

2009

The Catalyst Clemente project: Making journalism education accessible to disadvantaged Australians

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Recommended Citation

Cullen, T. (2009). The Catalyst Clemente project: Making journalism education accessible to disadvantaged Australians. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/324>

Cullen, T. (2009, December). The Catalyst Clemente project: Making journalism education accessible to disadvantaged Australians. Paper presented at the annual Journalism Education Association of Australia conference, the Burswood Intercontinental Hotel, Perth, Western Australia. Available [here](#)
This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.
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The Catalyst Clemente project: Making journalism education accessible to disadvantaged Australians.

This is a brief commentary on a new initiative to promote engagement with the wider community through the Catalyst Clemente project, which was introduced in Western Australia in 2008. It encourages participants to improve their personal situation through learning and developing essential skills in a supportive environment. It also seeks to promote self-confidence in people at risk of homelessness or physical and mental illness, by encouraging them to take control of their lives and bring about personal change through undergraduate education. The program gives applicants the opportunity to do accredited university courses in the area of the humanities. I was asked to join the project for one semester at Mission Australia's Maddington office in south-east Metropolitan Perth. Edith Cowan University (ECU) provides the lecturer while Woodside's Community Initiative Program assists with additional mid-week educational support. Mission Australia wants to expand the program to include other universities in Australia.

Background.

The Catalyst-Clemente project began in New York in 1997. The founder, Earl Shorris, a journalist and social commentator, was researching a book on poverty. Visiting a New York penitentiary, he asked a female prisoner, who was trying to improve the lot of fellow inmates, why she thought people were caught in the poverty. Shorris (2000) believed that tertiary-level education in the humanities could assist socially disenfranchised or marginalised people out of cycles of poverty and homelessness.

In 2003, the program started in Australia as a joint initiative between the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Mission Australia and the St Vincent de Paul Society. It uses the Arts and Humanities, such as literature and drama, to build participants' self-esteem, create a feeling of community engagement and develop new possibilities for the future. Catalyst-Clemente is based on the belief that poverty is more than just exclusion from material goods—it's also about social exclusion. Accordingly, the way out of poverty is about giving people access to more than just a wage or vocational training, it's also about engaging them in activities that lead to social interaction, learning and community participation. The Catalyst-Clemente project is now offered in Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Perth and Adelaide. Students who successfully complete four of the course units may enroll in the University's national's on-campus degree courses or choose to apply to other universities and tertiary education providers.

The start of the program in Western Australia

In 2008, Associate Professor Susan Ash, a lecturer at Edith Cowan University, in Perth, helped to start the Catalyst Clemente project in Western Australia, a program for people whose social and economic circumstances have kept them from following traditional routes to Higher Education. The program gives such people the opportunity to do accredited university courses in the area of the humanities. In Perth the project is funded by Woodside's community initiative program and delivered by ECU lecturers. The students must have a Year 10 Certificate before they can enter the program.

The students study four units over a two-year period which translates to one unit every semester. The units are: Media Studies, Literature and social change Introduction to Journalism and Introduction to Gender Studies. The units, however, are not fixed and their selection is often dependent on the availability of lecturers. So, for example, the unit in first semester 2010 is Criminal Underworlds. The drop-out rate varies but overall, in the last two years, roughly 35 per cent of students failed to complete their units.

I was extremely enthusiastic about this project and joined the team in February 2009 and agreed to spend three hours every week for 13 weeks in first semester, 2009, teaching JOU2111 - Introduction to Journalism to a class of 15 students at Mission Australia's Maddington office. The ages ranged from 26-60 years and classes were frequently interrupted with smoke and coffee breaks. The students, however, are keen to learn and to widen their knowledge base, despite struggling with personal problems or difficult domestic situations. Sometimes, it is hard-work to keep the people focused and to get them to a level that would allow them to pass the unit with 15 credit points.

ECU's Catalyst- Clemente program coordinator, Associate Professor Susan Ash, said that with Mission Australia in Maddington as host, ECU offers individuals the opportunity to engage in tertiary learning in a safe and supported environment, to build confidence and a conviction of entitlement. She said the program is an exemplary form of university Engagement since teaching moves off campus, and reaches out to serve community needs.

This project sits comfortably with ECU's future vision which has identified University-community engagement as a central strategic priority with a target to thoroughly and effectively integrate engagement activities into ECU's core functions of Teaching, Learning and Research. The term engagement is often used to describe

“the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university.” (Krause, 2005). However, ‘Engagement’ here, refers specifically to the interaction between the University and the broader community that is characterised by a two-way flow of benefits. More specifically, Engagement is characterised by forming partnerships with our community and the Catalyst-Clemente project increases the scope and extent of this Engagement in its learning and teaching programs. And the community includes businesses, industries, government agencies, non-government organisations, professional bodies, schools, Alumni, Indigenous and ethnic communities and local community groups around our campuses.

Outcome

On 31st January, 2010, four students were awarded Edith Cowan’s University Certificate in Humanities and Arts for successfully completing Mission Australia’s Catalyst Clemente Program at ECU. The successful students were: Alex Prudnicki, Nerissa Blake, Anita Welsh and Tasha La Mer. “It is important to realise that no matter what you do in life you only get back what you put into it,” said Alex “The Catalyst Clemente Program made me realise that I had a lot to give this world and there was more to life than what I was living,” said Nerissa. Since completing the program, Alex, Nerissa and Anita have been accepted into a Bachelor of Arts at ECU which they will commence this year (First semester, 2010).

Mission Australia’s Catalyst-Clemente Program Coordinator in Perth, Mario Gomes, said the course encourages people to discover their own potential. “The program is aimed at empowering students and enabling them to explore new opportunities,” he said. Another major benefit of Catalyst-Clemente’ he said, was its cost effectiveness. “Through the close collaboration between the NGOs and university, the resources contributed to run Catalyst-Clemente have been in a very cost effective way” He added that if more Australian universities, community organisations and businesses came on board, Mission Australia could expand the course around the country and reach a great many more people. “The opportunities for Catalyst-Clemente in Australia are extremely far reaching.” ECU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Kerry Cox said that it was important to break down the barriers that restrict entry to education. “ECU is committed to our work on the enhancement and development of alternative entry pathways to higher education, and the Mission Australia Catalyst Clemente program is a great example of this,” Professor Cox said.

Responses from around Australia

Other universities that have joined with Mission Australia to start the program are equally positive about the benefits. Associate Professor Peter Howard, from the Australian Catholic University (ACU), said the course's impact on the students was immediate and profound. "Since undertaking the course (in 2005) we've had students organise work experience for themselves, apply to university and to the National Art School," he said. "Through Catalyst-Clemente, some students have set up their own blogs, which they use to network with each other and other ACU students. They discuss what they've learnt, access information and undertake research. Many of them also have a sense of a very different future for themselves."

Students from around the country were equally positive about the experience. Steve Foster, 50, has suffered from drug abuse, said the course was opening his mind. "I knew what morals and principles were," he said. "These things come to you naturally as a human, but I really hadn't got into ethics."

Student Jenny Sheppard, 52, said she was from "the school of hard knocks" and had always wanted to study at university level. "I am a single parent," Jenny said. "I've raised three children on my own. My husband suicided. I felt this course would give me a chance to broaden my own knowledge and perhaps lead to other study. Michael has been fantastic presenting the course in an interesting way. I've met lots of other people. They've all got their own skills. Everyone is really friendly, regardless of the reasons we are here. I've enjoyed the discussion and interaction, and the support from

More than 150 students in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria have been exposed to tertiary-level subjects including Australian history, philosophy, Australian literature, art history, politics and media since Catalyst-Clemente program began in Australia in 2005.

The latest Program

Flinders University in South Australia is the latest university to sign an agreement with Mission Australia to start the program in 2010. Mission Australia State Director, Jillian Paull and Flinders University Vice-Chancellor Professor Michael Barber signed the agreement at Mission Australia's State Office on Thursday, January 14. Ms Paull said Catalyst would begin in South Australia with around 12 participants sourced from Mission Australia services and other local organisations such as

Housing SA and Families SA. She said Catalyst had proved valuable in increasing the social and economic participation of disadvantaged Australians since it was introduced in NSW in 2005. “Catalyst helps students identify new possibilities for their lives – possibilities they may have believed were out of their reach,” Ms Paull said. “The idea behind Catalyst is that poverty is more than just exclusion from material goods – it’s also about social exclusion. “The way out of poverty is to give people access to more than just a wage or vocational training - it’s about engaging them in activities that lead to social interaction, learning and community participation. “Catalyst uses the arts and humanities – such as literature, drama – to do just that. It builds participants’ self-esteem and creates a feeling of community engagement.”

Conclusion

Below is an abbreviated summary of the project from Bastian and Howard (2008) which captures the spirit and importance of the Clement-Catalyst program as a practical way for community organisations, tertiary institutions, corporate and government to work together to re-engage people in learning.

Universities working with Mission Australia can help empower Australians experiencing the effects of disadvantage. The national program, which now operates in Sydney Campbelltown, Canberra, Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne, Ballarat and Perth, has provided a learning environment for people in community settings that are supportive of the students' learning and personal needs. The Clemente-Catalyst program provides a model for community agencies and tertiary institutions to engage with one another in developing an innovative learning pathway for Australian marginalised people to access higher education, a human right that has often been denied. (Bastian and Howard, 2008, p.10).

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