

The Effects of a Humanities Reading Program on Economically and Educationally Disadvantaged Individuals

My classmates and I answered an invitation to come and learn. Twice a week for 2 semesters we gathered together to discuss some of history's great minds and ideas. We read and discussed the Greek Philosophers and dramatists... the foundations of Democracy in America...the Transcendentalists and contemporary writers...issues of slavery, prejudice, women's right, civil rights, human rights. We wrote papers and formulated thesis arguments. These things alone would constitute an interesting educational experience. But this is not all we learned. We learned that these were not just texts to be read, but ideas to live by. We learned about the power of words to harm or to help. We learned how to listen, and how and when to speak up. We learned that our ideas and our opinions are important. We learned that each of us can make a difference in our lives, in our community, in the world. We learned these things not only from these texts and from our teachers but from each other

Humanity in Perspective 2006 Graduation Speaker

There is growing interest in the application of literature to enrich the lives of economically and educationally disadvantaged individuals (Freedman, 2004). The Clemente Course in the Humanities (Riechers, 2000) developed by Earl Shorris is one of the first examples of this approach. The eight-month interdisciplinary course in poetry, logic, art, history, and moral philosophy described in Shorris's book *Riches for the Poor* (1997) has been adapted and implemented at numerous locations in the United States and abroad with a goal of fifty such programs in the coming years. According to Shorris, the intensive study of the humanities is an effective way to move people out of poverty and into community engagement and meaningful work.

How successful is the course in achieving this goal? Gathering evidence to answer this question is not easy. It is often difficult to track down participants in the courses, many of whom lead unstable lives with no permanent address or phone number. Shorris reports a preliminary evaluation in the Appendix to his first book, *New American Blues: A Journey through Poverty to Democracy* (Norton, 1996). Only half (55%) of the students were able to complete the course the first time he offered it, leaving a sample of

seventeen individuals for the pre-and-post-course assessment. The findings indicated there were modest gains in the student's self-esteem and use of cognitive strategies. However, most of the change scores were not statistically significant and absent comparative data from a group of individuals who were not able to participate in the course or were enrolled in an alternative program, these results are best viewed as provisional.

Slightly better evidence is available from a class in the humanities offered by faculty at Stanford University to groups of fifteen to twenty female addicts and ex-convicts who have been placed in a residential (Hope House) drug and alcohol treatment program (Satz & Reich, 2004). The Clemente-derived course offered at Hope House focuses on classic texts with an emphasis on political and social issues. Follow-up evidence from the women who participated in this program revealed that approximately 70% remained drug free and out of prison, a value that the authors describe as "far better than the national average."

The most direct attempt to investigate this issue is a program ambitiously known as Changing Lives Through Literature (Kane & Waxler, 1995). It is designed as a sentencing alternative for high-risk offenders with a large number of prior convictions, individuals not often responsive to conventional recidivism reduction techniques and thus a formidable group with whom to assess the experience of reading and discussing major works of literature. The program is restricted to offenders who express a willingness to participate in lieu of a jail sentence. The average number of prior convictions for the first two groups of male participants was 18.4 per person.

The program involves intensive reading and group discussions of contemporary literature, including works such as Bank's *The Affliction*, Dickey's *Deliverance*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, London's *Sea Wolf*, Mailer's *An American Dream*, and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The discussion sessions take place every other week for two hours. Robert Waxler (1997), one of its founders, suggests that

...offenders often commit criminal acts because they operate from a value system that gives priority to emotions and primal instinct, rather than to reason and critical thinking. We need to challenge that single-minded value system by using novels and short stories that unfold the complexity and diversity of character and human consciousness.

In a study of the first four groups of offenders, the recidivism rate of 32 men who completed the course was compared with a matched group of 40 probationers who were not exposed to any aspect of the program (Jaroura & Krumholz, 1998). An analysis of follow up criminal records indicated that only 6 of the 32 men in the reading group (18.8%) were convicted on new charges after completing the program. In the comparison group, 18 of the 40 men (45%), three times more than the reading group, were convicted on new charges during this period.

While these differences are important, it is not entirely clear they can be attributed to the *specific* literary works that were read or to the reading experience itself. The differences could also be due to the group discussions, or the contact the offenders had with each other, as well as with the rotating group leaders who consisted of a college professor, probation officer, and a judge.

Moreover, the attempt to match the groups was not successful, as those in the reading group had more prior convictions and were rated as more motivated to "make changes in their lives" than members of the comparison group. Without further tests that include a matched control or randomly selected group of offenders who read *non-literary* materials, these factors cannot be ruled out as possible explanations for the initial findings.

Current Study

Following in the tradition of these programs, the current study was designed to examine the effects of a college level course in the humanities for individuals in two quite different settings. The course, known as Humanity in Perspective (HIP), has been offered for the past five years by the Oregon Council of Humanities (OCH) in

collaboration with Reed College to economically and educationally disadvantaged individuals in the Portland metropolitan area. Last year the program was also introduced to a group of incarcerated inmates at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution (EOCI), a medium-security adult male correctional facility in Pendleton, Oregon.

Like other Clemente courses, HIP seeks to provide the knowledge and intellectual skills that will foster significant changes in the lives of the participants and thereby, prepare them for a fuller participation in their current and, in the case of the inmates, eventual civic, economic, and political life. It is based on the conviction that all individuals, no matter what their life histories or economic circumstances, can learn to live better lives once they have the opportunity to explore some of the fundamental questions of human existence through the great literature and ideas of the past and present.

In Portland the course is taught by faculty from the Reed College Humanities Program. The program is open to all qualifying individuals without the burden of tuition, childcare, or transportation costs. In Pendleton the course is taught by faculty from nearby academic institutions and is open to inmates who have completed all the available General Education Courses that are given at EOCI, an institution with a strong commitment to education. In both settings the cooperation of partner agencies and academic institutions is critical to the success of the program.

The Course

The HIP course is a two-semester study of college level humanities classics modeled on the humanities course required of all Reed College freshman. In the Fall semester students read key ancient Greek works drawn from texts in history (Thucydides), philosophy (Aristotle & Plato), poetry (Tyrtaeus & Sappho), and drama (Sophocles & Euripides). In the Spring Semester readings are drawn from more contemporary texts including Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, Martin Luther King, and Toni Morrison.

In Portland, the class meets in the evenings two nights a week from September through March, while at the prison, the class meets twice a week with an additional 2-hour study hall. Preparation for class is essential and students are expected to participate in class discussion and complete 4 writing assignments per term (8 for the year). Throughout the course four questions central to the study of the humanities are examined:

- The relationship between an individual and his or her community, the duties that the individual has to the community, and the rights that community should protect.
- The nature of love and desire, the ideal of good or proper love, the conflict between love and various social obligations, such as parents and children, and ideals of beauty.
- The relationship between power and justice, definitions of justice, and the use of the language of justice to hide the exercise of power.
- The role of knowledge in virtuous actions, what one needs to know to be virtuous, and how central knowledge is to being virtuous.

Method

Subjects

The final design of the study included two groups—a group of individuals enrolled in the HIP course in Portland, another in the HIP course at EOIC. Fifteen (15) individuals completed the two semester HIP course in Portland, while thirteen (13) did at EOIC. Due to confidentiality concerns, very little demographic information is available about the individuals in these groups. However, as a result of admission requirements, it is known that the participants were drawn from economically and educationally

disadvantaged segments of the population and that they had few, if any, opportunities to move beyond their current circumstances.

Procedure

- The principal evaluation tool was a pre-course and post-course survey completed by the individuals in each group. The survey consisted of three sections, each of which was designed to assess the impact of the course in meeting its objectives.
- Section 1 of the Survey listed several ways a person can engage in literary and civic activities; students were asked to check those in which they had participated. Examples included joining a book club, speaking with their children about a book they were reading, attending a community meeting, enrolling in a college class, or going to a library or museum.
- Section 2 asked the participants to rate their ability to perform skills relevant to the course goals. Examples included critical thinking, writing, verbal ability, self esteem and family literary activities.
- Section 3 asked the students to consider three questions concerning each of the four central questions of the HIP course—duty to community, nature of love and desire, the relationship of power to justice and leading a virtuous live. The students were asked to define each of these broad themes, then to state if the concept was important to them, and how it influenced their life.

Results

Survey Analysis

The student's responses on the post-course survey were compared with those on the pre-course survey. A numerical value was assigned to the response given to each question. Responses on Section 1 were assigned the score of 1 if the students reported they had engaged or said they intended to engage in the activity or 0 if they had not. The

questions on Section 2, where there were 3 alternatives were assigned a score of 1 for “Not at All,” 2 for “Sometimes,” and 3 for “Often.” The open-ended questions in Section 3 were coded in terms of the overall quality of the answer, ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (excellent). Paired t-tests were employed to determine if the observed differences (means between the pre-and-post course scores) were statistically significant.

Section 1

There were 14 questions that were identical on the pre-and-post course survey for each group. They included questions concerning participation cultural activities, civic participation, formal educational activities, and self-directed education. Unlike the group in Portland the mean score on the 14 post-course questions-in-common for the group of inmates at EOCI group was significantly ($P < .02$) *greater* than it was on the pre-course survey. That was the only statistically significant evidence of change on this section of the survey.

Section 2

On this portion of the survey the participants were asked a set of questions concerning 5 general topic areas—critical thinking, writing ability, verbal ability, self-esteem and family literary activity. In Portland the HIP course was associated with a number of positive changes as reflected in the student’s responses to these questions. The post-course scores on the verbal ability and one of the critical thinking questions (change of opinion) were significantly ($p < .05$) greater than the pre-course scores. In addition, the average self-esteem score (across six sub-questions) was significantly ($p = .02$) higher on the post-course survey than it was on the pre-course survey.

There were also notable gains for the participants in the HIP program at EOCI. An examination of individual questions revealed that the average post-course scores on the Writing Ability, Self-Esteem Question 4 (abilities and personal goals), and Self-Esteem Question 5 (impact of ideas on community) scores were significantly greater ($p = .01$, $.008$, and $.02$, respectively) than they were on the pre-course survey. In contrast, the

average post-course scores on the Critical Thinking Question 1 (question or disagree with media facts/opinions), Self-Esteem Question 1 (satisfaction with self), and Self-Esteem Question 3 (professional goals) were significantly *lower* ($p = .02, .04, \text{ and } .04$, respectively) than they were on the pre-course survey. A newfound awareness of their own limited education and slow progress toward meeting their intellectual capacities may account for these results.

Section 3

In the final section of the survey the students in the two HIP courses were asked to respond to three questions about the four broad themes of course—duty to community, nature of love & desire, relationship of power to justice and leading a virtuous life. Taken together the average score of the HIP Portland group across all four topic areas was significantly ($p = .0009$) greater on the post-course survey than it was on the pre-course survey. Further, an examination of the separate topic areas indicated that the average score on the post course Virtue questions was significantly ($p = .001$) higher than it was on the pre-course survey.

In contrast, there was no significant overall (across all four sets of general topic areas) difference between the average score on the pre-and post-course surveys for the HIP EOCI group. However, a closer examination of the specific themes revealed that the average score on the post-course Power questions was significantly ($p = .002$) greater than it had been on the pre-course survey. However, none of the differences on the Community, Virtue, and Love sections of the survey for the HIP EOCI participants.

General Discussion

It is evident that the HIP courses in Portland and the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution exerted considerable influence on the students. Not every measure reflected this influence nor were the two groups affected in the same ways. But taken together, the overwhelming impression one gets from examining these data is that the experience of reading and discussing some of the great works of literature went a long way toward

meeting the educational goals of the HIP Program and fostering a number of significant changes in the lives of the students.

This conclusion should be tempered somewhat by the fact that with the exception of the quality of answers to the conceptual questions on Section 3 of the Survey, we had no direct measure of the behavioral changes the survey attempted to measure. The limitations of self-reported data are most clearly evident for the inmates who could only describe what they planned to do once they were released from prison. In addition, the samples were small and there was considerable variation between the students and settings in which the course was offered. For instance, the two HIP groups were not evenly matched, especially in terms of educational background. Unlike the students in Portland, most at EOCI had enrolled in GED and other education courses offered at the institution. As a result, they had recent educational experiences that were directly assessed in the survey, whereas many of the students in Portland had been out of school for several years or had never participated in any non-school educational programs.

The inmates were also highly motivated to enroll in the class, while it was difficult to recruit students for the course in Portland. Furthermore, class attendance at EOCI was required and inmates were always escorted to the classroom by a guard. In contrast, the students in Portland often had to drive or take the bus a considerable distance to reach the classroom and, on occasion, missed the evening class because of travel or personal constraints. These difficulties may account for the differing course graduation rates between the two groups: the rate for the HIP course in Portland, over its five year history, was 41%, while it was 86% in the first year the course was offered at EOCI. There were also differences between the instructors, especially in the themes they tended to emphasize during the class sessions.

In combination, these differences may explain why the course did not have the same effects in the two settings. That is, gains on one measure by participants in one of the groups were not necessarily associated with comparable gains by the students in the

other group. As a result of the several differences between the two HIP courses, the focus of this analysis is on *within* group changes during the period the course was taught, rather than differences *between* the groups.

HIP Portland

To illustrate, the HIP Portland group displayed a noticeable improvement in their self-esteem and verbal ability scores, as well as a greater willingness to change their opinion on issues of personal and political significance. They also demonstrated a marked improvement in the quality of their responses to questions on the major themes of the course. This was most clearly reflected in their answers to the post-course questions on the topic of Virtue. In a word, at the end of the course the students in Portland were able to think more clearly and with greater insight about its major substantive themes. These changes were associated with greater confidence in their writing ability and skill in thinking more critically about these issues.

These findings are supported by the student's comments on the course evaluation forms given at the end of the Fall and Spring semesters. For example, several of the students reported the readings led them to rethink their former beliefs or clarify those they had never fully articulated before.

Plato's apology gave me a fresh view on how the human mind reasons, rationalizes, and views the world.

Thoreau shows us how important it is to stand up for your beliefs; the power of the individual is the greatest tool available.

Many also recognized the relevance of the HIP Program's major themes in their daily life.

Prior to this class I didn't realize I was missing the relationship between the individual and the community.

I now realize how important education is to my daily actions.

HIP offers students not just texts to be read, but ideas to live by.

The class discussions played a major role in contributing to the impact of the program.

It gave me the confidence to continue my education and give back to my community.

I liked the fact that everyone was from a different background—it gave different perspectives not often found in college classes.

Finally, in terms of the overall value of the HIP program the students described many positive effects.

HIP was an amazing experience. I will never forget it. It has made me a more responsible citizen in my community.

The class was extremely useful to my development at a time in my life when I really needed it.

HIP has afforded me the opportunity to become part of the intellectual community and I am currently using this knowledge to make a difference in the lives of “at risk” youth.

Additional evidence supports the conclusion that HIP is achieving its objective of encouraging civic and literary engagement on the part of its graduates. Of the fifty-six graduates of the Portland HIP program, approximately twenty attend one of two monthly reading and discussion groups that examine both classic and contemporary texts. Both groups attend two to three public readings and lectures together annually. One HIP graduate is currently designing a HIP graduate newsletter, another recently won the Mayor’s Spirit of Portland award for community service, and seven are currently enrolled in four-year degree programs.

HIP EOCI

The course also had a positive impact on the students at the prison but in somewhat different areas. For instance, unlike the group in Portland, the inmates in the prison displayed a significant overall positive change on their desire to engage in literary and

civic activities assessed in Section 1 of the survey. They also reported positive changes on two of the six self-esteem measures—measuring up to abilities/goals and community impact of ideas. Yet on two of the self-esteem measures—satisfaction with life and setting professional goals, they reported *lower* levels of self-esteem. Perhaps this unexpected finding can be attributed to the natural outcome of exposure to an intellectual world that both challenged and called into question the course their life had taken. EOCI's superintendent reported that similar short-term decreases in self-esteem and satisfaction have commonly been noted after other cognitive programs at correctional facilities, particularly in such programming focused on victim empathy. HIP's focus on open-minded dialogue and exercises involving inhabiting different fictional or historical characters and exploring their motivations might easily have similar impacts.

The students at the prison also reported a positive improvement in their writing skills but not in the areas of verbal ability or critical thinking. Still they displayed notable gains in the overall quality of their answers to the Section 3 questions concerning the major course themes. This was most clearly shown on the questions pertaining to Power and to a lesser extent on the questions about Virtue. There was also an improvement in the average score of all four areas taken together but it did not reach the level of statistical significance.

The inmates also confirmed these findings by the positive comments they made on the Fall and Spring evaluation forms. For instance, in terms of the class readings the inmates described the following kinds of effects.

Antigone challenged my thinking of moral law vs. man-made.

Plato's Apology flipped the coin for some/most of us by allowing us to be jurists— instead of the accused.

An improvement in their self-reported writing ability was one of the most notable findings for the students at the EOCl.

I'm a much more organized writer and I take notes when I read now.

I learned how to form and structure an essay by putting evidence to support my paper.

My structure and ability to support my arguments with facts has blossomed!

The classroom discussions of abstract philosophical concepts were probably a novel experience for most of the students at the prison and it was clear from their comments that the discussions contributed a great deal to the impact of the course.

The class discussions were an increasingly free and safe forum for us to build some more sophisticated intellectual tools and understanding than many of us may have ever thought possible.

The discussions were an electrical current pumping through each individual making a complete circuit.

The discussions stayed in my head and prompted me to take the ideas and share them with my family.

The students in their overall appraisal of the course reaffirmed these comments.

The course was the only positive in this whole bad prison experience.

The class is what people need to want to learn and be better people. I know I am because of it.

During this class our minds were freed. That is something that will always be with us, and trust me, it can never be taken away.

While we recognize the limitations of the self-reported measures employed in the survey and the inability of the inmates to act on many of their stated intentions, our findings add to the growing body of research demonstrating the potential of classic and contemporary literature to influence people's lives. The Humanity in Perspective program appeared to lead to a number of intellectual and personal changes among individuals drawn from low-income communities of Portland, as well as inmate students in the prison. This latter finding is consistent with the results of the Changing Lives through Literature program and other educational programs that have been implemented with some success in other prison settings. Our results are also similar to those reported for the many applications of literary reading programs based on the Clemente model.

Reading great works of literature is not often considered among the foremost agents of change. It is rarely, if ever, employed by psychotherapists or those doing research on effective methods of behavior change. Yet many people report that it was a book that changed the course of their life (Canfield & Hendricks, 2006; Sabine & Sabine, 1983). This is most likely to occur when individuals are seeking a solution to a difficult personal problem. This might be the case for many of the individuals in both HIP classes most of whom were hoping to find a more fulfilling life and economically rewarding work.

The impact of a book on one's life can be attributed to a number of factors. Robert Waxler, one of the Changing Lives Through Literature founders, suggests that "...offenders often commit criminal acts because they operate from a value system that gives priority to emotions and primal instinct, rather than to reason and critical thinking. We need to challenge that single-minded value system by using novels and short stories that unfold the complexity and diversity of character and human consciousness."

According to Waxler literature can achieve that goal by providing individuals an opportunity to engage in serious reflection and sustained analysis of their values and behaviors. As one of the participants reported: "I started to see myself in him (the ship

captain in *Sea Wolf*) and I didn't like what I saw." In addition, our evidence suggests that many of the participants gained greater confidence in their own ability to confront real world problems. At the same time, the course appeared to lead many of them to a better understanding of their personality and future goals.

When taken together with the research of other investigators, our results suggest that organized programs of study and discussion of literary works can sometimes act as powerful agents of change. We believe these encounters offer numerous research and applied opportunities for promoting the intellectual and personal growth of individuals across a wide segment of the population.

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