A Mission Possible

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Homeless people might seem an unlikely group of students – graduates of the school of hard knocks. But ACU National, in partnership with St Vincent de Paul Society and willing business people, has uncovered some of the keenest, most grateful students ever, and the learning experience has been mutual.

Australia’s first university courses for homeless people are taking place in a long room in Vincentian Village, East Sydney. The delivery is modelled on the Clemente program, initiated in the USA by Earl Shorris, author of Riches for the Poor, who visited Australia in 2003.

The students, aged in their 40s, 50s and 60s, come from a range of inner city homeless services to attend lectures by ACU National academics, and to write their assignments with the help of business people operating as “learning partners”.

Dr Judith Brophy, a member of the management committee of Vincentian Village who coordinates the program, said learning partners were volunteers who mostly work in Sydney’s CBD, in banks, businesses and government organisations.

“They are professional people from the business world, and it’s been amazing that they have so generously offered to come in here,” Dr Brophy said. “Our client group is not the group they would normally mix with. It could be a little bit daunting, but it is remarkable how well they are working together.”

Vincentian Village CEO, Ms Sue Chant, said the only prerequisites for the courses were an ability to read the newspaper and a passion for learning. So far, ACU National lecturers have provided University level courses on Ethics, Australian History, and Spirituality, with Art History and Theory being offered in 2005. Some 30 students have taken part so far, and word is spreading.

“It’s an inspiration to see the students’ dedication and commitment to learning,” Ms Chant said, noting that many were also finding new computer skills empowering. “They have a very strong hunger for learning. They can be in the room for up to six hours, enjoying working, looking at information and supporting each other. A percentage of them have developed a strong social support group. In the main, they wouldn’t have had a lot to do with each other in the past.”

While charitable organisations have traditionally helped their clients meet critical basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter for the night, providing them with a university level education is new.

“Tertiary education isn’t automatically connected with people who have come from this kind of disadvantaged background. I think that’s why they really value it. They are seen as being worthwhile enough to have this offered to them,” said Ms Chant.

“ Their right to learn has been denied by our society in general. There’s no support structure for them to get into any learning process,” said Dr Brophy.
“Everybody here has been through a hell of a lot.”

The lecturers have been very successful. One knows that they are very competent as teachers, but we have such a different client group,” said Dr Brophy.

Dr Peter Howard, a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the Strathfield Campus, said “everyone has something to offer”.

“It’s all about the dignity of the human being,” Dr Howard said. “It’s very much what community engagement is all about.”

All lecturers have said they have found the experience enriching, and have valued the students’ insights.

Dr Ross Keating, senior lecturer in ACU National’s School of Religious Education, sees his role in teaching the course, Spirituality for Life, as helping the students articulate their own vision of spirituality.

“They are working from their own experience, which is very rich, and I have been really surprised by their perception and insights, their eagerness to learn, their responsiveness to classes,” said Dr Keating. “For me it’s been very rewarding, very engaging.”

The ability to see personal experiences in a different light, and learn from them, was very empowering, he said.

“In their assignments they articulate their feelings about what it means to be a human person, and hopefully it will be a quality transformational experience they can take into life. It is planting seeds, giving spiritual and mental assistance and a certain strength. ‘Knowledge shall set you free’.”

Associate Professor Peter Bastian of ACU National’s School of Arts and Sciences (NSW), who taught Australian History to about 10 students in the Clemente program, said the classes were “fairly lively and positive”.

“A couple of the students surprised me,” he said. “I thought they would struggle, but some did quite well.”

Students undertake undergraduate approved units and complete assignments which are marked as rigorously as those of regular students.

“Our students deserve the best, and that’s what they are getting,” Ms Chant said. “We are not pretending to give them something less than what we believe they are entitled to. We and the University are very definite about the fact that these are university courses with qualified lecturers.”

Dr Brophy added: “One student received a distinction, and it was extraordinary the ripple that went right around.”

Senior lecturer in the School of Religious Education, Dr Graham English, teaches habilitation students who work with people with disabilities, as well as in the Clemente program.

“I never ask the students at ACU National about their background,” he said. “It just doesn’t seem to me it is any of my business. I took the same attitude with the homeless people. Some were clearly university graduates in various things.

“It was a strange experience. You realise that there’s a culture, a world that exists that you don’t know about, of different agencies and refuges …

“One woman said it was the only time she had any serious conversation with anyone from one Friday to the next. It’s a whole world in there, with its own kind of language, a fairly fluid world.”
The only prerequisites for the courses are an ability to read the newspaper and a passion for learning.

“For some people, the learning experience might make a difference, they might realise they have some power, that they can think and might order their lives. Others have settled into that lifestyle, but hearing lectures gives them something to do that is useful and thought provoking.

“Homeless people have the right to be able to be able to read, and read good stuff and be part of that tradition.”

From the philosophical to the practical, students were catching on, he said, realising their own questioning and thinking was part of a long tradition, stretching back to Aristotle and Plato.

A celebratory lunch at the end of the course reminded Dr English of a scene from the movie, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, when it is difficult to distinguish the doctors from the patients.

“I was very conscious of the thin line between being whatever we are, coping and normal, and people who are homeless. Most of these people have some kind of addiction, to gambling or substances, or some kind of psychological problem. You realise that everything is a fine balance. It touches your own insecurities.”

STUDENT INTERVIEW: “AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY”

Clemente student Tania Hilder said she had wanted to study the humanities since she was 19, but years of work, a battle with depression and changing circumstances worked against her until now.

“A friend brought me down here,” Tania said. “We have been very privileged to have been in this group. It’s just a fabulous opportunity. The learning experience has taken our minds off our own problems.

“Everybody here’s been through a hell of a lot. We support each other. This has been a wonderful community. We come to share as well. We don’t just come in to take.

“We are very grateful for everything that’s been offered to us. We try and do our best to thank them.”

The experience has opened up a new future for Tania. “We don’t know where it’s going to lead. I have always wanted to write and this is getting me into this mode.

It’s been wonderful. This has been an incredible journey of knowledge and opening up to the world.”

Tania studied World War I and World War II during the Australian History course, finding it “horrible yet rewarding in its way” and enjoyed the course on Spirituality. “It was beautiful, very broad, drawing on all the ancient wisdoms and knowledge, all the religions of the world, making sense of it all,” she said.

“It has been handed to us now to make sense of life and our place here, to find our place in it. This circle is helping us to understand our place in the world and our journey in it. For the assignment we have really had to clarify our thoughts and how we feel about God and spirituality in a very wide sense and how it’s included in every part of our lives, and the more we become aware of that, the more enriched our lives are. We are seeing how you can still live in a very spiritual way. It’s just been wonderful.”
“It makes intuitive good sense for us to share our expertise and experiences.”

MOVE MINDSETS TO BUILD ON STRENGTH

To complement its hundreds of services aimed at empowering people experiencing disadvantage and isolation across Australia, Mission Australia is planning to introduce tertiary education for homeless people at another site in Sydney and one in Queensland.

“Like ACU National and the St Vincent de Paul Society, we value the strengths of the people we work with very highly,” said Ms Anne Hampshire, National Manager Research and Social Policy with Mission Australia.

“We want to harness and build on the strengths of the clients at some of our homeless services, so they can take greater control of their lives.”

Ms Hampshire is a member of the ACU National Faculty of Education’s advisory board of the Office of Community Engagement and is also on the board of ACU National’s Flagship for Creative and Authentic Leadership.

She describes the partnership between the University and the community organisations as “powerful and based on common values”. “It makes intuitive good sense for us to share our expertise and experiences.

“We all bring complementary and essential skills to the table for a common purpose. We want the opportunity to engage with our clients and the community in new ways, and to be part of rethinking the role of universities,” Ms Hampshire said.

“We believe in the human dignity of each of the people whom we work with and in supporting them to pursue new possibilities and opportunities, such as a university education. We also believe we have much to learn from those we work with and our partner organisations.

“One of the important outcomes we’re hoping for through providing university education to homeless people is to change community mindsets about homeless people, to shift assumptions and expectations of what they can achieve and of what is possible.”

As well as providing lecturers, ACU National will lend expertise in qualitative and quantitative research, evaluating programs at each site to allow continual improvement.

“Our goal is to measure the outcomes not only for the participants, but also for the community organisations, for the learning partners, the University and the community. Through partnerships we’re hoping we can make an important contribution to the participation of homeless people in our community as well as help shape community views about what homeless people can achieve.”