

Annual Report

2009-2010 New Bedford Clemente Course in the Humanities

**Dr. Mark Santow
Academic Director**

Some reflections on the 2009-2010 academic year, by our graduates:

“I am totally impressed by the awesome professors we have, and how hard you all work so that we can be successful.” Carolyn

“I’ve been challenged and I welcome the opportunity to continue this experience.” Andrea

“I have learned how to read closely and, given enough time, can understand a lot more written works than ever before. My fears are less frightening now, and that resonates the most for me. Because I am less afraid of these things, it gives me courage and hope to pursue some sort of further education.” Evelyn

“The instructors gave us leadership in learning without degradation. We were adults to be taught, and not little kiddies in the classroom...my exposure to Clemente will carry me forward. I hope to do Clemente justice, just as it has done for me.” Bill

“Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street was meant for me to read...I love that you feel a part of her journey. I enjoy writing, and hope to one day write a book. I dreamed of taking a

course like this!” Iris

Overview

Note: Students' names have been changed to preserve their privacy.

Overall, the New Bedford Clemente course had a very successful year. Nine students (8 female, 1 male) participated in the 2009-2010 graduation ceremony at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, with eight of them receiving college credits from Bard. This year was unique in two ways: after a few months of awkwardness, this group of students formed a really intense and supportive community; and the faculty challenged them with a new and difficult end-of-the-year assignment. The former, at least in part, allowed the latter to succeed.

While the reasons for this success are to be found primarily in the make-up of the students themselves, we do believe that we have hit upon a variety of curricular and pedagogical tools that have allowed the New Bedford program to repeat its previous successes.

One of the wonderful things about the faculty we've put together in New Bedford is their self-reflective dedication to teaching. Over a series of summer email conversations and face-to-face meetings, we work our way through some of the difficulties and shortcomings of the previous year, and generate a series of responses. These conversations continue during the year, facilitated by the large number of team-taught sessions we schedule – we see one another a lot, both at Clemente and outside of it. Their dedication is such that everyone attends the four end-of-year portfolio sessions, even if their course has already concluded.

Everything that goes on in our classes is the result of a conscious, self-reflective and collaborative effort, enabling the program to change and improve with each year. Even as our faculty has grown over the years to include an ESL tutor and a public speaking teacher, we continue to search for ways to provide students within an integrated and coherent experience. In the past two years, the Writing course has served as a kind of mortar holding the bricks together; this year, the US History and Moral Philosophy professors collaborated on a common reading and portfolio paper assignment.

We have worked hard to make our expectations clear and consistent for the students across the disciplines, and have found ways to draw

connections between the ideas covered in each course.

The theme for our students this year – every year, really -- is “new beginnings.” It is striking how many of our students through the years have sought to use the opportunities Clemente provides to leverage themselves up and out of a dark place in their lives. For Carolyn, years of addiction and ill health had led to depression and thoughts of suicide. A student at UMass-Dartmouth decades ago, she found in the Clemente Course a means to recover the life of the mind, and to put her nurturing skills to work, too. Mary actually joined Clemente for the 2008-2009 year, but poor health caused her to drop out. Able to avoid seizures for years by walking 5 miles a day, she used that same persistence to overcome obstacles and finish this year. The same goes for Andrea. Andrea joined us back in 2008, fresh off her retirement and ready to expand her horizons. A series of medical set backs caused her to drop out, but she came back this year and finished as well. Iris inspired all of us, as a person, a mother and a student. She and her two little children walked out on an abusive relationship, and lived in homeless shelters while Iris used Clemente to get herself back on her feet.

This report will discuss the successes of this year’s program in a bit more detail, and explain some of the efforts that (hopefully) helped to bring it about.

Discussion

As a faculty we have always sought ways to further add to, integrate and improve the Clemente experience for our students. For the 2009-2010 year, we made two key changes, and launched an experiment:

- * We refined the use of Writing in our curriculum to better support the assignments in the other courses
- * We required the students to complete a difficult portfolio paper that brought together two different disciplines (US History, Moral Philosophy) in order to examine one text
- * We invited new students to join the program for the second-half classes, in the hope that they would complete them and then return in the fall of 2010 to attend the other two.

This last change will be discussed below, in the Recruitment and Retention section. Discussion of the other two can be found in the Schedule and Curriculum section.

Recruitment and retention

As in the past, we required prospective students to write a short essay in response to a reading. This caused the applicants to take Clemente (and their degree of commitment) more seriously from the start, since it gave them a stronger sense that they would have to *earn* their acceptance to the program. It gave our faculty much more information about student skill levels *before* we began to teach, assign them work, etc. The Academic Director photocopied all of the entrance essays and distributed them to the other faculty members before classes started. Finally, writing the essay gave the students a much more specific sense of what Clemente would actually be like – and whether they have the skills and commitment to stick with it.

The “surround of force” within which our students often find themselves make a Clemente commitment a daunting task – and a wonderful accomplishment, when fulfilled. In the present economy, maintaining high retention numbers *and* college academic standards is like trying to run up a down escalator. We have worked constantly to change and improve our program in order to grapple with it. Given the obstacles posed for our students by poverty and the economic recession, our student retention in the past three years has generally been solid, in large part because our recruitment and intake process has become more refined and purposeful. The Director was active this year in pursuing students who missed more than two classes in a row, and in communicating with students over the long winter break, when commitment tends to lag a bit. Each year there seem to be two or three students who find themselves subjected to constant missives and pleas from the Academic Director – and who actually respond. This year, it was Andrea and Carolyn.

While 26 students attended at least one class, eight of them stopped coming after two weeks, so we had a functional core of 18 students by late October. We had 12 students by early December, nine of whom ultimately graduated. To put it differently, we retained half of the core group that was in place at the end of October. Five of the nine left for

health reasons; two dropped out because of job conflicts. We do not have information on the other two.

We are comfortable with our recruitment and retention policies, as they have developed over the years. We do believe, however, that it is vitally important that the Director interview all potential students. Because of scheduling, it is often difficult to arrange this. But this year, it should be noted that – for whatever reason – there was a strong correlation between being interviewed, and graduating. As noted above, we had 26 students who attended at least one class. The Director interviewed 17 of them. Twelve of those seventeen were still attending class in January. It is our sense that students interpret the interview with the Director in two ways, both of them conducive to retention: they see their acceptance in the program as an accomplishment, something they've earned; they see the interview – and their acceptance – as a sign of a personal commitment by both parties to their successful completion of the course.

In the past, we have informally drawn upon Clemente alums to help us recruit students. We would like to be a bit more purposeful about this for the 2010-2011 year. Alums are often able to identify people who will benefit from Clemente, and can provide support when morale and confidence flag.

This year, we engaged in an experiment: we decided to allow a small number of students to join Clemente at midyear. We often receive inquiries from potential students well after the year has started – too late in the first set of courses to let them in. When told to come back next year, we often don't hear from them again. We also thought that a midyear boost to enrollment numbers might not be a bad thing, since those students would be admitted in the expectation that they would return the following fall to complete the first semester courses.

The experiment was not a success: two students, both very capable, joined in January. One stayed for about two weeks, the other for perhaps six weeks. In one case, a student dropped largely because of personality conflicts with other students. But the experiment was also hampered by the fact that we were unable to make Winter Break a true transition – as a result, both of them joined at the tail-end of the first semester courses, rather than the beginning of the second semester courses. In the 2010-2011 year, we will remedy this, and try it again.

Schedule and curriculum

We switched from a Monday-Wednesday schedule to a Monday-Thursday in the 2009-2010 academic year. In part this was done to accommodate faculty schedules, but also because we believed that extra time between classes would make it easier for students to keep up on reading and writing assignments. Circumstantial evidence seems to confirm this, so we will keep the Monday-Thursday schedule in the 2010-2011 year.

Writing

Rather than having most of the Writing sessions at the beginning of the year, with a series of stand-alone tasks and assignments, we chose instead to once again integrate Writing into the other four courses. Dr. Riley taught four distinct Writing sessions, with each one focused specifically on skills that would be useful for completing assignments in the other classes. She also team-taught two sessions with each of the four subject professors, to help students better understand writing within and across disciplines. In conjunction with four portfolio sessions scattered throughout the year, our students received intense and targeted writing instruction and feedback. At the same time, each faculty member learned some skills about how best to teach writing in their discipline.

Rather than treat the writing classes as separate entities, we worked to more fully integrate writing instruction across the Clemente curriculum. Each content area devoted class time to agreed-upon writing steps, facilitated by the writing instructor as follows:

- Brainstorming ideas/topics
- Outlining papers (outlines were used in public speaking as well to develop this skill)
- Drafting introductory paragraphs and work-shopping them and focusing on refining one's topic
- Using sources and integrating them into papers as appropriate for each discipline
- Drafting a full paper and work-shopping with a focus on developing content
- Reflection on final paper and what changed through workshops/revision process

Our goal was to repeat the same processes in each course so to drive home the writing process and to bring some commonalities to the courses to avoid varying directions.

Additionally, our writing instruction moved from being rule based (i.e. grammar and modes of writing) to process based (i.e. developing ideas, using different strategies at once, peer reviewing and work-shopping). Writing instruction was integrated into content class assignments, and we relied upon short handouts devoted to specific writing skills. We took the pressure off writing the perfect sentence and placed it instead on developing ideas over time through the sequencing of assignments (i.e. the literature assignments begin with summaries of texts moving to analysis so to model what the literature portfolio paper should be; thus, the students see how such a paper develops and build to that final product rather than simply being told to produce the final product).

The 2009-10 Clemente class came in with solid writing skills. It's clear that the approach we took with the writing process helped to develop those skills more effectively as the final portfolio papers we received were more detailed and extensive than those in past years.

As in the past, U.S. History and Moral Philosophy were taught in the spring.

Moral Philosophy

Discussions in Dr. Gardner's Moral Philosophy classes were always lively, and her warm and patient approach helped to calm student anxieties about philosophy.

This year, Dr. Gardner reported, "I tried to introduce them to classic texts in moral philosophy and to bring out themes that are relevant to their lives, such as the question of moral integrity. The combined assignment also functioned in this way, in that it placed philosophical questions of the moral law and civil disobedience into a concrete context, namely the actions of Martin Luther King and his followers."

U.S. History

While the material covered by the U.S. History class this year was altered only slightly, Dr. Santow made some significant changes to the writing assignments.

In the 2008-2009 year, rather than having them do a series of small writing assignments disconnected from one another, Dr. Santow challenged them to write a 4- to 5-page paper, on a topic of their choosing, that would use at least two primary sources to advance a thesis. He distributed a large collection of thematically organized primary sources, and gave them a list of seven broad themes. They could write on one of them. The idea was for each of them to develop an expertise on a subject, and for them to gain a better understanding of how we can use primary sources to make sense of the past. Ideally, this expertise would also put them in a position to comfortably and effectively make a public presentation of their work.

Since the writing for the course was now centered on one large paper, rather than a series of smaller ones, Santow gave them a series of paper-building assignments to help them build up to the big one. Dr. Riley's visits to the class were very helpful in this regard. Five weeks or so into the course they were asked to hand in a one-paragraph proposal describing their topic, and the primary sources they would use. Three weeks later they submitted a thesis statement and an outline. A month after this, they submitted a draft of the introduction to their paper, and an updated outline. They turned in a draft of their paper ten days later. After receiving feedback from Dr. Santow as well as the other faculty members at a portfolio session, they then handed in a final draft.

In the 2009-2010, some of this structure was retained. The readings once again focused on the lives of famous Americans, supplemented by primary sources. The students were asked to read two biographies (John Brown and Martin Luther King, Jr.) and a memoir (Frederick Douglass), while Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* provided a narrative overview and fodder for class discussion.

The writing assignments were different, however. In the first half of the semester, students wrote two 2-page papers on assigned questions, which asked them to make use of secondary and primary sources. Some of the previous year's students had struggled with the open-ended nature

of the paper assignments, so this year they were given specific questions to respond to.

The first paper was on Frederick Douglass' memoir; the second was on the ideas and policies of Franklin Roosevelt. The rest of the semester they were focused on a combined US History-Moral Philosophy portfolio paper, on Martin Luther King and his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Once again, students had a series of paper-building assignments: an introduction and outline; a first draft; and a final draft.

This was the most challenging assignment we have given students in Clemente, to date. It was 5-7 pages, and it asked them to juggle not only multiple texts, but also more than one discipline. Dr. Gardner and Dr. Santow tried to set the assignment up in such a way that it could be easily outlined, and that the students would find it relatively clear when historical analysis was called for, and when philosophical analysis was needed. Writing classes and portfolio sessions helped them work through ideas, the use of quotations from sources, and the outlining and writing of the papers.

This was something we had discussed doing for years, and while difficult for everyone, we believe it was a success. We will be juggling our schedule in the 2010-2011 year, so we can't do a repeat of this specific assignment – but we will almost certainly combine other disciplines in some way. The experience of using one body of knowledge to analyze another is empowering for the students, and is in many ways the essence of what the humanities entails – building connections, and developing skill and comfort with shifting perspectives.

Public Speaking

So much of the Clemente Course is about helping students to find their own voices, and to participate more effectively and confidently in public and private life. The ability to express themselves orally is not only an essential citizenship skill; it is vital for representing themselves and their loved ones at work, before civil servants, in places of worship, and in their relationships.

As a result, we made public speaking a regular part of our curriculum, and required students to do public presentations in order to receive the full six hours of college credits. More specifically, Dr. Torrens ran two full

workshops in the 2009-2010 year (one each semester), and engaged in two hours of team-teaching with each member of our faculty. The idea was to help the students participate in public speaking activities that were specific to each course. Our goal was to further integrate public speaking into each aspect of our curriculum, and to help the students reach a higher level of skill and self-confidence through repeated exposure and practice.

At the beginning of the year, Dr. Torrens provided the faculty with a comprehensive plan (see Appendixes) that included the objectives, guidance for each team member's public communication assignment and goals, and an overarching rationale. The goals for students this year were very simple and were grounded in comfort with speaking, lots of practice, and the ability to construct a thoughtful argument and deliver it fairly extemporaneously.

Those goals were largely achieved. Students participated in Torrens' workshops and exercises enthusiastically despite pretending to grumble. Every student gave a short speech at graduation -- a first in our history. All of them increased their comfort level with public speaking, improved their listening skills, and recognized the need to analyze their purpose and audience.

There continue to be areas that need improvement. Despite clear guidelines for public presentation assignments, some faculty members seemed reticent to accommodate Torrens' learning objectives or to integrate the skills into their teaching. While this integration is certainly another 'job' for each instructor, if they are designing assignments "written or otherwise" to accomplish their own learning objectives, it seems reasonable to expect them to incorporate and integrate the public speaking issues as well. More attention to the natural marriage of writing and speaking might help to ameliorate the 'different' nature of speech in some folks' perceptions.

A great deal of our success with public speaking is clearly attributable to Dr. Torrens herself. She is empathic, patient, and clear – a wonderful teacher. And her observations of where we need to improve are spot on.

We once again had Noreen Cleffi, our ESL and writing tutor, on staff all year. She met with students before class, and worked one-on-one with

them during class as well. Noreen attended virtually all Writing and Literature classes, and a good number of the other ones too. As it was last year, her presence was absolutely critical, particularly for the Portfolio sessions. Writing presents the biggest struggle for Clemente students, and thus individualized attention is absolutely critical for retention.

Expectations/assessment

Since our first year in New Bedford we have required students to submit a portfolio of their written work, to be evaluated by the faculty in order to determine whether college credits are to be bestowed. Because each of the four subject areas required students to submit a portfolio paper, a 'portfolio session' was held toward the end of each subject course. At these sessions, the entire faculty would come to class to work one-on-one with students, to help them write and revise their portfolio papers. These sessions have always been tremendously successful.

We address the issue of expectations and assessment in the following ways:

First, we distributed a handout to the students at the beginning of the year telling them quite specifically what will be necessary for them to receive the college credits (see appendix). This included a clearly stated policy on late papers and attendance, and a list of skills and abilities that their Portfolios will need to demonstrate.

Second, we have established a number of instruments that will enable students to set goals and meet them, while giving the faculty a much stronger sense of where we may be falling short. We distributed a survey to all students at the beginning of the program, and periodically thereafter. The first survey asked them to set out goals for themselves, and to consider what they would need in order to accomplish them; subsequent surveys provided them with an opportunity to assess their progress, voice concerns, and pinpoint difficulties.

During the first class we distributed a skills assessment survey, to give us a better sense of their reading and writing abilities and experiences. They retook this periodically, so that they could see their own progress.

We met as a faculty in the first week after classes ended, in order to make our final decisions about the granting of college credits. The Academic Director made copies of all the portfolio papers and made them available to the professors, so they could get a more complete sense of each student's work. He also gave them a complete attendance record. Once we meet we quickly dispense with the obvious cases, and spend most of the meeting on the rest.

We will generally follow the expectations document we distributed to the students, but there are always a few cases that just don't fit. Each year we have granted three credits to at least one student, but it has been difficult to come up with a consistent rubric for determining when to do this. We intend to make our rubric a bit more concrete this year, though it isn't as if we remake our standards every year – because we have retained virtually our entire faculty since the first year, we can easily make useful comparisons between students from different years.

The Director will need to come up with a better way of communicating to our graduates the reasons for our decisions. In virtually every case, our graduates got what they anticipated. But in a few instances that has not been the case. Perhaps an exit interview is in order.

Community building and student ownership

For the past five years we have had students participate in setting the rules for their community by collectively composing and publicly signing a 'contract' committing them to a set of rules and responsibilities. Early in the year, students laid out rules of classroom behavior in a very robust discussion. Many of them had never really given any serious thought to how a college classroom works; most of them had never had the opportunity to play a role in constructing the rules under which they live (citizenship, in other words). This was a very worthwhile exercise.

We wrote up a Student Contract and brought it to class for everyone to sign. I periodically reminded them of these commitments we made to one another and to ourselves later. Most interestingly, the students themselves often referred to portions of the Student Contract when civility was strained, or student commitment wavered.

Cultural enrichment activities

We once again took a guided tour (courtesy of our Art Historian, Dr. Memory Holloway) of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As in the past, this experience was tremendously popular and empowering. We continue to believe that financial support of cultural enrichment activities is vital for the success of the Clemente Course.

