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## Can Those Who Live in Poverty Find Liberation Through the Humanities? Or Is This Just A New Romance With an Old Model?

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In 1995, author Earl Shorris established a small educational program designed to help young adults escape from poverty. The curriculum chosen by Shorris for this experimental program focused solely on a classically based, college-level study in the humanities. While I do not find that Shorris provided proof that a classically inspired course in the humanities provides an effective and efficient way to escape poverty, the course drew much needed attention to conditions that surround poverty in America, and also made a compelling case for challenging long-standing assumptions about who is capable of benefiting from a rigorous, academic curriculum.

In 1995, author Earl Shorris established a small educational program designed to help young adults escape from poverty. The curriculum chosen by Shorris for this experimental program focused solely on a classically based, college-level study in the humanities. Shorris believed while there are other ways for poor people to escape poverty and to become actively engaged in public life, study of the humanities represents a viable avenue for gaining some of the intellectual skills that facilitate break-

ing away from the overwhelming forces that surround those who are poor. Study of the humanities “leads poor people to reflection, which is a necessary stage on the way to political life” (Shorris 1997a, 353). At its most basic level, the definition of reflection is that a listener or reader considers more than one possibility (Shorris 2000, 114). Shorris hopes that students will be empowered by their educational experiences to envision possibilities and then to act in ways that facilitate their escape from poverty. The course that Shorris created to promote this kind of reflection among the poor became known as the Clemente Course in the Humanities because of its location in the Roberto Clemente Center in New York City. The original Clemente Course began in 1995 and has continued under the auspices of Bard College, a small liberal arts college outside of New York City. The course of study included logic, philosophy, art history, American history, and poetry.

The Clemente Course model was patterned in many ways on Shorris’ own college experiences in an experimental undergraduate liberal arts program at the University of Chicago created in the 1930s by then college president Robert Maynard Hutchins (Shorris 1997a, 355). The Clemente Course also embraces three of Hutchins’s key beliefs: first, intellectual skills are necessary for active participation in a democracy; second, the humanities tradition lends itself to development of these skills; and third, all students in our society should have an opportunity to obtain these skills (Hutchins 1936, 77). While the Clemente Course offers college level study of the humanities, the course is short-term compared to liberal arts requirements of many colleges today and is certainly not as comprehensive as the Chicago program that focused heavily on the humanities for a full four years of the undergraduate experience. The Clemente Course offers a nine-month course with two ninety-minute seminars per week in the early evening.

The aim of the Clemente Course in the Humanities is “to enable poor people to make the journey into the public world, the political life as Pericles had defined it, beginning with family, and going on to neighborhood, community and state” (Shorris 2000, 4). This article examines Shorris’ claim that study of the humanities is an effective and efficient route to escaping poverty. In terms of its outcomes, while the Clemente Course led to significant life changes, such as jobs and higher education for most of the students who completed the program, as with many programs serving at-risk students there was also a high dropout rate. Does Shorris make a convincing case for his claims about the link between a classically based study in the humanities and skills of reflection needed to become “political”? Does the Clemente Course in the Humanities offer a new model for helping those who are poor to liberate themselves from poverty? Or, is the Clemente Course in the Humanities simply a new romance with an old model, another way to claim a central place for an intellectualist tradition tied to classics and philosophy in Western culture—simply a resurrection and repackaging of an elite notion about a classically based curriculum that searches for truths in Western philosophy and “great books” literature? What prompted Shorris to select this model?

## Why a Course of Study in the Humanities?

At the core of the Clemente Course in the Humanities is the belief that a course in the humanities patterned primarily on a classically inspired curriculum can serve as an efficient and effective curriculum that will promote reflective skills that support active participation in public life (Shorris 2000, 119). Shorris saw a strong connection between engagement in public life and certain intellectual skills while researching a book, *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy* (1997a). During a three-year period Shorris conducted interviews with over eight hundred people who were either living in poverty or who had lived in poverty at one point in their life. He was particularly interested in examining the circumstances that helped certain people to overcome the forces of poverty. How were some individuals able to overcome their hardships and to enter public life in a variety of self-directed activities within the family as well as the larger community? Shorris concluded that certain intellectual skills played a crucial role in helping some people escape long-term poverty (1997a, 342).

Shorris readily acknowledged there are many ways that human beings learn to avoid or to escape from poverty and to engage in an active public life or in “politics” as he called it:

There are many paths out of poverty. Those who know poverty least concentrate on jobs and money, as if poverty were merely quantitative and labor was God's own panacea. The formerly poor, and those who live in the distance of metaphor, know that the game of the modern world can be overcome; that politics, unlike economics or the strutting of status, is not a contest but a public accomplishment of power. (2000, 98)

Typically, people learn this kind of “politics” through everyday interactions with family, in their neighborhood, and in the larger community (Shorris 2000, 104–105). Some of the more common escape routes from poverty are immigration, experiences in political organizations and unions, connections to churches, and family activities that link individuals to the larger community (2000, 105). When people live in poverty, a powerful set of forces of deprivation and oppression can either diminish traditional opportunities for learning some of these skills or diminish opportunities to use reflective skills to engage in public life in a way that would assist their escape from those conditions.

Those familiar with curriculum history will recognize that Shorris' choice of some type of study of the humanities to form part of the basis of public activity is certainly not an entirely new idea. His proposed curriculum of study in the Clemente Course in the Humanities draws on a familiar traditional model of liberal education, one that extends as far back as the philosophical and literary traditions of ancient Athens.

Shorris' affinity for a classically based liberal arts program comes from personal educational experiences and can be traced back to his undergraduate days at the University of Chicago. As an undergraduate in the 1940s he enrolled in the University's experimental program known as "The College" (Shorris 1997a, 344n). Instituted by then President Robert Maynard Hutchins, this four-year undergraduate program in the humanities based on the study of the Great Books provided one of the most intense studies of the classical curriculum in the country. Hutchins' emphasis on liberal arts was to serve as a counter to the rise of materialism and professional study that was beginning to dominate college curriculum to the detriment of nurturing intellectual skills (Hutchins 1936, 31).

Hutchins also provided the inspiration for the direct link between study of the humanities and greater ability to engage in public life. In the 1930s, when Hutchins proposed educational changes, American democracy was threatened by a major depression as well as the rise of fascism in Europe. For Hutchins the urgency of social and economic problems faced by our democracy caused him not only to propose reforming college programs, which served a small elite group of students, but also to seek a way that public schools could be reformed to increase the involvement of all citizens in our democratic processes.

While faith in education to solve social problems is not a new idea, Hutchins' proposed solution was somewhat unique for its time. In the 1920s and 1930s, many progressive educators favored a social efficiency approach to public schooling that led most schools to differentiate the curriculum by adding courses that focused on basic skills and by introducing vocational courses aimed at preparing students for specific jobs. This resulted in limiting access to the more rigorous academic courses for a large portion of the student body (Callahan 1962). Hutchins believed that all students should have an opportunity to develop high-level intellectual skills. In his view, a more classically based study of the humanities should be part of the core curriculum in the high school because it provides essential intellectual skills that promote more active citizen participation in a democracy. The connection between the humanities and democracy led Hutchins to propose a radical change for public schools. To bring a more rigorous humanities curriculum to a majority of the nation's children, Hutchins proposed extending public education to the age of twenty so that all students could experience four years of "college level" liberal education through an "extended secondary" school experience. Hutchins' vision for a rigorous liberal education in public school has been revisited in recent decades. In the early 1980s, Hutchins' colleague Mortimer Adler (1982) proposed an emphasis on a broad liberal education for all students in *Paideia Proposal*. Like Hutchins, Adler criticized the lack of academic rigor and the dominance of vocational goals in schools. He called for a liberal education that included the following goals: the acquisition of knowledge; the development of intellectual skills; and the enlargement of understanding, insight, and aesthetic appreciation (1982, 22).

In choosing an educational solution based on a traditional study of the humanities as an efficient and effective antidote to poverty, Shorris expected disapproval from

educators on both the left and the right. Shorris pointed out, “the left has abandoned the study of the humanities as cultural imperialism of dead white European males, and conservatives embrace the humanities only when it promotes a narrowly defined canon with an official, acceptable interpretation of each work” (2000, 111).

In the spirit of using the humanities as a way to promote reflection rather than transmission of philosophical theories and select social views, Shorris attempted to distinguish his approach from a more rigid study of the humanities advocated by more conservative educators such as Allan Bloom (1987). Bloom espoused an essentialist view that classical texts hold both the questions meaningful to human existence as well as the answers. Bloom’s canonical view of literature, philosophy, history, and art, as well as his view backing the preservation of liberal education for an educated elite, typified the misuse of humanities according to Shorris (1997a, 344–347). Shorris rejected the conservative perspective like that proposed by Bloom. Shorris pointed out, “nothing about the operation of the course is fixed, dead; it exists in dialogue, which begins with the idea that the poor are human and that the proper celebration of their humanity is in the public world, as citizens” (2000, 11).

On the other hand, many educators on the “left” are strongly committed to more radical institutional reform as central to changing oppressive conditions that surround poverty and thus would surely discount Shorris’ efforts as representing reform. For those educators taking a critical theory perspective, the Clemente Course in the Humanities is just another example of misdirected reform—a program aimed at changing those who are poor rather than changing the structures and mainstream attitudes that help to perpetuate the status quo. A program that offers only an educational solution and then also emphasizes a classically inspired humanities curriculum is especially suspect. For example, critical theorist Peter McLaren provided a clear assessment of the ineffectiveness of study in the humanities as a tool for liberation of oppressed groups like those who are poor. McLaren regarded the humanities as works to “de-legitimize and disconfirm the lives of disadvantaged students” (1998, xv). McLaren argued that study of the humanities harms the lower classes by negating the value of their experiences with works that affirm the viewpoints of the dominant group.

Similarly, Freire believed that liberation of those who are oppressed by poverty can only be achieved by an education that begins with a “present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (1986, 85), which entails an examination of their own situation through a dialogue that develops a political consciousness that leads to political action. For Freire it is only after those who are oppressed have a firm grasp of their world that they can begin to acquire other kinds of knowledge. While the acquiring knowledge contained in the dominant curriculum should be a goal in the process of self and group empowerment for those who are poor, Freire viewed this knowledge as primarily a political tool for seeking social equity and justice (Freire and Macedo 1987, 128).

Shorris called his approach the “living humanities,” where the focus is on the process of reflection, communication, and self-development. Shorris stated:

Those who appreciate ancient history understand the radical character of the humanities, for they know that politics did not begin in a perfect world, but in a society even more flawed than ours—one that embraced slavery, denied the rights of women, accepted a form of homosexuality that verged on pedophilia, and endured the intrigue and corruption of its leaders. The genius of that society originated in man's re-creation of himself through the recognition of his humanness in the expression of it by art, literature, rhetoric, philosophy, and the unique notion of freedom. (Shorris 2000, 116–117)

For Shorris, both the left and the right miss the radical potential of the humanities. The aim is to gain opportunities for reflection when reading a variety of texts that raise questions about how human beings live. Shorris believed that skills and attitudes emerging out of dialogue centered on topics in the humanities are the key to students becoming subjects rather than objects in their education. These reflective skills are especially important to those living in poverty and serve as part of the foundation for being able to engage in public activities at all levels of life (2000, 4). The humanities provide the kind of education where students learn “critique as an avenue to the consideration of ethical questions, including politics” (2000, 109). To achieve these objectives, what kind of humanities curriculum did Shorris select? We turn to this question next.

### **The Clemente Course in the Humanities**

While the idea of using some sort of schooling to alleviate poverty is not a new idea, Shorris' choice of a classically inspired humanities curriculum departs dramatically from most of the recent approaches to the schooling of disadvantaged youth and adults. “Why,” Shorris asked himself, “should students who are poor and undereducated care about fourteenth century Italian painting or truth tables or the death of Socrates?” (1997b, 55). Most traditional intervention programs serving those who are poor focus on either improving basic academic skills or teaching job skills.

To locate potential students, Shorris looked to the institutions in New York City: “People were poor who connected themselves to institutions that serve the poor: settlement houses, social welfare agencies, shelter, free clinics, gangs, minimum-wage jobs, drug programs, food pantries, soup kitchens” (2000, 134–135). The target student group was to be between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, have a household income of less than 150% of the federal poverty level, have an ability to read a tabloid newspaper, and who expressed an intent to complete the course (2000, 123). In selecting students to participate in the program, Shorris sought students with enough stability in their life that there was a high likelihood these students would attend the course on a regular basis. A minimum level for ba-

sic needs, like food, shelter, and safety are needed so that students can attend a school program on a regular basis and can give energy to the rigors of study. Even with this selective screening process in place, almost half of the students failed to complete the program during the first two years.

Shorris and four other instructors, which included professional writers, an art critic, an editor, and a speechwriter (trained in mathematics at MIT), collaborated to develop what they viewed as college-level courses in philosophy, poetry, art history, American history, and logic. The teaching methods employed by the faculty encourage students to use the humanities as a vehicle for dialogue—to explore ideas, values, and politics through discussions that are meaningful to their lives. Study in the humanities that builds on dialogue allows students to view the world from multiple perspectives. While the program culminates in a comprehensive final essay exam, faculty assign homework and in-class writing assignments and administer tests.

While the Clemente Course has no set core curriculum, and has from the start been a product of negotiation among its faculty, Shorris maintained a strong preference for certain classic works. For example, at the center of the course in philosophy are works by Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Shorris reported a serious argument ensued when in the second year of the Clemente program one of the new professors suggested a curriculum that did not include a Greek play. While some changes occurred in the reading list over time, Shorris was quite adamant about retaining the life and thought of Socrates as the foundation of the course (2000, 230). Shorris pointed out that if the Clemente Course was longer than just one year, a proper humanities course would include such topics as world history, world literature, music, dance, and theater (2000, 106).

The Clemente American history course is taught through documents and focuses on the democratic ideal and the reality of American society and politics (Shorris 2000, 198). The history course is designed to highlight the political nature of the students' education, as they study American society and politics. The reading list includes traditional readings as well as nontraditional ones (e.g., Locke, the Declaration of Independence, selections from the Federalist papers, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, de Toqueville, Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln, the XIV and XV Amendments, Chief Joseph, FDR on the four freedoms, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ruben Salazar). The history course selects some readings of history reference books including Zinn's (1980) *A People's History of the United States* (Shorris 2000, 178).

Bard College now oversees most of the programs that fall under the Clemente Course rubric. By 2000, over four hundred students throughout the country participated in eleven programs modeled after the Clemente Courses. Universities, colleges, social service organizations, and State Councils for the Humanities support these new programs (Shorris 2000).

## Discussion

Is an educational program based on a classically based study of the humanities an efficient and effective way to help young adults living in poverty to escape their circumstances? While Shorris acknowledged that “human beings recreate themselves by one method or another, by instinct or instruction” for participation in the public realm, he believed study in the humanities offers one of the more effective and efficient instructional routes (1997a, 341). At its most basic level, the *Clemente Course in the Humanities* aims to promote reflection about possibilities for change. For those students who completed the course, change did indeed occur. Most graduates sought out further opportunities in higher education. But does Shorris make a convincing case for his claim about the essential link between a classically based study in the humanities and skills of reflection needed to become a “political” being who is more active in the public realm?

In my view, it is not precisely clear what elements of the *Clemente Course* contributed most to improved outcomes for students who completed the program. The *Clemente Course* does not convincingly prove that its curriculum, a classically inspired study in the humanities, served as a catalyst to help those who are poor to “save” themselves. What is clear is that those who remained in the course found ways to change their lives. As an intervention program, the *Clemente Course* became a bridge to higher education for its graduates. While Shorris maintained that the goal of the program is not to provide college preparation but to focus on developing intellectual skills, the program ultimately functioned as a first step toward higher education for most students. In the first few months of the *Clemente Course*, Shorris pursued gaining college credit for those who completed the program and sought out a connection with Bard College. Of the seventeen who completed the first year, fourteen received six college credits from Bard College.

While a formal college connection represented official affirmation of the rigor of the *Clemente Course*, it also provided a direct link to one of the more traditional paths for escaping poverty—higher education. In the first graduating class of sixteen, ten enrolled in four-year colleges or nursing schools, and most of the other graduates enrolled in two-year colleges or were working full-time (Shorris, 1997b, 59). It is perhaps not too surprising that many *Clemente* students have found it preferable to continue their education after completing the program. Moreover, five years after the program began, Shorris identified the need to establish a college scholarship program for *Clemente* graduates. Shorris contended, “when the desires of students to continue their education is frustrated, the course has failed” (2000, 229).

Moreover, the *Clemente Course in the Humanities* is important because it also serves to draw much needed attention to conditions that surround those living in poverty in America. Shorris provided a vivid account of how the forces that surround those living in poverty discourage and exclude the poor from the

benefits of public life that most in our society take for granted. The daily life of those living in poverty revolves around reactions to social and institutional forces that frequently cut off opportunities to nurture any kind of change that might permit these students to escape their circumstances. Shorris believed that most American citizens give too little attention to poverty, because they are not personally affected by the kinds of forces experienced daily by those living in poverty. By drawing attention to the conditions that those in poverty endure, Shorris attempted to personalize the circumstances of poverty to raise greater awareness of the problem.

After reading an article about the Clemente Course in the Humanities that I assigned in my social foundations course, one of my nontraditional students summarized what she viewed as one of the more powerful messages conveyed by the Clemente Course in the Humanities:

One particular high point for me was when we read "*As a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor*" by Earl Shorris. I couldn't believe what I was reading. He actually undertook the task of finding out what makes people poor and what keeps them poor. I have to say that I was surprised that anyone would bother, but it was such a relief to know that **SOMEbody** understood what I had been going through all my life. He identified a "surround of force" that encloses the poor and prevents them from escaping. He also found the key to break through and break free of that surround—liberal education and the humanities.

This reaction comes from a student who is a single mother of three young children, who had grown up poor and on welfare, who had dropped out of high school, become a runaway, lived in an abusive marriage, left the marriage and lived in a women's shelter, and was now one semester away from graduating with a BS degree in math. She is in strong agreement with Shorris' assessment of the problems and solutions because she traveled a similar route to escape poverty. Perhaps her more important observation is that someone outside of a personal experience with poverty had chosen to bring attention to the conditions and then acted in some way to promote change.

Certainly, critics can argue that in contrast to the significant scale of poverty and the continuing widespread undereducation of those who are poor, this program represents a meager effort. Moreover, the Clemente Program is not the first project to draw public attention to those living in poverty and the particular injustices they endure. Shorris' writings stand with others like Jonathan Kozol (1991) that provided vivid narratives of the numerous structures of forces that make up the social reality of those living in poverty. Shorris was effective in highlighting the difficulties of escaping poverty, and thus served to disrupt a view that "all is well" in our society. The personal stories of the students in the Clemente Course serve as a

powerful reminder to readers that our society falls short of keeping its most basic promises of fairness and equality to all, especially when it comes to opportunities for education.

Despite all of his efforts to call attention to the problems of poverty, Shorris is not, however, optimistic that greater awareness will lead to a ground swell for widespread social reform. While Shorris indicated that significant institutional reform would be a desirable goal, he held little hope that change will occur. Instead, from his study of the lives of people living in poverty, Shorris concluded that institutional reform promoting greater equity and fairness is unlikely given America's long history of excluding—through deprivation and force—those who are poor from most of the benefits of active citizenship (1997a, 251). Shorris refused to speculate as to how this greater engagement in public life might manifest itself, and he was adamant about not connecting education to advocate direct political activism. The main message Shorris advanced was that democracy is enhanced by inclusion, and “the chief reward of the public life is inclusion in the circle of legitimate power” (2000, 73). This tradition of exclusion of those who are poor led Shorris to conclude that the poor will have to rely on themselves to escape their circumstances (Shorris 1997a, 337).

Shorris also made a compelling case for rejecting long-standing assumptions about who is capable of benefiting from a rigorous, intellectual education. These negative assumptions about the intellectual capacity of some segments of the population help to justify educational exclusion that is so much a part of the American school tradition. In American public schools, Shorris contended correctly that the curriculum over the past one hundred years has been differentiated in such a way that students from lower classes and minority groups are frequently excluded from the academic curriculum. In the past, Shorris contended, public school students have been provided with an education that produces either “master builders” or “worker bees.”

Master builders are considered capable of independent thought and are prepared to engage in the politics of public life after graduation. On the other hand, worker bees are considered incapable of benefiting from advanced levels of education and receive little encouragement for developing skills of independent thought (Shorris 1997a, 188). The negative view regarding the limited capacity of those who are poor to study subject matter like that contained in the humanities provides a comfortable justification of their general exclusion. Students who were able to complete the Clemente Course successfully send out a strong message about their capacity to engage in a meaningful way with a rigorous academic curriculum. Research on tracking policies conducted by Oakes (1985) found that school policies limit access to courses that emphasize intellectual skills for many students. In our society, those students who have access to an academic curriculum can entertain many more choices in their lives. The Clemente Course is clearly committed to seeking to *educate* rather than train its students.

## Conclusions

Though small in size, the Clemente Course in the Humanities serves to direct public attention to circumstances of deprivation and oppression of those living in poverty. To its credit, the Clemente Course in the Humanities represents a highly visible challenge to public sensibilities that ignore the exclusion of those who are poor from an education traditionally reserved for the most affluent in society and that provides the most flexibility for life opportunities. It also serves to challenge the idea that those who are poor have neither the capacity nor the motivation for education or for active engagement in the public life.

As an intervention program serving young adults living in poverty, the Clemente Course provides its students with a much-needed respite from the powerful rules of force that they experience in their daily lives. The Clemente Course offers students that remain in the program a public space of dialogue and possibilities that encourage them to consider ways of breaking the cycle of poverty. During the program, students become members of a supportive learning community. A focus on dialogue in the course allows students to explore their position in the world even when discussions center on classic texts in poetry, art, and philosophy. In addition to the program serving as a bridge to higher education for most of its graduates during the first few years of the program, there is also evidence of changes in how students view themselves and their relationship to the larger community. During the first year, faculty administered a set of standardized personality inventories before and after the program. These formal evaluations indicate increases among most participants in terms of self-esteem, problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, and a values framework (Shorris 1997a, 403–408).

The Clemente Course in the Humanities is based on a strong hope that the enterprise of education can be a force to change how individuals act in the world. Underlying this goal is an expectation that the enterprise of education can be a force to change the world for the better. Affirming this view, Greg Michie concluded that most teachers choose their vocation believing that the “world is changeable, that it can be transformed into a better, more just, more peaceful place, and that the kids that show up in our classrooms each day not only deserve such a world, but can be instrumental in helping to bring it about” (1999, 180). When education is guided by these aims, then small steps forward in the process of liberation are possible when having a new romance with an old model.

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## The Use of Socrates: Earl Shorris and the Quest for Political Emancipation Through the Humanities

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In this article, we examine the invocation of Socrates as the exemplar for Earl Shorris' Clemente Course in the Humanities program. Our aim is to temper Shorris' claim that the Socratic method and the humanities are tools for political liberation. Though they may have this consequence, they are not exhausted by this consequence. Rather, this method and the humanities are an invitation to a quest of fundamental human questions that need no justification outside of themselves. In this essay, we undertake four related tasks: (a) We probe the arguments that Shorris makes for the inclusion of Socrates as the philosophical

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