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"THE DISCONNECT": STUDENT CULTURE AND JESUIT EDUCATION

*They're both here and elsewhere
at the same time.*

By Steve Kuder, S.J.

My gels are the crème de la crème." So repeats Miss Jean Brodie in her prime. And in so many words our presidents and admissions people tout our entering classes: "They have the highest SATs, GPAs, ACTs..." But we're educators. We take 'em where we find 'em, even if delivered by Lady Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... "We go in their doors in order to bring them out ours. That's our job as educators, no matter how bloody a business it might be."

But going in their doors today, what do we find? A new breed many of us are sensing. Even upperclassmen are noticing that their underclass peers are different. Student culture seems to be changing: more overt violence, less connectedness, more demands. And so we ask: is there a growing disconnect between the new student culture and what we are trying to do in Jesuit education? How do we educate this new breed?

We are educators: this is what we do. And in Jesuit schools we have both a particular mission and also a unique process, an Ignatian way of proceeding. Some call it the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, the IPP, based upon St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. In short: Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation. We've been applying this paradigm to student-disconnects for over 400 years: the new science, rationalism, romanticism, the industrial revolution, modernism, and now the technological revolution. What might this latest disconnect look like if we followed the IPP? The context of today's students is well documented. Statistically, we have the numbers. Our students have been

consuming an average of six hours and 32 minutes of TV and other media (including the internet) per day. That's a hefty 46 hours a week since the age of two. That's time they haven't been interacting with others face-to-face. Throw in the 360,000 broadcast commercials they've watched by the time they enter college, add the 200,000 televised acts of violence, and the accumulated impact of media begins to suggest itself. As educators we have to understand this impact before we can help our students understand its effects.

We also need to understand how differently our own generation responds to the computer. For us it's a tool for information and research: a virtual library. For our students, however, it's on-demand entertainment, a "virtual arcade" as Michael Bugeja terms it in *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age* (2005). Bugeja uses "divide" to describe the disconnect between today's students' virtual habitat and the interpersonal habitat of real-life community. His conclusion is that today's students are computer literate but not socially literate. That's the context. As they say in London: Watch the gap!

So what happens when we watch our experience, that of our students and ourselves? For St. Ignatius, experience has profound spiritual meaning; it is where we find God acting in our lives. Pay attention, Ignatius says; discern. This is the Ignatian starting point; and when we see where and how God is working, then we can choose to join the divine initiative.

As educators in the Ignatian tradition, we need to

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practice noticing—as Boston College’s Bill Torbert advocates in *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership* (Barrett-Kochler, 2004)—so we can increase our awareness of what’s going on in student culture. We of the National Seminar on Jesuit Education have been noticing some interesting phenomena as we visit three Jesuit campuses a year. We always schedule conversations with two groups—one of faculty-administrators, the other of student-leaders—in order to discover concerns for future issues of *Conversations*. This is often opening experiential fire-hoses as we invite discussion of local campus problems.

When asked if they read, students confirm the conclusions of *Reading At Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (National Endowment of the Arts, 2004) which was the theme of our last issue of *Conversations*. One student, the student-body president in fact, stated without embarrassment: “In my senior literature course, I haven’t read a single book; I just use Sparks Notes.” Other students nodded sagely. Asked what they do during free time from studies, one student blurted out: “Facebook!” Other students nodded brightly. We were noticing a pattern of virtual reading, virtual friendships, virtual social lives. And when we asked student leaders whether they could describe changes in the younger students, they seemed to agree with Bugeja’s findings: “shorter fuses, shorter attention spans, shorter and/or less sustainable relationships.” And more violence.

Another experience concerning today’s students we hear from faculty: students are more demanding. Perhaps because TV channels, cell phones, websites, play-stations are on demand, students feel that teachers should be as well: “Why haven’t you answered my e-mail [of 2 a.m.]?” “I came by your office [outside posted office-hours], and you weren’t there.”

“Can I have your cell-phone number so I can get help on my paper [any time of the day or night]?” This may well contain some spillover from the virtual, impersonal (as in “non face-to-face”) nature of their lives. Again: computer literate is not socially literate.

Another experience many of us have had concerns about is the split-consciousness of students. We see them leaving class, taking class breaks, walking on campus, and what do we notice? They’re talking on cell phones, plugging into iPods (or doing both at once) so they’re split between the real world and the virtual one. They’re both here and elsewhere at the same time. We go to an on-campus concert or game: count the number of students chatting on mobile phones. Are they really here or virtually there? And what is the cumulative effect of this on their ability to focus on the here and now, to enter into face-to-face relationships? One faculty member reports overhearing a student talking on the cell-phone

Asked what they do during free time, one student blurted out, “Facebook!”



Students get together in a dorm room at Saint Louis University.

*"I came by your office
[outside office hours] and
you weren't there!"*

says: "We are forgetting how to resolve problems without creating greater ones because we are more apt to use electronic communication to mediate our disputes, instead of resolving them face-to-face. We may misinterpret motives because the messages we send and receive do not convey the subtle but vital voice tones, body movements, and other guiding impersonal cues of physical place. We cannot 'get along' with each other because we don't know how to 'get on' with each other, showing grace and forgiveness in the wake of grievance or transgression." We might add that we notice that students tend to be more aggressive in on-line discussions than they ever would be in face-to-face dialogues.

What can we do about it? And if the problem is critical, well, we all know as educators that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.

The story is told of the disciple who complains to the master: "When will this problem be solved?" The master answers: "Shortly after we understand it." Not that understanding is the solution (though it may be), but it does welcome action, the fourth moment of the IPP. Torbert calls this "timely action," which involves the interweaving of past patterns, future goals, and present possibilities.

Let me suggest a few timely actions. Could a faculty member disallow laptops in class (knowing what we know about student perceptions: a computer is an entertainment source)? Could a faculty member disallow internet sources on undergrad research papers (knowing what we know about students' inability to discern legitimate websites vs. peer-reviewed publications in the library)? Could student life professionals explore ways of teaching face-to-face problem solving without mediated communication?

Evaluation? We leave this to readers and to the conversation-programs at our various Jesuit institutions. Topics will certainly range from the perceived effects of this disconnect, divide, gap, to how we can help students reconnect. Other questions will certainly present themselves. What applications of media and technology in our courses are helpful to closing the interpersonal divide; which are harmful? How do we teach students discretion in their use of media and technology? How do we bring students to an awareness of the displacement that virtual communication effects in their lives? And, finally, St. Ignatius' question: how can we find God at work in all this so we can join the divine initiative? ■

Student's engage in a game of frisbee on the campus at Saint Louis University.

on campus, surrounded by other students, saying "I just can't seem to make any friends here."

A final experiential foray: visit a student room in a residential hall on campus. What do you see? It's not your father's or mother's dorm room where concentrated study could take place. It's more like a NASA control center of media and technology, of entertainment and virtual communication. All going at once. Concentration, anyone?

But what about sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll? Student life professionals might well tell us that this is a constant in student culture (though pornographic sites are now on-demand and in-demand). What may be changing here is the students' ability to resolve problems after the inevitable falls. As Bugeja