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"We Went Through a Pandemic Together": Strategies for Facilitating Transformative Learning Among Nontraditional Adult Learners During a Crisis

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Abstract

COVID-19 has presented both challenges and opportunities for transformative education. While the pandemic has deeply disrupted learning, particularly for the most vulnerable and disenfranchised students, it has forced educators to re-assess and re-invent their courses. This Teaching Note draws on my experience directing and teaching in the Clemente Veterans' Initiative Newark—a free, college credit-bearing humanities course centered on themes of war and reconciliation for adult learners—during the COVID-19 pandemic. This Note offers strategies for educators interested in facilitating transformation in nontraditional academic settings, especially during times of crisis. When faced with a disorienting dilemma like a pandemic, educators might consider incorporating humanistic texts and art into their courses to promote reflection and perspective transformation; pursuing dialogic, synchronous instruction to build community; and focusing on students' deep and sustained engagement with material rather than mastery.

Keywords: adult education, COVID-19, humanities, transformative learning, veterans

The Clemente Course in the Humanities (CCH) was established in New York City in 1995 to teach college-level humanities to adults living in economic distress. Undergirding the program is the idea that a liberal education is education for liberation, and reflection inspired by the humanities can help marginalized adults to more actively shape their lives and communities. Over two semesters, students explore philosophy, literature, US history, and art history with faculty from area colleges. Upon completion, students receive 6 transferrable college credits from Bard College. Because CCH strives to remove barriers, the course is free and there are few requirements for admission: prospective students must be over age 18, have a household income at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level, and have basic literacy skills; a high school diploma or GED is not required. Since its inception over two decades ago, CCH has expanded to over 30 sites in the United States and Puerto Rico.

In 2014, CCH launched the Clemente Veterans' Initiative (CVI) to provide a humanities-focused intellectual community for veterans struggling to adapt to civilian life. Like a traditional Clemente course, CVI is free and open to all veterans, regardless of discharge status, as well as veterans' friends and family. Unlike a traditional Clemente course, CVI courses are a semester long, award students 3 credits, and focus specifically on themes of war and reconciliation in the humanities.

During the spring 2020 semester, I directed and co-taught a CVI course in Newark, New Jersey. The students, who ranged in age from 41 to 76, were veterans, as well as their spouses, mothers, and friends. Some had college experience and some did not, but all had been away from formal education for a number of years. The class had the good fortune of meeting in-person for a month, and building a budding classroom community together, before COVID-19 derailed our best laid plans for face-to-face discussion and field trips together. Like most of higher education in the US, we transitioned to Zoom, losing some students in the process but maintaining a group of half a dozen truly dedicated adult learners. Ultimately, both the students and I left the course transformed in important ways—feeling more

reflective, more connected to each other and the world around us, more empathetic, more curious, and more motivated to effect positive change. "We went through a *pandemic* together," a student remarked at our last online class meeting; "We aren't the same as when we started." This Teaching Note draws on my experience with the CVI course during the COVID-19 pandemic and offers strategies for educators interested in facilitating transformation in nontraditional academic settings, especially during times of crisis.

Theoretical Framework

Clemente's founder, journalist and social critic Earl Shorris (1997), established the course to help impoverished adults negotiate the "surround of force" that restricts their lives (p. 50). Myriad issues—such as crime, hunger, housing, illness, incarceration, isolation, police, and racism—surround marginalized adults, forcing them to live by *reaction*. The humanities, Shorris argued, teach *reflection* and with it, the ability to critically analyze and transform one's circumstances. The idea that the humanities can act as education for liberation by engendering critical reflection is in keeping with transformative learning theory generally (Mezirow, 2012) and the emancipatory learning domain in particular (Freire, 1985; Habermas, 1971). The sort of education Clemente offers can contribute to emancipation from the "surround of force," or what Mezirow (1991) calls the "libidinal, epistemic, institutional, or environmental forces that limit our options and our rational control over our lives but have been taken for granted or seen as beyond human control" (p. 87).

Incorporate the Humanities

Our class examined the Peloponnesian War, the American Civil War, and the Vietnam War through history, literature, and art, tackling works like Sophocles' plays, the *Declaration of Independence* and the Gettysburg Address, Walt Whitman's poetry, Picasso's *Guernica*, and Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial. On a good day, the humanities are often criticized as a discipline of the "elite" with no real utility. During the pandemic, the humanities were frequently decried as insignificant in the global fight against the coronavirus, the field "a wheel turning nothing in an emergency" (Callard, 2020, n.p.). Yet our class demonstrated that the humanities *do* serve a purpose during times of crisis. "Humanities" is simply shorthand for the study of the human experience (Sheedy, 2020). What humans—and in the case of our class, veterans and their loved ones—feel and experience is universal and cuts across time, space, and culture. Our close reading of humanistic texts and formal analysis of paintings and monuments revealed universal themes of the human condition and allowed us, during a time of fear, uncertainty, and isolation, to feel more connected. Such immersive educational experiences have the potential to usher in new perspectives, which can generate the dialogue needed for transformation (Bull, 2020; Hooper-Greenhill, 2013; Mezirow, 2000). COVID-19 presented us with a sudden, disorienting dilemma, but the humanities helped the class to pause, reflect, and adopt new viewpoints. As one CVI student stated, study of the humanities "truly stretched my mind."

Although we live in an interdisciplinary world, academic courses are typically structured along strict disciplinary lines (Faulconer & Griffith, 2020). Regardless of the courses we teach, we, as educators, can integrate the humanities. One might start by incorporating a poem, short story, historical document, or painting into a class discussion or assignment, guiding students to make connections between the texts or art and the class and reflect on what they see, what they feel, and in what ways they relate (or don't) to the humanistic material. Incorporating philosophy, literature, art, and history is generative, offering not only additional content and insight but also the epistemology and analytical methods of the humanities, all of which might otherwise be absent in the original discipline (Skorton & Bear, 2018). Taking an interdisciplinary approach may help students to understand and meaningfully engage with the world around them. As a CVI student veteran with no prior college experience remarked, "The humanities expand your horizons in all aspects of life."

Detractors may argue that the humanities have no place in some disciplines—especially mathematics and the "hard" sciences—but I contend that the humanities can, in fact, play meaningful roles in seemingly unexpected places. Dartmouth College, for example, developed nine courses linking mathematics with humanistic disciplines, including art and architecture, history, literature, music, and philosophy. Demonstrating how math is used in other fields helped students understand mathematics better, stimulated student interest, and offered students a new way of looking at other subjects and the world. By integrating disparate disciplines, instructors modeled the kind of intellectual dexterity needed to navigate our compartmentalized world (Korey, 2000). While research on the impacts of STEM courses integrated with the humanities is limited, it appears that students in integrated curricula outperform those in fragmented curricula (Becker & Park, 2011; Fan & Yu, 2017), and an interdisciplinary approach is associated with improved higher-level thinking skills, problem solving, and retention (Fan & Yu, 2017).

Keep Talking

COVID-19 stopped our class in its tracks, and I took several weeks to regroup. Despite my reservations about moving a Socratic, discussion-based class online, the students wanted to continue. "We miss class," one student wrote. "Hopefully we can work out this change and complete what we started together." Others concurred, writing in: "I miss you all" and "Thank you for keeping this class alive."

When educators are directed to take their teaching online, they often pivot to truncating discussion in favor of "discussion boards" and moving to asynchronous learning. While there are certainly benefits to asynchronous instruction, our class chose just the opposite. The dehumanizing, technicist approach of most online education is anathema to Clemente so, based on student input, we chose to meet synchronously and frequently, since living in crisis made us hungrier for intellectual community and contact. Pre-COVID, the class met in-person for about three hours on Saturdays. When the class moved online, we met virtually three times a week—two weekday evenings and Saturday mornings—for about an hour each time. Meeting so frequently required effort on all our parts but it meant that if a student couldn't make a class session, they could easily catch up.

Online education is well-suited to transformative learning. Our Zoom discussions were often *more* collegial, more relaxed, and more personal than those in traditional, in-person classes, and when asked what they liked most about the course, several students commented on the power of peer-to-peer discussion, relishing "the moments when we shared our thoughts and different points of view and ideas." The online format created a relatively egalitarian environment that challenged conventional norms of classroom power and authority. Too, the frequent online meetings helped create a supportive class community. Regular, sustained dialogue is critical to transformative learning because it facilitates students' collaboration and critical thought and promotes their tolerance of ambiguity and differences (Cranton, 2006; Meyers, 2008).

Focus on Engagement, not Mastery

Rather than tackling entire books when the class transitioned online, CVI students engaged with shorter, equally rigorous texts that accomplished the same pedagogical goals. During a crisis, no one, including educators, has the same level of focus as they did pre-crisis. Our Zoom class grew to be something we all looked forward to, in large part because we could come together to discuss poems, short stories, images, and film clips and, by the end of class, we felt that we had accomplished a discrete task and exercised some semblance of control in an otherwise out-of-control world. Quantity—of books, pages, or words—does not equal rigor. The *Declaration of Independence*, for instance, is a surprisingly short document but a text to which the CVI students continually returned, making frequent connections between the world around them and the founding document: "The current events going on now in America show that nothing much has changed," observed one student during the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

Crises offer new opportunities. Rather than trying to directly transfer our pre-pandemic syllabus to the online world, we made accommodations to fit our class meeting schedule and diminished attention spans. And because CVI students are nontraditional learners, it was particularly important to present complex or challenging material in smaller, digestible chunks. Students dove deeply into excerpts from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for instance, but were not overwhelmed with undertaking the entire novel. This way, students were able to wrestle with the material during a class meeting, question their assumptions, and even begin to act on newfound perspectives—what educators most hope for. As one student, a family member of veterans, commented mid-way through the course, "This class has encouraged my activism like never before."

Conclusion

Writing in the *New Yorker*, philosopher Agnes Callard (2020) argued that "Crises are, at least while they are happening, not educational opportunities. They are events that befall us, that harm us. They target everything about us, including our faculty for learning" (n.p.). Indeed, COVID-19, and all that encompassed 2020, re-shaped our country, hurting us deeply and in some ways irreparably. But I contend that it *has* been an educational opportunity, and a transformative one at that. The CVI course demonstrated the power of the humanities, which promote reflection on the human condition, something particularly relevant during times of crisis. Humanistic texts and art can be incorporated across disciplines, giving students a chance to make interdisciplinary connections, question their beliefs and assumptions, and transform their perspectives. Our choice to go entirely synchronous, while admittedly labor intensive, provided the human connection we needed during the pandemic, and our focus on engagement rather than mastery gave students the opportunity to tackle complex material without feeling overwhelmed. Taken together, these strategies helped facilitate a transformative learning experience among CVI's nontraditional learners during an especially challenging time.

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