Five Traits of Jesuit Education

Robert A. Mitchell, SJ

From Boston College Magazine, 1988

The first characteristic of Jesuit institutions is a passion for quality. Excellence is important. This does not mean that Jesuit colleges have never had inferior programs, but it does mean that the institution—be it agricultural school, engineering, business or liberal arts college—has, in every age, sought good education, respected by those who know the field. Jesuit institutions respond well to a remark of Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach: only excellence is apostolic. Because of this, the schools set demanding standards for both students and faculty.

A second characteristic of Jesuit colleges and universities is the study of the humanities and the sciences no matter what specializations may be offered. These institutions want their students to be able to think and speak and write; to know something about history, literature, and art; to have their minds expanded by philosophy and theology; and to have some understanding of math and sciences. They want students prepared for living as well as for working—to have a liberal education, if you will. The kind of education I suggest is even more important today than it has ever been, despite the demand for increased technological training in today’s world. We need engineers who have read Shakespeare and computer scientists who understand the history and roots of our civilization.

A third characteristic of Jesuit education has been a preoccupation with questions of ethics and values for both the personal and professional lives of graduates. Family values, personal integrity, and business ethics have always been important. In recent years, moreover, this characteristic has taken on added dimensions. Spurred by papal encyclicals and the strong social teaching of recent popes and our own American bishops, Jesuit institutions have tried to focus attention on the great questions of justice and fairness that confront our age: economic problems, racism, and unemployment in our own country; peace and war and the proliferation of arms; and poverty and oppression in the third world—to cite some examples. These are not easy questions, nor do they have any certain and universally accepted answers. But Jesuit institutions today feel compelled by their tradition to raise these questions for their students, not through sloganeering and political maneuvering, but in a way that is proper for higher education: through learning, research, reflection, and imagination.

A fourth characteristic of Jesuit education is the importance it gives to religious experience. It does this best, I suspect, for its Catholic students. However, especially in this ecumenical age, it tries to open this horizon for all its students, whatever their religious persuasion. Religious experience is important and it needs to be integrated into the education process so that a student has the opportunity to grow in both knowledge and faith, in both belief and learning; indeed belief can often sharpen and focus a mind. Prayer and liturgy are no threat to knowledge; they help form an education community in the fullest sense of the word.

Finally, related to this last is another characteristic of Jesuit education. It is person-centered. No matter how large or complex the institution, the individual is important and given as much personal attention as humanly possible, both in and out of the classroom. I believe that the reason for this specific attention to the individual is that for many in these institutions, teaching or administration is much more than a job—indeed, more than a profession. It is a vocation. This is true not only for members of religious orders but for so many lay men and women of different religious backgrounds who look on their work of teaching or administration as sharing in God’s work, as ministry to others.
Precis of Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach

Sharon J. Korth

A previously unpublished summary of the document developed by the International Center for Jesuit Education, Rome, 1993

What Is the Goal?

Ignatian education strives to develop men and women of competence, conscience, and compassion. It is a collaborative process between and among faculty and students that fosters personal and cooperative study, discovery, creativity, and reflection to promote lifelong learning and action in service to others.

The Ignatian pedagogical paradigm is a practical teaching framework that is consistent with and effective in communicating the Ignatian values and worldview. Faculty, regardless of discipline, can utilize this approach so that their teaching is academically sound and at the same time formative of persons for others.

What Is the Process?

Ignatian pedagogy is a model that promotes the goal of Jesuit education, speaks to the teaching-learning process, addresses the faculty-student relationship, and has practical meaning and application for the classroom. Similar to the process of guiding others in the Spiritual Exercises, faculty accompany students in their intellectual, spiritual, and emotional development. They do this by creating the conditions, laying the foundations, and providing the opportunities for the continual interplay of the student's experience, reflection, and action to occur. Throughout the process it is important that faculty be sensitive to their own experience, attitudes, and opinions, lest they impose their own agenda on their students.

The Ignatian pedagogical process includes the following elements: context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. Through consideration of the factors and context of students' lives, faculty create an environment where students recollect their past experience and assimilate information from newly provided experiences. Faculty help students learn the skills and techniques of reflection, which shapes their consciousness, and they then challenge students to action in service to others. The evaluation process includes academic mastery as well as ongoing assessments of students' well-rounded growth as persons for others.

Context

Since human experience, always the starting point in Ignatian pedagogy, never occurs in a vacuum, we must know as much as we can about the actual context within which teaching and learning take place. We as faculty need to understand the world of our students, including ways in which family, friends, social pressures, politics, economics, media, and other realities impact them. For a relationship of authenticity and truth to flourish between faculty and student, there has to be built a mutual trust and respect that grows out of a continuing experience of the other as genuine companion in learning. We need to know how to create an atmosphere for learning where we help one another and work together with enthusiasm and generosity, attempting to model concretely in word and action the ideals we uphold for our students and ourselves.
Experience

Experience for Ignatius meant to “taste something internally,” which involves the whole person—mind, heart, and will—because without internal feeling joined to intellectual grasp, learning will not move a person to action. To enhance learning, we faculty should first create the conditions whereby students gather and recollect the material of their own experience in order to distill what they already understand in terms of facts, feelings, values, insights, and intuitions related to the subject matter at hand. Later we guide students in assimilating new information and further experience so that their knowledge will gain in completeness and truth. We select activities that take students beyond rote knowledge to the development of the more complex learning skills of understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Through an eclectic mix of direct activities (such as conversations and discussions, simulations, role plays, laboratory investigations, field trips, service projects, etc.) and vicarious activities (reading, listening to a lecture, etc.), we strive to create learning experiences that involve the cognitive as well as affective responses, having students consider the questions, “What is this?” and, “How do I react to it?” We also help students integrate learning experiences in the classroom with those of home, work, peer culture, etc.

Reflection

Reflection and discernment were integral parts of Ignatius’s learning process. Reflection is a thoughtful reconsideration of some subject matter, experience, idea, purpose, or spontaneous reaction, in order to grasp its significance more fully. Thus, reflection is the process by which meaning surfaces in human experience by understanding the truth being studied more clearly; understanding the sources of one’s sensations or reactions in the consideration; deepening one’s understanding of the implications for oneself and others; achieving personal insights into events, ideas, truths, or the distortion of truth; coming to an understanding of who I am . . . and who I might be in relation to others. Reflection is a formative and a liberating process that forms the conscience of learners in such a manner that they are led to move beyond knowing to undertake action. Faculty lay the foundations for “learning how to learn” by engaging students in the skills and techniques of reflection. A major challenge to faculty is to formulate questions that will broaden students’ awareness and impel them to consider viewpoints of others.

Action

For Ignatius, love is shown in deeds, not words. Faculty hope that students are impelled to move beyond knowing to action—action that is for the welfare of society. It is our role as faculty to see that opportunities are provided that will challenge the imagination and exercise the will of the students to choose the best possible course of action to flow from and follow up on what they have learned. Through experiences that have been reflected upon, students make the truth their own and serve others. Faculty help students to consider their experience from a personal, human point of view, while remaining open to where the truth might lead.

Evaluation

Ignatian pedagogy aims at formation, which includes but goes beyond academic mastery. Here we are concerned about students’ well-rounded growth as persons for others. Traditional ongoing academic evaluation can alert faculty to possible needs for use of alternative methods of teaching; it also offers special opportunities to individualize encouragement and advice for academic improvement for each student. On the other hand, periodic evaluation of the student’s growth in attitudes, priorities, and actions consistent with being a person for others is essential. Faculty should foster relationships of mutual trust and respect that set a climate for discussion and growth. Useful evaluative processes include mentoring and reviews of student journals, as well as student self-evaluation in light of personal growth profiles, leisure time activity, and voluntary service to others. Internal or external feedback may serve to launch the learner once again into the cycle of the Ignatian learning paradigm.
What Is the Challenge?

Consistent use of the Ignatian paradigm can help the growth of a student

- who will gradually learn to discriminate and be selective in choosing experiences;
- who is able to draw fullness and richness from the reflection on those experiences;
- who becomes self-motivated by his or her own integrity and humanity to make conscious, responsible choices.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, consistent use of the Ignatian paradigm can result in the acquisition of life-long habits of learning that foster attention to experience, reflective understanding beyond self-interest, and criteria for effective action. Such formative effects were characteristics of Jesuit alumni in the early Society of Jesus. They are perhaps even more necessary for responsible citizens of the third millennium.

The Ignatian pedagogical paradigm applies to all curricula and students of all ages and backgrounds, is fundamental to the teaching-learning process in and out of the classroom, helps faculty be better teachers, personalizes learning, and stresses the social dimension of both teaching and learning. The challenge for faculty, therefore, is to find ways to bring the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm to the subjects we teach and the programs we run, knowing that it needs to be adapted and applied to our own specific situations. Through this process we will find ways to accompany our students on their journeys of becoming fully human persons.