

Promoting social inclusion: emerging evidence from the Catalyst-Clemente program

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Catalyst-Clemente is an innovative educational program based upon a collaboration involving Australian Catholic University, Mission Australia and the St Vincent de Paul Society. The program enhances the transformational learning opportunities and re-engagement of disadvantaged people within the community. This paper reports on the origins and rationale of the program and initial research undertaken with the students. Six key themes of self, social interaction, relationships with others, learning, community participation and the future have been identified that represent the ways in which the program impacts upon the participants. The initial study suggests that Catalyst-Clemente is a practical educational solution that has resulted in enhancing the life opportunities and choices for disadvantaged Australians.

Introduction

The numbers of people in Australia who are homeless and marginalised are increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, St Vincent de Paul Society 2007). Furthermore, the situation of homelessness and marginalisation is exacerbated by poor physical and mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, financial difficulties, inferior housing, family breakdown and unemployment (Vinson 2007). The resultant complexity of factors in people's lives often leads to disengagement and exclusion from one's family, friends and the wider community. The challenges of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion need to be addressed jointly by government, community, business and education sectors so as to assist disengaged people in their pathways to social inclusion.

Poverty stops people 'from having an acceptable standard of living', deprivation is 'an enforced lack of socially perceived essentials' and social exclusion means people do not fully participate in the community (Saunders, Naidoo & Griffiths 2007:viii). These three overarching elements, though distinct, do interact to bring about social disadvantage and the exclusion of people from their rightful choices in attaining their personal aspirations. Many Australians experience exclusion from the essential services they require, an exclusion from the social activities within family and community as well as an educational exclusion from learning and study structured appropriately to meet their personal needs.

Social exclusion is about more than income poverty. It is a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas have a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing (Social Exclusion Task Force 2006).

This lack of access and inclusion inhibits people's ability to contribute to and benefit from the society in which they live. Thus,

disadvantaged people are in a sense ‘disengaged’ from society, with their capacity to function socially and economically being restricted. Improving the educational access of marginalised people through alternative pathways and innovative co-operation amongst community agencies, business and education providers can assist the marginalised in embracing new life opportunities. Through cross-sector community networks and a focus on authentic learning opportunities, disadvantaged people can achieve higher levels of self-esteem, build their self-confidence and re-engage with community.

The Catalyst-Clemente program is an educationally focussed initiative based upon the value of transformational learning for the re-engagement of disadvantaged people with the community. The program is a collaborative process between community agencies, Mission Australia, St Vincent de Paul Society and Australian Catholic University, to provide a purposeful university education that supports the re-engagement of marginalised people with society. Catalyst-Clemente emphasises the need to enable disadvantaged Australians to access a wider range of choices and opportunities enjoyed by most members of society.

This paper reports on the origins and rationale of the Catalyst-Clemente program, as well as some initial research undertaken on it in two Australian capital cities, Sydney and Brisbane. The insights offered by the program’s students into the benefits they have experienced in their lives are examined as a basis for conceptualising further research into the re-engagement of disadvantaged people through collaborative, community-based humanities education programs.

Catalyst-Clemente

The original Clemente Course was offered in 1997 at a community centre in New York City (Shorris 2000). This was a free, tertiary-level,

humanities education program provided to disadvantaged adults. Since then, the model of the Clemente program has been the basis for establishing similar educational programs in a number of cities in the United States of America, and other countries including Canada, Mexico, Korea, South Africa and Australia.

In 2003, Australian Catholic University (ACU National), in collaboration with the St. Vincent de Paul Society and with financial assistance from the Sisters of Charity and Sydney City Council, offered the first Australian Clemente program at the community centre of Vincentian Village in East Sydney. In 2005, ACU National and Mission Australia, a leading, national community services organisation, initiated a collaborative process to establish a second Sydney-based program titled 'Catalyst' to be offered at the Mission Australia Centre in Surry Hills, East Sydney.

In 2006, ACU National and Mission Australia established the Catalyst program in another Australian capital city, Brisbane. A Canberra-based program commenced in early 2007, with plans for further Clemente derived programs to be established in Melbourne, Ballarat, Perth, and additional Sydney-based sites. Collectively, the Catalyst and Clemente programs in Australia are known as 'Catalyst-Clemente.' Each of these programs is provided within community settings, rather than at universities, to cater for the particular needs of disadvantaged people through combining education with social support. Some students rely upon a range of services provided at certain community centres, and so it was ideal that the Catalyst-Clemente classes were held at or near these centres. Each unit of the Catalyst-Clemente programs has an explicit focus upon the students engaging with the learning content of the humanities in examining their lives, and the lives of those about them. This is done through the lenses of areas such as literature, drama, art, philosophy and history.

The rationale for Catalyst-Clemente

Catalyst-Clemente stands as an alternative to the forms of education traditionally provided, in Australia, to marginalised people (Egan, Butcher, Howard, Hampshire, Henson & Homel 2006). Usually vocational or 'life skills' courses are offered to disadvantaged people, with the aim of fostering employability, independent living, and self-management skills. However, education can provide more than vocational skills: education can enlighten, empower and fulfil (Hammond 2004). Education is a key factor that ensures 'individuals are endowed with capabilities that allow them **freedom** to choose to live their lives in ways that have real meaning and real value' (Henry 2007:8). Whilst vocational courses are important, it is equally important that the full potential of education to transform the lives of people be realised (Stevenson, Yashin-Shaw & Howard 2007). Catalyst-Clemente is a community-based program which gives expression to the value of empowering people through re-engaging them with the community through tertiary study in the humanities. It is a program that has a clear focus on the social inclusion of people who have been excluded from their community. The Catalyst-Clemente program is founded on the values that underlie the humanities, designed to empower students to become more reflective and intellectually engaged by offering rigorous learning in an authentic, respectful and transformative way.

The role of education

There is substantial empirical evidence indicating that education can lead to the positive outcomes predicted to result from participation in Catalyst-Clemente. Hammond (2004) investigated the impact of education upon health and resilience throughout the lifespan. This research built upon previous investigations, suggesting that education may have a positive effect on mental and physical health (Grossman & Kaestner 1997, Hammond 2002, Hartog & Oosterbeek 1998, Ross & Mirowsky 1999). As Hammond (2004:552) pointed out:

Educational research into the immediate 'soft' outcomes of learning suggests that learning can develop a number of psychosocial qualities ... These psychosocial outcomes of learning may promote attitudes, practices and life circumstances that are conducive to positive health outcomes.

The distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes is likely a result of the emphasis placed upon variables whose effects are more readily measurable and whose importance is more readily demonstrable. In the context of Catalyst-Clemente, the employment rates of those who complete the course would be an example of a hard outcome, while the participants' levels of self-esteem would be a soft outcome. Whilst acknowledging the merit of hard outcomes, the importance of soft outcomes must also be recognised, as many soft outcomes facilitate or are foundational to the achievement of 'hard' outcomes (Hammond 2004). One such example is that a person is more likely to seek stable employment when they enjoy high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy and resilience (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia 2002).

A number of studies have indicated that relevant education can lead to improvements in:

- self-confidence (Carlton & Soulsby 1999, Dench & Regan 1999)
- self-efficacy (Wertheimer 1997)
- 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)
- substantive freedoms and capabilities (Sen 1999).

Hammond (2004:553) linked these benefits to long-term health outcomes, concluding that education 'can lead to improved well-being, increased efficacy, protection and recovery from mental health difficulties, and more effective coping, including coping

with physical ill health'. Furthermore, education can enable people to obtain qualifications, find employment, increase their level of social engagement and civic participation, develop their careers, and form healthy interpersonal relationships. Based upon this reviewed literature, these important benefits were mediated by the positive impact of education on the following identified psychosocial dimensions:

- self-esteem and self-efficacy
- sense of identity
- sense of purpose and hope
- competencies and communication skills
- social integration

Thus, there is evidence that the 'soft' outcomes of education can contribute to the achievement of 'hard' outcomes, with appropriate education leading to improvements within the social, economic and personal domains of a person's life.

Catalyst-Clemente: identifying impact

Beginning in 2003, the Australian iterations of the Clemente program have been the subject of an ongoing program of evaluation assessing the impact and the extent of engaging with the program on the lives of the participants. This paper reports upon the impact of the Catalyst-Clemente courses upon students as investigated at two Sydney sites and a Brisbane site during the second semester of 2006, and the gathered data analysed to identify key categories of influence upon their lives. The researchers have sought to acquire both a deeper appreciation and an understanding of the complex and intricate processes, relationships and transitions that occur during the programs.

Program overview

The Catalyst-Clemente courses were constructed to be sensitive to the particular needs, requirements and capacities of disadvantaged people while maintaining academic standards. Thus, the class size of each course was restricted to a maximum of 15 people to ensure that there was sufficient opportunity for each student's individual learning needs to be met. Admission to each course was determined by informal interview processes, whereby potential students were informed as to the nature of the course, and their willingness and ability to participate in the necessary studies were gauged. This interview process was implemented as a duty of care precaution to ensure that as much as reasonably possible students were not being 'set up to fail'. Thus, there were people who entered the program as enrolled students, some who attended the lectures to decide on whether the program was appropriate for them, while others were advised of alternate adult educational programs that would best meet their current learning needs.

Each course offered a different humanities subject. The Clemente students studied 'Spirituality in Australian literature', the Sydney-based Catalyst students studied 'Art history and theory', and the Brisbane-based Catalyst students studied '2D art practice'. The courses were taught over 12 weeks, and each week the students attended a two-hour lecture and a two-hour 'shared learning' tutorial-style session. The 'shared learning' sessions were staffed by volunteers from the business and corporate sectors. These volunteers were known as 'learning partners' to reflect the fact that both the students and the volunteers learn from their experiences of interacting with one another. The learning partners were provided with a professional briefing prior to the commencement of the courses. Their role was to assist the students in undertaking and completing their tasks, assignments and other coursework, especially with regard to computing and written language skills. To further coordinate the ongoing implementation of the program, each site

had a community-based coordinator who responded to the social support needs of students, liaised with the university academic coordinator in managing the everyday issues related to the program and oversaw the weekly lecturing and learning partner sessions. The selection of the lecturers was critical in that they had to have expertise in the subject content but more importantly, the teaching skills to recognise, acknowledge and adapt to the learning needs of the students maintaining a standard of scholarship as well as concern and compassion for individuals.

At the commencement of Semester 2, 2006, thirty students began their studies across the Sydney and Brisbane sites. The Clemente program in Sydney was completed by six students, eight students completed the Sydney-based Catalyst program, and three students completed the Catalyst program in Brisbane. Thus, by semester's end, 17 students had successfully completed the course(s) they commenced. This is an extraordinary result given that many of the students had not undertaken significant tertiary study for an extended period of time and had experienced a variety of life challenges including mental health illnesses, transitional housing issues, substance abuse, alcoholism, anxiety disorders and gambling addiction. Thus, many of these thirty students have had to overcome significant internal and external barriers just to enter into and begin the Catalyst-Clemente program. Coming to the first class can be a daunting experience in itself and the ongoing attendance and completion can be precarious and fragile depending upon the individual's circumstance from week to week. Each student has shown a level of personal courage in beginning a journey of learning when they may continue to encounter drug and alcohol misuse and feelings of anxiety and self-doubt.

Methodology and data collection

The data for the present study were gathered employing a 'methodology of engagement'. Foundational to this methodology

was having the students as authentic collaborators in the study. The students, usually with fragile and vulnerable backgrounds, give of themselves in undertaking the Catalyst-Clemente program of study, to be involved 'with' this study and to reflect upon their learning journey. Purposeful relationships were established amongst the students and the researchers that were based upon a sincere and honest trust and engagement with one another. The research was built upon a collaborative research paradigm based upon mutual trust, respect, integrity, dignity and rapport (Liamputtong 2007, Delamont 1992). Questions asked of the students during the data gathering process were tailored to be respectful, engaging and open-ended, allowing the respondents to share their perspectives and experiences in a dignified way.

Data were gathered in three phases at the beginning, during and conclusion of the semester. In each phase, the participants were asked questions exploring their experiences and perspectives. At the beginning of the 12-week course (Phase 1, during the first or second week), the participants completed a short open-ended questionnaire consisting of the following five questions:

1. What do you hope you will get from this course?
2. What do you hope to get from the lecturer?
3. What are your hopes for yourself?
4. What are the reasons why you decided to participate in the course?
5. What do you think you'll need to help you with this course?

Mid-way through the course (Phase 2), the participants participated in either one-on-one structured interviews or focus group sessions, during which they were asked the following questions:

1. How is it going?
2. What have you found most satisfying about the course so far, and why?

3. What have you found most challenging about the course so far, and why?
4. What have been the benefits of your participation in the course?
5. Are there any obstacles that have been an issue for you during the course?
6. What feedback or advice can you give us about the course, and how it's being run?
7. Anything else you'd like to say?

The participants' responses to these questions were recorded and transcribed.

At the completion of the course (Phase 3, during the eleventh or twelfth week), the participants completed another short open-ended questionnaire consisting of the following questions:

1. How have your expectations of the course been met?
2. How have your expectations of the course not been met?
3. Looking back over the whole course, what did you get out of it?
4. What has been the most significant change that has resulted from the course?
5. Are there any other significant changes you'd like to mention?
6. How has your experience on the course had an impact on your life?
7. What's next for you now you have finished this subject?
8. What else would you like us to know?

During Phase 3, in-depth, semi-structured, biographical interviews were conducted with three of the participant groups. These interviews offered students the opportunity to explore the above questions in more detail while providing more in-depth descriptions of their personal backgrounds and life circumstances. The interviews focused on the place of the Catalyst-Clemente program within the interviewees' broader life journeys, and how the program

contributed to their re-engagement with society. Upon completion, the participants' responses were analysed to identify emerging themes that would assist in shaping key findings from the study.

Emerging evidence of student outcomes

Six core themes emerged from the analysis of the gathered data. These themes of self, social interaction, relationships with others, learning, community participation and the future were representative of the student views of the impact of the program on them.

Self

Students expressed an enhanced view of self and well-being. They commented on self-esteem, increased levels of confidence and personal development. These are essential factors in enhancing economic and social participation.

The course gives you self-esteem ... I have learnt so much through the course. Not just the subject-matter, but my own capabilities.

Events took away my confidence and self-esteem ... the course helped me get back on track ...

I need something meaningful in my life because up till now it has just been surviving ... but now I am able to start this ... I feel encouraged to just have a go and I have found by having a go, that is, from having awareness, all kinds of things are opening up.

Social interaction

Social exclusion and isolation has a negative impact upon the lives, well-being and mental health of disadvantaged Australians. The Catalyst-Clemente students expressed a desire for enhanced and increased social participation with all others involved in the program. This was articulated at the beginning of the program as a hope and developed further as a reality as the program progressed.

It is a great joy being here with my peers ... you find yourself talking not just about art, you are talking about life, which is what it is all about anyway.

I've enjoyed the social side of it. I've enjoyed meeting new people, loved going to the Opera House and seeing Shakespeare and all that.

Relationships with others

This was an unexpected theme to emerge and provided evidence that, for some students, their relationships with others changed in positive ways. The change went beyond simply enhancing students' social interactions to include changes in their relationships and how they engaged with others, including their family and friends.

People see that I have a brain because I have done a university unit. I am back in society.

It is important because everyone always asks you first thing what you do ... now we're doing something.

It might be too soon to say but I think it has enhanced my self-esteem. I think my teenage son is proud of me.

Learning

Many disadvantaged Australians have not only interrupted learning experiences but have also been excluded from education. The students expressed a belief that the process of learning and the course content was important to them as was the opportunity to engage with others in the learning process.

I'm learning a lot, some things go over my head but I'm able to go back home and go over things...and by the time the next class comes around, I've got some sort of understanding of it.

The whole experience of education is rather alien ... I never went to school. I've had an interest in the content of what we've been studying but I haven't had the discipline to actually sit down and read and write an assignment ... So it's been challenging and

rewarding and I've received quite good marks ... It comes as a bit of a shock to me ... It's been really good for my confidence that I'm at this university level. I would never have guessed that.

I'm aware of the people that I'm with, how much more they've done and that is interesting, so you are picking up ideas.

Community participation

Many disadvantaged Australians do not participate in cultural or community arts activities. They are often excluded from attending what other Australians take for granted. The students commented on the value of such participation through the program.

Just the experience of going to the theatre, never done that before, and that was an eye-opener, something that I didn't really think I was going to enjoy, and I ended up enjoying it ... I thought it was going to be one of those nights where it was just gonna drag on ... but I wasn't tired ... I really enjoyed it.

He [the lecturer] makes us more aware of what is going on around us, and the environment as far as art is concerned and architecture and sculpture...[we've] more awareness.

The future

Long-term disadvantaged Australians often find it difficult to see the potential and possibilities of a different future for themselves and their families. They often feel they lack a sense of being able to control their future and are instead subject to circumstances outside of their control. As the Catalyst-Clemente program progressed, the students spoke increasingly about their future.

It is helping [me] for the present, for now, to think a bit more positively about the future and taking those steps into the future.

I am thinking about my future, and thinking perhaps I can direct it.

We'd like to think that quite possibly through learning we can make a difference for our children and our future.

The evidence that has emerged from the student comments as categorised in these six themes indicates there are relevant outcomes resulting from their participation in the Catalyst-Clemente program which are important for promoting social inclusion. As part of the courses, some students journeyed to Canberra and visited Parliament House, others have visited art galleries, the Opera House and been involved in collaborative courses with Bell Shakespeare Company. Overall, there is an enhanced sense of self and their abilities and potential, their relationships with others have been strengthened and there are changes in personal perceptions about the future. To date, there are seven students who have completed four Catalyst-Clemente units and enrolled in an on-site university course. Two have undertaken study at the National Art School. The findings and engagement demonstrate that significant change has occurred in the lives of the students who have experienced long-term levels of disadvantage. Participating in the Catalyst-Clemente program at the right time in a person's life, with appropriate supports and structures, can affect real transitions and enhance social inclusion.

Considering the success of Catalyst-Clemente

There are several structural issues involved in the implementation of the Catalyst-Clemente program that have contributed its success. Integral to the success of the program was the selection of course participants. People made a choice to begin the program after attending an information session where the content, structure and the study expectations of the program were explained and discussed. The potential students needed to show their commitment, appropriate skills and a willingness to undertake the required study in the individual units. The basis for these decisions lay in their personal and educational characteristics at the time of selection: a level of stability in their lives and a desire and capacity to learn.

Catalyst-Clemente was staffed by people who shared the values, vision and philosophy that lie at the heart of the program. Indeed, the promotion of re-engagement is best performed by those who are willing, and have the personal and professional competencies necessary to engage with marginalised people, with mutual benefit and reciprocity as key features of the relationship. Thus the personal qualities and commitment of the agency staff, lecturers and learning partners who delivered Catalyst-Clemente were essential elements for the success of the program in 2006.

The structure and setting of the program were also important factors. The relatively small size of the classes enabled the students to receive greater levels of attention from the lecturers, and the two-hour duration of the classes allowed the students to explore their subject-matter in sufficient depth. The importance of the learning partners cannot be over-emphasised. With students being able to access weekly one-on-one sessions with their learning partner, many of the personal barriers that constrained their learning (for example, levels of computing skills, reading and writing skills) were addressed and reduced.

Many students encountered medical, financial or material adversities while participating in Catalyst-Clemente. Thus, delivery of the program within a community setting was significant as students were able to access the support services attached to the community-based venues (for example, medical and dental services, meals, counsellors). Not every service was available at every site, but each site offered or was in proximity to a number of services and facilities that could be accessed by the students. At two of the sites, a dedicated welfare/support worker was available to arrange various services and provisions for the students. These workers were critical lynch-pins in helping to weave together the multiple components of the program. Furthermore, it is likely that the students felt more comfortable

studying within the supportive atmosphere of the community settings, than within university campuses.

One of the defining features of Catalyst-Clemente is that it is a *humanities* program. There was evidence that this focus on the humanities was important, because it enabled accessible content matter for the participants, allowing them to draw upon their life experiences in reflecting upon the literature, artworks and philosophies being studied.

The students' engagement was reinforced by the way in which the course content was delivered by the lecturers who engaged the students in group discussions, excursions, drama presentations and other alternate learning strategies whilst encouraging all to participate. Each student was called upon to offer their own personal reflections, insights and contributions, and a high level of interaction was fostered. By creating an engaging learning environment, the Catalyst-Clemente program promoted a broader re-engagement with community.

The creation and implementation of the Catalyst-Clemente program was possible only through cross-sectoral collaboration between a tertiary institution ACU National and community partners, Mission Australia and the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Catalyst-Clemente has been provided to disadvantaged Australians within community settings, and with the attendant supports and services offered at or in the vicinity of the program venues. Collectively, these are some of the crucial elements of the success of the program in 2006.

The future of Catalyst-Clemente in Australia

The emerging evidence suggests that Catalyst-Clemente has a positive impact on re-engaging and supporting students in successfully undertaking purposefully structured and supported tertiary learning.

It is now timely to develop this initial research into a deeper understanding of the impact that Catalyst-Clemente has upon the students over the longer term. A detailed profile of the students participating in the Catalyst-Clemente needs to be created as a baseline. Thereafter, consideration should be given to the way in which educational processes combine with social supports to provide pathways out of disadvantage. Overall, the precise impacts in terms of health and well-being as well as social and economic participation need to be articulated over the short, medium and long term. Further, it is important that the costs and benefits of participation are appropriately articulated to inform public policy design in relation to social inclusion.

As the evidence of the impact of the Catalyst-Clemente program grows, so too will its expansion into new areas. As the program is rolled out across Australia, the number of participants will increase, allowing more robust and comprehensive conclusions to be drawn. During 2008, the Catalyst-Clemente program began in Perth, Melbourne, and Ballarat and involved additional tertiary institutions namely Edith Cowan University and the University of Ballarat. Each Australian site will be attended by up to 15 students. Together with sites in Sydney, Campbelltown, Canberra and Brisbane, the eight Australian programs will involve up to 120 disadvantaged people each semester. Those students who continue their studies across four semesters will graduate from ACU National with a Certificate in Liberal Studies, enabling them more readily to access further tertiary studies.

Conclusion

The insights already gleaned from the participants in Catalyst-Clemente clearly suggest a range of benefits are gained by their participation in a community-based, socially supported humanities education program. Further investigations of the

participants' journeys will add to the indicative and anecdotal understandings of the various pathways with which people enter and proceed through the program. Disadvantaged people will benefit from this program if appropriate pathways are developed that result in them gaining the educational and personal capabilities they need to be successful in Catalyst-Clemente and beyond. Longitudinal research with Catalyst-Clemente students, including both those who complete the program and those who withdraw, will provide an empirical basis for understanding what pre-requisite pathway programs may be appropriate for community agencies and educational institutions in supporting 'near-potential' students to be ready to enter Catalyst-Clemente. Further, such longitudinal research will inform the articulation of the Catalyst-Clemente program with university, vocational and community-sector courses.

Disadvantaged people have reported how they have re-engaged educationally, socially and personally through Catalyst-Clemente. Their stories provide evidence of empowerment and hope, which can inform opportunities and pathways offered to other marginalised people in the future. Catalyst-Clemente is a practical solution resulting from a collaborative process amongst the community, business, government and educational sectors that has resulted in enhancing the life opportunities and choices of disadvantaged Australians.

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