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Janet Groen and Tara Hyland-Russell
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Humanities Professors on the Margins: Creating the Possibility for Transformative Learning

Janet Groen¹ and Tara Hyland-Russell²

Abstract
This article recounts the experiences of professors who taught entry level university humanities courses to adult learners on the margins of society and what their stories can tell the readers about a potentially transformative teaching and learning space. Based on interviews with 13 instructors in 3 programs, the study reveals that while the techniques of facilitative dialogue and gentle coaching are important in shifting learners from disengagement to engagement in the possibility of learning, it is the underlying stance of instructors’ mature authenticity and their desire to create and sustain trusting relationships with their students that is pivotal in cultivating the possibility of transformation for marginalized students within this program.

Keywords
adult learning, personal transformation, transformative education

¹ Faculty of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada
² English Department, St. Mary’s University College, Calgary, AB, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Janet Groen, Faculty of Education, EDT 1244, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, AB T2N 1N4, Canada
Email: jgroen@ucalgary.ca
I taught this course down in Calgary, in a church basement, one night a week. We all sat in uncomfortable stackable chairs. I think these sorts of chairs are pretty common in church basements and we began by eating dinner together. And then we talked for three hours . . . I was teaching this class, a history course, to disadvantaged adults. One or two of my students had taken some technical training at the college level, but for most of them, this was the first post-secondary course that they’d ever taken. All in all, I’d say that it was probably the most rewarding teaching experience I’ve ever had.

Jeremy Mouat, Instructor for Calgary’s Storefront 101 Program

Introduction

This article recounts the experiences of professors who taught entry-level university humanities courses to adult learners on the margins of society and what their stories can tell us about a potentially transformative teaching and learning space. This strand of our research is part of a larger case study research project that illuminates barriers and motivators to learning as well as stories of success with nontraditional adult learners engaged in unique Radical Humanities programs based on Earl Shorris’ Clemente Program. In 1995, journalist and social critic Earl Shorris (2000) launched the first humanities course in philosophy directed toward the poor and disenfranchised in New York City. The course is named after the Roberto Clemente family guidance center in lower Manhattan, a facility that provides counselling to poor people in their own language and in their own community. Since the inaugural course, versions of the Clemente Program have been held in numerous centers across the United States, Australia, Mexico, and Canada. Though all the Canadian programs are based to some extent on Shorris’ vision, a dialogue across the programs demonstrated the need to provide a title that captures their mission. We coined the term Radical Humanities programs to distinguish the Canadian programs while demonstrating their rootedness in the humanities, and the radical nature (Giroux, 1992; Jackson, 1997) of their educational goals to counter marginalizing social forces through the access of postsecondary institutions and content typically denied these adults learners.

Inspired by a belief in the power of education and intrigued by the vision of social change for the poor that Shorris promoted through the humanities, we became involved in our local program, Calgary’s Storefront 101: Tara as an instructor for one course and both of us as members of the working committee. We believed that Storefront 101 was a unique program in our city with its focus on English Literature, Philosophy, and History—a contrast to the more typical short-term vocational programs offered to nontraditional adult learners able to read and write (Rubenson & Walker, 2006). Our research (Hyland-Russell & Groen, in press) has revealed that nontraditional adult learners experience a constellation of barriers to learning that include poverty, homelessness, addictions, mental or physical illness, low
self-esteem; a belief that education is not for them; negative histories with learning institutions; and feelings of disenfranchisement. As a result, when many of these learners are asked to identify their learning goals at the beginning of a course, they are unable to do so, having internalized the message that they have no right to access further education or that they lack the ability to succeed. However, it has been compelling and inspirational for us to watch a gradual dissolution of students’ internalized negative messages as they become excited about the process of learning and the content of the humanities courses. Many of the students begin to shape learning goals and dream about the future in ways they never thought possible. In essence, these students are engaged in transformative learning as defined by Mezirow in 1991 and Mezirow and Associates in 2000. Through their involvement in a Radical Humanities program, students are experiencing a deep shift in their perspective of themselves and their place in their world: A shift that moves from disengagement in the learning process and society to hopeful engagement in the possibility of learning and the world around them. As these learners reflected upon causes for their reengagement in learning, many touched on the pivotal role of the Radical Humanities program instructors’ ability to challenge the frequently negative beliefs students held of themselves as learners.

Focusing on three Canadian Radical Humanities programs, Storefront 101 in Calgary, Discovery University in Ottawa, and Humanities 101 in Thunder Bay, we explored the connections between students’ stories of hopeful reengagement in the learning process and their instructors’ accounts of their teaching experiences. According to Cranton and Wright (2008), research on transformative learning for adult literacy learners is only beginning to emerge and “the role of the educator is hardly mentioned, which could be an indication of why we do not readily find studies on literacy educators as mentors, guides or companions” (p. 36). Indeed, parallel to Cranton and Wright’s observation, we have found little research on programs with a humanities focus that deliberately focus on the possibility of transformative learning for marginalized nontraditional adult learners. In turn, then, there is little understanding of what supports must be in place, particularly the role instructors play, in cultivating space in the margins of society in order to shift learners from disengagement to hopeful engagement in the learning process.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Nontraditional Adult Learners and Humanities Programs as a Pathway for Transformative Learning

MacKeracher, Suart, and Potter (2006), in a report focused on barriers to participation in adult learning, indicated that for most people engagement in learning is a matter of choice, they have a higher level of education, and they are between the ages of 18 and 50 (p. 2). Conversely, nonparticipants, such as the nontraditional adult learners who attend Radical Humanities programs, “are more likely to be members of
racial or ethnic minorities, persons over 50 years, and persons with low literacy skills, low income and physical sensory or learning disability” (MacKeracher et al., 2006, p. 2). Barriers to learning for this segment of adult learners are significant and rarely occur in isolation. Utilizing Cross’s (1981) model of barriers to learning (dispositional barriers, situational barriers, and institutional barriers), one can see how their interplay reinforces learners’ beliefs that they have no right to access learning opportunities, particularly at a university level. Dispositional and attitudinal barriers relate to internal self-perceptions such as low-self-esteem, lack of interest, and negative perceptions about being an adult learner. Moving outward, situational barriers such as financial difficulties, child care responsibilities, transportation problems, and job commitments reveal how learners’ circumstances can hinder their access to learning. Finally, institutional barriers are those elements within our educational institutions, which make access for marginalized adult learners difficult: Program entrance requirements, inflexible timetables, and their physical location. As important as the kinds of barriers that nontraditional adult learners face is the cumulative effect of more than one barrier. Cross (1981) stressed that students’ difficulty starting or finishing educational projects increased with the numbers of barriers they experienced, an assertion supported by Bowl’s (2001) study, “University entry is experienced as a dislocation and disjunction, which is intensified if the learner is non-traditional in more than one sense” (p. 157).

Educational programs for marginalized nontraditional adult learners are typically short-term basic training programs (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002) that offer a pathway into jobs with limited advancement and do little to reduce poverty or remove the barriers described above. Indeed, one could argue that short-term training programs reinforce barriers and ensure that these adults are kept at the margins of society and our educational and cultural institutions. However, Radical Humanities programs invite marginalized nontraditional adult learners into the university, into dialogue about Plato’s philosophy of love, and into our museums, libraries, concert halls, and museums. Shorris believed that access to the humanities addresses the significant power differential within society that regulates relative poverty and affluence and provides students the reflective space and tools necessary to become fully engaged citizens, to join the viva activa (the active life), a life based on action and choice, and to escape from lives of impoverishment. The humanities “enable poor people to make the journey into the public world, the political life as Pericles had defined it, beginning with family, and going on to neighborhood, community, and state” (Shorris, 1997, pp. 4–5) and to move beyond the internal and external barriers of poverty that create isolation, alienation, and anomie (Durkheim, 1951).

Foundational to Shorris’ vision of the humanities is the notion of Socratic “maieutic dialogue” as midwifery of the mind. Socratic philosophical midwifery involves facilitating participants’ ideas through dialogue and critiquing and analyzing their ideas in a respectful and honest manner. In summary, it is the combination of self-reflection, dialogue, and humanities in Radical Humanities programs that has
served as the catalyst for the process of transformative learning experienced by many marginalized nontraditional adult learners as they shift from disengagement to engagement in learning.

Transformative learning has become a foundational theory of learning in adult education since Mezirow first introduced the notion (1978) with a publication exploring the learning journeys of women returning to college. Cranton and King (2003) outlined the basic dynamic underlying personal transformative learning:

At its core, the idea is elegant in its simplicity. We make meaning of the world through our experiences. What happens once, we expect to happen again. Through this process, we develop habits of mind or a frame of reference for understanding the world, much of which is uncritically assimilated. In the process of daily living, we absorb values, assumptions, and beliefs about how things are without much thought. When something different happens, we can be led to question our way of seeing the world. (p. 32)

As Cranton and King (2003) suggested, the essence of personal transformative learning is a fundamental change in how people see themselves and the world. However, debate continues on the process of transformative learning. Ongoing work on transformative learning theory has broadened the base of Mezirow’s rational cognitive learning approach (1991) to address affective, spiritual, ethical, and collaborative dimensions of the learning process (Dirkx, 1997; King & Wright, 2003; Taylor, 2000). Yet, paradoxically, part of the debate has also suggested a narrowing of focus by delimiting who is able to undergo the critically reflective process deemed essential, not only for transformative learning, but for a deep understanding of the concepts explored in the humanities. Mezirow et al. (2000) stated that preconditions required for such engagement include “elements of maturity, education [italics added], safety, health, economic security and emotional intelligence” (p. 15). He also indicated that “hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute and intimidated people obviously cannot participate fully and freely in discourse” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Merriam (2004) in turn suggested that a minimal level of education is desirable for the rational discourse and critical self-reflection necessary to move toward perspective transformation. According to the above criteria for critical thinking, the majority of the students in a Radical Humanities program should be excluded from the possibility of transformative learning. However, several studies (Coombes & Danaher, 2006; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Willans & Seary, 2007) have challenged this epistemological assumption. In particular, Wright, Cranton, and Quigley (2007) explored the learning journeys of adult literacy students who had little formal education. Their results revealed the possibility of transformative learning for marginalized adult learners and the central role the instructor played in its cultivation. Therefore, we are challenged as adult educators to expand our perceptions of where and how transformative learning can occur, to shift the transformative learning discourse, and to learn how to create the conditions that support transformative learning for all adult learners, including those who have been marginalized.
Taylor (2007) in his transformative learning update indicated that most significant in his review was the increasing attention given to the practice of fostering transformative learning in higher education and workshop settings. Reviewed studies revealed “the importance of providing direct and active learning experiences, the availability of varied mediums for fostering transformative learning, the importance of ‘pedagogical entry points’ (Lange, 2004, p. 129) and the nature and importance of support” (p. 182). Focusing specifically on the nature and importance of support, we consider the type of relationship between the instructor and the student to be of central importance in opening the possibility of transformative learning for learners who have deeply absorbed the message that they do not have the right to access further education or that they are unable to learn. While the relationship must be one of nurturing and caring, we find the work of Daloz (2000) and Belenky and Stanton (2000) helpful as they posited that instructors also must challenge their learners to engage in critical thought and ultimately help learners to recognize and value their own experiences and expertise.

**Authenticity in Teaching**

As we began to consider the fundamental role of the instructor in the transformative learning journeys of marginalized nontraditional adult learners in this unique program, we realized we needed to understand more than instructors’ classroom strategies. While pedagogical methodologies are important, we wanted to go deeper and understand who these instructors were and what personal qualities informed their practice. We resonated with the following statement by Palmer (1998), “[italics his] good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10).

We turned to the newly emerging discussion of authenticity and teaching as a framework to understand the connection between teacher identity and integrity and the instructor’s ability to cultivate transformative learning experiences for marginalized nontraditional adult learners. Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, and Knottenbelt (2007) argued that, while authenticity in teaching has “been recognized as a significant construct with respect to learning and development and teachers and students” (p. 25), it is still an elusive phenomenon, making it challenging to understand its meaning and its implications for practice in our classrooms. In their comparative review of the philosophical and educational literature, Kreber et al. listed the qualities of authenticity in teaching, “being genuine, becoming more self-aware, being defined by one’s self rather than by others’ expectations, bringing parts of oneself into interactions with students, and critically reflecting on self, others, relationships and contexts” (pp. 40–41). These qualities resonate with those uncovered by Cranton and Carussetta (2004a, 2004b) during their 3-year grounded theory research study, as they worked to understand how faculty members speak about authenticity, bring a sense of self into their teaching, relate to others in authentic ways, and reflect on their practice:
Authenticity is not just genuineness and openness, though that forms a central part of being authentic, but it is socially situated. It involved helping others, relating to others, and caring for the authenticity of others around us. And moving outward further, it involves knowing who we are within our social world, how we are shaped by the world, and how we position ourselves in that world. Being authentic is being conscious of self, other, relationships, and context through critical reflection. (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004b, p. 289)

Cranton and Carusetta (2004b) developed a continuum of beginning authenticity to mature authenticity, arguing that for instructors in their study, growth toward mature authenticity generally developed over time and with experience. For example, focusing on the perception of self, the shift from beginning authenticity to mature authenticity revealed that “the movement is from fragmented, authority-based perceptions to more integrated, constructed understandings of oneself” (p. 281).

Throughout the discourse on teacher authenticity, consistency between one’s values and one’s actions (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Tisdell, 2003) is emphasized and in turn there is an assumption that these values and actions will reflect noble qualities such as “trustworthiness,” “genuineness,” “kindness,” and “caring” (Chickering et al., 2006; Rogers, 1983). Demonstration of such noble qualities, while including classroom actions of timely and supportive feedback and the creation of a safe learning environment, may also involve pushing against “institutional barriers” in order to support student growth and agency. Challenging such barriers and the status quo demonstrates yet one more pivotal dimension of teacher authenticity: Its moral dimension (Kreber et al., 2007).

Taylor (1991) cautioned against the modern notion of authenticity that is limited only to self-realization, self-awareness, and congruence between values and actions, arguing that for the internal work of authentic engagement to be meaningful it must be explored against the backdrop of societal issues that are crucial or the horizons of significance in which we understand ourselves as educators, “The understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life” (Taylor, 1991, p. 39). Within our study, the horizon of significance and the moral dimension of the instructors’ authenticity is their agency (Kreber et al., 2007) in dissolving the institutional barrier of exclusive access to postsecondary humanities education by engaging marginalized nontraditional adult learners in dialogue around ideas that matter (Palmer, 1998).

Methodology and Design of the Study

This strand of our research is part of a larger case study research project that illuminates barriers and motivators to learning as well as stories of success with nontraditional adult learners engaged in various iterations of Clemente-inspired Humanities programs. This article focuses on the experiences of professors who taught within three Canadian iterations of Radical Humanities programs in order to deepen our
understanding on how to cultivate a potentially transformative teaching and learning space for marginalized adult learners. Who are these instructors and what motivates them? How are transformative spaces created? What are the particular challenges and opportunities afforded in teaching humanities courses on the margins?

Case study methodology for this research study was utilized as it allowed us to closely examine three iterations of a specific program, fulfilling one of case study methodology’s central criteria. “They are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or a bounded system (Smith, 1978) such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). We appreciated that case study methodology recognizes and addresses the complex and multilayered nature of the specific unit or bounded situation. The complexity in this research study becomes apparent as each “specific unit” or program offering involves multiple participants in different roles: Students, instructors, program coordinators, tutors, and working committee members. Each program design and delivery is unique, reflecting its own historical development and planning decisions, and each program is located in a particular socioeconomic context. Therefore, case study methodology is particularly useful in reflecting the programs’ complexity as multiple techniques to data collection are the norm (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The larger research study relied on a variety of techniques for data gathering: Analysis of documents within each of the programs such as course outlines, student attendance records and promotional brochures; individual interviews with students, instructors, program directors, and working committee members; and a survey instrument for students focusing on demographic information and barriers to learning. The process of data collection occurred over a 2-year period, fall 2006 to fall 2008, allowing us to immerse ourselves in each of the three programs.

Of the 10 Canadian programs, we chose to research 3 cases or programs. Storefront 101 in Calgary, Discovery 101 in Ottawa, and Humanities 101 in Thunder Bay were selected as they represented a range of program types in three geographically and socially diverse cities. As Yin noted, “when more than one case is studied, the researcher can conduct cross-case analyses for comparison purposes” (1994, pp. 104–105). While the analysis that has emerged from this research study is context specific to marginalized nontraditional adult learners in the three chosen Canadian programs and cannot be generalized, we stand by the logic proposed by Rossman and Rallis (2003) when they stated that “reasoning by analogy allows the application of lessons learned in one case to another population or set of circumstances believed or assumed to be sufficiently similar to the study sample that findings apply there as well” (p. 105).

This article reports on the findings elicited from semistructured interviews with 13 instructors and 7 students in the 3 programs. The 1- to 2-hr audiotaped and transcribed interviews focused on the participants’ understandings of the vision and purpose of the program, their experiences in the program, and the impact of the program on students and instructors. The participants were asked to review and edit their transcripts. Using the preliminary research questions and the related literature explored
in this study, analysis of the transcripts was an iterative ongoing process as we sought to challenge our own and each other’s thematic analysis and interpretation of the data, search for alternative understandings, and eventually move toward interpretation of the data. We adhered to the following criteria for a rigorous and valid process of analysis, “Analysis will be sufficient when critical categories are defined, relationships between them are established, and they are integrated into an elegant, credible interpretation” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 156).

In this article, as we focus on experiences of the instructors within the three profiled Radical Humanities programs, only a portion of the student stories are represented here—those which illuminate the roles of the instructors in students’ learning journeys.

**Findings**

Before presenting the voices of the instructors, we contextualize their responses by providing a brief overview of the programs in this study.

**Program Summary**

Across the three Radical Humanities programs, weekly classes that are 2–3 hr in length are held in a university classroom for a 10- to 13-week session. Students in *Storefront 101* and *Discovery 101* also meet one more time weekly for tutoring sessions. Class size ranges from 15 to 30 students. Instructor commitment varies across the three programs. In *Humanities 101*, whose approach resembles a lecture series, a typical term involves several instructors, with each instructor providing only one or two lectures. In *Discovery 101*, one instructor teaches a course, with a specific focus (e.g., English Literature) for the entire term. Finally, *Storefront 101* is the only program that offers students the option of selecting their course for university credit or audit. Therefore, instructors in the *Storefront 101* program have the additional responsibility of assigning and grading written assignments.

Each program offers practical supports at no cost for students and includes all course reading materials, bus tickets, and remuneration for child care. *Storefront 101* and *Humanities 101* provide a dinner prior to each class, and *Storefront 101* and *Discovery 101* also offer meals prior to their tutorial sessions.

**Instructor Voices**

As students across these programs looked back on their learning experiences, what emerged was the pivotal role of the instructor in initially alleviating student fears and then moving them toward the process of learning through the creation and maintenance of a safe and dynamic learning space. As we considered instructors’ stories and how they created their learning environments, we found the five interrelated dimensions of instructor authenticity—*self, other, relationship, context,* and *critical*...
reflection (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004a, 2004b)—to be a useful framework for our thematic analysis. Cranton and Carusetta’s dimensions provided the needed holistic view of instructors’ stories that moved from self-awareness to an outward manifestation of how understanding was translated into pedagogical practice.

**Self-Engagement as a Call**

The majority of the interviewed instructors in the three Canadian programs were experienced full-time associate or full professors from one of the partnering universities. In *Storefront 101*, Jeremy Mouat, an Associate History Professor, came to the program from Athabasca University; Don Smith and Janis Svilpis, Professors from the University of Calgary, taught History and English, respectively; and Tara Hyland-Russell, Associate Professor of English, Michael Duggan, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Theology, and Ernie McCullough, Professor of Philosophy, hailed from St. Mary’s University College. Jason Salter was a PhD candidate in English from the University of Calgary, with some experience as a university teaching assistant for undergraduate English courses. In *Humanities 101*, we spoke with Roger Delaney, Professor of Social Work; Dolores Wawia, Assistant Professor of Native Education; Gillian Siddall, Associate Professor of English and Acting Dean for the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Doug West, an Associate Professor of Political Science. Finally, for *Discovery 101*, we interviewed Eileen Kerwin-Jones, who had just recently completed her PhD and who taught several sessional courses at the University of Ottawa and St. Paul’s University, and Gerry Wilson, a Philosophy Professor at the University of Ottawa.

Common to instructors, upon hearing about their local program, was an instant recognition that they had to get involved: The agenda of providing access to educational opportunities for disenfranchised adult learners coalesced with their ongoing call to work toward social justice. For example, Michael, who had previously worked with marginalized adults, felt compelled to continue what he viewed as social justice in the classroom:

> I used to do a certain amount of work with Mother Teresa’s sisters when I was in Washington. I did some retreat work with them and then I did some work with them in giving retreats in Mexico three times and Cuba and in Haiti ... So I don’t know how to describe it but one of the great blessings in my life is to be with people who experience marginalization or, what shall I say, that they struggle to just be able to find their way.

For Jason, involvement in a Radical Humanities program resonated with his early interest in social change expressed through music. “I grew up listening to Bob Dylan, Harry Chapin and those kinds of folk singers of the 60s and 70s that were very much about social change.” Dolores could identify personally with many of the challenges the students faced and the impact of education on her life:
I had a second chance. I was a married woman and from an abusive situation I left my husband. I had three children when I went back to high school to finish and to go to teacher’s college. I got help through different facets to have that opportunity . . . and people came out of nowhere to give me assistance to where I am today so I thought “Heck, you know, we should give these people a second chance too.”

Most of the instructors unreservedly demonstrated that “bringing one’s sense of self into the classroom was important” (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004b, p. 278) and they moved beyond the institutional power typically associated with being a professor, as described by Tara, “I know some faculty members believe ‘I own this classroom and I can do whatever I want’ and I think I’m not a lot like that. I really try to break down that power differential.” And yet, for Jason, since “this was the first kick where it was something that I created from scratch,” instructing in Storefront 101 was fraught with some of the nervousness of teaching his first class, an emotion often experienced by new instructors. While reflecting on the importance of breaking down the power dynamics—“I felt that we were all on a level playing field, you know, I felt like there was no hierarchical structure in place between professor, instructor and student,”—Jason was trying to determine what his role as instructor was and how to negotiate his relationship with the students.

I was really nervous about it all ‘cause again as a new instructor . . . I was probably more intimidated by them than they were of me. . . . It was a balancing act, you know, like starting with the content of the course but also with due dates and those kinds of things, and assignments. Should I have been right from the get go, very strict with due dates?

While more experienced instructors had some basis to sort out which elements of the course were unique because of the marginalized students’ enrollment, for Jason all of the facets of the classroom were new. He had no way of gauging whether negotiating due dates and assignment content would undermine his authority as a teacher or whether it was a necessary flexibility, given the experience and trepidation of the marginalized students in his class.

Valuing the Other—Interdependence and Seeing Student Potential

Typically, within a university setting, preparing for and delivering classes are an independent venture. However, this program was markedly different: Teaching in the Radical Humanities was an interdependent enterprise, as a peek into the classroom would reveal instructors interacting with volunteer tutors who were aiding students, the program coordinator getting dinner organized and providing additional resources and information to the learners—all while the students were learning. Ernie described the context:

You’ve got a kind of very community-oriented place. And then you’ve got a person like the program administrator who is just marvelous really and [she] took care of us all of
this through grungy details that you have to deal with . . . also [the tutors] played an essential role in this. I don’t think the students could have made the progress they made without that help.

Unfortunately, the significance of this interdependent model as providing valuable support for the instructor was notable in its absence during Jason’s tenure. When Jason was an instructor in the Storefront 101 program during the winter of 2008, the lead agency was directing much of its energy to providing emergency shelter to homeless Calgarians. As well, the original program coordinator had recently resigned and the new coordinator had only been in place for a few weeks. While the past program coordinator assumed logistical responsibility for classroom setup, preparation of course materials, meals, and following up with absent students, Jason could not assume a steady and guiding hand would be there for him. As Jason related:

The Mustard Seed has a huge turnover rate there so I think one of things is—I really began to realize that Storefront, at least at that time, wasn’t as stable as I maybe initially thought it might be, and . . . we’ve talked about support and outward support . . . I didn’t feel as supported as I’d hoped.

For Jason as a new instructor, the impact of limited support became particularly acute as he found it challenging to move beyond the survival struggles of preparing and presenting course material to connect deeply with the students and to understand their particular learning needs. However, unlike Jason, the majority of the instructors experienced the benefits of interdependent model of support for themselves and the students. In turn, they were then able to shift their energy from every day logistics to become increasingly aware of and concerned about students’ personal problems and lives outside the classroom. Tara painted a picture of some of the challenges:

There were students who didn’t complete the course. There was one who got kicked out of housing, who was sort of back into alcoholism. . . . I mean [pause] I think the learning was offered to them. They know at some point they’re welcome to come back.

Roger worried about inadvertently opening up painful memories for students:

I think sometimes I just see the look on someone’s face, and I go, “Oh, my God, you’re distressed.” I tapped something here, and so what I do is I then try to just pull myself back out of it and sort of gently bring back hope. And normally what I do is I just give another narrative.

Mirroring Roger’s concern that he had touched a little too close to home, one student indicated that “he [Roger] was touching on the self talking and . . . it felt a little like a group therapy session.”

Instructors needed to mediate between offering course content, negotiating healthy boundaries with students, and figuring out how to respond appropriately
to student crises in housing or health that, strictly speaking, were outside the classroom realm but that definitely impacted students’ ability to engage in learning. As they became aware of the barriers to learning, instructors became increasingly impressed by the learners, as noted by Eileen:

I learned so much from interacting with them, and I often found myself a little bit in awe of them, about what they were managing to hold together, how they still had interest in learning, despite all these issues that were going on in their lives, how they had a kind of enthusiasm and kind of *joie de vivre*, if you want, that you know, was humbling to me.

**Relationship: Creating and Sustaining of Safe Space**

The instructors’ ability to create and sustain a safe space within the learning environment was a critical quality that was frequently highlighted by students. Indeed, many of these students expressed heightened anxiety at the beginning of the term. One student, upon hearing about the program, was “pretty excited about checking this out . . . pretty scared because after all it was university.” Another wanted to bolt from the first class and remembered that for the first 20 min of each class her major preoccupation would be “can I get out of this building quickly?” Several expressed some concern over the instructor prior to starting the program. And yet their fears began to dissolve as their instructors put them at ease. One student described her first instructor as an “absolute jewel” and then elaborated, “He made it easy for us and knew what we were and the difficulties of our backgrounds . . . . He was just one of us, right at our level. He wanted to see where each one of was at, and was absolutely accepting of who we were and what we knew.” The sensitivity of instructors was highlighted by another student:

This was a new experience [for us] and they were all aware of this. This was key. They were in a classroom with people who for the most part hadn’t been in the classroom for 10 years. They were willing to allow us to learn and to grow. They weren’t rigid. The problem now is this is what I have come to expect from a professor.

Shifting then to the instructors, we were led to probe how the instructors were able to create and sustain and safe learning space. Both Tara and Jeremy set the chairs in a semicircle or a horseshoe formation to minimize hierarchical positions and to facilitate student dialogue. Doug emphasized the importance of dialogue and crafting a safe space, “You teach by interacting with students who want to be there. I think these people want to be there. They are not quite sure why yet, but they want to be there. It’s a comfortable warm place.”

It occasionally took teacher discipline and direct intervention to protect the respectful space, as demonstrated by Jeremy’s commentary:

You’d need to exert a little authority . . . some people might be talking more than you are really comfortable with, you might want to hear from other people, and you might...
be aware that it’s hard for some people and you need to be a little sensitive about the ways in which you encourage people to contribute to classroom discussions.

A built-in program component also communicated the message that a caring community was important to the learning process: The communal meal prior to class in the Storefront 101 and Humanities 101 programs and the tutorial sessions in both the Discovery 101 and Storefront 101 programs. While instructors were not obligated to attend the meal, the majority came in order spend time with the students. Ernie commented on the meal’s importance in creating and sustaining community, “We need to have a common table and eat together . . . You get to be friends with the people. There are no barriers. They don’t think of you as some exalted person. They think of you as another learner.”

As we explored the importance of establishing relationships and cultivating a feeling of community, we realized that Storefront 101 instructors had the most sustained connection with the students due to the following program factors: One instructor worked with the students over a 13-week term, they graded written assignments for each student, and met the students over a meal prior to class. We were curious as to whether or not a strong learning community would be possible in the other two programs. For example, in Humanities 101, the instructors only connected with the students for two classes. What became apparent with two of the instructors was that some initial in-class relationships were sustained beyond the short classroom contact through their own initiative. Roger explained what happened after his 2-week visit to the class:

I had a student who called me this week, who was in this year’s first class, and said, “Look, there’s four or five of us who really liked your presentation; can we come to your class? We can’t afford to pay tuition but we’d just like to come in and sit in your classes. Would you allow us to come in?” I said, “I’ve got a hundred and one students, I really don’t care, a hundred and one a hundred and six, you know, it’s not going make a difference . . . you’re more than welcome to come.” She said, “I’ll be quiet, I won’t say anything, none of us will say anything . . . we just want to come and listen.” I said, “No, no, if you come, make me a deal. I’m happy to have you come and just listen, but you should never feel that’s all you can do; if you have questions, you ask them.”

Doug also ignited ongoing interest in his topic and inspired students to keep in touch, “We have this local gourmet series we are running over at the college where people on low income . . . can come and take cooking classes, for free. We got a whole bunch of people from Humanities 101 to come to the cooking class, which was great.” At the same time, Doug did express reservations about the lack of long-term connections between the instructor and the students, “Who is providing the continuity other than Christina [Program Director]and her assistant showing up, which is great? They understand everybody because they know everybody. But do we know everybody?”
Context: Opening New Vistas for Marginalized Nontraditional Adult Learners

According to Cranton and Carusetta (2004a, 2004b) the context within which faculty work influences their perceptions of themselves, their students, and their relationships with students. A particular dimension of context central to the original Clemente program is that “the content of the teaching, the discipline or subject area” (2004b, p. 272) must be from the liberal arts disciplines. As defined by Elias and Merriam (2005), in the liberal arts “central emphasis is to be given to the classics in literature and social and intellectual history” (p. 33). Storefront 101 instructors mirrored the original Clemente program in their passionate belief in the power of a liberal education to open new vistas and possibilities to adults who had been previously denied such educational riches. Don indicated that “[liberal arts] works, it makes them think; it helps them think, it gives them the confidence to challenge authority, to see some things wrong. I mean, they know that some things are wrong, but now they can articulate that.”

Even though the program in Thunder Bay is called Humanities 101, it did not limit itself to a liberal arts focus and expanded the course content to include professional and social sciences faculties such as social work, aboriginal education, community development, and political science. Their emphasis was to select instructors who were passionate about teaching and student engagement in learning, the “best teachers in the university.” The program director explained her position on the content of the course:

In some ways I really don’t think it [the course content] matters. In that situation you’re right—it’s the delivery, its how you think about knowledge, and how you think about the transmission of knowledge that really matters more, and critical thinking and that kind of thing can be and should be, a part of any discipline and not just the humanities. The kind of politics of identity and so on that tend to be part of humanities work could and should be part of any discipline.

What became apparent across the three programs, regardless of the debate on the focus on humanities content, was an underlying alignment with the instructors’ central values of exploring, critically investigating, and connecting ideas to lives of the students, as reflected by Roger’s and Eileen’s comments. Roger argued, “they get people who care about them, but they get people who are prepared to challenge them and give them concepts, get them thinking . . . treat them like they’re people who can think, and are not lost causes.” Eileen, from Discovery 101, reflected on a class on environmental ethics and wanted students to make connections between their lives, ideas, and empowerment:

I think the process of actually voicing their concerns or ideas with another person was very empowering and I think they began to realize that they, you know, that they were on to something and that kind of had stimulated their interest . . . . Then for instance
when we ended up talking later in the course about environmental ethics, they made the connection between Kant’s idea that, you know, \textit{no one person should be a means to your end} and they thought of the environment in that context.

As instructors considered their course content, their comments reflected an underlying belief and expectation that marginalized students could engage in the critical thinking and demanding readings required of them. Many of the students, while speaking about being pushed out of their comfort zone, tinged their responses with some pride at having met the bar, “Well, I didn’t think it would be as hard as I’m finding it. Like I say, it seems to be that I’m not getting enough time for the reading that I should be doing, and, if I have to take this course over again, I’m ready to do it.” For another learner, a paradoxical highlight was writing his first essay. While the process was anxiety-ridden, he was proud of completing it, “It’s mine and I’ve created it.”

\textbf{Critical Reflection}

Critical reflection was a strong theme in Cranton and Carusetta’s (2004a, 2004b) interviews with faculty members regarding their role as instructors, “There was a sense that people were critical of or questioning themselves, others and social norms” (2004b, p. 280). Instructors in the Radical Humanities programs realized that not only had the students been changed, but they too, through their stance of openness to learning and ongoing reflection, had been transformed by the program. Tara reflected on a causal change in her instructional approach in her regular teaching assignments at the university:

I became aware that we sometimes make assumptions that students are feeling much safer than they really are. And so, in my current class now, I actually talked about safety for the first time and talked about how to make a safe learning environment and what it means to that particular group of students, which is different, because it’s a different context.

For Janis, the program had such an impact on him that it became part of his transition plan as he neared the end of his formal career.

You know, reading is better than cocaine, and I can see a lot of the \textit{Storefront} or The Seed’s educational programs dedicated to that kind of proposition, to finding something to replace the things you relied on too much. To do that perfectly takes huge amounts of time, money, and human resources. I think I’ve found what I would like to do when I retire.

For others, teaching in a Radical Humanities program provided a vehicle to question access to the university and transformative education, as noted by Jeremy and Doug. “I wasn’t getting much slack cut from the institution for my regular duties but it was
just a belief in the idea that education is emancipation, and that I could give some of
my abilities to help other people who were disadvantaged” (Jeremy). “I look at this
as an opportunity for the university to really live up to what it’s supposed to be,
which is an open place for anyone committed to come . . . So what kind of know-
edge would really give them a sense of where they are but also a sense of where they
may want to go with their own lives?” (Doug)

Discussion

Cranton and Wright’s (2008) study on how adult literacy educators foster transfor-
mative learning in their classroom determined that the learning companion relation-
ship developed between the learners and the instructor was pivotal in creating the
possibility for transformation. “People were listened to, respected, trusted, and
heard. It was then that they could see the possibility that they could hold a different
point of view, that they could learn” (p. 44). These findings resonate with the central
role of instructors from three Radical Humanities programs in cultivating the possi-
bility for student transformation from disengagement to engagement in learning and
society. For example, as Mary reminisced about one of her first Storefront 101
classes, she remembered tentatively raising her hand in disagreement with some-
ting Jeremy, her instructor, had presented. As she articulated her opinion, she
anticipated being silenced. However, Jeremy responded, “That’s an interesting point
Mary. Can you tell us a little more about that?” This exchange was a turning point
for Mary. She felt valued, her opinion mattered, and she was respected as a learner. If
her instructor respected her ideas maybe she could learn! Mary has since completed
several courses in the Storefront 101 program and has graduated with an undergrad-
uate degree from a local university.

As we explored the stories of the instructors in this program to discern what they
did to cultivate the possibility of transformative learning for Mary and other students
in Radical Humanities programs, the dimensions of authenticity, as outlined by
Cranton and Carusetta (2004b), became a helpful framework in providing a deeper
understanding of their “way of being” with these learners. In Cranton and Caruset-
ta’s (2004b) continuum of beginning authenticity to mature authenticity, we are able
to locate the majority of the instructors along the continuum as exemplifying a more
mature authenticity. Specifically, most of the instructors have a “more integrated
sense of self” (p. 281); they see students as individual people, allowing “for the
development of genuine relationships with students” (p. 291); they are “distinguis-
hing one’s own beliefs about teaching from the common rhetoric of how to teach” (p.
290); and they are deeply reflective of their practice. While these qualities are
important in any classroom, the success of marginalized nontraditional adult learners
in a program like Radical Humanities requires their instructors to hold the qualities
of mature authenticity. Most of these learners are particularly fragile when they enter
the classroom environment, unable to afford the potential fallout of being taught by
an instructor new to the role, who may be struggling with course content and
classroom management techniques. Unfortunately, the risk of engaging an instructor who is in the preliminary stages of understanding his or her identity as an instructor became apparent with Jason’s experience teaching in the Storefront 101 program. While Jason had been a teaching assistant for undergraduate courses, this was his first solo instructor experience. Struggling to understand his teacher persona (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004b) and managing the tension between the content and the needs of marginalized nontraditional learners, he found it difficult to balance all the demands and student enrollment steadily dropped throughout the term. Supporting nontraditional students as they deal with low-self esteem and often traumatic educational histories requires discernment, flexibility, and sensitivity more typically associated with experienced instructors adept at balancing course content with the needs of their learners. In hindsight, it was unfair, not only to the learners but also to Jason, to place him in such an intense instructional experience, without supports, so early in his career.

The most critical dimension of authenticity for these instructors was the need to cultivate trusting relationships with the learners. This was not an easy task as many of the students had educational histories that spoke of intimidation at an institutional and/or instructor level. Indeed, Taylor’s (2007) caution that strict adherence to university policies such as a focus on assignment completion and rigidity around deadlines and roles dramatically decreases the possibility of transformative learning are particularly relevant to this community of learners. An initial step in reducing the heightened anxiety for these students and building trust involved instructors_downplaying the positional power (Brookfield, 2006) associated with being a professor and using their power to unleash the emancipatory possibility of learning in each of their students. Brookfield (2006) argued in his discussion on authenticity and power that, while there might be tension between the two, they can coexist in balance as the instructor becomes an ally and an authority. As an ally, instructors need to be transparent in presenting themselves, their stories, and their wishes for student growth and there needs to be congruence between their actions and their words. Teacher authority, as it relates to content expertise and evaluator of student performance, is then expected and valued by learners. Within the Radical Humanities programs, students valued both dimensions of instructor power. While they wanted a safe and supportive learning environment, comfort was not enough. They also wanted to experience the positional authority of being taught by professors at a university level. They wanted to be validated and respected as learners (Bennetts, 2003; King, 2003) as opposed to having lower course expectations because they were marginalized nontraditional learners. It is interesting to note that several of the instructors had moved well beyond a respectful and caring attitude toward their students and were humbled as they cultivated their students’ courage and ability to use their own narratives (Berger, 2004) to provide deep insights into the content of the humanities. Michael observed “I mean for me the students in the Storefront program are among the most amazing humans . . . they live life at a very, you could say, a very intense level and they don’t take for granted aspects of life that others might.”
expressing such appreciation for their students, these instructors had shifted well away from a place of positional power; they opened themselves up to the possibility they too would learn and be changed by their students and their understanding of the humanities—they became colearners. Such a shift speaks to the possibility of an I–Thou relationship (Buber, 1970), a total involvement of self and learners in intimacy, sharing, empathy, caring, openness, and trust. For the majority of marginalized adult learners who have been at the receiving end of I–It relationships, their experiences in a Radical Humanities program were a deeply significant change in their lives, sending them a message that not only could they be learners, but they have something of value to teach others, including their instructors.

Nodding (1995) argued that the use of dialogue is the most fundamental demonstration of a caring relationship between an instructor and student, “Both speak; both listen. Dialogue is not just conversation . . . a carer must attend to or be engrossed in the cared-for, and the cared-for must receive the carer’s efforts at caring” (p. 140). The use of dialogue was an essential approach in the Radical Humanities program and it was a concrete demonstration that the instructors were colearners. Cranton (2006) argued that dialogue that validates personal experience, as opposed to a narrower focus on rational discourse, in which individuals rely predominantly on abstract thinking to critique their own as well as other’s perspectives, allows an entry way to transformative learning for nontraditional adult learners. “If we follow this particular line of Mezirow’s thinking [reliance on rational discourse] the practice of educators such as Moses Coady, Myles Horton, and Paulo Freire would not have led to transformative experiences” (p. 125). In a similar vein, with the use of empowering dialogue in humanities education, learners are made to understand that “the truth was inside them and had only to be brought forth through dialogue . . . the humanities became a mirror in which they saw their human worth, and, like all lovers, they were transformed by love” (Shorris, 1997, p. 240). Returning to Mary’s example, we see an example of a dialogic exchange. Her opinion, offered in trepidation, was accepted by Jeremy and she was gently challenged to extend her ideas even further. While the dialogue in this example was focused on the content of a history lesson, a dialogic approach to learning persistently repeated during a 13-week term through the gentle and caring touch of a genuinely engaged instructor gradually alters the negative perspectives these students hold of themselves.

Finally, it is important to be reminded that as the instructors stepped out the confines of their regular teaching assignments within their university setting to break down the walls of exclusion and invite in those typically denied the potential riches of a humanities education, they were communicating a powerful message about who can learn. “When people start critically questioning why they are living and teaching by the rules, they have moved into premise reflection, transformative learning is possible, openness and complexity of perspectives increase” (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004b, p. 292). For Mary and many of the programs’ students, the idea that they too could study philosophy, English literature, and history was absolutely incongruous; it did not match their perception of themselves as someone unable to learn much less
tackle the deeper questions that would emerge from grappling with Plato’s notions of courage and love. And yet, by opening up this possibility, the Radical Humanities program and its instructors are telling marginalized nontraditional adult learners that they have a right and the ability to engage in content that requires them to be active and engaged learners.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the stories of instructors in the Radical Humanities programs reveal how important it is to create and sustain trusting and caring relationships with the students. While instructor techniques of facilitative dialogue, gentle coaching, assertiveness in creating safe space, and engaging students in multiple, creative ways of learning are all important, these skills must be undergirded by instructors’ deep interest in their learners and a belief they can learn and have much to contribute. Such a steadfast belief in each student’s ability to learn is particularly important for instructors working with marginalized nontraditional adult learners as these students often have challenging educational histories and hold a negative self-perceptions of their ability to learn.

Such deeply grounded and authentic instructors send a powerful message not only to marginalized learners about their capacity to learn but also to society that access to educational opportunities should not be restricted to the elite in society. For while, Mezirow (2004) and Merriam (2004) may wonder whether barriers such as homelessness, hunger, and lack of education attainment that are associated with marginalized nontraditional adult learners preclude them from experiencing transformative learning, the Radical Humanities instructors, like those in Cranton and Wright’s (2008) study, are challenging such limitations every week as they dialogue and colearn with their students. These instructors, animated by genuine caring and a deep belief in education for all, cast the transformative learning net far and wide to include those pushed to the margins of society.

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**Bios**

**Janet Groen** is Associate Professor in Adult Learning in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on transformational learning and learning opportunities for marginalized non-traditional adult learners. Her other area of research explores spirituality and adult learning within various contexts such as the workplace and university.

**Tara Hyland-Russell** is Associate Professor of English at St. Mary’s University College in Calgary. Located within the field of Life Writing, her research focuses on narratives of transformation for marginalized non-traditional adult learners. Her other work explores the relationships between gender and genre in forms ranging from fairy tales to the Canadian Long Poem and contemporary drama.