

# Personal Agency as a Primary Focus of University-Community Engagement:

## A Case Study of Clemente Australia

*Jude Butcher, John O’Gorman and Peter Howard*

Jude Butcher, Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia;

John O’Gorman, School of Applied Psychology and Griffith Health Institute, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia;

Peter Howard, Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, Australian Catholic University, Sydney Australia

### Abstract

Clemente Australia is a collaboration of Australian Catholic University (ACU) with not-for-profit agencies, other universities and the broader community directed to developing and implementing a model for community-embedded, socially-supported university education. It involves people from backgrounds of disadvantage taking semester-length university courses in the humanities for credit.

The paper presents an integrative model explaining the development of personal agency through the Clemente Australia program. In terms of the model, Clemente Australia builds ideas of hope, meaning, and identity into the personal narratives of participants through reflection on their experiences in the program and the competencies and changed expectancies that these bring. This integrative model can both shed light upon participants’ reports of the program and suggest ways of making it more effective.

Data drawn from Clemente student case studies are analysed with respect to changes in personal agency and social inclusion to show how the model can be used as a lens for understanding the benefits of community-embedded, socially-supported university humanities education.

**Keywords:** *Clemente Australia; community engagement; personal agency; hope; personal narrative*



## **Introduction**

Universities through their community engagement programs and research are well positioned to make significant contributions to social change at local, national and international levels. Such contributions are based upon an approach to community engagement which is differentiated from community service and includes generating new knowledge about social issues and problems.

Engagement is a reciprocal process whereby communication is backed up, if possible, by interaction in ways that can effectively alter the way the problem is perceived by oneself and others. Genuine engagement moves beyond the level of mere service and allows the opportunity for societal response to help redefine the nature of the problem itself and perhaps forge new solutions (Sheehan, 2002, p. 136).

This change in perceptions includes changes in perceptions of ourselves as individuals. This change in perceptions of oneself is

integral to moving from a stance of service where the recipient is dependent upon services provided by another(s) to the process of engagement where both parties are involved with equal dignity and sense of agency in the engagement.

This paper shows how a commitment to personal agency as a foundation for university- community engagement has contributed to participants in the Clemente Australia program developing a new sense of efficacy, outcomes, and personal identity and meaning. The participants created life narratives, which expressed new goals and capabilities for personal and social wellbeing. The theory underpinning this personal agency approach within the Clemente Australia program has implications for the consideration and structuring of university- community engagement focused upon social change for enhancing personal and community wellbeing. The benefits of the integrative theory for understanding the journeys of participants in Clemente Australia are shown through the use of case study methodology and the analysis of a participant's self report data.

## **The Clemente Australia Program**

Clemente Australia is a collaboration of Australian Catholic University (ACU) with not-for-profit agencies, other universities and the broader community directed to developing and implementing a model for community-embedded, socially-supported university education (Howard, Butcher and Egan, 2010). The program seeks to assist individuals in making personal life choices through participating in education and fostering community connectedness. It has evolved from a project begun in New York by Earl Shorris (1997, 2000), who proposed that tertiary-level education in the humanities could assist socially marginalised people in their breaking away from cycles of poverty and homelessness.

In Clemente Australia, students typically attend a two-hour lecture and a two-hour 'shared learning' tutorial session each week of a 12-week university approved course. The lectures are taken by university staff selected on the basis of their scholarship, their teaching capabilities and their willingness to engage with homeless people in a

community setting. The shared learning sessions are staffed by volunteers from the business and corporate sectors, known as 'Learning Partners' who work with the students. For each community site, there is a community-based coordinator who responds to the social support needs of students, liaises with the university academic coordinator in managing the everyday issues related to the program, and oversees the weekly lecturing and learning partner sessions. Reflective practice is a structured component of scheduled classes and learning partner sessions, providing conversational opportunities for students to conceptualise and synthesise their thoughts and ideas (Howard et al., 2008). Such purposeful reflection enables the students to share their life experiences with others and to locate the thinking provoked by their studies in a personal context.

Students enrolling in Clemente Australia must express within a personal interview with Clemente staff a desire to learn, a willingness to commit initially to a 12 week program, a literacy level sufficient to read a newspaper; and some degree of ongoing stability in their lives.

Since its inception in 2003, Clemente Australia has enrolled 852 students, almost 10% of whom have now completed four units and been awarded a Certificate of Liberal Studies by ACU. Core findings to emerge from ongoing reviews of the program for the participating students show: increases in self-esteem, confidence and personal development; desire for increased social participation with others; improved relationships with family and friends; overcoming what had often been an alien experience of education; increased community participation; seeing new possibilities and taking positive steps for their futures (Mission Australia, 2007).

### **Theorising Clemente Australia**

Clemente Australia has been theorised about in various ways since it began. Among these have been (a) conceiving it as an exercise in empowerment or engagement, (b) disturbing the taken-for granted habits and dispositions of participants (the habitus in Bourdieu's terms) (Grenfell, 2007), and (c) as a means of conferring hope (O'Gorman,

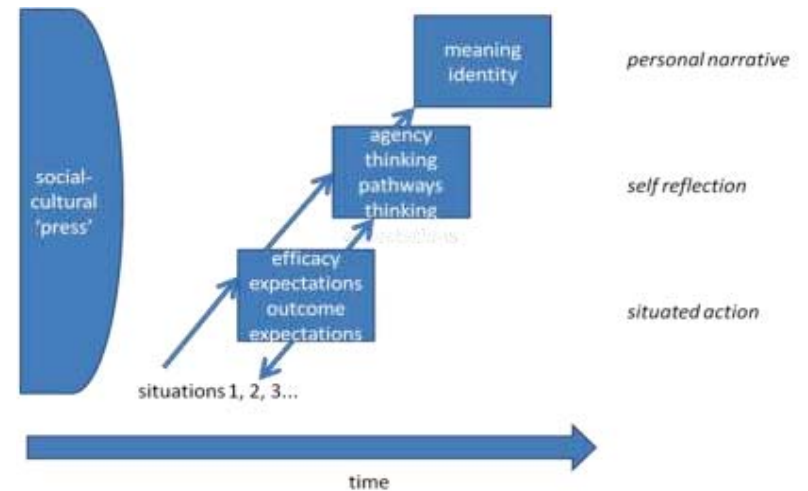
Butcher, & Howard, 2012). All have merit and we have sought to integrate them in a model of what might be happening in Clemente that draws heavily on the *social cognitive theory* of Albert Bandura (1977, 2006) and adds, as a focus, *hope theory* as developed by Charles Snyder (1995), and the idea of *personal narrative* as discussed by Dan McAdams (1993, 2008).

In the model, we assume that people attempt to make sense of the world around them and their place in it. This 'sense making' takes the form of the story that individuals tell themselves about themselves, their personal narratives, and is constructed and reconstructed on the basis of their actions in various situations and reflections on those actions by themselves and others. Clemente helps shape a personal narrative for participants that is positive and future oriented. It does this by stimulating action and self-reflection which changes expectations about what they, as individuals, can do and the effects their actions have. These expectations about behaviour in the everyday situations that are part of the program lead in time to generalisations of

beliefs participants have about a sense of agency and pathways to achieving outcomes and in turn to changes in the personal narrative.

Figure 1 is an attempt to bring these ideas together in a model of what is happening in Clemente Australia. There are three intra-individual processes that are considered critical: situated action, self-reflection, and the personal narrative. More will be said about these subsequently, but it is important to note that they are bounded in the figure by two contextual factors. One is time. Changing behaviour, expectations, and personal narratives all take time, and the pace of change is idiosyncratic. Less experience may be required for one person than for another because gains need to consolidate before further change is possible and this differs among participants, and gains can be lost as the result of new experiences specific to individuals. These processes occur in time and so this appears as a dimension in the model.

**Figure 1. A model of processes proposed for understanding Clemente.**



The second contextual factor is what is labelled in the figure as ‘social-cultural press’. The processes assumed to be at work in Clemente are located in the individual but are influenced by what the participants in Clemente see about them, their physical environment and the people in it, and importantly too by social norms and cultural practices of

families, workplaces, and communities. This social world affects expectations, self-reflections, and the personal narratives that people construct. We use the term 'press', borrowed from Henry Murray (1938), to characterise the social world as it is and as it is perceived to be by the individual, which may not always be one and the same. Press conveys the idea that it is not a neutral factor but one that exerts a force that can support or impede change.

The critical processes in the model take place at different levels, with one level scaffolding the next, which begins somewhat later on the time dimension. The first level involves what is termed here as "situated action", and is based on Bandura's theory of human agency (Bandura, 2006). Participants, in the course of the 12-week program have to respond in a number of situations, designated s1, s2, s3 and so on in the figure. These might be getting to the first session of the program or returning for the next, but in time will involve, among other things, reading a quantity of material or submitting an assessment, or venturing an opinion in a group, or disclosing aspects of one's life to

another over a cup of coffee. These relatively simple behaviours can be problematic because of expectations participants have about the likely consequences of their behaviour on themselves and others (the outcome expectancies in the model) or about their capacity to actually carry them out (their efficacy expectations) or expectations that come from their own previous experiences in similar situations. A supportive environment and exposure to others actually performing successfully can lead to successful performance and with it a change in expectations. What might be thought of as small changes accumulate over time. A university course provides a rich variety of challenges and opportunities for new learning that can be graduated in their difficulty by lecturing staff and supported in their accomplishment by learning partners as well as the ongoing social supports provided by community agencies.

The next level involves self-reflection, where sense is made of new experiences in the light of previous ones. It is based partly on Bandura's social cognitive theory (2006) and partly on Snyder's hope

theory (1995). Important here are the causal attributions that people make in accounting for their actions, including whether outcomes are attributed to characteristics of oneself or of others. Success can be attributed to the actions of others (e.g., soft marking by the staff member, the good ideas of the learning partner) or to oneself ('I did work hard on that'). In the same way, failure can be blamed on adopting a poor strategy or on personal lack of ability. Reflection needs to involve correct attributions from current behaviour. Getting the attributions right is assisted by feedback from other participants, staff, and learning partners whose judgments come to be respected in the course of the program. Important too in reflection is goal setting, projecting what might be possible in the future from what has happened in the past. As efficacy expectations build for behaviour in a given situation, then 'tougher' goals can be set or extended further in time ('I'll try for a credit on the next assignment'; 'Once I have completed this course I will come back next semester').

As expectations broaden across a range of discrete situations, academic and interpersonal, a changed outlook on self and the social world can develop. Bandura maintains that outcome and efficacy expectations necessarily entail specific situations. One may feel efficacious in one context but not necessarily in another. Reflection allows experiences to be aggregated and broader beliefs to be formed that transcend particular situations. These broader beliefs or ways of thinking have the same characteristics as expectations in Snyder's theory about agency thinking and pathways thinking. Agency thinking refers to 'a sense of successful determination in meeting goals in the past, present, and future', and pathways to 'a sense of being able to generate successful plans to meet goals' (Snyder, 1995 pp. 570-571). Together, agency and pathways thinking constitute hope, a disposition of mind in which there is a positive orientation to the future and in which setting goals and forming plans makes sense because there is a conviction that ways will be found to meet them. We see the development of this disposition as the result of the accumulation of



successful experiences and the change in expectations that these produce. Hope is the culmination of the first and second levels and vital to the third in which the writing and re-writing of personal narrative takes place. This third level is based on McAdams' theorising (1997).

Meaning (why the world is as it is) and identity (who I am) are constructed on the basis of past and present experiences, social-cultural press, and conversation with others. Conversation is important in hearing what parts of the story sound like and in recognising consistencies that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. The result is captured in the story of self -- the personal narrative. This is not simply a read-out from the memory banks but a synthesis and interpretation of events aimed at organising a reasonably coherent view of the world. Not all available information is included, some information receives more weight in the account, and sub-plots are used to maintain themes that seem important but do not presently fit. The personal narrative is updated from time to time with, for example, major change in life circumstances or transition from one stage of life to the next.

Clemente presents an opportunity for participants to revise their personal narratives in a radical way. The key to this is hope - in the form of agency - and pathways thinking, which can reframe past experience and reinforce positive themes at the expense of negative ones. Through an accumulation of experiences, Clemente provides opportunity for new meaning and enhanced identity in a new edition of the personal narrative.

We make no claim for great novelty in this model, which brings together existing theories to provide an integrative account of what is happening in Clemente. We rely on evidence for these component theories as support for integrating them into the model. There is considerable empirical work supporting social cognitive theory as it is applied in an educational context. Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) used social cognitive theory to model vocational choice and, in a series of studies, Lent and colleagues (e.g., Lent et al., 2001; Lent, Lopez, Lopez, & Sheu, 2008) have provided data in support of the central constructs in the model of self- efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting in

predicting choice, persistence, and performance in university students. The meta-analysis of over 100 studies by Robbins et al. (2004) of psychosocial factors predicting performance and retention in tertiary education settings points to the importance of self-efficacy and goal setting in these situations. Although Clemente provides an academic learning environment, it is primarily focused upon enhancing well-being through a community based university experience. It is relevant, however, that key constructs used in the Clemente model are supported by empirical work on what is important in these settings.

Hope theory is not as well supported as social cognitive theory, understandably so given the shorter time since it was first published. There are, however, studies that support its relevance in academic settings. Measures of hope, as Snyder conceives it, have been shown in longitudinal studies with adolescent samples in the United States of America and Australia to predict academic achievement, emotional well-being, and general life satisfaction (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006). A longitudinal study of university

students by Rand, Martin and Shea (2011) showed that Snyder's hope measure predicted both performance and life satisfaction better than a measure of optimism did. What has not been tested is the idea that hope mediates the effects of efficacy and outcome expectations in determining outcomes in educational and vocational settings, as implied by our model of Clemente.

What research on hope theory to date does show is that hope is not easily changed, which is consistent with it being a disposition of mind rather than a short-term emotional state. A recent meta-analysis (Weis & Speridakos, 2012) of 27 studies directed to increasing hope in people in a range of clinical and community settings indicated that in general these interventions produced only small changes (of the order of a quarter of a standard deviation) and point to the importance of being cautious in claims about increasing hope. Studies undertaken in group settings and involving community samples rather than special groups or clinical samples returned best results. The authors raised the possibility that hope may be an effect rather than a cause: good

outcomes increase hope rather than the other way round. In the model proposed here, hope is the product of situated action over a period of time and self- reflection on the changes in expectations that it produces. Increases in hope in turn energise changes to the personal narrative that Clemente leads to. Hope grows, but only slowly, in a shared and supportive environment through personal action and reflection upon it.

As for the third component of the model, the idea of personal narrative is now widely used in qualitative research in the social sciences (e.g., Czarianwaska, 2004; Orbucks, 1997). Studies by King and colleagues (2000) of life transitions and by Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) of recovery from traumatic events indicate the importance of rehearsing life experiences in the form of personal narratives for self-development and well-being. The causal link between increasing hope and change in personal narrative has, however, yet to be demonstrated. In attempting to build a model for Clemente Australia, we are seeking to achieve three things. First, we are seeking to simplify what is a complex set of processes so that all participants in Clemente Australia - students,

staff, learning partners, and community members - can have a better understanding of it and talk about it in a shared language. Second, we want an account that sensitises us to the processes that lead to change, so that all involved can be more deliberate, more aware about what is happening in the course of the program. Third, we need an account that can guide and develop a more analytical examination of the program. From the outset, evaluation has been part of Clemente Australia, though this has been more in terms of process, where feedback is sought from participants through surveys or interviews. A useful theoretical model of Clemente Australia is one that points to particular factors that need to be studied as it unfolds in the lives of participants.

### **Applying the Model**

The integrated model of Clemente Australia provides a basis for understanding student outcomes identified in research studies to date (Howard & Butcher, in press). These outcomes include:

- improvement in sense of self and well-being;
- change in bodily comportment;
- improvement in social engagement;
- new skills and knowledge;
- positive attitudes to learning; and
- developing hope and belief in one's future.

Equally important, however, the model provides a lens for understanding what is involved in each Clemente student's journey. A case study in the form of self report data from John, a Clemente Australia graduate, from welfare recipient to active participant in society provides an illustration. The case study provides comprehensive and rich data provided by a particular Clemente Australia graduate with no structuring by researchers. This methodology allows for the different perspectives or explanations incorporated in the integrated model for Clemente Australia to be examined from within the rich, un-structured reporting of the graduate. The case study provides a context for the analysis of the research data and the identification of salient factors in

the case study. John shared his story as a Clemente student at the 2009 launch of the St Vincent de Paul Society's annual door knock appeal for a Catholic Diocese. John's account of his story was then reported in the Society's publication, *The Record* (Lusty, 2009). John begins the account of his story with a statement of what he expects to accomplish in the coming four months:

*'I've been a student in the Clemente Program, and next week I will be commencing my fourth and final semester. So, all going well, I will obtain a Certificate in Liberal Studies in four months time.'*

John's account provides important information about himself, his journey and his expectations. This information is presented in Table 1 as a triptych of three columns – John's initial life narrative, his transitional narrative and his new life narrative. A tabular presentation of the data as a triptych was chosen to convey the sense of a journey and to see the data as a total set rather than directing our attention to the individual elements of the data. Art works have been presented as triptychs and in

this sense the triptych in this paper is intended to show how this story is John’s art work, the re-defining of his life. All data in the triptych are taken directly from John’s account of his story.

**Table 1: The changing personal narrative of John, a Clemente student.**

Initial life narrative	Transitional life narrative	New life narrative
Spending money on drug habit	Mum told me about the Clemente program ... I decided to investigate	Recovered drug addict
	I’ve now been clean for several years and I now feel my life is finally getting back on track	I let down my wife and children – terribly I let down my parents and siblings, and I let down my friends.
Hit rock bottom	Taking stock of my life	I won’t go back there again
Drug habit out of hand, completely out of hand	Getting life back on track	Everybody does have skills and abilities
Back to Australia and with the wrong people	Pretty tough journey	Gain confidence in “our” skills
Foul of the law	Ready to go back to work	Invited me - Helping to teach senior citizens to use the internet
It is very hard bumping into friends...and having to admit you haven’t got a job – that you can’t even manage to support yourself. It can be quite soul destroying.	Look elsewhere for work	St Vincent de Paul Society – regular position volunteering in their office... It’s not paid work, but it is work!
	(CA) provides structure to my life. It’s important to have something to do with your time, or else you fall into a hole.	I feel confident about the future
	(CA) increases your self-esteem. You start to feel like you’re more than just a bum.	I finally recommenced paid employment... it’s a big step in the right direction.
	(CA) speaks to my stability, my determination and my commitment.	I’ve gained much from the course. It has truly turned my life around

	You start to build up a network of people who know you and who know your abilities. And that’s important!	My six year old son can now get to school and tell his classmates about his dad’s job.
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The data across the triptych shows John’s movement or journey from dependency and low sense of self through reflection, structure in one’s life, opportunity for new networks of people, increased self esteem and new self knowledge to new identity, confidence and commitment, formal role and participation in community, family pride, and public statement of his story.

The triptych shows John establishing himself anew with his new life narrative acknowledging how he drew upon the influence and support of key people including his mother, friends, other significant people and his son as well as upon the structure of the Clemente Australia program.

John in his initial life narrative expresses a lack of personal agency and hope with his “drug habit out of hand, completely out of hand” and the “soul destroying” impact on himself of admitting “you haven’t got a

job-you can't even support yourself". He had been unable to meet the public expectations of the social cultural "press" which reinforced his being unable to change this life narrative.

John's engagement in Clemente Australia sees him transitioning from the first life narrative to a new life narrative in which he acknowledges the impact of his first life narrative on his wife, children, parents and siblings. In the new life narrative John expresses his new sense of self, his skills and abilities, his confidence in being able to maintain this narrative and how to not "go back there again". The new life narrative conveys John's new sense of himself and his "meaning", purpose and role in life. He is also engaging in a new, positive and constructive way with the social-cultural "press". Integral to this new life narrative is John's positive sense of efficacy and the goals or outcomes he has, is and will achieve, and an awareness of and involvement in new pathways.

John's transitional life narrative comes from his mother offering a new pathway for him to address the impact of the social-cultural

"press". John's reflection upon his first life narrative and the lack of meaning he was finding in himself and in his life saw him developing a new sense of outcomes that could be achieved through quite different pathways. John lived through this transitional life narrative in the context of his experiences of Clemente Australia, with the new social-cultural "press" from fellow students, learning partners, lecturers and community agency people. From here he developed a new sense of meaning and identity which saw him as an expression of his new life narrative speaking publicly about his journey, the Clemente Australia program, and his invitation to all to be either a participant in or supporter of the program.

## **Conclusion**

The triptych provided a framework for both presenting John's personal account of his journey through Clemente Australia in terms of his initial, transitional and new life narratives and showing the changes he reported in terms of personal efficacy, agency, meaning, identity and

hope. The narratives also showed differences over time in the social cultural “press” and the ways in which John engaged with it. John was able to effect these changes in life narratives for himself through Clemente Australia, a university-community engagement program of community-embedded, socially-supported university education.

The analysis of John’s story provided a case study validation of the integrated model of personal agency as a framework for understanding the impact of Clemente Australia. The wider applicability of this framework, including its role in understanding why the template has or has not been applicable to some participants, will be studied across other cases.

Furthermore, the structure of a triptych can be used for framing changes for people and communities which occur through university-community engagement programs which are based upon a central commitment to the personal agency of the participants with the community engagement contributing to the social-cultural press which assists participants in creating their new life narratives.

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