

“You’re Gonna Get Respected, Listened To, and Your Opinion Will Be Respected”: Dignity Affirmation in the Clemente Course in the Humanities / **DRAFT** chapter by Charity Anderson

“If I had to put a finger on what I consider ... a good radical education, it wouldn’t be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first. ... And then next is respect for people’s abilities to learn and to act and to shape their own lives. ... The third thing grows out of caring for people and having respect for people’s ability to do things, and that is that you value their experiences.” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 177)

Neoliberal ideology underlies much discourse on adult education today—a discourse that is focused on creating a “flexible” and “adaptable” workforce. Low-income adults in particular are targeted for vocational training and basic education courses, which are often dubiously marketed as pathways out of poverty and into jobs. The Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities has little in common with the market-driven ideology that undergirds most adult learning today. At over 30 independently-run sites across the United States and Puerto Rico, Clemente provides economically and socially marginalized adults a free, yearlong, college-credit bearing course in the humanities—art and American history, literature, philosophy, and critical thinking and writing—taught by college professors.

The course is open to prospective students who are at least 18 years old, able to read a newspaper, and live in a household with an income at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level. Clemente believes that liberal education, unlike remedial or compensatory programs, is education for liberation, and that reflection inspired by the humanities can help historically marginalized adults to more actively shape the direction of their lives and communities. At Clemente’s core is the idea that all adults, however disenfranchised, *can* learn and deserve access to a rigorous liberal education typically reserved for society’s elite. This chapter, which draws from a two-year ethnographic study of Clemente courses in the midwest and northeast United States, examines students’ experiences in the course and the ways in which dignity is affirmed in the classroom.

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Data from over 400 hours of participant observation and 150 interviews with Clemente students, alumni, faculty, and staff reveal that the vast majority of instructors make a concerted effort to create a learning environment that cultivates and affirms students’ worth and potential—an environment centered around dialogic, problem-posing instruction and horizontal, mutually trusting relationships, a classroom that functions, in students’ words, as a “community” and a “family.” Students report feeling “valued,” “respected,” and “heard” and leave the course feeling more confident and engaged—with themselves, their families, and their communities. By offering a college-level, credit-granting opportunity in the heart of the community rather than behind campus walls, Clemente brings a dignity-centered experience to adults typically excluded from humanistic education and demonstrates that adult educators can make deliberate pedagogical choices to honor the power and potential of nontraditional adult learners.

Clemente Course in the Humanities

Clemente was established over two decades ago by the writer and social critic Earl Shorris (1936-2012), who was inspired to start the course while researching a book on the causes of poverty. As part of his research, Shorris visited a maximum-security women’s prison where he met an inmate, Viniece Walker, who argued that poverty could be interrupted through education, but not just *any* education:

You’ve got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children. And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts, lectures, where they can learn the moral life of downtown ... a moral alternative to the street. (Walker, as cited in Shorris, 2000, p. 97)

Walker’s perspective triggered an epiphany of sorts within Shorris: if marginalized adults were to fully engage with the world, it would, in Shorris’ words, require a “new kind of thinking—

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Believing in the “radical character” of the humanities, Shorris, with the help of the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in lower Manhattan (after which the course is named) and scholars who volunteered their time, established the first Clemente course in 1995 (Shorris, 2000, p. 116). Shortly thereafter, Leon Bottstein, president of Bard College, a liberal arts college in upstate New York, offered to place the course under the school’s “academic aegis” (Shorris, 1997, p. 136) and, since 2000, Bard has conferred six transferable credits to course graduates. (It is important to note, though, that individual course sites operate with considerable autonomy. While Bard approves syllabi and hiring decisions for courses that bear the Clemente name, individual sites are responsible for their own recruitment, funding, and budgets.) Since its inception, Clemente courses have sprouted across the US, and the world, reaching over 10,000 students to date, the majority of whom are women (Clemente, 2020). A combination of private and public funding keeps courses entirely free to admitted students, covering tuition and books, transportation costs, childcare, and, at some sites, social service referrals and counseling. Courses typically meet twice weekly in the evenings over an academic year, often in community-based organizations or local libraries. On any given class night, one will likely find 20 or so students engaged not in a lecture but in a *discussion* with professors from area universities about, say, Michelangelo’s *David*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, the *Declaration of Independence*, or a short story by James Baldwin.

Education for Liberation

Central to Clemente is the idea that education can act as a tool for liberation. Scandinavian folkehøgskole (folk schools) are an important model of liberatory adult education

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without which we may not have programs like Clemente. Folkehøgskole emerged during a period of significant cultural, political, and social upheaval in nineteenth-century Denmark, as the rural “folk” revolted against the German domination of Danish culture, language, and schools (Kohl, 1991). N.F.S. Grundtvig, a Danish scholar, theologian, and central figure in the revolt, observed the increasing chasm between the urban elite and the rural peasants and took particular issue with elitist schools, which he called “schools for death.” He envisioned a different sort of education— “schools for life”—that would embrace the idea of folkelighed (literally translated as “equality within a people”) and provide an equitable education for peasants and farmers (Kohl, 1991). Grundtvig’s particular concern was that schools should bring dignity to rural people and to the life of farmers, who made up most of Denmark’s population at the time. He envisioned the language of folk schools being that of the common people; the curriculum focusing on Danish humanities—history, literature, myths, and poems—and students discussing cultural, social, and religious issues. Adams (1972) underscored the radical nature of this education endeavor when he described the schools as:

Free of government control... [and] unencumbered with grades, ranking, examinations, and certifying students. ... Anyone eighteen or older could attend. Those who came supported the schools in whatever way possible—work at the school, food from their farms, money, if they had it. They stayed as long as they were able. ...The lectures were often repeated in the evening for older people who came into the lecture halls from the countryside. (p. 501)

Grundtvigian philosophy took root among the common people and spurred the opening of the first Danish folk school in 1844, giving adults on society’s margins the opportunity to realize their unique intellectual and creative potential. Today, there are about 70 folkehøgskole across

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Denmark open to adults aged 17.5 and older regardless of their educational history and, although folk school curricula have been affected by contemporary cultural, social, and technological influences, the schools are still considered “Grundtvigian” in the sense that they focus on enlightenment, ethics, morality, and democracy (Association of Folk High Schools, n.d.). In stark contrast to adult education in America, every folk school is publicly funded to about 50% of its operational costs, provided no vocational skills are taught, no marks or grades are awarded, and at least half of the syllabus focuses on activities the school can defend as “general, liberal, mind broadening” education (Collins, 2013, p. 338).

While folk schools never took root in the US like they did in Scandinavia, Citizenship Schools were an American attempt to liberate the rural folk of the South. The first Citizenship School was established in 1957 in South Carolina’s Sea Islands during a time when voter registration laws in South Carolina, as in most southern states, required applicants to pass a literacy test, making it exceptionally difficult for African Americans to register to vote (Levine, 2004; Rachal, 1998; Tjerandersen, 1980). In response, Septima Clark, a school teacher, and Esau Jenkins, a farmer and bus driver, with the support of Highlander Folk School based in Tennessee (and incidentally whose founder, Myles Horton, was directly influenced by Danish folk schools), planned the first Citizenship School focused on literacy education in the Sea Islands (Levine, 2004).

The historic neglect of Black education on the four Sea Islands meant that when the School began, a high proportion of adults needed and were enthusiastic to obtain literacy instruction (Levine, 2004). The first School’s teacher was Septima Clark’s cousin, Bernice Robinson, a beautician and active member of the NAACP, who based the curriculum on what the

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initial 14 adult students wanted to learn: “how to write their name, how to read the words of the South Carolina election laws ... how to spell those words ... how to fill in blanks when they were ordering out of a catalog ... how to fill in a money order” (Clark, 1960, as cited in Horton, 1971/1989, p. 223). Interest in the school spread to adjacent islands and, with time, the curriculum expanded to include community development and teacher training (Tjerandersen, 1980). In a report to the Board of Directors of Highlander in 1965, Septima Clark reported that the Citizenship Schools had educated more than 25,000 students and were responsible for more than 50,000 registered Black voters in the South (Clark, 1965). By the project’s end in 1970, roughly 2,500 African Americans had taught basic literacy and political education classes to tens of thousands of their neighbors (Horton, 1971/1989; Levine, 2004). Jenkins perhaps best explained the Schools’ strengths-based approach:

Sometimes we underestimate these people and forget that they have something we really need. There are people who haven’t got a college education or even a high school education. But anyone able to raise twelve children—and raise ’em healthy too—must know something good. They were smart enough to plant and to raise the kind of thing the children need. They raised their own hogs, they raised their cows, they had the milk with the vitamin D that they need. Some of these older people thought very deeply. ... Some achieved more than some of the young people who have been able to go to college.

(Carawan, 1994, p. 38)

Both the Citizenship Schools and the folk schools that preceded them offered historically marginalized adults access to power through education (Horton, 1971/1989; Irby, 2021; Levine, 2004). This ethos laid the foundation for contemporary liberatory education programs like Clemente. Adult education programs that work to create learning conditions and opportunities

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that cultivate and preserve adult students’ dignity are rare. Adult learners’ experiences and needs are often neglected in higher education (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000). Adult education frequently focuses on basic education or discrete skill transmission, and students are too often seen as “at-risk burdens or cash-cow boons” (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 18; Lanford, 2020; Richardson & King, 1998).

The Study

I first learned about Clemente in 2014 as a doctoral student and, with piqued curiosity, sat in on a few nights of a class held in a community center near campus. Little did I know at the time, but the course would become a significant part of my life—first as a curious interloper and later as the director of a Clemente course for veterans. After those initial observations, I spent two years conducting ethnographic research at course sites in the midwest and northeast US, immersing myself in the student experience. I attended class, of course, but also accompanied students and instructors on field trips to plays, museums, concerts, walking tours, and poetry readings; volunteered as a writing tutor for students; ate meals with them; attended faculty meetings and annual directors’ retreats; talked with them anytime they were willing; and continued to keep in touch with students and staff long after my time in the classroom had come to a close. In addition to the hundreds of hours I spent inside Clemente and the countless informal conversations I had, I conducted 150 interviews, which ranged from half an hour to two and a half hours, with 116 individuals associated with Clemente courses past and present—that is, faculty, staff, current students, alumni, and non-completers. The work of participant observation, coupled with in-depth interviews, put me at the heart of Clemente activities and demonstrated what dignity-affirming adult education could look like in practice.

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It is worth noting that the “typical” Clemente student—to the extent that there is one—is a racial/ethnic minority woman about 40 years old. Nearly all of the Clemente students in the study sample were racial minorities and nearly all of the staff were white, both of which mirror Clemente nationwide. What’s more, most Clemente students across the country, and within the sample, are women, which reflects higher education in the US generally. (In 2018, female students made up 56 percent of total undergraduate enrollment; NCES, 2020). Clemente students in the sample ranged from age 19 to 70, with 40 being the average. On the whole, Clemente students fall under the “nontraditional” category—students who delayed postsecondary enrollment; attend part-time; work full-time; are financially independent; have dependents; are single parents; and/or do not have a high school diploma—a marker of otherness (Pelletier, 2010).

Typically, a Clemente student’s formal education has been interrupted at some point by various life circumstances: physical and mental illness; familial obligations (most often caring for a sick or elderly family member), pregnancy and subsequent childrearing, substance abuse, incarceration, poverty, indecision, and prior academic failure. They often enter the course with a host of vulnerabilities and having had educational experiences that left them feeling silenced, with internalized feelings of inadequacy, doubt, and fear about their ability to learn; they enter with a degraded sense of dignity. They are, in many ways, what Kirsten Olson (2009) terms “wounded learners.” For many of Clemente’s students, the idea of returning to formal schooling is, in their words, “intimidating,” “overwhelming” and even “terrifying.” They fear returning to what Chovanec and Lange (2010) call “inflexible postsecondary educational environments that do not take their needs into account” and, unfortunately, such educational environments are the ones to which they are accustomed (p. 14). Clemente differs from a traditional postsecondary

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environment, though, by actively recruiting disenfranchised adults and striving to affirm their worth.

“The Hook Is That You’re Gonna Get Respected”

Each spring, course directors from around the US gather for a weekend-long retreat at Bard College, where they talk about all things Clemente—recruitment and retention, curricula, best teaching practices, resources for students, funding streams, and so on. Clemente directors tend to be deeply committed, enthusiastic, and perhaps idealistic intellectuals, and their annual meetings are part homecoming (many directors have attended the meetings for years) and part seminar, with wide ranging discussions centered on how to optimize courses generally and students’ experiences specifically. During one retreat, directors wondered aloud what drew students to the course and kept them engaged—what the directors called the “hook.” An excerpt from my field notes during their meeting reveals the directors’ speculation:

Someone poses the question, “What’s the hook? Is it credits, learning about philosophy, writing? What’s the pull?”

“People want something different,” Valerie, who is one of the few women of color in the room and with a shorter Clemente history than many others, suggests.

“The hook is that you’re gonna get respected, listened to, and your opinion will be respected,” Sonja adds. “That’s what they take, that’s a hook.”

Indeed, what most students saw as the “hook” was the teaching. The care instructors took to convey material was important, to be sure, but what students repeatedly talked about, and what I saw firsthand in classes, was instructors’ commitment to centering student voices, which meant foregoing lectures in favor of dialogic, problem-posing instruction that foregrounded genuine listening, dialogue, and, as Sonja argued at the retreat, respect. In interviews, students routinely underscored the respect that instructors conveyed in the classroom, treating them—as one student put it—“like a real person.” For example, four Clemente graduates I interviewed, all women and all of whom attended courses in different cities, emphasized the point. Janelle, a

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poised African American woman in her late forties with some college experience prior to Clemente, appreciated how instructors approached students as equals, saying, “I never got that sense they were like missionaries going to Africa, teaching the natives, that kind of attitude. I felt like they really respected everybody as adults.” Similarly, Anita, an African American mother of three with some college under her belt before starting Clemente, echoed Janelle’s sentiments: “They made us feel *valued* in Clemente. ... In no way, shape, or form did they make us feel like we were a charity case, I’m just saying. ... They just made us feel like you are getting a valuable education from respectable professors.” Jennie, a White woman in her forties whose education was derailed by incarceration, said that Clemente instructors’ pedagogy was “more humane” than teachers she had encountered in traditional educational environments, adding, “It’s more active. There is a level of care there, there is a concern about understanding and interpreting the knowledge when most places don’t take that extra step.” And lastly Alejandra, a Latinx course graduate in her thirties who earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees post-Clemente, stated that the course was “the first time that—it may sound harsh—but being treated like a *real person*. You know, to have just someone interact with you on such a deeper level, and it could be short. It can be just a short period of time of interaction but it has so much depth to it. ... Because people are not used to being treated in such a way. So, that’s huge.”

“They Do It Socratic Seminar Style”

Those periods of “interaction” that Alejandra referenced are what Paulo Freire (1970) called “dialogical relations” between instructors and students—in this case, rich discussions of humanistic texts, often dense primary sources, and artworks (p. 79). The Socratic method of questioning, in its purest form, is a disciplined process of dialogue between teacher and students, instigated by the probing questions of the teacher, in an effort to explore the underlying beliefs

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that shape the students’ views and opinions. The version of the Socratic method that I saw, and heard about, in Clemente classrooms was a less formal version than what Socrates illustrated. Clemente instructors probed students with questions, but not exclusively, and encouraged dialogue, which in turn helped facilitate reciprocal relationships among students and instructors. Because Clemente courses are not typically held on university campuses, the classrooms are often makeshift and, in my experience, could be cramped and sweltering, but the spaces were *always* full of life, rarely if ever silent, with laughter emanating through the buildings. Al, a Latinx course graduate in his fifties with a long career in social services, saw the dialogical relations as one of the course’s most significant strengths:

Strengths, the fact that it’s, what’s the name of that? They do it Socratic seminar style where everybody gets to ask questions and tear things apart. The fact that it’s easily accessible, no one is made to feel like they just don’t have what it takes to be a part of the class. We also like, you know, we were all brought along at a steady pace. At the same time, they [instructors] were very good at challenging us.

Luciana, a Latinx a mother of three in her forties who left an abusive relationship immediately prior to starting the course, expressed how the class always provided a “forum” for students to engage in dialogue, which helped her retain the material:

We interact with each other, and there is always a forum. We express what we’ve learned and how we feel about what we’ve learned during the course of learning it. It helps to learn. It kind of reinforces what you’re learning, so it makes it easier to maintain that information.

This approach to teaching is couched in “acts of cognition not in the transferal of information” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 67). That is, students and teacher engage in dialogue with one

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another, and wrestle with questions *together*: “Dialogue is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity, but actively defend it, and thus grow together” (Freire, 2004, p. 101). Understanding that every student has something valuable to offer the learning community means that educators honor *all* capabilities (hooks, 2010). When students are fully engaged, instructors no longer assume the singular leadership role in the classroom. Instead, the classroom functions as a collaborative environment where everyone contributes. The typical, vertical teacher-student relationship is shifted to a horizontal one where the teacher shares power with the students and both operate on more equal footing.

Ultimately, most, if not all, educators want students to learn and to see education as a means of “self- development and self-actualization” (hooks, 2010, p. 22). Zia, a North African immigrant in her thirties and course graduate, explained how her Critical Thinking and Writing instructor encouraged dialogue and shared leadership with the students by acting as a “mediator” rather than a typical professor:

There is one thing that really, I really enjoyed is how open the teachers are. They are so open minded. They are trying to let us know that we have a voice, we are entitled to our opinions, we have the right to have opinions, and it doesn’t have to be the same as anyone else. It was encouraging to learn and ... to know that your opinion matters. That is really empowering. ... Like in the Critical Thinking, the teacher would just, you know, ask the question and provoke the conversation. And we’re all here sharing, we don’t even have to ask permission to talk, we’re just exchanging opinions. [She was] just like a mediator somehow.

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What strikes me as particularly salient about this excerpt is the importance of dialogue in creating an intellectual community that honors participants’ dignity. And Zia’s remark—“We don’t even have to ask permission to talk”—speaks volumes about the sort of education she was likely exposed to prior to Clemente, an education where students’ voices were not valued and where students were taught to ask an “authority” for permission to verbalize their own thoughts and opinions. This calls to mind educator and activist Parker Palmer’s (2007) summation of good teaching: “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10).

When I think of a particularly “good” night of teaching in Clemente, I think of a particular instructor who always arrived well before class was scheduled to begin and made a point of eating dinner with the students, where he talked with them not just about the class material but engaged students about their lives and current events. He would begin each class by clearly explaining what he wanted to accomplish and would invite input on the texts students had been expected to read. His classes were characterized by a near-constant back-and-forth between him and the students—he, reading passages, dramatizing, giving context and explanations, and asking questions, and the students also reading, sharing their ideas, and asking questions. Time passed quickly largely because he kept students engaged in reading, thinking, and talking. An excerpt from my field notes, taken during a philosophy class, illustrate:

Seventeen students sit under the green cast of fluorescent lighting in a cramped, stuffy conference room. It’s not meant to be a classroom, but it works. Ross, who’s teaching philosophy tonight, leans against the wall at the front of the room, twirling a marker with his right hand and holding his dog-eared, battle-scarred copy of *The Republic* in his left. Next to him is an easel with a pad of chart paper, ruffled and precariously perched. In front of students, copies of *The Republic* are splayed open and glowing in yellow highlighter. Notebooks, half-drunk cups of coffee, balled up candy wrappers, and phones dot the tables.

“All right. Plato, remember him? Allegory of the Cave?” Ross asks, waving his book above his head. “Let’s start with the cave itself. How do we interpret the cave?”

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The windows are open as far as they’ll go (just a couple inches) and the sounds of horns and sirens drown out the persistent hum of the overhead lights. Estelle takes a deep breath and exhales, “It’s *familiar*.” There’s a brief pause. Everyone seems to let that sink in. Then Mia adds, “It’s an obstacle for the uneducated, something to overcome.” “My cave happened before I was in prison,” Rick says. He was recently released from prison and is on parole. “Because of my lifestyle ... I wasn’t able to appreciate life. Being away for so long, I had the opportunity to really think about those shadows.” “And the prisoners in the cave—how about them?” Ross asks. “That’s *us*,” Evie says. Others chime in: “The people.” “Humankind.” “The innocent.” “OK,” Ross says. “Once you’ve been out and seen the light, do you go back?” ... “I don’t think it’s possible to go back,” Shalisa interjects. “Once you learn something, you can’t unlearn it. ... You can’t go back into that cave.”

However, this is not to say that all Clemente teaching was dialogic and roundly praised by students. I also witnessed unsuccessful teaching, which was typically categorized by a lack of organization and/or a lack of problem-posing instruction. For example, Rico, a Latinx Clemente graduate in his thirties, criticized his history instructor, whom he felt lectured too much, thereby alienating Rico:

I also felt that Marcus [history instructor] was just lecturing and that there wasn’t a Socratic dialogue that we had with Kenneth [philosophy instructor]. I just can’t learn like that. ... For me to fully grasp and harness an understanding of something, I need to be having a conversation. ... But [Marcus was] depositing information and, quite frankly, that shit is not going in because I’m not in the conversation with you. It’s like, *it wasn’t happening*.

What is particularly important about this criticism is that it highlights Rico’s disdain for Marcus’ singular focus on “depositing” content—what Freire (1970) termed additive or “banking” education—but it also suggests that the lack of dialogue between them was an affront to Rico’s dignity and failed to recognize Rico as a contributor to the class. Unlike Marcus, Ross, a White philosophy instructor whose class was highlighted in the earlier field note excerpt, believed that his focus should be less on disseminating content and far more on the students themselves:

My mission is to help kindle self-esteem and critical thinking with my students, and it doesn’t matter who they are. That to me is more important than whatever it is we’re studying. In a way it doesn’t even matter what we study. ... It’s about feeling good about one’s abilities. That sense of self-esteem can kindle all kinds of things. ... So, that’s why my teaching method is very heavily Socratic. ... Yeah, and that’s why my students always say to me, “We don’t know what you really think.”... I want them to have increased self-esteem and I want them to exercise their thinking muscles and their humanity and rationality, in that order.

Ross, like his students, saw dialogic instruction as the bedrock of a successful Clemente course, and Ross saw himself as having a “mission” or duty to extend respect, cultivate students’ self-worth, and give them access to power through reading and writing—the essence of a dignity-affirming education. In this way, education becomes a dynamic practice of liberation where both students and teachers are jointly responsible for growth.

Practical Implications

Although much of the literature in adult education, as well as the theory of andragogy, stresses that adult learners want job-relevant credentials, autonomy, and virtual coursework, my time with Clemente indicated otherwise (Lanford, 2020). The liberatory adult education programs that laid the foundation for Clemente, like folk schools and Citizenship Schools, also suggest otherwise. The Clemente students with whom I spoke and attended class valued the dialogic instruction they received in the classroom, alongside their instructors and peers, and the genuine respect they were afforded. Educational theorist Gert Biesta (2010) argued that teachers can help make education something more than “temporarily marketable skills and an already obsolete certificate,” but to do so requires that they “read their [students’] world and not just

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ours. ... It requires us to leave the podium and join the fray” (p. 86). Most, if not all, Clemente instructors do indeed “join the fray” to support students’ academic and social-emotional growth. This means going beyond merely lecturing or teaching content to *engage* with students; Socratic-style, back-and-forth engagement with students helps them learn and also demonstrates to students that their thoughts and opinions are valuable. Programs and policies that reduce the role of the instructor to that of a part-time or adjunct content provider, rather than an active member of an educational community, may be severely misguided. For vulnerable adult learners, this sort of interaction and affirmation are particularly vital.

For some educators, this approach to teaching and student engagement requires an identity shift, as Palmer (2007) suggested. Outside of the “banking” method of education, instructors are no longer seen as having all the answers, but are seen as teacher-students. Similarly, students are no longer seen as deficient, but are instead constructed as student-teachers. When educators see adult learners as individuals with unique and varied backgrounds, goals, and talents and treat them accordingly, educators honor and affirm students’ dignity. This shift toward dignity-affirmation is beneficial to both students and instructors, as Donna Hicks (2018) contends: “The transformation that occurs with a consciousness of dignity helps us to gain perspective—it allows us to take a step away from our usual point of view so we can better understand why we do what we do, why we feel the way we feel, and why we think the way we think” (p. 7).

Not too long ago, I visited a Clemente class with which I’d spent considerable time the year prior. It was the first class of the academic year and the classroom and hallway were buzzing with the new students’ nervous, excited energy. Several course graduates from years past, whom I’d come to know through my research, milled about. I was talking with Pilar, a

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Clemente staff member, when Tisha, a recent graduate in her early twenties, came over to us in the hall. Both Pilar and I hugged Tisha and welcomed her back. She was there to speak and offer support to the incoming class, to cheerlead and let them know they *can* do this. After our initial greetings, Tisha stepped back and sighed. “Ahhhhh,” she exhaled as she leaned in and wrapped her arms around both Pilar and me again. “I feel like I’m *home*.” What made Tisha feel so at home was not the material she’d been taught, but the way she had been treated—like a real person.

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