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CASE STUDY

A Crash Course in Directing the Clemente Course in the Humanities

Jim Cocola

Department of Humanities and Arts, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA, USA
Email: jcocola@wpi.edu

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Abstract

A former academic director and instructor in the Clemente Course in Humanities outlines the arc of this National Humanities Medal-winning program, and the arc of a career with it, discussing key elements involving academic and curricular matters, community partnerships, event planning, faculty and student recruitment, fiscal support, and public engagement extending across various institutions and organizations. Reflections on the value of adult education programs in the context of humanistic inquiry occasion further accounts and assertions about the nature of the public humanities, engaging publics not conceived in the abstract, in general, or for research purposes, but as they are configured and manifested among one's fellow citizens, at particular times and in particular places.

Keywords: adult education; citizenship; civic education; Earl Shorris; public humanities; state humanities councils

As an undergraduate, I justify my decision to major in the humanities – history and literature, to be specific – as an education in what I describe to myself as "the history of human feeling." But which humans? I learn from a relatively narrow cross section of them in the course of my undergraduate education. Graduate school proves scarcely better. Later, as an advanced assistant professor, I decide I want to connect with the public – not some inchoate and intangible version of the extremely online public, but the public IRL, in all of its manifold variousness. Among the several initiatives in adult education, one presents a unique opportunity to meet the public where they are: the Clemente Course in the Humanities.

Founded by Earl Shorris in New York City in 1995, the Clemente Course offers a five-strand, six-credit, eight-month, multidisciplinary night course in the humanities, including over 100 contact hours of fellowship and instruction for low-income adults. In succeeding decades, it has been implemented across dozens of sites around the country, from Charleston to South Bend to Port Townsend, and across the world, from Halifax to Budapest to Sydney. Books, childcare, transportation, and tuition are provided. Shorris believed that the Clemente Course would improve the lives of low-income adults by exposing them, through education in the strands of American history, art history, critical thinking, literature, and philosophy, to what one of his charges, Viniece Walker, a mentee in a maximum security

prison, described as "the moral life of downtown" – manifested in cultural institutions that enliven the city through programming in the humanities and arts.[1] Such institutions are enlivened, in turn, when they actively welcome the students, alumni, faculty, and supporters of the Clemente Course.

For Shorris himself, an education in the humanities was also civic in nature, and could "enable poor people to make the journey into the public world, the political life as Pericles had defined it, beginning with the family" before "going on to neighborhood, community, and state."[2] Those attempting such journeys were "students who come heroically out of a surround of force, at the edge of hopelessness, to the beauty and clarity of reflective thinking."[3] This "surround of force," so critical to Shorris's thinking, has been described elsewhere as a fugitive architecture of poverty structured by "the convergence of numerous forces – hunger, drugs, landlords, the police, and so on," which, taken together, have "enclosed the poor in a kind of negative psychic field": these forces have, as constituent counterparts, or even outright causes – satiety, wellness, rent collection, legal advantage, and so on – a correspondingly veiled "surround of opportunity" enjoyed by the privileged.[4]

Over three decades, more than 10,000 students have benefitted from Clemente, and hundreds of them have emerged into leadership positions in parent–teacher associations, neighborhood groups, school boards, town councils, and unions. In our own community, recent graduates have made a multitude of contributions along these lines: Winnie led the drive to renovate and re-establish a neighborhood park through her work with a community action council, Kenza offered oral testimonies as part of an ongoing women's history project, and Vanessa organized a gallery exhibition, film screening, performance night, residency program, and block party for local artists of color. As Danielle Allen, an instructor in Chicago's Clemente-adjacent Odyssey Project, puts it, such students "achieve personal empowerment by improving their capacity to diagnose their circumstances and present convincing arguments to others about new directions to pursue," bolstered, as the public itself is bolstered, by their Clemente experience, where "the cultivation of participatory readiness leads to political institutions that will themselves pull toward social equality and economic fairness."[5]

Susan Smulyan identifies "two main audiences" for public humanities projects: "people within the university" and "communities outside the university."[6] This firewall wants dismantling, for it reifies a false and fundamentally regressive distinction, one the Clemente Course manages to straddle and indeed blur if not wholly dismantle. We're a quarter of the way into the 21st century: between the promulgation of name, image, and likeness policies among athletic departments, sustained social media campaigns by public relations divisions, and grand ambitions across technology transfer offices, the university can hardly be understood as an insular entity with regard to its athletic, media, or research activities. It is time to stop operating as though the university could or should be insular with respect to its surrounding communities. In getting involved with the Clemente Course, I do not aim to bring the academy to the community, or the community to the academy – rather, I aim to reject the notion that two entities could ever be separated from one another.

[1] Shorris 2011, 5.
[2] Shorris 2000, 4.
[3] Shorris 2011, 2.
[4] Berman 2001, 146; Eisenberg 2007, 247.
[5] Allen 2016, 49–50.
[6] Smulyan 2021, 2.

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I am drawn to affiliate with the Clemente Course for many other reasons, some quite personal. Unable to shake the image of my late paternal grandfather as an archetype of a would-be Clemente student, I recall that he was born to impoverished non-citizens from Calabria, and won distinction as the valedictorian of the Class of 1932 at Geneva High School, in Geneva, New York. He did not graduate to college, but rather to the cannery, working full time plus overtime in the depths of the depression, leaving him dead of a heart condition before the age of 40. Although he remains a mystery to me, I learn about his struggles indirectly by reading in the community with Clemente students. They too, in large numbers, are working parents, blocked from furthering their education for economic reasons connected to emigration and exile, in a context where immigration and naturalization restrictions have returned with a vengeance.[7]

Many of these students are saddled with outstanding and unserviceable debt connected to prior college loans, confirming Jeffrey J. Williams's view that "since around 1980, college has actually calcified class in America"; others regard degrees earned in their home countries as bearing little purchase in the United States.[8] In several Clemente branches, students earn academic credit through Bard College, which serves as a national hub for the program as a whole, hosting an annual meeting of program coordinators and directors. Other Clemente branches have arrangements with their own local degree-granting institutions. Some manifestations – Austin's Free Minds; Calvin University's Wayfinder Program; the Odyssey Projects in Champaign–Urbana, Chicago, and Madison; Utah's Venture; Portland's Humanity in Perspective – depart sufficiently from the model to brand themselves separately while remaining loosely affiliated to the larger effort. Still other programs, like Cleveland's Books@Work, have drawn on the "inspiration" of Clemente's example in modeling the "transformative power of high-quality adult education experiences."[9] In honor of the collective efforts of its many branch courses, the Clemente Course in the Humanities was awarded a National Humanities Medal in 2014, recognized in a White House citation "for improving the lives of disadvantaged adults," bringing "free humanities education to thousands of men and women" and "enriching their lives and broadening their horizons."[10]

I join Clemente after writing a board member of my state humanities council to learn more about the program, expressing interest in serving as a faculty member or even helping to catalyze a local branch of the course. Before long, the director of the state humanities council begins to copy me on emerging plans. While different state humanities councils possess varying amounts of experience, funding capability, staffing power, and willingness to engage in an ongoing project as complex as the Clemente Course, they have proven tremendous resources and supporters in many states. My initial inclination is merely to teach for Clemente, over 11 night sessions; as it happens, I am also invited to serve as an academic director, signing up for over 50 nights of work per year. At the time, still in my probationary period as an assistant professor, with three young children at home, the prospect of directing such a program proves somewhat daunting.

Such initiatives are not easily realized even in favorable circumstances. An earlier effort to establish our local branch course, in Worcester, Massachusetts, fizzled shortly thereafter due to a lack of steady support from a fiscal agent. This time around, we turn to an interfaith community organization committed to social justice. They handle the program's funds,

[7] For more on the experiences of reading in the community with Clemente students, see Cocola 2018, 2021.
[8] Williams 2016.
[9] Isaac 2017, 98.
[10] National Endowment for the Humanities 2014.

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without providing any: for further backing, we lean not only on the state humanities council but also on other arts and culture organizations, who provide space for class sessions, commencement ceremonies, and special events; on local colleges and universities, who fund faculty lines or provide course releases in kind; and on corporate and family foundations, who offer grants and provide ad hoc support. These arrangements persist for five years, garnering praise as a valuable example of broad-based coalition support for a Clemente branch course. With a critical mass of benefactors, we overcome the status quo "lack of institutional and financial support" for public humanities projects, too often "tied to the notion that the humanities are carried out by solo practitioners," a view that may have also hampered prior appeals for support in Worcester.[11]

A lesson learned: projects depending solely on the goodwill of deans and department heads with ample purse strings and generous hearts may not get very far. One needs to cobble together funds from an array of supporters. Nothing generates institutional goodwill – and renewed streams of support – like the feeling of playing a modest but indispensable role in a mutual aid effort. Despite our many champions, a bump in the road emerges when leadership changes at the interfaith community organization cool their commitment to our effort. Needing to identify a new fiscal agent, we endure several false starts, fueled by implicit concerns about indemnification and liability. Turning away from social service agencies, we secure the services of the Worcester County Poetry Association as a fiscal agent, in a partnership persisting to this day. Because our missions align under the umbrella of the humanities, the arrangement proves a particularly harmonious match.

In the Clemente Course, an academic director's primary tasks include setting the annual calendar, hiring and mentoring the faculty, synthesizing the curriculum into a coherent whole, teaching one of the five strands, regularly attending sessions across the other four strands, and arranging for student receipt of academic credit, certificates of completion, letters of recommendation, and transcript requests. A complementary administrative role, the community coordinator, can be relied on to assist or take the lead in recruiting students and arranging and aligning childcare, social support, and transportation services. Our branch benefits from the services of Elizabeth Bacon, a formidable public humanities advocate with long experience conducting public history tours and providing youth enrichment opportunities. As community coordinator, she catalyzes our student recruitment process in churches, in ethnic advocacy organizations, in public libraries, at block parties, and at street fairs.

Our annual student cohorts consist of 20–30 students, drawn from pools of 40–50 applicants, who submit a brief informational form and essay and sit for 15-minute interviews to discuss their individual backgrounds and their interests in the humanities before reading, aloud, a brief passage from a humanistic text and engaging in a short conversation and dialogue about its contents. These texts feature in our course of study, including philosophers from Epictetus, Hobbes, Kant, and Nietzsche to key figures in American history, including Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone, and poets from William Blake and Walt Whitman to Gwendolyn Brooks and Maya Angelou.

Because Worcester has long been home to immigrant populations, our annual student cohorts tend to reflect that diversity, commonly drawn from as many as 15 sending countries and 5 sending continents. Other branches prove less diverse in their makeup,

[11] Kuramoto Moffat 2024, 34.

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whether situated in more homogenous locations, hosted in more specific neighborhoods, or functioning in collaboration with niche social service agencies. Such courses have their own values and emphases: for example, the Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities, at the University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma, has been designed "to practice the Kiowa language and learn Kiowa ways that include oral tradition, songs, military and women's societies, protocol, ceremony, history, and values."[12]

In Worcester, we honor the variousness of our student body, in a city more diverse than its size would suggest, as a long-standing center for immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, by considering prominent artifacts of expressive culture from around the world. Thus, we enlarge the core curriculum by looking not only to the Pantheon and the Parthenon but also to the Pyramid of Djoser and the Great Zimbabwe, by considering American history not only in a national but also in a hemispheric key, and by reading odes not only by Andrew Marvell and John Keats but also by Pablo Neruda and Lucille Clifton. In my poetry classes, I consistently ask my students to think and write comparatively, whether analyzing one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* alongside one of his *Songs of Experience*, or connecting themes of displacement, love, mourning, and power in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to similar currents in more modern poems: elegies by Tennyson and W. S. Merwin, sonnets by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Wanda Coleman, and Terrence Hayes, and free verse poems by Lorna Dee Cervantes, Laura Da', and John Yau.

According to Charity Anderson, who wrote a 2017 dissertation on Clemente's impact, "four primary themes emerge from student experiences in the course: (1) an appreciation for the humanities, (2) personal growth and communal bonding, (3) a sense of self-as-democratic-citizen, and (4) more deeply engaged parenting."[13] We reinforce such outcomes in several ways: converging our course syllabi with a parallel curriculum in our childcare program, so that parents and children are engaged with comparable texts, themes, and topics that might carry over into the domestic sphere; holding quarterly community dinners, complete with food prepared by current students, faculty, and alumni, who come together with community supporters, prospective students, and guest speakers; staging commencement ceremonies complete with caps and gowns, catering, gift books, invited addresses, occasional poems, and student speeches; and delivering one-off and semester-long Clemente alumni classes, connecting students from several distinct cohorts, devoted, among other topics, to the history of U.S. citizenship across its many cultural, political, and social contexts. As we grow into a more complex initiative, we begin to convene an advisory board of academics, alumni, and community supporters to help us weather challenging periods, providing additional channels for fundraising, for faculty and student recruitment, and for the incubation of related project activities.

In some branches, single institutions provide the full complement of Clemente faculty. In our branch, we draw on an instructor pool from half a dozen local colleges and universities. In the early years, most of our faculty are tenured and of long experience; many of our more recent hires are less seasoned, and untenured, but equally committed to the role. Wary of reinforcing differences between our students and more typical undergraduate populations in our city's campuses, we hold our inaugural classes elsewhere, in the basement art room of a local elementary school. While convenient to most parts of the city, we soon find that the space brings students down rather than raising them up.

[12] Jackson and Whitehorse DeLaune 2018, 38.

[13] Anderson 2017, vii. For a more recent, distilled account of this research, see Anderson 2023.

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Nevertheless, many of these early sessions are characterized by unforgettable exchanges. In one of the first meetings of the philosophy course, our instructor, Ruth, begins to explain some of the tenets of feminism when she finds herself unceremoniously interrupted.

"So everything my daddy told me was false?" José, formally educated through the third grade, interjects.

"Yes," Ruth replies, with a wry smile.

"See," José continues, incensed, turning on a dime, without missing a beat – "I should have told that Puerto Rican dude—"

Does this ad-lib repudiate a certain brand of machismo so often associated with Puerto Rican culture, or does it contest the feminist critique of patriarchy by asserting an intersectional masculinity inflected by Puerto Rican dispossession? Somehow, it manages to do both and neither at once, in the blink of an eye. In the next blink, one of José's fellow Puerto Ricans comes to his defense.

"Your papi was right, but sometimes women have more ideas," Roberto volunteers.

"All the time," explains Winnie.

"Men, help me out on this," José asks.

The room falls silent. It is José's turn to smile wryly.

In the following semester, and in years since, we arrange to hold sessions in a designated classroom at the Worcester Art Museum, where we enjoy gallery tours connected to our art history strand, introducing students to works by prominent artists in the permanent collection and in visiting exhibitions, from Rembrandt and Monet to Paul Gaugin and Louise Nevelson. Other spaces hosting individual class sessions include archives, craft centers, history museums, and public libraries. In the literature strand, partnerships with area colleges and universities allow us to bring students to poetry readings featuring Martín Espada, Naomi Shihab Nye, Gregory Orr, and Natasha Trethewey.[14] In the cases of Espada, Nye, and Cheryl Savageau, the poets feature directly in our classrooms and join us at our community dinners.

In the mid-1990s, when Earl Shorris established the Clemente Course in the Humanities, he made a clear distinction between the intended audience of this course and the more usual audience in higher education. Thirty years later, that distinction has begun to collapse. Professors without the benefits and protections of the tenure track have become the norm, and part-time adjuncts continue to swell the ranks, often working near or even below the poverty line. Food insecurity also marks the lives of many undergraduates – for 1 in 3 at Arizona State University and for 6 in 10 at Western Oregon University, by recent accounts. What are such students doing in college in the first place? And what are Clemente students

[14] Espada's visit proves especially apt, for in Shorris's 2001 book *Latinos* he had celebrated Espada as one who was "well on his way to becoming Latino poet of his generation." See Shorris 2001, 394. Espada's fourth book, *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (New York: Norton, 1994), has a particular connection to the lives of the disadvantaged, emerging from his work as a Legal Aid tenant lawyer representing the citizens of Chelsea, Massachusetts in their attempts to assert tenant rights and resolve housing disputes.

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doing in humanities classrooms? Fortifying themselves. As New Bedford Clemente instructor Jeannette Riley explains, "we can all go out and learn practical skills," but a humanities course engaging our ethical sense and our imaginative capacity "teaches us what we value and believe," shows us "how to think about the issues that face us in our society every day," then "gives us a language with which to talk about it" and "offers us a way to learn throughout our entire lives."[15]

A humanities not meant for all humans is scarcely worthy of the name. But as director I find myself startled by how much time our students spend speaking about gender and race, and how little time they spend talking about class. What kind of a person is able to take the leisure, like Whitman, to "lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass"?[16] In Antonio Gramsci's terms, "all men are intellectuals … but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."[17] Too often, that function proves a function of class.[18] As Shorris wrote of his earliest Clemente students, they taught me to revise my definition of poverty. The federal guidelines were meaningless. People were poor who connected themselves to institutions that serve the poor: settlement houses, social welfare agencies, shelters, free clinics, gangs, minimum-wage jobs, drug programs, food pantries, and soup kitchens. People are poor when they concede that they are poor, when there is no saving politics in their lives. That became the criterion for selection.[19]

By this definition, students enter the Clemente Course poor and exit enriched. This is why Clemente's alumni networks are such potent forces. Indeed, a politics that might emerge to save such students may well need to come from the students themselves – or, perhaps more likely, from alumni who may not be able to lean or loaf, but who have learned how to observe and how to intervene more keenly.

The Clemente Course is not without critics. John Marsh, a former instructor in the effort, has styled the Odyssey Project at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign as a misleading educational opportunity, where education is presented as "a solution to every ill one could imagine." Since education alone cannot ameliorate inequality, Marsh impugns endeavors like Clemente and Odyssey for providing "false hopes to students" and "false comfort to the community."[20] Marsh's doubts about Odyssey are finally "not about whether education *should* serve the industrial classes, the poor and low-income, but whether it does, whether it is capable of doing so, and what good could come of it if it could": his conclusion is that "education bears far too much of the burden of our hopes for economic justice."[21] But one must start somewhere: moving to counter social inequality, if not to erase economic inequality.

What, then, of social programs underwritten by economic injustice? The late Louis Proyect, a prominent blogger among Bard alumni, raised the concern on the occasion of Shorris's

[15] Riley and Smoot 2010, 182.
[16] Whitman 1980, I.i.
[17] Gramsci 2000, 304.
[18] To this point, and to the persistent academic blind spot privileging racialized difference while occluding classed difference, Anthony Abraham Jack observes that whereas, in 2017, Harvard College "admitted its first majority-minority class with respect to race … economic diversity is another issue; that same class remains mostly rich and wealthy." See Jack 2024, 1.
[19] Shorris 1997, 366.
[20] Marsh 2011, 13.
[21] Marsh 2011, 18.

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death in 2012, finding himself "appreciative of Earl Shorris's efforts on behalf of the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities while feeling queasy about its funding from George Soros's Open Society Foundation, like so many of Bard's philanthropic efforts," and worrying over "Soros's impact on the poor people of Hungary whose homes were foreclosed in the tens of thousands after the Central Bank suffered huge losses because of Soros's insider trading."[22] To Proyect's point, it can hardly do to rob one disadvantaged group in order to favor another, and anyone looking to engage in public humanities projects that are not only public-facing but also public-serving ought to be mindful of such potential contradictions.

For better or for worse, the Clemente Course offers students the tools to critique the terms of their own educations, and their own relationships to the public sphere. As Judith Butler has argued, the "most basic forms of public engagement demand an education in how to read, in history, in culture and media, in philosophy and argumentation." As for the nature of the public sphere, Butler notes that it "has no permanently established borders, and the borders it does have are crafted in part of the exclusion of those who are to remain unpublic, shadowed, or private."[23] The Clemente Course presents an opportunity for those who have been rendered unpublic to emerge in the public sphere, and, more than this, to begin to understand, in Butler's formulation, "How that public sphere has been constituted, through what media and idioms, and how it has expanded and contracted in different ways, for what reasons, and to whose benefit and whose loss."[24] As our students walk the halls of the museum alongside other members of the public – not quite rubbing shoulders with the well-heeled at an evening corporate event or annual fundraiser – they cannot help but engage in the crucial work of "attending to the imaginaries of publicness," thereby led to consider the very constitution of the public and to envision how it might be reconstituted in turn.[25]

I think of other discussions from that first cohort of philosophy students, meeting in that basement art room of that local elementary school. In another session, Ruth introduces Hegel's master–slave dialectic, which the students promptly deconstruct, in a matter of 15 seconds.

"What does the master think of the slave's consciousness?" Ruth asks.

"It doesn't occur to him," Nathan responds.

"What does the slave think of the master's consciousness?" Ruth continues.

"Thinks of it all the time," America concludes.

For Hegel, mutual depersonalization marks the dynamic sometimes also translated as the lord-bondsman dialectic, wherein each party "sieht auch nicht das Andere als Wesen, sondern *sich selbst* im Andern" ["does not view this other as a being, but sees *itself* in the other"].[26] By contrast, for Nathan, and for America, the lord does not see at all: it is only the bondsman who labors under and is thereby preoccupied with the relationship, or the lack thereof. To discuss such dynamics in community is not merely to absorb Hegel's theory, but

[22] Proyect 2012.
[23] Butler 2014, 15–6.
[24] Butler 2014, 16.
[25] de Waard 2022, 144.
[26] Hegel 1994 [1807], 50.

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to live in the midst of its contradictions. This presents a necessary step toward the strategy that Portland's Humanity in Perspective instructor Nicholas Hengen Fox describes as "tactical reading," which "develops language and ideas about connection and mutual support," toward the end of collective action.[27]

Still another of our philosophy sessions centers on the matter of justice.

"Can there be justice?" Ruth asks.

"That depends on what your view of justice is," answers Winnie.

A brief discussion of justice and the judiciary ensues.

"They make the laws that judge everyone else, but who judges them?" Dennete asks.

Answers vary: people, gods. No one. Committees. The rich. Roberto suggests that poverty counts for a lot where justice is concerned, and Ruth adds that prejudice does too. No one speaks up to disagree.

"Even in the just city," Trevorblack argues, "there will be injustice."

No one speaks up to consider the converse: that even in the unjust city, there will be justice.

Too often, the publics of the public humanities are conceived in abstract terms, as though a matter, on the one hand, of an "all-encompassing" public, or, on the other, as a mere "object of study."[28] By contrast, the publics of the Clemente course consist of publics of fellow community members. In my own local context, the Clemente Course flourishes thanks to the scale and substance of our community's public sphere. Such efforts may gain particular traction at sites that are not only big enough, in terms of scale, to support robust institutions, but also small enough that interested parties can navigate those institutions and link them in common cause.

Nevertheless, due in part to the radical instability that so often plagues our students, many have struggled to complete the course, not only for practical reasons but also because, in their transformative power, the humanities constitute a disruptive and unsettling force, particularly for the disadvantaged. Students engaged in such transformative learning can be aided by instructors schooled in transformation theory, which, per Jack Mezirow, "attempts to describe and analyze how adults learn to make meaning of their experience": never an easy task, even under more comfortable circumstances.[29] Confronted with what Mezirow describes as a "disorienting dilemma," whether in the key of bereavement, dislocation, job loss, or simply in the key of humanistic learning "exposing learners to alternative perspectives through reading, film, fiction, and discussion," the lives of our students can be upended from one week to the next.[30]

In the process of such disorientations, many have been led to change their worlds, with more than one mother fleeing an abusive relationship for a shelter, bringing young children in

[27] Hengen Fox 2017, 52.
[28] Lewis 2024, 47.
[29] Mezirow 1991, 198.
[30] Mezirow 2000, 22; Kroth and Cranton 2014, 2.

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tow, midcourse, whether from personal circumstance or philosophical awakening – which, in either event, leads to disruptions in their academic progress. Moving through Mezirow's process of transformative learning from disorientation to self-examination, alienation, relation, investigation, competency building, knowledge acquisition, role inhabitation, and social reintegration can take far longer than a semester or an academic year, and the process can prove overwhelming.[31] In attempting to ameliorate these challenges, we follow Shorris's counsel, recognizing, as he did, that "retention rates can be improved by recruiting older students, people in their fifties, sixties, and seventies who are more settled in their ways."[32] In this more stable company, bringing multiple generations into dialogue with one another, we have contested and spirited conversations, which, more often than not, against all apparent odds, bring us closer together.

We talk to each other, two nights a week, for eight months, about all kinds of things, but always returning to the humanities, making for a particularly enriching form of public engagement. As Charles Frankel, one of the leading humanities advocates of the twentieth century, argued, "the humanities are that form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed," so that "all knowledge becomes humanistic when this effect takes place, when we are asked to contemplate not only a proposition but the proposer, when we hear the human voice behind what is being said."[33] A World War II veteran and Columbia University graduate, Frankel was later assistant secretary of state for education and culture, resigning his post in protest of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He founded the National Humanities Center in 1978, and was killed in a robbery the following year. Little do I realize, as I read Frankel's words aloud at one of our orientation sessions, that the National Humanities Medal, presented to the Clemente Course in the Humanities that very same month, had been awarded in its first several years under its founding name: the Charles Frankel Prize.

Frankel's proposition suggests a presence. In Clemente classrooms, we often attend to a recording of a human voice, or its transmutation into the written word, but our conversations and dialogues are finally driven by a group of speakers and listeners in the flesh. In an era when many of us spend far more time staring into screens than we spend looking into one another's eyes, the instructors and students in our program hone their capacities for critical thinking and civic engagement as a matter of course – not just in the abstract, but to and for each other. Such practice proves of deep significance for many Clemente students. As Utah's Venture director and an instructor, Jean Cheney observes, "talking about important questions with others has power," and "this is true for all of us, but especially for those who haven't done it before," many of whom "have been waiting, without realizing it, for a way to make more sense of their lives."[34]

These conversations, in turn, help faculty make more sense of their lives as well. In the words of Clemente instructor Ousmane Power-Greene, who has taught in the Springfield and Worcester branches, "Community education geared toward adults who have not had the opportunity to complete their college degree is particularly gratifying because it offers a more direct path to promote an important human right: the right to education." For Power-Greene, "teaching adults who have, for whatever reason, been denied this right is a moral imperative."[35] That moral imperative presents itself to all teachers, and those interested in

[31] Mezirow 2000, 22.
[32] Shorris 2000, 224.
[33] Frankel 1978, 2.
[34] Cheney 2016, 75.
[35] Power-Greene 2024, 116.

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pursuing such work should remember that there are many sources of public and private support – affective, financial, infrastructural, intellectual – to help bolster the cultivation of publics such as the community-driven adult education enterprise known as the Clemente Course in the Humanities. Don't be afraid to initiate your own local branch. And consider me one of those sources.

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