

Humanities education as a pathway for women in regional and rural Australia: Clemente Ballarat

Ann Gervasoni
Australian Catholic University

Jeremy Smith
University of Ballarat

Peter Howard
Australian Catholic University

This paper provides insight into the experience of Clemente humanities education for six regional and rural Australian women living around Ballarat. Each took part in an audio-taped semi-structured interview which explored the impact that university study had on their lives. Their responses suggest that Clemente Ballarat was life-giving. The student insights identified the critical importance of: providing a supportive learning environment for people lacking life opportunities and routine; students feeling better and happier with themselves resultant from personal learning

achievements; doing something that was about 'me'; support from others including Learning Partners and the program's counsellor; students appreciating their academic and inner strengths; rekindling dreams and hope; seeking ways out of poverty for their family; finding friendship and connection; appreciating the academic disciplines; improvements in well-being and mental health; and pride in achievements. Students also were apprehensive about what the future may hold after completion and graduation. These insights highlight the treasures that students found when engaged in humanities education based upon community embedded socially supported structures that enable learning. Further, these insights provide contextual outcomes for the Clemente program, which could be implemented across regional and rural Australia for people experiencing multiple disadvantages or social exclusion.

Keywords: *social inclusion, equity, disadvantage, transformation, humanities education, community engagement.*

Introduction

Promoting social justice and connection for all is essential for Australian regional and rural communities who acknowledge those who are socially excluded for brief or prolonged periods of time. Social exclusion occurs when individuals, families and communities: experience low incomes relative to community norms; do not have secure and safe shelter; experience unemployment; cannot access the health, child care and social services needed; receive inadequate schooling; are not connected with friends, families and their community; and experience self-esteem and quality of life well below those of the general Australian community.

Education is well established as one domain of social inclusion and its corollary social exclusion (Headey, 2006; Headey & Warren, 2007; Scutella, Wilkins and Kostenko, 2009; Eurostat 2009; ASIB 2010; Scutella & Wilkins, 2010). This article looks at how a broadly Socratic approach to education – specifically the Clemente Humanities Course

in Ballarat – can diminish the effects of social exclusion and empower those excluded to participate as democratic citizens with greater autonomy. The focus is the experiences of a group of women in an Australian regional/rural setting where tertiary education is delivered through a partnership between universities, local government and community organisations and enterprises. The authors add to a growing body of research on the personal efficacy of Clemente education (Egan et al, 2006; Howard & Butcher, 2007, 2009; Howard et al, 2010; O’Gorman, Howard & Butcher, 2012; Yashin-Shaw, Howard & Butcher, 2005) and strengthen the evidence-based case for harnessing the humanities to achieve social justice goals.

Social Exclusion and the Impact of Education for Increasing Social Inclusion

The concept of social exclusion first emerged in France in the 1970s and is replacing more traditional ways of thinking about, and measuring degrees of personal isolation that people experience. Increasingly *social exclusion* is used to refer to the range of dimensions experienced by people who are marginalised that lead to a reduction in their opportunities to engage to their potential in social or political life (Saunders 2011; Scutella & Wilkins, 2010). Within the Australian context, social exclusion is viewed as multidimensional in nature, and therefore “its extent, character, causes and consequences can be understood only by examining the range of dimensions of disadvantage or exclusion that are present” (Scutella & Wilkins, 2010:449).

Kostenko, Scutella and Wilkins (2009), following on from Headey (2006), produced estimates of social exclusion in Australia based on 29 indicators distributed across seven domains that were identified by Scutella, Wilkins and Horn (2009): material resources; employment; education and skills; health and disability; social; community; and personal safety. The study used 2001 to 2007 data from Waves 1 to 7 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey to construct individual-level estimates of exclusion that depend on: the number of domains in which exclusion was experienced; the number of indicators of exclusion present within

each domain; and, the persistence of exclusion over time. Whilst recognising certain limitations in the available data and the need to further develop and refine this measurement process, the findings provide some insight about the depth of social exclusion in Australia during this period. The measurement exercise established that 20 to 30 per cent of Australians aged 15 years and over were experiencing 'marginal exclusion' at any point in time. Four to six per cent were 'deeply excluded', and less than one per cent were 'very deeply excluded'. People found to be most prone to exclusion included females, the young and the old, single parents, persons in regional areas, Indigenous Australians, persons born in non-English speaking countries, persons in private rental accommodation, persons with a long term health condition and persons not completing secondary school or its equivalent (Kostenko, Scutella, & Wilkins, 2009).

One impact of social exclusion is increased levels of public spending on welfare and related public services (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008; Henry, 2008), and this social and economic reality provides further impetus for increasing *social inclusion*. This explains the current interest of the Labor-led Australian Government in the social inclusion agenda. In May 2008 the Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB) was established, and their definition of social inclusion enables dimensions of social exclusion in Australia to be discerned and politically discussed.

Being socially included means that people have the resources, opportunities and capabilities they need to: learn (participate in education and training); work (participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including family and carer responsibilities); engage (connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities); and have a voice (influence decisions that affect them). [ASIB 2009:15]

Education provides one means of increasing social inclusion. Further, there are positive correlations between education and the good health and wellbeing of individuals (Hammond, 2002; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Hartog & Oosterbeek, 1998). The specific impacts of education upon health and resilience throughout the lifespan

have been thoroughly investigated (Hammond, 2004; Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Hammond, 2002; Hartog & Oosterbeek, 1998; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). A number of studies have indicated that relevant education can lead to improvements in a number of areas of wellbeing: self-confidence (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999; Dench & Regan, 1999); self-efficacy (Wertheimer, 1997); self-image; (Stephenson, Yashin-Shaw, & Howard, 2007); self-understanding (Cox & Pascall, 1994); competencies, communication skills, and civic engagement (Emler & Fraser, 1999; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992); a sense of belonging to a social group (Emler & Fraser, 1999; Jarvis & Walker, 1997); and substantive freedoms and capabilities (Sen, 1999). Thus, there are clear research-based indications that purposeful and appropriate education can contribute to improvements in the social, economic, and personal domains of a person's life (Hammond, 2004; Luby & Welch, 2006; Scull & Cuthill, 2010). This is one clear aim of Clemente education.

The Clemente Course: International Origins

Clemente originated in New York in 1996 as an innovative approach to providing transformative humanities-based study for people who were otherwise locked out of tertiary education. Earl Shorris (1936-2012), a journalist and activist, was moved by the remarks of a woman prisoner who thought that the poor would benefit from another educational view of the world. He developed this idea into an educational inspiration - The Clemente Course - with the expressed purpose of empowering the poor and marginalised by offering a humanities based education utilising a Socratic teaching paradigm.

Shorris (2000) argued that often all the education the poor receive was training programs designed around instilling in people the daily habits of the disciplined life of work-ready subjects. The intention of such training is to move people from welfare to work. The other effect is to withhold from them a means of developing their cognitive and deliberative abilities. Rather than routines for the poor, Shorris (2000) envisaged an education that offered the rich cultural capital of citizenship. He believed that an active and engaged life is the model for the poor, and was quite explicit in his vision of Clemente

as a politicising experience for all involved. For its teachers and supporters, Clemente is a seminar in the lives of the poor, and a way to share experiences from different worlds. Shorris concluded that a Socratic-style education that re-engages people who are suffering isolation and profound disconnection, and fosters in them reflexivity and agency, should be the curriculum foundation of Clemente.

Shorris (2000) set out a striking vision for confronting the reality of poverty, especially multi-generational poverty through people studying the humanities.

‘...poverty in contemporary America...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.’ (Shorris, 2000:32)

In place of the vocationally-oriented training typical of many educational systems (Jensen & Walker, 2008), the Clemente course engages the disaffected, isolated, homeless and poor in a values-based education, and promotes practices of autonomy that counteract the routinisation experienced by the poor. It is a radical alternative to welfare training programs that often churn the poor through regulatory bureaucracy. Shorris (2000) expressed the following key pedagogical principles of the Clemente course.

1. It is generalist in content. The curriculum breaks down the substantive distinction between learning (for the well-off) and churning (for the poor), thus opening a regular routine of participation.
2. Dialogue is the purpose taking the place of a teacher-centred education.
3. Classes become a temporary public space, a “public sphere” (Habermas, 1989) to be involved in for its students to escape their “private troubles” and confront “public issues” as influential sociologists have cast it (Giddens, 1982; Mills, 1970). Clemente is a place and a time that students can break out of isolation.

4. Participation is the measure of success. Academic grades are important to the students to be sure. Being present and participating is a key aspect of the students' success.

Establishing the Clemente Course in Ballarat: Regional and Rural Australia

The potential of the Clemente course for providing all Australians with access to the treasures of tertiary education through the humanities was recognised in 2003 by Peter Howard from Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the St Vincent de Paul Society (Sydney). Since then ACU, with other partner organisations and national universities have collaborated in implementing the Clemente course across nine Australian locations and contexts, and the course has been acknowledged as an effective method of addressing the social injustices faced by many Australians (Mission Australia, 2007; Mission Australia, 2011; Howard, Butcher & Egan, 2010).

The Clemente Ballarat course benefits from the experiences of others and is the first regionally-based Clemente course in Australia (Gervasoni, Smith, & Howard, 2010). Established in 2008, the Clemente Ballarat course is an innovative venture in community engagement through the collaborative partnership of seven organisations: ACU - Ballarat; Ballarat Cares/United Way Community Fund; Centacare Ballarat; Ballarat Libraries; City of Ballarat; The Smith Family; and University of Ballarat (UB). These organisations collaborate purposefully to provide a rigorous, university-approved course in the humanities for people in the region who are otherwise locked out of university education at a given point in their lives. Students are enrolled at ACU and student fees are absorbed by ACU. Those who successfully complete the course's required four units across four semesters are awarded a Certificate in Liberal Studies by ACU. Subjects for Clemente Ballarat are selected from a national set of academic approved units of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Community volunteers recruited and supported by Ballarat Cares/United Way, act as 'learning partners' to students in planning, writing, research and learning computer skills. Community agencies, such as The Smith Family and Centacare, recruit students,

co-ordinate the program and provide personal and pastoral support for students. Both ACU and UB provide academics who teach academic approved units and offer a positive experience of tertiary learning.

Clemente is intended for a small cohort of students so as to address their individual learning and personal needs. The program goes beyond the mode of delivery of curriculum that mass education offers for more self-reliant learners. Students undertake one unit per semester so that their experience of tertiary study is focussed and manageable. Two learning sessions occur weekly: a two hour seminar supplemented by a one hour shared learning session with the learning partners. Both sessions take place in Ballarat's public library because it offers a civic atmosphere well suited to seminars in humanities subjects and is easily accessible for the students. The space used as the Clemente classroom is bright and accommodating with a kitchen attached where meals and afternoon teas are provided to foster conversation, engagement and fellowship amongst students, lecturers and learning partners. This sharing of a meal is an important feature of the Clemente Ballarat experience.

The units studied by Clemente Ballarat students during the first six semesters were: Australia's Indigenous Peoples Past and Present; Introduction to Australian politics; Introduction to Ethics; Introduction to Sociology; 2D Visual Arts; and Australian History Until 1900. Across each unit study skills support was offered by ACU and there was the supportive presence of a dedicated counsellor provided by Centacare. The study skills sessions conducted by librarians and study skills professionals each semester canvassed essay conception, planning and writing skills, time management and library-based research skills. The counsellor provided enhanced pastoral support for each student, ensured necessary transport and childcare arrangements were made available for students, dealt with critical issues and followed up students in between classes and learning partner sessions. Student learning opportunities were further enhanced by field trips to the Kirrit Barreet Aboriginal Art & Cultural Centre, the City of Ballarat Town Hall, the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Sovereign Hill and World Café events where the students act

as co-hosts for stakeholders and invited participants from the Ballarat community who discuss the issues associated with the semester's unit of study following the World Café format.

The Clemente Ballarat course began in August 2008 when fourteen female students who each experienced social exclusion found the courage to walk into the Ballarat Library to commence a time of re-engagement and learning. This paper provides insights into the personal impact of the Clemente Ballarat course for six of these women aged between 35 and 55 years. These six were selected because they had each been involved in the Clemente course for at least three semesters and could discuss the personal impact of their studies over this extended period. The research design included interviews with students to gain insight about how they became engaged in the Clemente course, the highlights, personal strengths and challenges they wished to identify and, finally, how they and others, such as friends and family, had been influenced by their participation in Clemente education. Interviews were used because the researchers were interested in how students might 'biographise' their lives; that is write their lives as a narrative (Ricoeur, 1988).

Clemente Ballarat – Examining the Impact for Students in a Regional Setting

Existing research has identified a number of positive outcomes for Clemente students in relation to their sense of self and their abilities, their relationships and their perceptions of the future (Mission Australia, 2007). This study sought to examine Clemente Ballarat students' experiences with respect to these outcomes, and contribute to the growing body of evidence about the impact of student participation in the Clemente course. The key aims of the research were to:

1. Gain insight into the life journeys of Clemente students with respect to their engagement in learning and re-engagement with the community; and

2. Explore the supports and barriers to students' successful re-engagement and ongoing participation in a regional-based Clemente course.

This study employed participatory action-based research with participants as partners in the research as, together, we seek to modify, adapt, refine, change and enhance the effectiveness of the Clemente Course. The research adopted a similar method to that used in existing published research on Clemente, in particular the 'methodology of engagement' (O'Gorman, Howard & Butcher, 2012).

All six students who were approached agreed to be interviewed in an audio-taped semi-structured conversation. Two elected to be interviewed as a pair. The research design included a piloting phase during which the interview schedule was validated, clarified and refined. Piloting the questions enabled the interviewers to hone their skills in interviewing a group of people with whom they have little previous experience. Five interviews were conducted by two of the authors (Gervasoni and Smith) and the sixth by a research assistant. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed, and methods derived from grounded theory were used to identify the key categories and themes that emerged through personal inspection of the transcripts. These categories and themes were corroborated and refined by the three-member research team as part of the data analysis process.

Student Insights into the Personal Impact of the Clemente Course Students

The analyses of student responses to the interviews suggest that the Clemente course was life-giving for students. Each interview produced unexpected and varied results with some common insights identified across the interviews. Important for this study are the insights related to the life journeys of students with respect to their engagement in learning and re-engagement with the community; and any supports and barriers to students' successful re-engagement and ongoing participation in a regionally-based Clemente course. The following section presents interview excerpts from Debbie, Christine,

Tammy, Shell, Lily and Taryn (pseudonyms) in order to highlight and discuss the themes and insights that emerged from the analyses.

Debbie believed that Clemente provided a learning environment for people lacking life opportunities:

It's an opportunity for them and for people like myself who struggle a little bit to ... get us back out there into life, and, to see some sort of future....And for people who couldn't, didn't learn before, or didn't have an opportunity or weren't in the right environment years ago who can now.

She described a scenario which seems common to the experiences of most students:

...it's been a reinforcement every week, and to be with the other women and know that they are...dealing with the same things, issues with children and so forth...and learning together.

Debbie pithily described the general student profile although each student in the program is extraordinarily unique. In her life, Debbie viewed Clemente as a chance to reclaim something for herself. She had sacrificed much for her family and a distinct theme in her remarks was 'it's about me'. She engaged in a twofold reflection on her own place in the educational process. Often, it was a battle she fought with herself to just be there:

I withdraw, and then I have a constant battle with myself and then I get down on myself to...but...the times I could get through the door and come to sessions I did feel great...and have the support from everybody.

The door was a portal metaphor for Debbie as well as referring to the literal door of the classroom. She repeatedly invoked this metaphor - the door that she must compel herself to traverse. The metaphor referred to Clemente as an opportunity, a door to something that was community-based and gave her life routine:

Getting through the door is half the problem and once you get through the door you feel okay and afterwards you feel better about it. So getting through that door is the hardest part, but

once you are through it, it's the easiest part.... The course was really important for me...because I have routine in my life again. For the first time in years it was about me.

The community that Debbie experiences when she passes through the door was made up of students who were true peers. The spirit of this community, including teachers, learning partners, the course co-ordinator and agency staff, was very supportive: *'The life experiences are brought into it so you are not feeling like some silly dodo sitting there or whatever. You're not made to feel inferior of anyone else in the room.'* Christine felt the same way. *'They ...support staff and teachers... pump you full of confidence and lift your spirits.'* Support is vital to inclusion in this educational community.

Debbie explained the importance of the Course Co-ordinator.

When anyone comes through the door, whether it's someone who is having a hard time that day getting through the door, or somebody that's not happy or someone's upset...she's that one person we know, as we walk through the door...will always be there...if I know I am feeling uneasy, she'll look at me and try and pull me back again, and she knows.

As the content of the Clemente course's units is rigorous, personal encouragement and assistance were vital to keeping Christine in the course when she faced personal challenges: *'I'm scared of failing.'* Even so, her tenacity to continue was an inner strength. Indeed, anecdotal observations from Clemente teachers and administrators were that every week was an occasion for most of the students, a test to see if they could just make it to the class. Passing through doors to attend Clemente motivated Christine in her everyday life. Invoking the well-known Foucaultian phrase that infers self-empowerment, she identified a major purpose of Clemente for her was to: *'get out of the house 'cos I get a bit cabin-fever-ish...Knowledge is power. And I think the more knowledge you have the stronger you are mentally, physically...'* Even in assessment (which by Christine's own admission she struggled with), she felt a power. Clemente education produces results in providing a learning environment in which people can find personal strengths. When asked about strengths Christine said, *'I like*

to debate...I surprised myself actually; I didn't think I could get up in front of people and talk.' Studying in Clemente was a journey of self-discovery for many students. Christine found a resource within herself in her talent for debating. Clemente has become an essential part of Christine's life journey: *'If I didn't have it I think I would be in a psych ward. I'd definitely be in a psych ward actually.'*

Students experienced an impact from their learning on their general outlook on the world. The greatest potential of humanities education lies in the self-transformation of an individual's world-view. Shell, for one, found that a conscious effort to practice what she was acquiring was noticed by those near to her:

With each lecture I try and take something away from it and put it into life outside of this room here, especially with ethics. Even my parents have stopped and said, "Shell...you've kind of changed a little bit...you're still the same but you're kind of a little bit different. And it's nice. It's a nice Shell".

Shell commented that her personal problem-solving powers grew as she steadily comprehended the disciplines studied:

(T)his time last year when I was sort of getting paper work for all of this stuff [ethics unit], I looked at those words and I went, "Oh, I don't know what they mean. Can I get a dictionary? [laughs]. How do I spell that one?" And now I know them. And I know what they mean and I use them and I do what Richard says. If I've got a problem, and I think I've just used that theory, what was that theory I've just put into work today, you know. And that's what I try and do, and even with the sociology. It's taken me a couple of lectures to get my head around what's... going on but...each lecture I take something away from it and try and put it into life and it's made my life easier, to be honest with you. It's less complicated. My problems I have are simple ones, and I've got the thought processes to work them out so the simple problems are not usually that hard to solve now. Things are less complicated, if that makes sense?

Lily also changed her views but in quite a different way. Her sense of herself and what she knows has changed as a result of studying the

history unit. She too uses the word 'horrified' in respect of a number of contentious issues in Australian society. She feels the history unit, particularly, has reversed her previous understanding of Australia's past. In her new view, she recognises that she was deprived of a vital appreciation of history in an earlier stage of education:

Half of it I didn't know. Like, for instance, when they said Captain Cook founded the country, when actually he just invaded it... when I first got into that one I started getting very angry...when I thought, "Why weren't we taught that at School?"...

A different narrative emerges from Tammy, in her journey with Multiple Sclerosis. She had to 'rewire' her brain (*as she puts it*) after some short term neurological problems. Self-expression is her power: '*...there's stuff that's within you that just needs expression and it tends to find a way, once the obstacles have [been] overcome and Clemente's a path through that.*' Her dreams drove her on:

Okay. I have a couple of options. I overcome MS and I'm determined to do that. It is doable; people have done it before. The other option is ...I mean...yes, I've done a few interesting things in my life and I like to write.

Tammy's dream was for her children to flourish and she has a dream of writing to inspire them. She described Clemente as a 'path' to help her in this. Though creative writing came easily to her, not so academic writing. As with other students she did not face such challenges alone and unsupported:

My brain is still rewiring itself, but I've learnt such a lot along the way that I'm completely and utterly thrilled and proud of myself. Without the Clemente guidance and supportive, really, truly supportive atmosphere, I could not attempt to go into say UB Uni and...fulfil their expectations without any help along the way.

The Smith Family, a partner in the Ballarat Clemente course, has helped Tammy's family access education through providing personal support and scholarships. This motivated Tammy to pursue her own education after circumstances had inclined her to '*put that dream on hold*'. The scholarships were a circuit-breaker in the life of her family.

For them, the potential to break out of the poverty trap through participation in education and an accumulation of cultural capital had yet to be realised. Tammy commented:

...it's the only way out of poverty because, I've lived below the poverty line for what, 30 years basically, and there starts to become a build-up to...need housing, to need things...and to seek the opportunities that would allow you to get what's needed to live life, instead of not being able to participate in life, not being able to do your hobbies and things like this.

Tammy maintained her ambition to rise above a life of poverty which was partly caused by her illness - a neurological condition - that regularly interrupted her Clemente study. Nonetheless, she drew upon her inner resources to return. Creativity was one of her strengths, though she felt that this was inhibited by the requirement to write assessment tasks in a scholarly style. *'It's very hard for me just to do the academic stuff without being creative.'* She recognised that writing in a disciplined academic style was something she had learnt.

The way out of poverty for Shell appears different. She invests much hope in her son and wants to set an example for him. At the same time, she harbours a dream for herself; a path out of routine industrial jobs and into work where she can feel pride in herself:

I've looked at my son and said, "Hopefully, one day when I've finished doing all this study...maybe my next job won't be at Maxi Trans, maybe my next job won't be at FMP [a local manufacturer – authors], maybe my next job won't be at Rivers, Oliver's or anywhere else I've worked. You know, it might be in an office, where I can put make-up on and wear high heels, and stockings and a dress [laughs]....That's the way I want to feel when I go off to work.

Clemente has nurtured this future dream and hope for Shell and she reports that her ideal path of teaching looks possible. When she entered the Clemente course, the social networks were already established. One of the students *'looked at me and she said, "You'll like it here Shell. We're all the same, you know [laughs]...and you'll*

find you'll become a part of our family". Shell was sceptical but before long found herself socialising with her classmates and enjoying family-like relationships.

Shell's dream does not stop with education and a new kind of job. Quietly, she longs for re-connection with her family. *'In my family I am a little bit of a black sheep.'*

I miss out on family things, like my sister and her husband and my mum and dad go away to Bali every year. I don't go. I can't afford it. I'd love to be able to get myself a decent enough education, get a decent job. Be able to look at them one day and go "listen here mum, there's me cash for me ticket, get on that internet and book us tickets 'cos we're all going to Bali now 'cos I can come too."

An overseas holiday matters to Shell for the value of connection it would bring. *'We have to hear your stories, we love your stories and we love the presents [laughs] but we want to be a part of that too.'* Shell spoke frequently and at length about her family. As with other students she seeks a space for herself: the part where 'it was about me' as Debbie describes it, and evidence of the transformative potential of Clemente:

I know I could come here and I could sit back in that chair... and say nothing and...I could just not be getting it...but it's not something like you want to stand up and go, "Nah'. You know, I'm not getting it." I know I could do that and just sit here and eat lunch and take in bits and pieces and be really blasé about the whole thing, but I don't want to be like that. I want to make the most out of this and then hopefully move onto something else. I don't know what that something else is; I'm just hoping I can find it between now and then, to be quite honest with you.

Shell takes education seriously. Clemente has given her unexpected friendships as well as learning. Not only are the students friendly, so too are the Learning Partners, indeed they raise her esteem. *'Sometimes in life there are people that will speak above you...they try and tangle you up with words [laughs] and try and confuse you. Those tutors (learning partners) aren't like that.'* Shell reports that

the ACU library staff are also welcoming and act to enhance her pride and sense that she is on the path of education, *‘They’re very helpful up there. I don’t feel like I’m not a part of the Uni because my classes are down here [at the Ballarat Library].’* Shell’s brightness and the broad range of comments are indicators of the multifaceted nature of this transformative education.

Lily and Taryn (interviewed as a pair) spoke about the variety of goods – opportunities - available through education. Friendship and connection were high on their list. Their close friendship was born in the Clemente course. Lily explained, *‘I’ve made some good friends in the class; two really good friends, and they help me a lot. They help me through it. So that was a bonus making new friends as well.’* She added that she expected to meet new people *‘but I didn’t know how I’d go because I don’t go out a lot.’* Lily’s experience of isolation was a common theme across all interviews. Taryn spoke further about friendship:

I’m good friends with Lily. I’m over there probably every second day but we talk on the phone every day and with another one of the ladies here. The girls have actually organised a weekend away for my 50th... If I wasn’t here that...I’d probably be sitting at home or just going out for tea.

Lily agreed, *‘You meet nicer people, too, like.....different people, different atmosphere from what I’ve been used to...’* Sociability takes the form of friendship here. Students are peers but become more than peers. This deepens the experience of social connection and then extends that connection beyond the end of teaching semesters.

Other values informed the ways in which Taryn interacted with others. *‘I think I’ve learnt more tolerance too, with knowing some of the people’s backgrounds.’* Both Lily and Taryn had strong views about Clemente and the units they had completed. They appreciated the academic disciplines they had learnt, embracing both the academic challenges and the personal difficulties encountered through Clemente. As with Debbie, Taryn had to push herself to attend.

I have low days, but I've come here on low days and had tears in my eyes and still done it, which surprised me. In the past I usually just lock myself away when I have days like that. So that's something really different for me and a lot of people here have bad days, so everybody seems to understand and says "you'll be right". You know, and it's not as embarrassing as I thought it would be.

The students appreciate the support and connections they have found through Clemente, as well as valuing the opportunities to participate in intellectual activity and conversations. Debbie highlighted the importance of the intellectual community shaped by Clemente classes.

All the time, when I read the newspapers...I'd be consumed by it. I would just have nobody to talk to about it, so coming to school was a good thing for that as well because I would have nobody to chat with; no neighbours or anybody who was, not on my level, but just not doing what I was doing, so I would suffer intellectually But then you would come to class and discuss these things, so you could get that out...what was inside me bursting and things like, "isn't this fascinating! and "I couldn't believe this, or "isn't that amazing!" and all that stuff. It's great.

Debbie had a strong sense that Ballarat was an “educational hub”, and that this gave her opportunities for the future: *“I love thinking I'm part of all this too, this progression that Ballarat is moving in.... That things are happening for the future in Ballarat and that I can be part of that.”*

Debbie acknowledged the role of local government in her education and sense of community building.

It just reinforced for me that the community is in it together. That if your local government is supporting what you are doing, and supporting the program that you are in...it would make me think that someone like me, who's going through changes and rebuilding and so forth, that support is there, in your head, within your community...and it makes you feel good.

In contrast to this view of a supportive local government, Tammy questioned the approach of Federal governments towards “*people like me who were struggling beyond my capacity to do the right thing and then being shunted through their system*”. In a manner that echoes the sentiments of Shorris (2000), Tammy recognises that many people would benefit from the educational treasures of Clemente.

They're really intelligent and they're being asked to do really simple stuff that gives them no challenge and gives them a lot of unhappiness. I mean we all know how to wash dishes. ... It's a waste, a real waste of a good load of innate talent that people have, that really does need expression and I would really like to see people given a chance, but sometimes it's a hard road to get there.

The power of the learning within each unit and the continuing impact upon their lives were other important insights from the interviews. Lily finished school after Year 8 and has had little opportunity for education since. As with the history unit, she and Taryn found the politics unit difficult but both continued to reflect on political issues. They had also needed to justify their participation in education to friends and family, but were convinced about its importance. Connection was important, as was the critical content of their learning. Taryn commented:

A lot of people said, “What are you doing it for?” “What job do you get?” and I go, “Well it just adds to everything else that you do in your life.” And as I've said, it's made me more aware of things as in politics and ethics and especially with the Australian history – it just horrifies me when I look, think about what we did.... I would never have known any of that if I didn't come here. I would have just kept living, plodding on, not knowing, like, it's pretty ignorant not knowing about it.... As I've said, I've become a lot more aware of what goes on in society now, take more notice, don't just sit back in my house thinking nothing's happening out there.

Taryn and Lily reflected on the end of the Clemente course when they qualify for the Certificate in Liberal Studies. Taryn worried in particular, *'I'm a bit scared of what I'm going to have to do next. I don't think I could handle full time work. I don't think I could go back full time. Not mentally.'* Such sentiments raised the need for the Clemente program to support graduating students to become more aware of and acknowledge the choices they have for further education and other life pathways.

Graduation is viewed as an important signal to the students' families of the role of education in their futures. In the words of Debbie:

I want to achieve that [graduation], and I want my son to be there [cries] and for him to see that...even if you have had a rough ten years you can still get up, and Mum's moving on. Even though Mum fell to pieces, she's getting up... All of that's important and then it rubs off on the grandkids, hopefully. So that's the plan.

Conclusion

This study sought insight into the life journeys of students in the Clemente Ballarat course with respect to their engagement in learning and re-engagement with the community. It explored the supports and barriers to students' successful re-engagement and ongoing participation in a regionally-based course.

The Clemente course was life changing and path-breaking for the six students interviewed. All spoke variously about reconnection and the worth of relationships struck up through their participation. Three of them faced significant barriers in commencing and maintaining their participation. These barriers included their entrenched feelings of isolation, lack of self-belief, ill health, and pressures from family and friends about the worth of the education they were undertaking. The student insights highlight the gravitas of providing a supportive learning environment for people lacking life opportunities and routine in mitigating these barriers. Central to such support were the encouraging role of the Learning Partners recruited from local businesses, the enabling role of the Centacare Student Co-ordinator,

the helping role of the ACU librarians, and the civil responsibility role of local government. Significantly, the students report that the Clemente course has provided a number of personal benefits:

- increased feelings of positive wellbeing and self-esteem;
- focussing on doing something for ‘me’ for the first time in years;
- finding personal strengths;
- rekindling dreams;
- perceiving a future in which the cycle of poverty for their family is broken;
- discovering new friendships and connections;
- appreciating the academic disciplines;
- appreciating the role of education as a means of getting through bad days;
- overall improvements in mental health;
- pride in learning achievements; and,
- enhancing future life choices following Clemente graduation.

These student insights highlight the treasures of a humanities education for women in regional and rural settings. For some, it might appear that the humanities are too great a challenge for people suffering exclusion, deprivation and disconnection. Data from these interviews suggest otherwise. These analyses highlight the positive impact of the Clemente course upon students, confirm the relevance of the course’s community partnership model for the Ballarat context, and suggest significant potential for the Clemente course to increase educative justice for women particularly in regional and rural Australian. Shorris’ (2000) vision of Clemente as an especially inclusive form of education that expands the participation of the poor as citizens in society, found realisation in this Clemente Ballarat course. Community-based socially supported educational structures that have enabled these students, initially, to participate and, then, to sustain their engagement in Clemente are of critical value in allowing these women to seek future life choices.

The authors believe that the values of a humanities-based education that is supported with the high level of personal and pastoral care embodied in the Clemente Ballarat program would be of great benefit to many tertiary students. Such a re-visioning of higher education, properly resourced and led by universities in partnership with community organisations, could increase social inclusion and active citizenship for many Australians. The findings from this study suggest that the Clemente Ballarat approach to tertiary education has brought about purposeful learning and self-transformation, leading to ongoing life and learning opportunities for mature-aged women living in a rural and regional setting. This study adds to the growing body of published research about the benefits of Clemente education in achieving social justice outcomes, especially for women who face often unacknowledged obstacles to undertaking tertiary education. The insights from this study highlight the many positive outcomes for these students and the unique features of this Clemente course developed and delivered in a rural and regional context. Further research is needed to gain greater insight about the specific role of the community partners and their partnership in bringing about this outcome.

References

- Australian Social Inclusion Board (2010) *Social Inclusion in Australia: How Australia Is Faring?* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Carlton, S., & Soulsby, J. (1999) *Learning to grow older and bolder*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Cox, R., & Pascall, G. (1994) 'Individualism, self-evaluation and self-fulfillment in the experience of mature women students' in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 13: 2, 159-173.
- Dench, S., & Regan, J. (1998) *Learning in later life: Motivation and impact*. Brighton, UK: Institute for Employment Studies.
- Emler, N., & Fraser, E. (1999) 'Politics, the education effect' in *Oxford Review of Education*, 25: 1-2, 251-273.
- Eurostat, (2009) *Europe in Figures: Eurostat Yearbook 2009*, Luxembourg: Author.

- Gervasoni, A., Smith, J., Howard, P. (2010) 'The Ballarat Clemente Program: A doorway to the treasures of humanities education' in *Australian Association of Research in Education Annual Conference*. Melbourne University, 28 Nov- 3 Dec. viewed 7 November, 2012 <<http://www.aare.edu.au/10pap/2517GervasoniSmithHoward.pdf>>
- Giddens, A. (1982) *Sociology, a brief but critical introduction*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Grossman, M. & Kaestner, R. (1997) 'Effects of education on health' in J. R. Behrman & N. Stacey (Eds.), *The social benefits of education*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989) *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hammond, C. (2002) *Learning to be healthy*. The wider benefits of learning papers no.3. London: Institute of Education.
- Hammond, C. (2004) 'Impacts of lifelong learning upon emotional resilience, psychological and mental health: fieldwork evidence' in *Oxford Review of Education*, 30: 4, 551-568.
- Hartog, J., & Oosterbeek, O. (1998) 'Health, wealth and happiness: why pursue a higher education?' in *Economics of Education Review*, 17: 3, 245-256.
- Headey, B. (2006) 'A framework for assessing poverty, disadvantage and low capabilities in Australia' in Melbourne Institute Report No. 6, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Headey, B. & Warren, D. (2007) *Families, income and jobs, volume 2: a statistical report on waves 1 to 4 of the HILDA survey*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.
- Henry, K. (2008) *Addressing extreme disadvantage through investment in capability development*. Keynote address to the Australasian Institute of Health and Welfare Conference . Australia's Welfare 2007.
- Howard, P., & Butcher, J. (2007) 'Community engagement and student learning: Making community a core element of teacher education' in International Study Association on Teachers and Teaching 13th Biennial Conference, Brock-Canada, July.
- Howard, P. & Butcher, J. (2009) *From disadvantage to learning and engagement: community embedded socially supported education*. Paper presented at the annual Australian Association for Research in Education, Canberra.

- Howard, P., Hampshire, A., Butcher, J., Saggors, S., Flatau, P., Marchant, T., Campton, J., Taouk, Y. & Cherednichenko, B. (2010) 'Social Inclusion through Transformative Education: The Catalyst Clemente Program' in *The Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement*, 5: 2, 49-66.
- Howard, P., Butcher, J. & Egan, L. (2010) 'Transformative Education Pathways to identity, independence and hope' in *Gateways - International Journal of Community Engagement and Research*. 3, 88-103.
- Jarvis, P., & Walker, J. (1997) 'When the process becomes the product: Summer universities for seniors' in *Education and Ageing*, 12, 60-68.
- Jensen, K. & Walker, S. (2008) *Education, Democracy and Discourse*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Kostenko, W., Scutella, R., & Wilkins, R. (2009) Estimates of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Australia: A Multidimensional Approach. Paper presented at the Economic and Social Outlook Conference, University of Melbourne, 5-6 November, 2009, viewed 9 November 2012, <http://melbourneinstitute.com/downloads/conferences/rosanna-scutella-paper.pdf>
- Kohen, D., Leventhal, T., Dahinten, V. & McIntosh, C. (2008) 'Neighborhood disadvantage: Pathways of effects for young children' in *Child development*, 79: 1, 156-169.
- Luby, J. & Welsh, J. (2006) *Missed opportunities: the case for investment in learning and skills for homeless people*. London: Crises.
- Matijn, C. & Sharpe, L. (2006) 'Pathways to youth homelessness' in *Social Science & Medicine*, 62, 1-12.
- Mills C. W. (1970) *The sociological imagination*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Mission Australia. (2011) 'Addressing multiple disadvantage' in *Snapshot*. Sydney: Mission Australia.
- Mission Australia. (2007) Enhancing participation: New possibilities for disadvantaged Australians in *Snapshot*. Sydney: Mission Australia.
- O'Gorman, J., Howard, P., & Butcher J. (2012) 'Promoting Personal Agency and Social Inclusion through the Clemente Australia Program' in *Journal of Social Inclusion*. 3: 1, 21-42.
- Parry, G., Moyser, G., & Day, N. (1992) *Political participation and democracy in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricouer, P. (1988) *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

- Ross, C. E., & Mirowsky, J. (1999) 'Refining the association between education and health: the effects of quantity, credential, and selectivity' in *Demography*, 36: 4, 445-460.
- Saunders P. (2011) *Down and out: poverty and exclusion in Australia*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Scull, S. & Cuthill, M. (2010) 'Engaged Outreach: Using Community Engagement to Facilitate Access to Higher Education for People from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds' in *Higher Education Research and Development*. 29: 1, 59-74.
- Scutella, R., & Wilkins, R. (2010) 'Measuring Social Exclusion in Australia: Assessing Existing Data Sources' in *Australian Economic Review*, 43:4, 449-463.
- Scutella, R., Wilkins, R. & Horn, M. (2009) *Measuring poverty and social exclusion in Australia: A proposed multidimensional framework for identifying socio-economic disadvantage*. Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research Working Paper no. 4/09, University of Melbourne.
- Scutella, R., Wilkins, R. and Kostenko, W. (2009) *Estimates of poverty and social exclusion in Australia: A multidimensional approach*. Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research Working Paper no. 26/09, University of Melbourne.
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shorris, E. (2000) *Riches for the poor: The Clemente course in the humanities*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Wertheimer, A. (1997) *Images of possibility. Creating learning opportunities for adults with mental health difficulties*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Yashin-Shaw, I. Howard, P. & Butcher, J. (2005) 'Educating Disaffected Adult Learners: Re-engaging the Homeless Through Tertiary Level Humanities Studies' in J. Searle, F. Beven, D. Roebuck (Eds.), *Vocational Learning: Transitions, Interrelationships, Partnerships* (pp.276-281) Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press.

About the Authors:

Dr Ann Gervasoni is a senior lecturer at Australian Catholic University and chair of the Clemente Ballarat Steering Committee. Her present research focuses on the impact of tertiary education for adults, and strategies to build teacher and community capacity in effective learning and teaching of mathematics. Ann has presented

at numerous Australian and international conferences and published chapters and journal articles in the field of community engagement and mathematics education.

Dr Jeremy Smith is Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) in the School of Education and the Arts at University of Ballarat. His research interests include the impact of tertiary education for adults participating in the Clemente Program, and historical sociology and social theory with a focus on the Americas and Japan. Jeremy has taught two Clemente units in Ballarat and is a member of the Clemente Ballarat Steering Committee.

Assoc Prof Peter Howard from Australian Catholic University is the National Leader of Clemente Australia. He has engaged extensively in community engagement with marginalised and Aboriginal rural and urban communities in identifying ways in which education can bring hope to people and enhance community capacity for all involved. He has presented at numerous Australian and international conferences, as well published chapters and journal articles in the field of community engagement, adult learning and mathematics education.

Contact Details

Dr Ann Gervasoni

Faculty of Education
Australian Catholic University
1200 Mair Street
Ballarat VIC 3350

E: Ann.Gervasoni@acu.edu.au

Dr Jeremy Smith

School of Education and Arts
University of Ballarat
Mount Helen VIC 3350

E: Jeremy.Smith@ballarat.edu.au

Assoc Prof Peter Howard

*National Director of Clemente Australia
National Leader, Beyond Disadvantage/
National Leader, Clemente Australia
Institute for Advancing Community Engagement*

*Australian Catholic University
Locked Bag 2002
Strathfield NSW 2135*

E: Peter.Howard@acu.edu.au