Introduction

Earl Shorris launched his presentation to 20 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 again 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 centres 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 just completing our second year of the Clemente Course for the humanities where introductory university-level courses in disciplines including history, art, philosophy, literature and political science are offered to low-income, disenfranchised individuals. The goal of the programme, locally called Storefront 101, is to foster a new sense of citizenship and lifelong commitment to learning. All expenses, such as books, a pre-class meal, transit fares, and childcare (if applicable) are covered by the programme’s sponsors. One of the students, a mother of five, who has taken two courses in the programme 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).

In creating the first programme seven years ago, Earl Shorris did not claim to have adult education experience either as an academic or as a practitioner. 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 impact of such a programme here in Calgary, I cannot help but see both a theoretical grounding that reflects the historical and philosophical roots of adult education and the manifestation of supportive adult learning processes. The following is a reflective review of the philosophical perspective of the programme’s founder and the resulting programme through the lens of adult education’s social justice roots and the tenets of supportive and effective adult learning processes.

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, north of New York City, to learn about a programme that staff and inmates had developed which dealt with family violence. He wanted to see how their ideas fitted in with what he had learned about poverty. In summary, Shorris began to realise that numerous forces such as hunger, isolation, and abuse, among many others, exerted 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 neighbourhood to the broader community to the city-state' (p. 1).

While at the correctional facility he met Viniece 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 realise 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, Viniece 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 programme, is a unique adult education programme planner who has a clear agenda for his programme. Rothwell and Cookson (1997), in prompting programme planners to develop their own working philosophy, ask the question ‘what is the overall purpose of lifelong education and programme planning? In short, why is programme 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 (orientation one) as a vehicle for radical change within our society (orientation two). 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 and 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 in various locations, and the local programme, Storefront 101, have woven together liberal education and radical education both in its philosophical orientation and practice.

Links Between The Philosophical Roots of the Clemente Program/Storefront 101 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 as public citizens. Storefront 101 will make all its students rich in understanding. (Storefront 101, 2004)

Shorris, while being profoundly transformed in his conversation with Walker regarding the value of the humanities, had already experienced and 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 30, and during his tenure as president from 1945 to 1951 he instituted many innovative ideas, based on his belief that a liberal education was the best way for people to think for themselves about fundamental issues. While Hutchins is associated with the liberal education philosophical tradition (Elias and Merriam, 1980, p. 27), he, like Shorris, also saw liberal education as a means towards a political agenda. He understood the link between positions of power and influence within our society and access to the study of humanities. Liberal education was the education of rulers; it was the education of those who had leisure. 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). Over 50 years have passed since Hutchins made these comments and not much has changed. Liberal arts education is still the domain of the rich and is still connected with power and privilege as demonstrated by the comments from a recent graduate of the Clemente Course in Washington State:

I have become aware that many people in our society (including myself at one time) also have entrenched beliefs about who is worthy of access to that knowledge. High school councillors, educators, previous college experiences, and a multitude of social service case workers have told me at different times that because of my educational background, or my temperament, or my social status, or my economic status, or family history and orientation, I

Convergence, Volume XXXVIII, Number 2, 2005

68
could not and should not focus on the studies of culture, history, philosophy and the arts, instead I should build ‘job skills’ through secretarial school or a technical college. I grew to believe that education was a precious treasure that only a select few were worthy of attaining, and that I was not one of those few. (Update, 2003, p. 2)

Utilising the study of the humanities to move towards radical political change is occasionally criticised because it is claimed that it is a body of knowledge based on the ‘cultural imperialism of dead white European males’ (Shorris, 2000, p. 105), and therefore perpetuates the knowledge of those in our society who hold power and privilege. In addition, at first glance a liberal arts education does not appear to be relevant to the life experience of students within the programme. Shorris (2000) argued that the content within a liberal arts education transcends class boundaries: ‘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). In addition, a student who recently graduated from the philosophy course within the Storefront 101 programme indicated ‘although Plato’s ideas are 2,300 years old, I was amazed at how relevant they were to my life today’ (Morton, 2005). However, Shorris has also acknowledged that courses that take place in other parts of the world should choose their great philosophers, their poets, and their history, but regardless of the location, the questions are universal.

The use of humanities as providing a path out of poverty for the disenfranchised within a society challenges the instrumental view of adult education which believes that the disenfranchised 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 and present day thinkers in adult and higher education, as well as Shorris, concurred. Livingstone (1945), while he acknowledged the importance of vocational and technical training, stated,

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 saw 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). I believe that Cunningham would also welcome
Shorris’s mission in the Clemente Program. In her critique of adult education (Cunningham, 1993) she challenged 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).

The common thread in the voices above, as they disassociated themselves from the instrumental provision of a technical education as a means to break the poverty cycle, rests on the importance of reflection. Critical reflection as the path in working toward radical political change was also the fundamental educational approach of another adult educator. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) Paulo Freire described the process of banking education, comparable to vocational and job skills training, 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). Freire also hoped that through critical reflection the oppressed and disenfranchised within society would 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).

In summary, Shorris, like these adult educators, believed that a liberal arts education, not vocational training, would allow his students the space to step back from their situation and in turn instil in them the ability to reflect; the pathway he saw as necessary to becoming a fully engaged citizen of our society. The first graduating students from the Clemente Program understood this power of reflection as demonstrated by Shorris’s description of their graduation ceremony and his wish for them. ‘“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’ (Shorris, 1997, p. 16).

In turn then, the concept of being a fully engaged citizen is not only for individual students to have access to the ‘good life’ of reflection and to rise above the poverty cycle, there is a radical agenda that hopes these students will begin to question the status quo and perhaps work toward societal change. In further describing the first graduating class of the Clemente Program, Shorris revealed this agenda. Several of these graduates had gone on to attend local colleges or universities, while others had gone on to obtain and keep jobs. However, there was one exception: one student ‘had been fired from her job in a fast-food restaurant for trying to start a union’ (Shorris, 1997, p. 16). One small example of a liberal education being used for radical change.
The Process of Learning

Access to the riches of a liberal arts education through the Clemente Program and the local programme, Storefront 101, is only half of the equation; the other half being the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment. Many of the students arrive the first evening of a new course looking for any reason to leave. They are used to a process of learning that is teacher directed, exam driven, and places little value on their thoughts and contributions. One student in the local programme, Storefront 101, ‘became so stressed out the first time he took a course that he had to drop out. “A lot of us were scared and apprehensive”, he says, “especially when it came to writing essays”’ (A Spare Change Newspaper, January 2005, B13). The programme recognises this fear and utilises learning processes that strive to dissolve these fears and in turn cultivate an atmosphere that ‘initiates the discovery or rediscovery of the inborn potential in adult learners as students … through the rigours and challenges of a university-level course’ (Storefront 101, 2004). This learning ideal can be equated with the hope for personal transformation where students ‘align various disparate parts of the self to gain coherence, peace, and a sense of wholeness. This promotes a sense of freedom and authenticity which can contribute to meaningful work and activity in the social sphere’ (Scott, 1998, p. 183). The following are the central learning tenets that instructors strive to emulate within the programme to cultivate this personal transformation:

- To encourage students to be reflective and critical thinkers, and problem solvers.
- To provide students with the opportunity to work as part of a group.
- To develop relationships of mutual respect among each other, and with their tutors and professors.
- To build an inclusive learning community which extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom and into the larger community.
- To work with cultural institutions in order to access the rich resources available.
- To allow students to challenge the rigours of a university-level humanities course in a supportive and approachable manner. (Storefront 101, 2004)

The central instructional technique in the Clemente Program and the local programme, Storefront 101, is the Socratic method, ‘which is called maieutic dialogue. “Maieutic” comes from the Greek words for midwifery. [The instructor] takes the role of midwife in the dialogue’ (Shorris, 1997, p. 11). In addition, while the instructor is the guide for cultivating this dialogue, it is critical that the instructor take the stance of being a co-learner within the course. One of the instructors of the Storefront programme, clearly a co-learner, spoke convincingly about the high value he placed on his own learning journey in teaching the psychology course:

Convergence, Volume XXXVIII, Number 2, 2005

71
My conclusion is that it is the teachers and the professors who derive the lion’s share of benefits in terms of learning, growth and satisfactions. That conclusion was strongly reinforced during the past semester. For me, teaching the course was an awesome experience. It was a privilege, a blessing, a tremendous set of satisfactions, and a time of accelerated growth and learning. (Storefront 101, 2004)

Ultimately this programme is striving toward egalitarian dialogue between the students and the instructor, which occurs ‘when it takes different contributions into consideration according to the validity of their reasoning instead of according to the positions of power held by those who make the contributions’ (Flecha, 2000, p. 2). Flecha described his use of egalitarian dialogue in a programme that is strikingly similar in its goals and in its learners; specifically a literacy circle in Columbia comprised of learners who were also initially inhibited within an academic setting. Like the instructors in Storefront 101, Flecha wanted to foster their self-confidence, self-knowledge, and creativity through the use of egalitarian dialogue around various pieces of literature. ‘Thus, not only does literature reach a new public but the public also transforms the readings, enriching them with new ways of bringing them to life. [Their] comments … differ greatly from what we hear in most literature classes or read in books of literary criticism’ (p. 10, B11).

Eliciting the perspectives and personal connections these students bring to the content offered within these programmes not only validates their experiences, it often illuminates course content in ways the instructors could never have imagined. One professor instructing within a parallel programme in British Columbia describes his experience in teaching Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, a profound tale of men chained all their lives in the darkness of the cave. As this instructor spoke about those men who chose to stay chained to their familiar reality, rather than venture outside into the world, he saw his ‘students’ faces transformed as the realisation sank in that poverty or social isolation was their own cave, and each of them would remain trapped within it unless they saw the light of reality. It’s like watching the prisoners casting off their chains’ (Pfeiff, 2003, p. 126).

An underlying message within the egalitarian dialogue learning process is that the opinions of each of the students has worth and should be heard; a new and profound concept for many of the learners within Storefront 101, as described by the programme’s English literature instructor. ‘When we started, many felt like they didn’t have anything to say about literature. But I’ve been so impressed by their passion for learning and their course to push themselves’ (Morton, 2004). In turn this ability to communicate and reflect on literature, ideas, and opinions of their colleagues has boosted their confidence, ultimately working toward the ultimate learning ideal, mentioned earlier; to initiate the discovery or rediscovery of the inborn potential in adult learners as students.
Concluding Comments

A short time ago, I spent some time with the local Storefront 101 programme assistant and we dialogued about the word ‘disenfranchised’ that is used within this paper to describe the students this programme is seeking to attract. As we shared potential definitions we began to settle on the concept of ‘denied access’ and then we considered various ways that access had been denied to potential students. For many of the students, access may have been initially denied because the surrounding forces of poverty had been so overwhelming. In turn, students had also absorbed a societal message that told them which doors are open to them and which doors are closed. Specifically, as it relates to our students, the door to a liberal arts education, and in turn, post-secondary education, was firmly shut. Eventually, we began to realise that the external societal message of denied access and disenfranchisement became internalised for many of them. Before coming into our programmes, many of our students would deny themselves access to cultural downtown life; specifically museums, galleries, libraries, concerts halls, and ultimately, access to a liberal arts education and full participation within a civil society. At a deeper level, many of our students also denied themselves access to the value of their opinions and ultimately their self-worth.

The Clemente Program and the local version, Storefront 101, begins to dissolve these internal and external barriers to access by opening the door to a liberal arts education to those who are traditionally denied entry. Students in turn begin to dissolve their internal barriers to access by rediscovering their self-worth and, in turn, they begin to access cultural downtown life. Finally, perhaps as Earl Shorris hopes, they begin to access their right to being political agents of change.

It is important to acknowledge that this programme has its limitations and is not suitable for everyone. Shorris (1997, p. 9) explains that some potential students who came for programme 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 programme. In addition, I do not wish to negate the value of local vocational programmes within our community. Many local students, who have availed themselves of vocational and upgrading literacy programmes, have been able to step away from the forces of hunger and poverty. Perhaps because they have pushed these forces back, these adults too might now have a chance to shift from vocational training into the riches of a humanities course that allows them to reflect and pursue ‘the good life’ so they can become full citizens in our society.

Convergence, Volume XXXVIII, Number 2, 2005

73
Janet Groen is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. She has published on spirituality in the workplace, social justice and adult education, and faculty development in distance learning. She teaches within the Workplace and Adult Learning Specialisation and offers courses on organisational theory and analysis in education, adults as learners, spirituality in the workplace, and qualitative research. She is a member of the working committee for the local iteration of the Clemente Program: Storefront 101. She can be reached at <jgroen@ucalgary.ca>.

References


