What are we willing to risk: Social Justice and Partnerships in Radical Humanities Courses for the Poor

Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA). Researching Adult Learning: Communities and Partnerships in the Local Context. 3-5 July 2007. Queens' University, Belfast.

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When you live in poverty it’s like you’re always being pushed down.
(Kevin, Storefront 101 student)

It’s been a struggle for me to learn I could go to school and I could learn … I just wasn’t allowed to think it was for me.
(Mary, Storefront 101 student)

You don’t get what it’s like living in poverty. It’s having a huge rock pushing down on you 24/7. You never get out from under it. You’re always aware it’s there. It grinds you down.
(Tracy Ray, Storefront 101 student)

The National Council of Welfare reports that, despite their efforts of nearly a quarter century of tracking the dimensions of poverty in Canada and working toward change, ‘there has been little lasting improvement despite Canada’s wealth, Canadians’ good intentions and the promises governments have made’ (Solving Poverty 2007, iii). In a comprehensive survey conducted by the National Council of Welfare, over a third of Canadians report being always or frequently worried about living in poverty (Solving Poverty 12). While poverty rates for seniors have fallen dramatically over the past 25 years, rates for all other ages, including children, have changed little: ‘Poverty rates for … lone-parent families, Aboriginal people, recent immigrants and persons with disabilities remain unacceptably high. There have been staggering losses in welfare rates across the country and all welfare incomes fall far below the poverty line’ (Solving Poverty 1).

Program of Radical Humanities
In 1995, journalist and social critic Earl Shorris launched his newly developed humanities course directed toward the poor and disenfranchised in New York City, after noting that it is relative, not absolute, poverty that causes the most profound distress: ‘At the end of the game, when the middle class has chosen to ally itself with the winners, thereby defining everyone else as poor, envy comes to the ward. And out of envy: isolation, hatred, and rage’ (1997, 24). Shorris believes 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 neighbourhood, community, and state’ (1997, 4-5) and to move beyond the internal and external barriers of
poverty that create isolation, alienation and anomie (Durkheim 1951). However, to help people move from a life of poverty to the *viva activa* requires an entirely different view of poverty and poor people, asserts Shorris: ‘the old ideas about the poor had been proved wrong, or if not wrong, at least not very successful in assisting people out of multigenerational poverty’ (1997, 4-5).

Shorris’s program of radical humanities, the Clemente Course, was 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. A number of iterations of the Clemente Course, all individually developed and named, but based on Shorris’ principles, have been established in Canada, Mexico, Australia and the United States through a diverse range of partnerships. Collaborations have included community agencies; post-secondary institutions; churches and government organizations.

**Research Design**

This paper focuses on one Canadian iteration of the Clemente Course, *Storefront 101* housed in Calgary, AB, and is based on research conducted as part of a two year project “Providing Access to Transformational Learning for Non-Traditional Adult Learners: A Study of the Clemente Program as a Model for Lifelong Learning.” Utilizing case study methodology, we examine various iterations of the Clemente program across Canada that offer entry-level liberal arts university courses to non-traditional learners. Specifically, our research question framing the entire project is: *What elements of the Clemente program facilitate access to transformational learning for non-traditional adult learners in Canada.* By conducting in-depth case studies on several iterations of Clemente courses across Canada, we access adults who have not previously engaged in further education and/or informal learning.

Over the past year and a half we have studied three programs based on Shorris’ program of radical humanities: *Storefront 101* in Calgary, AB; *Discovery University* in Ottawa, ON; and *Humanities 101* in Vancouver, B.C., observing classes, tutorials, and graduation ceremonies; listening to learner, tutor, instructor and facilitator stories; and studying written documents and artefacts. Case study methodology was chosen for the research for its complex, multi-layered, and heuristic value (Yin 1994). As a case study inquiry, the project relies on a variety of techniques for data gathering including a demographic survey instrument for students across the three programs, document analysis, individual interviews and focus groups with a variety of participants within each of the three programs. While the complete process of data collection is occurring over a two year period, this paper uses data from phase one of the research project.

Phase one involved documenting the three regional programs in terms of their history, values, mandate, context, clients, and program delivery. Program documents were reviewed and key participants, such as program coordinators, committee members, tutors, and learners, were interviewed. Under the broad umbrella of qualitative methodology, we used a narrative methodology (Clandinin
and Connelly 2000). According to Christine Wihak (2004) and Jerome Bruner (1986, 1994) narrative inquiry is fundamental to an understanding of how self-identity is constructed, how people make meaning in their lives, and how meanings are shared in a culture—an important principle for this study.

**Storefront 101 Calgary, AB**

In 2003 *Storefront 101* was launched 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 initiated 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, a private faith-based university college.

Working Committee members include representatives from the above-mentioned partners as well as representatives from Literacy Alberta, Potential Place Clubhouse (serving persons with mental illness), students and tutors from *Storefront 101*. Instructors are drawn from several Alberta post-secondary institutions, both public and private; tutors represent a variety of agencies, organizations and perspectives.

The Mustard Seed provides the administrative and organizational framework and support for the program and administers the budget, which is maintained through a variety of community and corporate sponsors. Students register through St. Mary’s University College, attend weekly classes at Alliance University College & Nazarene University College, and weekly tutorials at the Mustard Seed for a full 13 week semester. Students are 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. Course syllabi are developed in consultation with Academic Council at St. Mary’s and approved by that body. St. Mary’s creates graduation certificates for Storefront participants and issues official transcripts to students. Final grades for each course are reviewed by the Dean of Students at St. Mary’s; students are awarded an audit notation or final grade in keeping with the academic standards of St. Mary’s.

Following Shorris’ principles, *Storefront 101* offers profound change for students through the study of the humanities and its reflective stance toward understanding the ideas and ideologies that shape our social worlds:
We all possess unlimited potential as public, political and moral beings and we have a place in public life. The radical nature of the humanities with its emphasis on philosophy, art, literature, history, logic, debate, critical thinking and politics of freedom and public life is the best guide available in realizing our potential as individuals and our role in society. The study of these disciplines is powerful and liberating. (*Storefront 101 Working Committee Notes*, 2004)

Foundational to both Shorris’ vision of the radical humanities and its Canadian iterations is the notion of Socratic ‘maieutic dialogue’ as a midwifery of the mind. Socratic philosophical midwifery involves bringing forth participants’ ideas through Socratic dialogue as well as critiquing and analysing these ideas in a respectful and honest manner. Another radical educator, Paulo Freire, describes dialogue as an ‘encounter between men that provides impetus to ‘name the world’’ (1970, 76): ‘Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression’ (1970, 77). It is through the Socratic dialogue among students and instructors of the radical humanities programs that the movement from poverty into citizenship is born.

*Storefront 101 Adult Learning Community: Building Polis Through Partnership*

Shorris’ contribution to addressing the poverty he saw across the United States originated in the life and thought of the ancient Greeks. As the ‘first to exemplify the connection between the political world and the humanities’ (Shorris 1997, 5) Socrates gave the course its method. As in the Greek city state, the *polis*, the political life of students begins not with listening to lectures but in the melding of thought and action through dialogue. Socratic dialogue emphasises listening to other participants in a free and open atmosphere and expressing honest, critical and independent thought. For many Storefront students, being listened to respectfully and attentively is every bit as important as being heard when they share their ideas. As Socratic dialogue is central to the transformation of students in the radical humanities, so too is it central for the effective connection between pedagogy and the tenets of social justice among the partners offering the radical humanities program that leads to a praxis of social justice, a praxis that seeks to push back the forces that surround the poor.

When Earl Shorris researched the face of poverty across the Untied States prior to developing his radical course of humanities, he discovered that the forces converging on the poor pushed them out of the public world and into the realm of daily struggle for survival:

Perhaps no better definition can be made for poverty in contemporary America than to say it is the life of necessity, with all the violence the Greeks found in that word. To live in poverty, then, is to live according to the rules of force, which push people out of the free space of public life into the private concerns of mere survival (1997, 32).
Shorris describes the forces affecting the poor as a *surround*, a fence circling and pressing upon them: analogous to the circling manoeuvre used by hunters to gather and isolate prey and eliminate possibility of escape. He cautions us not to imagine this surround of force acting upon an abstract ‘poor,’ however, but upon individual people with names and lives: ‘the forces of the surround do not affect the poor, they affect poor persons, not even families, but persons, one at a time. Everyone who lives within the surround lives alone. The weight of the forces separates them, splintering the body of the poor like glass, driving the shards of family, community, society into feckless privacy’ (1997, 47). Indeed, we have seen the powerful effect of the forces surrounding the poor in the lives of those seeking to join our Storefront course. Intense isolation and alienation results from the range of experience that characterizes our students’ lives, including recent migration, war, bankruptcy, negative educational experiences, alcohol and drug addictions, history of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, long term physical and/or mental disability, inadequate housing and low paying jobs. Very often students living in profound isolation are difficult to recruit for the course or do not make it through a full term.

Such force closes off any opportunity for change and growth, insists Shorris, because it cannot be reasoned with: ‘Unlike argument, which has a dialectical shape, involving thesis and antithesis, and lies at the heart of the political life at all levels of society, force closes off dialogue’ (1997, 42). The Socratic dialogue that lies at the heart of the Clemente program is the means through which students are offered a reflective path to begin to understand themselves in relation to the world around them. For instance, Mary recalls learning about Aristotle’s notion of the virtuous ‘mean’ as a life-altering event. She tracks a transformation first in her thinking and then in her life to that moment.

A deep sense of safety and belonging within the Storefront classroom provides students with the intellectual and emotional space necessary to begin to enter the dialogue with fellow students, society and themselves. For many of the Storefront students, being legitimated as students was a novel experience. Many had troubled histories with education or felt education was barred to them for some reason. Sharon recalls a mental gate clanging shut on learning in grade six when she was publicly humiliated by the teacher. Tracy Ray stated that she has had to overcome ‘a lot of warped stuff from family.’ Specifically, her age and alcoholism barred her from higher education: ‘My family told me you had to get your education at a certain age or there was no point... you couldn’t get an education while you were working. If you didn’t finish high school when you were supposed to you may as well just give up.’

Differentiating between force and power, Shorris maps the path to liberation through collaborative action: ‘Power differs from force in that it is self-contained, both the subject and the object. Force is always lonely, while power never occurs in isolation; one person alone among others cannot have legitimate power’
Legitimate power, then, not only resists the isolating surround of force that alienates and fragments those living in poverty, but it also animates a collective action that not only provides impetus for change but the energy through which lasting change can be sustained. The question then that most concerns us is how do we achieve legitimate power – and what is the nature of collaboration that best fosters transformative radical humanities?

**Educational Power vs Force**

Universities and other formal educational institutions are not power neutral: they are both implicated within larger power structures and constituted as their own systems. Yet, while universities can be and often are instruments of exclusion, especially to those already excluded by other social forces, they can also open themselves to a changed order. While acknowledging the constraints on universities, Handel Wright argues for the potential of universities to be powerful sites of praxis for social justice. In particular he speaks of their ability to breach dichotomies of academy/community; academic and non-academic work; theory and practice; text and lived cultures: ‘the university itself must not be overlooked as a site of praxis, a site where issues of difference, representation and social justice, and even what constitutes legitimate academic work are being contested’ (2003, 808).

Henry Giroux suggests a way in which universities can make a significant impact in partnership with other agencies seeking radical social change:

> radical education...questions fundamental categories and is concerned with making society more democratic. It brings together theory and practice. Radical educators have a concern with the crucial role of pedagogy, in particular calling into question the relationship of knowledge to power, and a responsibility to engage with questions of difference, and questions of the experiential. (in Jackson 1997, 2)

In *Storefront 101* and other radical humanities programs, calling into question the relationship of knowledge to power necessitates an examination not only of power relationships outside the learning community but also, and perhaps most importantly, those within. The first experience Storefront students have of becoming part of the *viva activa* occurs in the context of the program and of the shared meanings they create as learners and legitimate members of that learning community. Shorris speaks of the development first of a virtual *polis* in which people learn to act as citizens before they are able to enter the full state of engaged citizenship. *Storefront 101* and other Clemente programs offer students a way to begin to understand the rights and roles of citizenship and to experience the difference between force and power. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is through transforming the nature of the academy and its pedagogical activities.

**Social Justice Praxis**

St. Mary’s University College became involved with *Storefront 101* as one way to enact its foundational principles of social justice. The aims of the program were
seen as compatible with St. Mary’s mission that, ‘through a synthesis of faith and reason ... invites and challenges all individuals of the community to become compassionate, thoughtful, and resourceful members of society’ (St. Mary’s University College Academic Calendar 2007-8, 12). Storefront’s goal to empower students and help realize ‘our potential as individuals and our role in society’ was congruent with St. Mary’s vision to be a ‘beacon of learning, civility, and hope, inspiring students to lead with integrity and to meet the future with confidence, intellectual acuity, moral conviction, and a passion for social justice and the common good’ (2007-8, 12).

As the program’s accrediting academic institution, St. Mary’s has a vital role to play, not only in maintaining the academic rigor that provides Storefront students the dignity of being fully legitimate members of the academy, but also in negotiating what Derek Briton calls a ‘pedagogy of engagement’ that challenges adult educators to address the real problems of putting democratic and emancipatory ideals into practice (1996). While St. Mary’s is steeped in the ideals of social justice and draws faculty, staff and students to its community because of its commitment to social justice, is it able to practice those ideals within the partnership fostering Storefront 101? And how has the experience of Storefront 101 impacted its students, staff and faculty? Is that perhaps the test not only of social justice praxis at St. Mary’s but also of the radical ideals of the Clemente program itself: has involvement in Storefront 101 affirmed or precipitated effective social change within and through the academic institution that accredits the program? The Clemente program will change St. Mary’s as long as the University College is fully committed to the program and the praxis of social justice.

What are we willing to risk?: not a conclusion but more questions and the promise of stories

‘Are we willing to transform ourselves in the process of helping our students transform?’ (Taylor 2006, 92). At the heart of our reflection on the challenges of social justice praxis within learning partnerships lies our ability and willingness to embrace, with humility, transformation in ourselves and in the institutions we inhabit. The process of transformation is the same for us as for the students of the program: through entering a dialogic and reflective space in which we encounter others who are also willing to be transformed.

While in this paper we have explored the theoretical bases of our collaborative intent to work for social transformation, during the conference presentation we will explore stories of students’ experiences within Storefront 101; an account of the evolving discussions within the working committee about how to enact an engaged pedagogy through actions as diverse as instructor selection, classroom intervention and transitional support; and the impact Storefront 101 has had on its constitutive partners. We will note the risk-taking inherent in trying to effect social change, especially and even in relation to our academic institutions and agencies.
Notes
This paper is based on a research project funded by the Canadian Council of Learning: Adult Learning.

References


*Mustard Seed Ministry Fact Sheet.*


*St. Mary’s University College Academic Calendar (2007-2008)* Calgary, AB.

