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The Odyssey Project: Teaching Humanities in the Community

Amy Thomas Elder, Illinois Humanities Council, Chicago, *What the students learned*

The short answer to the question is that our students have learned much more than we have taught them. They learn all kinds of things, of course, some from us, some about us, some despite us. But the most important thing they learn is not something that we have at our disposal to teach. We don't dispense humanities to the poor like bags of groceries. The notion that it works that way is both dangerous and seductive, and we have to combat it continually, I think, lest, in bell hooks's terms, we reinscribe the hegemony we're seeking to destroy. Certainly, one can say that the humanities are wonderful and priceless treasures, and, unfortunately and increasingly, treasures available only to a privileged few. The Clemente Course seeks to share these riches with the poor, and as such, it is at best a small scale attempt to rectify a large scale injustice. Furthermore, in Earl Shorris's original conception of the course, not only are the humanities riches in themselves, they're also means to a materially better life, through habits of reflection and critical thinking that they foster (Shorris, 50-51). This is more like the teach-a-man-to-fish proverb than it is like the bag of groceries, but even this notion diminishes what I will argue is the real power of the course, a power that students consistently describe in transformational terms. That power is in pointing beyond the humanities themselves as cultural objects to a moral ground of ultimate human values, and it is against this ground that our students discover new ways of understanding and articulating their own lives and identities.

Stated objectives of the Clemente Course

The Clemente Course sets for itself a dual objective, (1) to provide a bridge to college and (2) to foster students' intellectual development with a view to promoting their greater participation in political and economic life.¹ In preparing

¹ From the beginning, the Clemente Course has defined itself as a traditional, text-based, seminar-style humanities course, in which students must grapple with the same intellectually and personally challenging texts, ideas and issues as a freshman at a top tier liberal arts college. We

to talk to you today I was struck by the fact that neither of the objectives we state is tied expressly to what might be called actual learning outcomes. On the one hand, I'm inclined to think it's just as well that way, since none of us wants to shape the course according to concrete measures that could undermine its larger purpose, however we conceive that. On the other hand, if we're to be responsible, and if we insist that the Course has *some* characteristic content, then we ought to be able to articulate the kinds of things that we want students to learn. Furthermore, we ought to be able to say how those things lead to our objectives.

Outline

I will briefly mention three kinds of things that the students learn (please excuse me, I've just been teaching Aristotle), and speculate on the connection between these and the participation objective. My point is that while learning outcomes based on *knowing that* and *knowing how* are essential to the students' experience, thinking of outcomes in these terms misses something else essential. Neither *knowing that* nor *knowing how* is, in itself, properly the objective of education in the humanities, either for Clemente students or for anyone else. Rather, it is the encounter with what the students frequently call "a whole new world"—that is, what I would call the Tradition, with a capital T—a rich context of ideas and reflection upon them, and one which our students have frequently never even imagined. Students come to see themselves as participants in and inheritors of that Tradition, and in some sense even responsible to it. As they do so, they become increasingly able to reimagine themselves and their lives—to connect with the deeper sources of their being, and to act on what they see and feel.

Knowing that and knowing how

have insisted to everyone—applicants, teachers, funders, partners—that the Course is in no way remedial. It assumes that educationally and economically disadvantaged adults are perfectly capable of reading and responding to great works of philosophy, art and literature regardless of gaps in background knowledge or of problems they may have with writing. It is a fine and noble ideal, and, like all fine and noble ideals, not easy to attain. (I'm told that even at top tier liberal arts colleges students sometimes need help with skills some would call remedial.)

The less exalted, or more specific and academic benefits our students report and that we also observe may be described in terms of “knowing that” and “knowing how.” As to the former, students learn to appreciate the various humanistic disciplines and to understand the kinds of truth, beauty, or goodness people have sought to express or articulate through them. They learn of the existence of long, rich, and contested traditions of reflection, and they learn how much more they can learn. As to “knowing how,” they learn to ask the right kinds of questions about humanistic texts and objects and to understand the boundaries of intellectual discussion. They learn to appeal to reason and evidence rather than merely to assert personal opinion. They gain richer, more nuanced and more objective ways of understanding their own lives and speaking about their own perceptions and concerns. They move from a primarily personal and confessional mode of expression to more objective and critical judgment, reflecting the standards of human excellence implicit or explicit in the texts they have read and discussed.

These academic benefits shade into personal ones. First, our students become more likely to access the humanities offered in their community—to go to museums, lectures and the like—and they express a greater sense of belonging in those environments. Second, students feel greater confidence in their ability to express their ideas and opinions both in speaking and in writing, as well as greater confidence in those opinions. Third, some students gain a greater sense of direction for their own lives, though this may take longer than a year to develop. They talk about “coming to know themselves” and “changing their lives.” They get married, get divorced, leave their old jobs, start new education or work programs, join new groups, take up former pursuits in art or writing, or embark on plans that they have been considering for years. All of these benefits may cause students to participate more actively in the economic and political lives of their communities, but do not necessarily do so.

I want to add that those things are what anyone learns in the honest and fervent study of the humanities as modes by which we discern, articulate and reflect upon matters of ultimate value for a human life. What sets Clemente Course

students apart is that they frequently have less background than typical college students, which is why the world revealed by the humanities breaks in on them as something thoroughly new. Just as importantly, they often lack confidence in themselves as thinkers, along with the critical skills that would engender such confidence. In contrast to the typical undergraduates at most better colleges and universities, most of our students in the Clemente Courses have had limited opportunity for reasoned, responsible reflection and self-expression. They have experience, but they generally lack the cultural resources, critical distance, and objectivity which will allow them to transform that experience into practical wisdom and reasoned communication. The kinds of knowledge and skills I have mentioned help students to develop these capacities, but I am convinced that the key element is something less tangible.

Tacit knowledge

The transformation that students describe is a result of more than either knowing that or knowing how. If it is knowledge at all, it is a kind of tacit knowledge—something that cannot be taught directly. It is not even something that we as teachers model, although that metaphor comes closer. Rather, students see their teachers' sense of moral seriousness in light of their orientation toward something profoundly important, and something that the students come only gradually to see. They frequently say when we begin to interpret literature or art that it is "deep," that it contains meaning they hadn't expected to find there, and that that meaning resonates with their own attempts to describe their most important aspirations, impressions and experiences. At the same time, many students report that the Course is the first time their ideas about these deep subjects have been taken seriously, the first time that others have asked them to reflect upon fundamental issues, have listened to them, questioned them, challenged them, and expected them to be able to contribute something of value to the discussion. They rise to the occasion, and they come to expect more of themselves. They relish the recognition that they're joining a millennia-old debate about a good human life, and that the Tradition belongs to them, and they recognize implicit in the Tradition a demand—a moral horizon, if you

will—a sense of standards that can never be stated directly but which the humanities approach obliquely. Students take on a different moral seriousness and also assume a moral authority. They come to feel that their actions and choices are important in ways that they had not considered, and they come to see themselves as thinkers and actors.

Creative misunderstanding

The Tradition is vast and complex, our time is short, and our points of origin very different. There is potential for a great deal of misunderstanding of specifics, but even that can be creative and productive of valuable insight. Students make wildly original connections between things—often involving frank misreadings of texts.² One of my favorite examples is of a student who says that she went to give blood after 9/11 because of taking the Clemente philosophy class. Now, the class did far more to question the apparent morality of such an act than to enjoin it. Furthermore, this student is an ardent, life-long Christian, and the imperative to do good to others was hardly new to her. How then, did she see her act as Socratic? Frankly, I have no idea, but I think that her act is an example of the sense of moral seriousness and connection to a larger world that I've tried to describe. It wasn't anything specific that she read, but she experienced her education in philosophy as a moral demand, and she responded to it as she knew how.

In the end, it is not the humanities themselves that are the transforming power, and it is not exposure to great works that transforms people. If that were the case, we as teachers would be offering to our students something that we possess

² The famous example that Earl Shorris uses of the woman whom he claims gave him the idea for the course is one such misreading. She told him that he had to include the allegory of the cave in the curriculum because poor people would understand that—the cave is the ghetto. Well, as Plato says, the cave is the world, not one part of it. To interpret it as the ghetto, or as addiction, as our students very frequently do, is not to interpret it in its strictest meaning, that we should regard all appearances as mere shadows, but simply to recast it different allegorical terms. But it doesn't really matter. The act of interpreting the allegory with professor and classmates, of struggling with an enigmatic and powerful text, is itself liberating for all of us.

to give away. Instead, we merely point—through our own engagement, our own questions, our own striving—towards something that cannot be directly said, something that remains tacit despite all our efforts to express it. Humanities education involves the recognition of that external reality, the moral ground of the conviction that truth, beauty, goodness, and justice matter, and matter ultimately. It is this toward which the humanistic disciplines properly strive, and that recognition is not taught directly nor even modeled but rather lived as students join the teacher in his or her relation to the text and to the ultimate notion of value entailed by the text. And I should rather say *we* than *they*, since we as teachers, if we are paying attention, also grow in our understanding and awareness of this ultimate ground through our interactions with our students and with our ongoing study of our texts.

And there is real understanding sometimes. One of the students said, at the conclusion of the study of Plato, "It surprises me that the people in power claim Plato as their own. It's about how all the things they care about are false. It seems to belong much more to us than to them." Yes, exactly.

Outcomes

Will any of this lead to the kinds of outcomes that Shorris envisioned—increased civic involvement and greater sense of agency? Through education in the humanities we become less isolated. We become aware of a larger world of which we are a part—not merely a social world but a human one. This may lead to the kind of involvement Shorris seeks to promote—perhaps it inevitably will, but that involvement is a second order result.

Why insist on this distinction? If we think that we're combating poverty we are kidding ourselves, and we're likely to shape the course in ways that work against what we're actually accomplishing. We're likely to feel righteous or complacent. We're likely to fall into the bag-of-groceries mentality. We may also confuse what we're doing with instilling middle class values in our students.

One of our colleagues, after teaching U.S. History in the Clemente Course for three years wrote an article for *The Good Society* arguing that the kind of participation in political and economic life that the Clemente Course seeks to engender in its students is simply unrealistic given the general climate of higher education in the U.S., and without a radical and large-scale recommitment to higher education for participatory democracy by the government and society as a whole, “to expect a course in the humanities to empower citizens to arise out of poverty is hubristic.” (82) I’m inclined to agree, though I’m not remotely optimistic that such a recommitment will occur in my lifetime. At any rate, we cannot look for the Clemente Course to have a measurable impact on the level of the community.

At the level of the individual, I would argue that virtually any measure we would want to suggest to assess such outcomes is intrinsically problematic. Of course we hope that our students will get better jobs, or make more money, or continue their college education. But none of these is properly an objective of teaching the humanities, or at least not the primary objective. They may be happy by-products, but I have to say that my own conversion to the humanities did not increase my income potential. (And I wouldn’t trust anyone for whom it had.) Does all of this make us more politically and economically active members of our communities? Probably, only probably, but it certainly makes us, in Nietzsche’s words, if not better, at least more profound.

References:

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