A HISTORY OF THE CLEMENTE/CATALYST PROGRAM IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

Within Australia, the numbers of people who are homeless and marginalised are increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; St Vincent de Paul Society, 2007) with the situation being exacerbated by poor physical and mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, financial difficulties, inferior housing, family breakdown, and unemployment (Vinson, 2007). Many of these 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. Improving the educational access of the homeless and marginalised through alternative educational pathways and collaboration amongst community agencies, business and education providers can bring about new life opportunities for the disadvantaged.

The Clemente program is an educationally focussed initiative delivered within the community through the collaboration between community agencies and universities. The program is founded upon the value of transformational learning for the re-engagement of disadvantaged people with the community. The program emphasises the use of Humanities subjects in providing disadvantaged Australians access a wider range of educational choices and opportunities enjoyed by most members of society. This paper reports on the evolving history of the Clemente program, in Australia, from its beginnings in 2003 through to the end of 2008. The purpose is to provide the background sequence of events which places the growth of the program across this timeframe providing people with an appreciation of the events and people involved.

ORIGINS

The Clemente program had its origins in the United States 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. (Shorris, 1997). 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 US 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.

Shorris soon found that the students were enthusiastic learners who brought rich life experiences to their studies. Aside from the United States of America, over time the Clemente program was introduced into a number of other countries including Canada,
Mexico and Argentina. It was also offered, with some variation in content, in Yucatan and Alaska for Native Americans. 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’s 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 Christine Crimmins drafted a short proposal to introduce the Clemente program at the Vincentian Village in Woolloomooloo. (Working Party, 2003). In the 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. Amongst its members were Judy Brophy, Sue Chant, Christine Crimmins, Bernard Cronin, Denys Goggin, Marie Leech, Meryle McQueen, Carole-Anne Priest and Felicity Reynolds.

**SHAPING CLEMENTE IN AUSTRALIA: 2002-2005**

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. Bernard Cronin was one of the pioneers in this field first offering short Clemente-type courses in the Humanities at the Charles O’Neill House in Surry Hills. (Working Party, 2003) However, 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]. He had attended one of the Shorris’ talks and had been impressed by the idea of Clemente as he and John Finneran, from the Edmund Rice Centre, had previously conducted undergraduate courses in social justice and community outreach at the university. Carole-Anne Priest also met with Peter to discuss his possible involvement in the program and gave him a copy of *Riches for the Poor*. With the support of Dr Jude Butcher, the Head of School, Peter Howard decided to organise at least a couple of units to see if the program would work. To some extent there was now a rush in the
second half of 2003 to commence the program at Vincentian Village in order to complete one semester of study before the end of the year.

Dr Graham English agreed to conduct the first unit, ‘Ethics: Living an Examined Life’ for about a dozen students and this began on Friday, 19 September 2003. The class had access to a separate basement area of the Vincentian Village building with computers, internet and a printer made available for the students’ use. Funding was provided by the Vincentian Village, the Sisters of Charity and the Sydney City Council. The following March, Associate Professor Peter Bastian ran the second unit, ‘Modern Australia’, for about a dozen students. In June 2004 the students put together a display of memorabilia, on the First and Second World Wars, which was opened by Rusty Priest, ex-president of the New South Wales Returned Servicemen League and closed the following week by Clover Moore, Lord Mayor of Sydney. Dr Ross Keating then conducted a third unit, ‘Spirituality for Life’ in the second half of 2004. As well summer and winter schools in subjects such as Creative Writing, Psychology and Legal Studies were offered in 2005 although none of these short courses qualified as part of the tertiary studies component of Clemente. The final major units in the program, Art History and Literature were taught in 2005 and 2006 respectively while both the Ethics (2004) and Spirituality (2005) were repeated.

By the end of 2005 the general parameters of the Clemente Australia program had been established:

1. In essence the humanities program outlined by Shorris was used although with variations for local conditions. Each unit was offered for a twelve week semester and involved a range of assessment tasks. As well, a student evaluation of the unit was eventually built into the programme.

2. Classroom teaching was carried out by academics from the Australian Catholic University but students were greatly assisted by being assigned Learning Partners. Connie Henson played a crucial role in helping recruit corporate and community volunteers to implement this critical element of the program. These volunteers took the students, usually in a one on one situation, to help them with their study skills and essay writing tasks. They were not expected to be tutors with specialised knowledge of the subject matter being taught, but were there to help students organise their studies. A typical
learning partner was someone with an average age of thirty eight, working full time who had little previous contact with the homeless or disadvantaged. At first, there was only limited preparation provided for the Learning Partners but over time new orientation packages have been introduced and ACU has made available its undergraduate Study Skills Guide which provided further practical guidance to everyone in the program. Also as the programme became established, a number of learning partners have performed this role over several semesters and so have became experienced by ‘learning on the job.’

3. Although taught at a particular site, students have often been taken outside the formal classroom setting as well. In Art History a tour was made of the NSW Art Gallery while students visited the Sydney War Memorial for Australian history and a later group studying Australian Politics visited Parliament House Canberra. As well, over time, the Bell Shakespeare Company has become associated with the Literature courses taught by Associate Professor Michael Griffith, and Sara Woods in particular has assisted in teaching and helping students perform Shakespearian presentations and attending theatre performances at the Sydney Opera House.

4. Unlike the USA model there has never been any age restriction upon Australian students although they have usually been expected to be over eighteen. Otherwise they come from disadvantaged situations, need to show a willingness to undertake the program, have some evidence of stability in their lives and be at least able to read a tabloid newspaper. In fact some students have much better educational backgrounds than this but have faced a range of health or other personal problems that have left them disadvantaged.

5. Shorris preferred not to have students in the program graded but the Australian model from the beginning insisted upon assignments and graded work. Amongst the arguments for doing this was that it would send the message that Clemente was not a welfare program but an academic approved educational course. Further, such grading gained credibility in the eyes of the academic teaching staff, other tertiary institutions and the program would have tangible end points in terms of final results and the celebration of achievement.

6. In October 2005 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Australian Catholic University and St Vincent De Paul - Sydney whereby the units of the Clemente program were recognised by ACU as contributing
toward a non award Certificate in Liberal Studies. Students in the programme in cities where there is a campus of ACU could also register as a non-award student and gain access to a student and library borrower’s card. This work was largely due to the support and efforts of Professor Gabriel McMullen, Pro Vice Chancellor [Academic] of ACU. By the time the MOU was signed there were at least three students in the process of reaching the target of having completed four units needed for the Certificate and they attended the first program graduation ceremony held in 2006 in the Sydney Town Hall.

7. The attainment of the Certificate and the occasion of a graduation with the University’s student body has proven significant for the program in that it provides many students with a sense of longer term goals as they have to set themselves a programme of study for up to two years in order to complete the four units. By the end of 2008 eleven students had completed their Certificate in Liberal Studies. In July 2008 there were 87 students enrolled in the program across eight national sites and of these students, at least, forty have passed one or more units and are working towards their Certificate.

8. By 2008 there were five former students studying at the undergraduate level at ACU at its Strathfield campus and at least one more will commence in 2009. Two other students have entered the National Art School and another, already a university graduate in earlier life, is undertaking his doctoral studies at the University of Western Sydney.

EXTENDING CLEMENTE-CATALYST ACROSS AUSTRALIA: 2006-2008

In October 2005 due to the considerable efforts of Anne Hampshire [National Manager Research and Social Policy], the program, using the name of Catalyst, was extended to Mission Australia premises in Darlinghurst (Associate Professor Peter Bastian taught the first unit titled ‘Modern Australia’). The following year, in 2006, Catalyst was introduced at Mission Australia in Brisbane initially at Café One on Wickham. This was a difficult spot as many people using this centre were completely homeless and were suffering severe drug and alcohol addiction. It was subsequently decided to move the teaching site to Fortitude Valley. The program also faced a setback in Sydney when the Vincentian Village was closed and Clemente could no longer operate from its premises. One unit was taught temporarily at Charles O’Neil
House in 2006 but after that time the program has operated only within the inner Sydney area at Mission Australia. Over the time it had operated at the Vincentian Village more than fifty students had enrolled in the various Clemente units. However In 2007 St Vincent de Paul Society with ACU established a Clemente program in Canberra. At the same time the St Vincent de Paul Society-Wollongong, with assistance from the Presentation Sisters and in collaboration with ACU established the program at The Nagle Centre in Campbelltown, a south-western Sydney area,

Organisationally, the original working committee which had set up the programme and continued to monitor it in these early years had all but ceased to function by 2006. The general oversight of the programme therefore largely fell to Associate Professor Peter Howard and, in turn to the new Institute for Advancing Community Engagement at ACU headed by Professor Jude Butcher. Peter Howard believes that 2007 proved to be a crucial year for Clemente. He was given a larger teaching allocation for his work on the program as well as some administrative assistance. This made it possible to begin to formalise and organise the structures, policies and procedures of the program in a more systematic manner while starting to implement research projects. There was now more time available to spend upon planning for possible new sites and developing interested partners in the programme. In 2007, a policy decision was made by Mission Australia to introduce the program to Victoria and be taught in Melbourne in 2008. It also decided to commence the programme in Perth in the first half of 2008 with the courses being taught by staff from Edith Cowan University. The change in federal government at the end of 2008 also made for a better national atmosphere of social inclusion that was in keeping with the spirit of Clemente.

Although the programme had attracted earlier publicity through ACU efforts, newspapers and even the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Stateline television program, Peter Howard believes it was the Mission Australia Snapshot 2007 Newsletter with its article ‘Enhancing participation: New Possibilities for disadvantaged Australians’ that engendered enormous print, radio and television media interest including a segment of the ABC’s national 7:30 Report. In some ways, the period 2002/3-2007 can be seen as one of introducing, publicising and extending the programme and perhaps formed an era in its own right.
Aside from commencing in Melbourne and Perth in 2008, Clemente also commenced in Ballarat in the second half of the year with the support and inter-organisational collaboration of the Ballarat City Council, Ballarat Cares, Centacare, Central Highlands Regional Library Co-Op and The Smith Family. It is being taught through the shared delivery of the subjects by the academic staff of the University of Ballarat and ACU with all parties signing a MOU to launch the project on 12 September 2008. An overview of the subjects taught across sites since the program’s inception in Australia is in Appendix 1. The table shows those lecturers who were involved in the teaching, the number of students enrolled in each subject and the number of students who completed assessment tasks. The program is also expected to be launched in Newcastle through Mission Australia, Black Josephites, CatholicCare and ACU in the first half of 2009 and a number of other capital and regional cities have expressed an interest in it.

CONSOLIDATING AND EXPANDING: 2009 –

In a short time span 2002-2008, Clemente/ Catalyst Australia has been recognised by a number of significant national and institutional awards. The program received an Honourable Mention for the 2005 national Business-Higher Education RoundTable [BHERT] Award. In 2006 five of the teaching staff received a national Carrick Australian Award for University Teaching for their work in [include actual citation] the program. The citation read, For transformational teaching and learning contributions within an unique Australian community based tertiary education program for homeless and marginalised people. In 2007 the Clemente-Catalyst program was awarded the Vice Chancellor’s Community Engagement Award at ACU. Yet, there is much work still to be done and a number of issues to be resolved.

1. On his 2003 visit Shorris had hoped that Clemente might be introduced to the Sydney Aboriginal community but to date that has not been possible. There are other disadvantaged groups such as prisoners and single parents that the program has not yet touched and of course there remains many rural regional centres where there is no such program.

2. The program is Humanities based but as the chart of units taught to date reveals there is little consistency in the units offered at the different sites either
in subject matter or in sequences. While there is a sound case for the program responding to local needs and maintaining a degree of flexibility, this needs further pedagogical consideration.

3. Shorris found that he had a drop-out rate of around 50% in his program and it was difficult to predict which students would stay and benefit from the course. The Australian drop-out/failure rates are perhaps just marginally better but given the nature of the student clientele if one in two participants complete the course, is this a need for concern or a sign of significant achievement?

In October 2008 the Clemente-Catalyst program received an Australian Research Council grant for 2009-2011 [$120 000] to investigate the life journeys of the Clemente-Catalyst students across the two years of their study. This was a significant national acknowledgement of the value of the program to the Australian community. In March 2009, the first Clemente-Catalyst National Forum for all interested stakeholders is being planned and there is a proposal to conduct the first formal review of the program. The recommendations from both of these activities will help consolidate the program and may recommend new administrative structures and advisory groups.

**CONCLUSION**

The Australian community has a history of coming together to assist one another in times of need. It has often searched for innovative ways to share and combine resources in looking for answers to social issues. Clement-Catalyst is one way in which community organisations, tertiary institutions, corporate and government have come together to re-engage people in learning. As national institutions, ACU National, Mission Australia, and the St Vincent de Paul Society are jointly committed to empowering Australians experiencing the effects of disadvantage, such as poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, inferior housing, homelessness, family breakdown, and social marginalisation by providing them with rigorous tertiary humanities learning that kindles their intellectual engagement, encourage personal reflection, and support social integration and social competence.
Since 2003, the Australian Catholic University, Mission Australia and St Vincent de Paul Society have worked collaboratively to provide community based academic programs the for homeless and 'disadvantaged'. The Clemente-Catalyst program aims to produce constructive, long-term changes in the personal dispositions of disadvantaged Australians. Its students make long-term gains in self-efficacy, self-knowledge, sense of purpose, communication skills and competence, social integration, and hope for the future. The national program, which now operates in Sydney Campbelltown, Canberra, Brisbane, Melbourne, Ballarat and Perth, has provided a learning environment for people in community settings that are supportive of the students' learning and personal needs. The Clemente-Catalyst program provides a model for community agencies and tertiary institutions to engage with one another in developing an innovative learning pathway for Australian marginalised people to access higher education, a human right that has often been denied.

References
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