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Teaching Democracy: Reflections on the Clemente Course in the Humanities, Higher Education, and Democracy

Kevin Mattson

What the evening college ought to do for the community is to fight all those forces which are destroying genuine publics . . . ; or stated positively: to help build and to strengthen the self-cultivating liberal public.

—C. Wright Mills¹

My interest in the Clemente Course in the Humanities was sparked in 1997 when Earl Shorris published a provocative piece about the program in *Harper's* magazine. Shorris explained how he decided to teach a course in the humanities on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He argued that this was a way to re-engage poorer citizens in thinking seriously about democratic citizenship and public life. I was immediately interested in learning more about the program and possibly teaching for it. A friend who worked for a private foundation got me in contact with the director of the program. A year after meeting him, I started teaching for the program as it established a course in New Brunswick, N.J. I am now in my third year of teaching the American history section of the Clemente Course. In reflecting upon my experience here, I believe strongly that this experiment has something to teach us about the deeper purposes of higher education and the future of American democracy.

The Clemente Course, like other nonprofit experiments, has received money from major funders, including governmental agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities and private organizations like the Open Society Institute. With this support, it has successfully recruited poorer citizens to take courses throughout New York City and has established itself across the United States, in major urban areas (Philadelphia, Seattle, Washington, D.C.) and even Alaska. For these reasons, it deserves attention as a serious national initiative that highlights the critical relation between higher education (especially as it relates to adult, non-traditional students), democracy, and civic equality. Here I will explain the significance of the program by situating it within its historical and political context.

Situating the Clemente Course

Critical experiments in American adult education pale to the history of Danish and British adult schools. Nonetheless, there is a rich tradition of modern adult education, much of it originating with social reform movements that sprang up during the Progressive Era. At the University of Chicago (home to John

Dewey and other leading progressives), adult education initiatives engaged working class citizens in forums that helped them understand the roots of current social and political crises engendered by industrialization. Charles Zueblin, for instance, lectured throughout the city under the auspices of the University of Chicago's "University Extension" program. He had previously worked in the Settlement House movement and believed speaking to newly arrived immigrants about economic and

political issues was crucial to democracy. Adult education, Zueblin believed, could nurture the deliberative potential seated within American civil society. He explained, "It is found that University Extension is proving a decided stimulus to the intellectual life of the communities that undertake it. The clubs, the schools, the churches, even the newspapers, have been aroused to greater intellectual activity." By engendering learning and deliberation, adult education could facilitate a democratic public.²

Zueblin's progressive vision of adult education was not the only vision around at the time. In studying the growth of adult education during the Progressive Era, the historian Leon Fink found a tension between "social control"—the desire to forge citizens obedient to existing political institutions and values—and "social criticism and transformation." Though adult educators might have intended to teach poor, disenfranchised citizens

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obedience, the processes they unleashed—critical learning and dialogue—could create quite different results. Fink’s focus on this tension highlights a central theme in the history of American adult education. Adult education walks a fine line between proping up the status quo and opening up new possibilities for democratic citizenship.³

Today, the biggest pressure on adult education comes from the private sector. In one of the few books written on the history of American adult education, Harold Stubblefield points out that adult educators at the turn of the century thought of their students “as citizens” but that this vision “has greatly diminished.” He explains, “How to equip adults for their place in the economic sector now engages the greatest interest.”⁴ For good reason too, since what are often called “non-traditional students”—typically working adults—constitute the largest portion of students entering higher education institutions today. Accompanying these students is a demand for higher education institutions to become vocationally oriented—to focus on upgrading the skillbase of employees. As one recent analyst of higher education pointed out, the biggest growth in higher education recently has been due to the “proliferation of preprofessional schools, from law to nursing, from hotel management to public health.”⁵ This vocational emphasis limits the possibilities of education opening up critical deliberative processes. Of course, providing more economic stability for working adults is good in and of itself (and can sometimes lead to civic engagement). But by thinking of education solely as enhancing private well-being, we underestimate its potential to create engaged and deliberative citizens.

This is what makes the Clemente Course’s emphasis on citizenship and public life so crucial. Indeed, the spokesperson for the course, Earl Shorris, a cultural critic, draws connections between education and citizenship and is fiercely opposed to defining education as training. In his recent book on the Clemente Course, he explains, “Whenever the nation becomes interested, for whatever reason, in alleviating the suffering of the poor, the method is always the same: training. . . . By training the poor while keeping education in the humanities beyond their reach, the rich and middle classes maintain the poor in the role of the meek.”⁶ Shorris wants to empower the poor by giving them opportunities at reflection and knowledge that are crucial for democratic citizenship.

Philosophy And Reality

Shorris clearly put a great deal of thought into the purposes behind the Clemente Course. Though not a political theorist by

training, his reasoning draws from some fundamentals inherited from the Western tradition of political thought as well as a critical scrutiny of what it means to be poor in America. Shorris eschews sociological or statistical definitions of poverty (which diminish a more profound sense of what it means to be poor). Instead, he sees poorer citizens as subject to “force” and “power.” He juxtaposes “force” to the life of citizenship and public life—drawing from Hannah Arendt’s thinking about the *vita activa*. Politics, for Shorris as for Arendt, grows out of the realm of freedom, a realm delineated from the constrained world of economic production (in the Aristotelian sense of the household economy). Shorris argues that for a citizen to be free, that person must see the “need for reflective thinking as a precursor to the political

life” (11). The healthy movement in a citizen’s life, then, is from reflection to action, from the private to the public. The Clemente Course helps poor people by critically intervening and jump-starting this process.

Not surprisingly, Shorris’ emphasis on a widened conception of citizenship and public life leads him to criticize the public policy of workfare and job training (both very limited responses to the problem of poverty). Along the way of making these arguments, he takes on

the right’s appropriation of the humanities, especially Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*. Shorris believes the left should be the true heirs of the humanities: “The left has abandoned the study of the humanities as the cultural imperialism of dead white European males, giving it over to conservatives, who have claimed it as their own. In fact, the humanities should belong to the left, for the study of the humanities by large numbers of people, especially the poor, is in itself a redistribution of wealth” (105). For Shorris, teaching the humanities to poor people can bring them into the realm of public life and democratic, contentious citizenship.

Shorris’ vision provides a great deal to live up to. The daily realities of running a program that tries to recruit poor people to sacrifice two evenings a week to learn about philosophy, literature, and history often overwhelms the bigger vision. Nonetheless, from my own experience, I see some connections between Shorris’s ideas and the act of teaching American history in the Clemente Course. By teaching the American Revolution and the Constitution, students learn more about the role citizens can play within a constitutional republic (more limited than they originally think). Reading Frederick Douglass, the Dred Scott decision, and Booker T. Washington provides students with a deeper sense of the conflict between racial and economic inequality and the promise of American democracy. Most

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importantly, when I teach the civil rights movement, students witness the possibilities that stem from ordinary (often poor) citizens entering into the public and political realm. Essentially, by learning this history, students see that an Arendtian politics has existed in the past for citizens very much like themselves. What students do with that information is, of course, open-ended.

In one case, though, students and staff at the Clemente Center on the Lower East Side decided to put the course to use in their local community. As explained by the director of the center, some students, after taking the course, started examining their surrounding community both for its assets and its needs. Taking the teachings of democratic citizenship seriously, they committed to buying a plot of land next to the Clemente Center and turning it into a community garden. Here, they believed, other citizens could find a quiet, public space in which to contemplate and reflect. In their own small way, these students gave back to the community the lessons they took from the Clemente Course.

This sort of anecdotal story is precisely that—anecdotal and therefore limited in how much it can teach us. There is some broad evidence, captured through some preliminary testing, that the course elevates certain individual traits among the students—articulateness, clearer thinking, self-esteem, and a sense of efficacy. But this assessment is in its first stages and focuses solely on individual behavior. For all of these reasons, I worry about the impact the course can make, especially when measured against Earl Shorris' bigger vision of democratic citizenship. Search as we might, it is not always so easy to find an Arendtian outcome from the Clemente Course. My concern is exacerbated by a general feeling that the rhetoric of democracy is easily deployed but not so easily integrated into America's institutional reality (on this point, see my earlier article with Mark Button, "Public Deliberation and Democracy—What's the Connection?" in vol. 8: No. 2, 1998). More simply, rhetoric is easy; reality is hard.

As the Clemente Course comes to rely upon private and public philanthropy, this problem is heightened. Foundation officers express wariness about anecdotal stories and grow hungry for documented (i.e., statistical) results. So the Clemente Course has found itself needing to prove its impact on students. The clearest way to do this is to track the growth of each individual's knowledge and self-esteem, especially how many graduate from Clemente to pursue a college education or find gainful employment (or even more simply, the number of students who com-

plete the course). Shorris himself bristles at the idea of objective evaluation: "There is something irresistibly comic about applying modern 'scientific' evaluation techniques to" the Clemente Course (171). Needless to say, he admits that the course often has to "describe its success or failure in terms of the percentage of students who enter colleges" (174). It is easier to assess the course's impact on individuals since the civic and collective impact is more difficult to quantify and measure. Even while sniping at objective assessment, Shorris has been unable to resist the pressures of foundations to justify a program through the numbers game. Though it might be unnecessary to say so, all of this makes me even more wary of using the rhetoric of citizenship and public life to describe the program, since this

rhetoric seems trumped by the measurement of college entrance and job statistics.

At the least, there appears a conflict here between the program's stated philosophy and reality. On the one hand, we have the promise that students in the Clemente Course will be aided in climbing out of the world of force and poverty and into the life of citizenship and public life or, in Shorris' words, "the way out of poverty and into a successful, self-governing life" relies upon "reflection" (255). In contrast, we have a program that increasingly measures its success by the number of students entering college and that struggles on a daily basis to keep students from drop-

ping out of the course (due precisely to the pressures of being poor and juggling other obligations like family and work). Perhaps this is an expression of the age-old conflict between rhetoric and reality, something that shows up in the nonprofit sector constantly (big promises, struggling programs). Or maybe it illustrates how fragile our efforts at civic equality have become. To expect a course in the humanities to empower citizens to arise out of poverty is hubristic. It is also indicative of how there are so few efforts that attempt to generate civic equality in America today.

In my mind, the Clemente Course alerts us to the need to revive a civic-minded liberalism through programs and policies that confront rising economic inequality and its attendant civic destruction. Local experiments that help citizens think critically need to be linked to national programs that redistribute income and provide job training and security (something like Clinton's original vision in 1992). Shorris is right to criticize the *limits* of welfare reform and workfare, and his critique should lead us to search for ways that allow citizens to work with dignity—that is, with child care, health care, and civic amenities. Here is the

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role for the dreaded monster of “big government.” Precisely because of the limits of local experiments, we need to rethink what role government can play, while never forgetting the importance of local civic activity. The Clemente program and the daily struggles of the students within it should remind us of this.

What’s It All Got To Do With the Future of Democracy and Education?

I should be clear here: My concerns with the Clemente program’s limits are expressed with sympathy. In fact, I think the program has some very important lessons to teach us today. Perhaps the most important one is an implicit critique of how higher education institutions have lost sight of their civic responsibility. Many higher education institutions have targeted working adult students, some of them poor. The president of the University of Phoenix—which is the largest private university today that predominantly offers on-line education—describes traditional liberal arts education as “a luxury” that “a working adult” cannot afford.⁷ With this criticism in mind, the DeVry Institute and other vocationally-oriented colleges (which eschew liberal arts and the humanities altogether) are spreading and recruiting a growing number of students. Even Al Gore celebrated this trend, arguing that vocational education should be placed front and center in higher education reform.⁸ All of this highlights a missed opportunity. We are denying many working adults the possibility of discovering the civic and humanistic dimension of higher education. In so doing, we are not only limiting their educational experiences but also exacerbating the general decline in civic values that critics like Robert Putnam rightfully bemoan.

Though limited, the Clemente Course shows how we can create spaces that bridge the gaps between the rich (typically educated) and the poor (typically uneducated). It understands that we need to make a *conscious* effort to find spaces for thoughtful deliberation and learning. In certain ways, the Clemente Course (especially when housed at a place like the Clemente Center) renews the spirit of the settlement house movement of the Progressive Era. As Jane Addams understood it, the efforts of Hull House (a leading settlement house where wealthier citizens worked together with poorer immigrants) were based on some basic principles: “That if in a democratic country nothing can be permanently achieved save through the masses of the people, it will be impossible to establish a higher political life than the people themselves crave; that it is difficult to see how the notion of a higher civic life can be fostered save through common intercourse; that the blessings which we associate with a life of refinement and cultivation can be made universal and must be made universal if they are to be permanent; that the good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating mid-air, until secured for all of us and incorporated into our common

life.” But as Addams also understood, the sort of “private beneficence” she practiced at Hull House was “totally inadequate to deal with the vast numbers of the city’s disinherited.”⁹ And so she linked her local activities with national reform initiatives aimed at making bigger changes (in her case, with Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party).

Of course, there are those who would take a very different lesson from the Clemente Course. I could imagine the political theorist, Jeff Isaac, suggesting that experiments like the Clemente Course are by nature small and fragile, existing like “islands” of democracy in a sea of bureaucracy and alienation. Indeed, Morris Berman, the cultural critic, follows this line of reasoning when he situates the Clemente Course within an overall monastic revolt against the commercialization of American culture.¹⁰ I conclude differently from Berman. The damage done by poverty—the pressures, humiliation, and alienation that you witness when teaching in the program—demands much more than a small program like the Clemente Course can offer. We need not only a big vision of civic liberalism but also government programs aimed at correcting for economic inequalities. Of course, these things must be in dialogue and consort with local civic activities. I am not assuming that we’re heading towards an imminent rebirth of civic liberalism. So in the mean time, I take to heart the teachings of Isaac and Berman in my daily practice. I will go on teaching in the “island” created by the Clemente Course. Yet while doing this, I will do my best to make the island speak to the wider society and demand of it political and social reform aimed at correcting for our society’s injustices.

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Endnotes

1. *Power, Politics, and People*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 368.
2. Zueblin quoted in Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era*. University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 1998, p. 27.
3. Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, Chapter Eight.
4. Harold Stubblefield, *Towards a History of Adult Education in America*. London: Croom Helm, 1988, “Introduction” (unpaginated).
5. Zachary Karabell, *What’s College For?: The Struggle to Define American Higher Education*. New York: Basic Books, 1998, p. 232.
6. Earl Shorris, *Riches for Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities*. New York: Norton, 2000, p. 9. I will quote from Shorris in what follows and simply provide page numbers in parentheses.

7. Quoted in “Dollar Scholar,” *People Weekly*, March 2, 2000, p. 87.

8. See “Gore Backs Job Training and Adult Education,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 22, 1999, A27.

9. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Signet, 1960), pp. 92, 219.

10. Here I rely upon Jeffrey Isaac’s essay on progressivism reprinted in his *Democracy in Dark Times*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998 (plus a roundtable discussion on his work held at the Open Society Institute on November 22, 1999) and Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture*. New York: Norton, 2000.