

**New Possibilities for People Experiencing Disadvantage:  
Insights from Clemente Australia**

Peter Howard<sup>†</sup>

<sup>†</sup>National Leader, Clemente Australia

**Australian Catholic University**

**Abstract**

Clemente is a community embedded university humanities course providing higher education opportunity in collaboration with social agencies for people experiencing multiple disadvantage. It has set out a vision for confronting the reality of disadvantage, especially multigenerational poverty through studying the humanities. The program had its origins in the United States of America in the 1990s when Earl Shorris, a journalist and social commentator, was researching a book on poverty. The insight that the Humanities empower people to think about and reflect upon the world in which they live, which promotes a broader re-engagement with society allowing the disadvantaged learn to see themselves, not as victims, but as agents of change, led Shorris to devise a humanities program for the poor. Clemente was first offered in New York City in 1995 at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Centre. In 2003 the first Clemente university program in Australia was initiated with eight people experiencing homelessness and disadvantage. It is now operated by many partnerships across Australia.

There are any people who at some point in life face a setback or disadvantage that at best hinders and at worst excludes their engagement in society. For most of us this is a temporary state of affairs. However, a significant number of people face ongoing adversity across a range of life areas which can compound to reduce their capacity to build the sort of lives they would otherwise choose for themselves.

In Australia close to one million people (5%) aged 18-64 currently experience at least three types of disadvantage (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2010). from amongst: low income and assets; low skills; housing stress; unemployment or underemployment; and poor health. Factors such as substance misuse, mental illness, disability, family violence, discrimination and homelessness (and combinations of these) can further entrench multiple disadvantage.

Indeed, there are pockets of concentrated and severe social disadvantage that have become entrenched across certain communities (Vinson, 2007). These communities and many people living within them are experiencing long term and sustained social exclusion. While education can be a powerful means for addressing multiple disadvantage it also has significant value in itself and perhaps especially for multigenerational disadvantage. Sadly, people experiencing disadvantage who are most in need of access to education and the critical pathway it provides to transformative learning, life choice and future hope are often those least likely to access it

The experience of disadvantage has a significant psychological impact upon people (Social Inclusion Board, 2011). There are three key principles are identified for addressing cycles of disadvantage that can be used in delivery reform: the way you treat people matters; continuity of support is essential; and a focus on addressing structural barriers must be maintained. There is no single answer, though, relevant and purposeful education continues to be a powerful pathway enabling people experiencing multiple disadvantage to make life choices that

enhance their social inclusion. This has particular application to higher education reform for engaging people in learning who experience multiple disadvantage.

### **Clemente: new hope for universities - engaging with people experiencing disadvantage**

The Clemente program had its origins in the United States of America in the 1990s when Earl Shorris, a journalist and social commentator, was researching a book on poverty. Visiting a New York penitentiary, he asked a female prisoner, who was trying to improve the lot of fellow inmates, why she thought people were caught in the poverty trap. He expected a range of possible answers but was surprised when she said they needed to be provided with an alternative to the street by being introduced to the moral life of Downtown. He realised that what she was talking about was the need for the poor to be able to reflect through the humanities (likely to be found in the concerts, museums and libraries located in many USA downtown areas). The assumption, at the time, was that disadvantaged people needed to be 'trained' in vocational/skills type courses to equip them for the workforce.

In contrast, the Humanities empower people to think about and reflect upon the world in which they live. In turn, this promotes a broader re-engagement with society and the disadvantaged learn to see themselves, not as victims, but as agents of change. Shorris proceeded to devise a humanities program for the poor. Clemente was first offered in New York City in 1995 at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Centre. Shorris then set out its details in his book *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities*. Under this scheme:

1. Clemente would provide humanities subjects in literature, history, art history, philosophy and logic taught at a suitable academic standard (usually the equivalent of Year 1 university).
2. These subjects would be conducted by good academic teachers who would be paid for their time in order to make this a serious teaching contract.
3. The students would be taught for free because they were selected from disadvantaged households and should range between eighteen and thirty five in age.

4. The other criteria for selecting students for the programme would be their ability to read a tabloid newspaper and to show a desire to complete the course.
5. The classes would comprise no more than fifteen students and would use the Socratic Method of teaching to avoid the formal lecture situation.
6. Usually students would not be graded but would receive a certificate of completion for each subject.

Clemente is a community embedded university humanities course providing higher education opportunity in collaboration with social agencies for people experiencing multiple disadvantage (Howard et al, 2008; Howard et al 2012, Gervasoni, Smith & Howard, 2013). It has set out a vision for confronting the reality of disadvantage, especially multigenerational poverty through studying the humanities. Shorris believed that education in the humanities helps socially disenfranchised people out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Thus, the program is premised on the belief that studying the humanities through courses such as literature, history, the arts, philosophy and ethics serve to engage and empower people to think about and reflect on the world in which they live, so that they might become less likely to react simply to contexts and events and more likely to examine, question and contemplate.

### **Shaping Clemente in Australia**

By 2002 a number of people in Sydney, working for or associated with the Society of St Vincent de Paul, had taken notice of Shorris' ideas. Clemente seemed an attractive alternative to simply providing short vocational/ skills type courses that were, at the time, very much the Australian government policy. It was decided to invite Shorris to Sydney for a speaking tour and by late December 2002 a short proposal was written to introduce the Clemente program at the Vincentian Village in Woolloomooloo. In March of 2003 Shorris visited Sydney as a guest of a number of welfare agencies where he outlined his program to various audiences. After his visit a number of interested parties set up an interim working committee on 24 April 2003 to pursue the idea of implementing the Clemente programme.

Shorris had suggested three possible ways for launching the Australian program. The first could be a series of one off seminars, the second could be short or abbreviated Clemente courses and the third would be setting up the full program. The committee tended to favour launching the full program and a number of academic staff at different universities were contacted about their possible involvement. Amongst these was Dr Peter Howard from the School of Education at the Mount St Mary, Strathfield campus of Australian Catholic University [ACU]. I had attended one of the Shorris' talks and had been impressed by the idea of Clemente and had been conducting undergraduate courses in social justice and community outreach at ACU. With the support of Dr Jude Butcher, the Head of School, I decided to organise at least a couple of units to see if the program would work. To some extent, there was a rush in the second half of 2003 to commence the program at Vincentian Village in East Sydney in order to complete one semester of study before the end of the year.

So in 2003 the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Sisters of Charity and the St Vincent de Paul Society (Sydney) initiated the first Clemente university program in Australia with eight people experiencing homelessness and disadvantage. Since then ACU, with other partner organizations and universities have collaborated in implementing Clemente across multiple Australian locations and contexts. In Australia the basic requisites for students enrolling in a Clemente course are: a desire to learn; a willingness to commit to learning [initially to a 12 week unit]; a literacy level sufficient to read and discuss the contents of a newspaper; and a degree of stability in their lives. Today, there is a strong evidence base for the effectiveness of Clemente education in Australia that stretches from 2005 (Yashin-Shaw, Butcher and Howard) to the 2012 Australian Research Council Grant Report (Howard et al.) that provides a detailed understanding of participation in Clemente. One case study from "We're part of our own solution!" (2012) relates to the life journey of Neo [pseudonym] and the impact on his life through his participation in Clemente.

### **Neo and Clemente**

Having left school at 14 to get a job, Neo worked for more than 20 years in the automotive industry and human resource management. Along the way he fathered four children. While he has achieved much, Neo has also lived with many challenges. From the age of eleven he looked after himself and his younger brother when his mother left the family due to illness and his father travelled extensively with work. As a result Neo's school years were not positive; despite this, he has managed to dip in and out of education successfully over the years.

In recent years, Neo's physical and emotional health has suffered and he is no longer able to work full-time. He has ended his long-term and often abusive relationship with the mother of his children, although he still sees his children every weekend. With money a constant source of worry, and with only casual work over the past few years, Neo found new hope through his relationship with a community agency and a supported living environment. He tutored young people and had links with other organizations. He reflects:

*The best job I had was probably, well I did enjoy the teaching and it was good because you know I suppose I enjoyed passing my knowledge on to other people.*

*Neo describes his upbringing and most of his adult life as being "pretty financially secure", with both parents working, his father as a state manager. However, since his illness of recent years affected his ability to engage socially, he has not worked very much and he has struggled to get by. As a result, Neo felt isolated from most aspects of social life, including friends, family and community activities. Neo began the Clemente program in 2009, and after completing his study he has been able to reflect on his own experiences and the range of influences that have affected his life:*

*Well I think it [my life] has changed. I have met a lot of people here and having, like a phobia of you know this sort of thing, meeting people and whatnot, it's been a great help. Although I did teaching and all that I was sort of teaching mainly to year 10 leavers and long term*

*unemployed. They were mostly younger and I think I was doing that to sort of also help with this phobia I had but meeting other people this has been great and it's certainly improved my social sort of thing.*

Since enrolling in Clemente after some time in a rehabilitation clinic, Neo has stayed well enough to complete his third Technical and Further Education Certificate iv, this time aligned with his new career goals in counselling. His experiences before Clemente and his current studies in the humanities have influenced his new career plans to become a counsellor and to continue his university studies in counselling or psychology part-time while working part-time:

*I'm quite amazed how for me, it was almost like... spiritually planned to just flow from one to the next with the subjects; I think whoever chose the subjects had a spiritual insight. For me it did because it really... scratched the surface the first one, then it went a little bit deeper... and it... just sort of rolled like that for me. It was almost like it was meant to be. That's how I found it.*

While his financial situation is still very challenging, neo is now working casually. He has developed a sense of community around Clemente and made friends with other students. The barriers that affected his social interactions in the past have begun to be broken down, and he now has some social activities outside of class such as shopping and visiting the library.

*Well actually I do go out fairly often. I go to meetings Monday, Tuesday, take my daughter to singing lessons on Wednesday, but socially with friends we don't go out a lot.*

Significantly, since his enrolment in Clemente, Neo says that his physical and psychological wellbeing has consistently and slowly improved. His social relationships have fluctuated but his environment has improved significantly.

*The people I have met since I have been in rehab. I go to meetings...where I've met most of the friends I now have. They're really important to me. ...Living in a place that's owned by the church who are sort of supporting me ... for the last year.*

Neo is now more positive about his living arrangements, his study and academic capability, his career prospects and his plans for the future than when he commenced his studies. During this period he has moved from temporary accommodation to private rental accommodation, a change about which he is very positive.

*Well, I have got a friend who comes over regularly because there's a little workshop downstairs from where I'm living and... we restore motorbikes and things like that... that was set up by the bloke whom I'm renting the house off ... get us back into doing stuff and you know getting back into the workforce and whatnot. We do sometimes get paid for projects we've done.*

Neo still expresses some unhappiness about his social life, his financial situation and the ways in which he occupies his spare time. But he reflects that consistently throughout his time in the course, his standard of living has improved as he has become more engaged with study and society.

*Well this program has given me hope of a better future you know. There's something to work towards and you know I think without it for me, it's pretty important to be able to achieve, to do this program because I'd really, I've always wanted to do a uni degree and never thought I'd have the chance. It's sort of made me more focused to look after myself and to get back on my feet and sort out all of my issues. It's certainly been a great help towards doing all of that.*

*(Howard et al 2012, p.8-9)*

## **New Possibilities**



More recently, Howard, Butcher & Marchant (2013, under review) in interviewing Clemente graduates reported that they wove what they experienced through Clemente in their own way to their own ends. For most, involvement in Clemente lead directly to their enrolling in a further course of higher education, for others it helped to support decisions to pursue other creative and community interests. Clemente often played an important role in people's lives beyond the specific academic skills learned or increased self esteem or confidence that they might have felt initially. One participant described Clemente as 'a launch pad and a springboard' and which made new possibilities possible.

Across the interviews, a larger, shared pattern of raising new possibilities, planning on these new possibilities and acting on them. For example, Greg on entry to Clemente was 'at the crossroads'. He had been released from prison (again), had tackled serious addiction issues and was trying to get his life together. In addition to participating in Clemente he attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, saw the psychologist, had some dental work done, passed his driver's license and did some part time laboring work. Clemente, therefore, sits together and as part of a range of supports that he was able to access.

A pattern of new possibilities emerges in the lives of Clemente students. It is clear that the interviewees continue to face disadvantage which can be of a deep and entrenched kind. There is evidence of recent experience of adversity through being homeless or in hazardous living conditions. There is also a sense in many of the experience of trauma which stretches back to the past, to being a refugee, the strictures of parents (imaginary or otherwise) or family abuse.

Those interviewed may have inheritances which are not of their own making. There is good evidence that individuals are moving from a situation in which their life may have been out of control to finding some degree of self-determination or at least some degree of control. This can be seen in choosing to do something but equally in deciding something is not for them. The evidence suggests that Clemente in conjunction with other supports and services appears to assist in supporting people to gain more control over their lives and become more self-

determining in making decisions that suit them. Here is ongoing supportive evidence that participating in Clemente may act as a springboard for people to raise, plan and action the wants that exist within.

## Conclusion

Clemente Australia respects the dignity of the individual in a non-judgmental way. It brings together university and social agencies to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage to become university students whilst recognizing that such issues as housing, employment, financial support, mental and physical health need to be continually addressed.

People experiencing multiple disadvantage should never be viewed as passive victims for whom things need to be done. Rather, Clemente Australia acknowledges people's capacities and capabilities and supports their own self-determination. The research scholarship and the experiences of impact upon the participants across time are now available to universities to realise their responsibilities for all within the community, even those rarely considered 'worthy' of access to higher education.

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