put meaning into the whole of life” (p. 21). This is the pursuit of the good life, where people want intelligence, power, self-expression, freedom, creativity, appreciation, enjoyment and fellowship. I believe that Cunningham would also welcome Shorris’s mission in the Clemente Program. In her critique of adult education, she challenges us to move beyond the vocational thrust of our field, “learning for earning is the goal” (p. 3) and to focus
upon education that creates a “strong civil society, which promotes the full participation of its citizens” (p. 6).

Therefore, Shorris, like other educators such as Livingstone, Lindeman and Cunningham, wanted to move beyond the instrumental provision of a technical education, as a means to break the poverty cycle. He, like Vincee Walker, wished to encourage the students in the Clemente program to have access to this “good life,” by providing them with the chance to step back from their situation and to instill in them the ability to reflect, the pathway he sees as necessary to becoming a fully engaged citizen of our society. “The humanities, the study of human constructs and concerns, has been the source of reflection for the secular world since the Greeks first stepped back from nature to experience wonder at what they beheld. If the political life was the way out of poverty, the humanities provided an entrance to reflection and the political life (Shorris, 1997, p. 2). He goes on to powerfully demonstrate the riches and power of reflection when he describes the first graduation ceremony from the Clemente program and his wish for his students. “This is what I wish for you: May you never be more active than when you are doing nothing…” I saw their smiles of recognition. One or two, perhaps more of the students closed their eyes. In the momentary stillness of the room, it was possible to think (p. 16).

Paulo Freire would have understood Earl Shorris’s desire for critical reflection in the Clemente Program. In *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire, 1970) he describes the process of banking education as a way to keep the disenfranchised in their place: “the banking approach to adult education for example, will never propose to students that they critically consider reality … the “humanism” of the banking approach masks the effort to turn men into automatons – the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human” (p. 106). He also hoped that through critical reflection that that the oppressed and disenfranchised within society may discover “that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become fully human … and then [may] engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation” (p. 107)

**Concluding Comments**

It is important to acknowledge that this program has its limitations and it not suitable for everyone. Shorris (1997, p. 9) explains that some potential students who came for program entry interviews were too poor. “There is a point at which the level of forces that surround the poor can become insurmountable, when there is no time or energy left to be anything but poor. Most often I could not recruit such people for the course; when I did, they soon dropped out.” We have also found this to be the case within our local Storefront 101 program. In addition, I do not wish to negate the value of local vocational programs within our community. Many local students, who have availed themselves of vocational and upgrading literacy programs, have been able to step away from the forces of hunger and poverty.

However, I have seen the power of the local Storefront program and have read the stories of students who graduated form the first Clemente program in New York City. Several of our students have gone on to attend local colleges or universities, while others
have gone onto to obtain and keep jobs. Earl Shorris (1997) notes one exception in his first year graduating class: [one student] “had been fired from her job in a fast-good restaurant for trying to start a union” (p. 16). One small example of a liberal education being used for radical change.

References