

1-1-2012

# Reflection in Action: A Signature Ignatian Pedagogy for the 21st Century

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Published Version. "Reflection in Action: A Signature Ignatian Pedagogy for the 21st Century," in *Exploring More Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*. Eds. Nancy L Chick, Aeron Haynie and Regan A R Gurung. Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing, 2012: 129-142.  
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## REFLECTION IN ACTION

## A Signature Ignatian Pedagogy for the 21st Century

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What distinguishes a Jesuit education from the education provided at other colleges and universities? Many of the aims of Jesuit education—intellectual excellence, development of moral as well as intellectual capacities, a commitment to social justice—are shared by many institutions of higher education, whether religiously affiliated or secular. Is there, then, a distinctively Jesuit means toward those ends—one with deep roots in Jesuit tradition? We believe there is: a cycle of experience, reflection, action, and evaluation that can be traced back to the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

To be clear from the start, we write together as two individuals with very different relationships to Catholicism: Susan is a practicing Catholic; Rebecca is not. What we share is a respect for the Jesuit mission of our university and a desire to understand better how it might catalyze student learning in distinctive ways. Although the signature pedagogy we describe is not one of a discipline or a profession, our exploration of Ignatian pedagogy has significance beyond the campuses of the 28 Jesuit institutions of higher education in the United States. Certainly the scope of Jesuit education is large: These colleges and universities serve more than 183,000 students through 260 undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs and have more than a million living alumni (Jesuit Conference, 2007). In addition, many instructors at non-Jesuit institutions might welcome a pedagogy committed to character formation, ethics, and global awareness as well as a commitment

to dialogue (especially interfaith dialogue)—issues addressed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the Carnegie Foundation, and others. The five-century tradition of Jesuit education places it on the nexus between the ivory tower of higher education and the increasingly complex needs of a world with shrinking resources and conflict.

If we seek the foundation of a distinctively Ignatian pedagogy for the 21st century, we must grapple with the fact that it must be grounded in the Jesuit commitment to a life centered in God. In the words of the “First Principle and Foundation” of St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*, “our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to the deepening of God’s life in me” (Mullan, 1914, p. 18). If religious faith is the bedrock of a distinctively Ignatian pedagogy, we must ask how this pedagogy might be adapted to religiously diverse contemporary classrooms. To what degree can instructors and students of various faith traditions (including agnostic and atheist) seek to transform the historically established signature pedagogy of Jesuit education for 21st-century U.S. classrooms? And to what degree might a distinctively Ignatian pedagogy seek to transform students and instructors? Furthermore, to what degree is the signature pedagogy of a very specific institutional type relevant to other institutions and to the disciplines that cut across all institutions?

In the first part of this chapter, we contextualize Ignatian pedagogy within the scholarship of teaching and learning. We then turn to the history of Jesuit education, looking primarily at the *Spiritual Exercises*. We conclude by exploring the ways in which this traditional, faith-driven Ignatian pedagogy can be translated into contemporary classrooms.

## The Puzzle of a Cross-Disciplinary Signature Pedagogy

The signature pedagogy of Jesuit education is not limited to any one academic discipline, but provides a “way of proceeding”<sup>1</sup> that can be infused throughout the curriculum. However, the concept of signature pedagogies is premised on the idea that different disciplines and professions entail distinct ways of knowing and doing. There are, in Shulman’s words, “characteristic forms of teaching and learning” in which “novices are instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work—to think, to perform, and to act with integrity” (2005, p. 52).

So is it meaningful to propose a cross-disciplinary Ignatian signature pedagogy? We think so, because the overriding goal of any signature pedagogy is to prepare students to act in the world in the ways required by the profession or discipline. In the case of Ignatian pedagogy, the “professional” goal, across every discipline and department, is to link the cultivation of intellectual accomplishment and scholarly expertise to the moral and spiritual dimension. We are, in the oft-quoted words of Father Pedro Arrupe, forming “men [and women] for [and with] others” (Arrupe, 1973)—a goal that does not stray far from Shulman’s initial formulation. Signature pedagogies tend to be found in the professions, Shulman argues, because “education is not education for understanding alone; it is preparation for accomplished and responsible practice in the service of others. It is preparation for ‘good work’” (p. 53). If traditional signature pedagogies are intended to prepare students for good work in the professions, the Ignatian signature pedagogy we describe is meant to prepare students for good work in all professions.

### **Catholic Mission in Higher Education and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

Unfortunately, a disconnect exists between scholarly discussions of Jesuit education on the one hand and efforts to build institutional support for the scholarship of teaching and learning on the other. Scholarly discussions of the aims and methods of Jesuit education are easy to find. The focus of *A Jesuit Education Reader* (Traub, 2008) is, as its subtitle suggests, “contemporary writings on the Jesuit mission in education, principles, the issue of Catholic identity, practical applications of the Ignatian way, and more.” These essays offer histories of and visions for the future of Jesuit education; they grapple with issues such as postmodern spirituality, academic freedom, and education for social justice. The section on “Practical Applications” includes thoughtful essays from faculty, describing their approaches to situating their disciplinary objectives within the mission of a Jesuit school. They do not, however, look directly at evidence of student learning. These are teacher narratives rather than inquiries into student learning (see Chick, 2009, for an elaboration on this distinction).

The same trend is visible in three important journals. *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* offers thematic issues (on topics such as women in

Catholic education or the core curriculum) filled with vision statements, accounts of particular institutional programs, and personal histories from students and teachers. But there are no inquiries into student learning. Similarly, the peer-reviewed journals *Catholic Education* and the *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* are dominated by descriptions of programmatic approaches, analyses of national problems, and surveys of faculty attitudes toward issues related to Catholic education. Although these journals do include some inquiries into student learning, the studies are rarely conducted by the teachers themselves. To the extent that there is a scholarship of Jesuit teaching and learning, the studies seem to be (to use Pat Hutchings's [2000] taxonomy) "visions of the possible" and efforts toward theory building. Scholarly publications from instructors conducting "what is" or "what works" inquiries related to Jesuit goals or methods in their own classrooms are rare.

Ironically, however, a number of Jesuit colleges and universities are national leaders in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) movement. Creighton University and Rockhurst College (together with several other colleges) recently sponsored the 8th Annual National CASTL Summer Institute for the Development of Scholars of Teaching and Learning. Centers for Teaching and Learning at Canisius College, Loyola Marymount University, St. Louis University, and Seattle University have well-established programs to support faculty undertaking SoTL inquiries. The Center for New Designs in Learning (CNDL) at Georgetown University—including their "Teaching to the Whole Person" initiative—is a model program for universities looking to see how the scholarship of teaching and learning can invigorate a campus.

But CNDL's "Teaching to the Whole Person" initiative seems to be the exception; as a rule, the scholarship of teaching and learning that has taken root at Jesuit universities has not focused on the Jesuit mission or sought to define a distinctly Ignatian pedagogy. We make this observation not to criticize but to identify an opportunity. In the pages that follow we draw on historical and contemporary writings on Jesuit education to articulate a signature pedagogy that might be further explored in future SoTL inquiries.

## Reflection and Action in the Jesuit Tradition

The roots of contemporary Ignatian pedagogy go back centuries. More than 450 years ago, a Basque nobleman named Ignatius Loyola went through a

transformational discernment experience that led him from being a soldier to serving God. As a student at the University of Paris he banded with a group of companions; in 1537 they founded a community of priests called “The Society of Jesus”—or “the Jesuits.” The Jesuits’ numbers grew exponentially, and by 1565 the Society included 3,500 men (O’Malley, 1993, p. 2). Although Ignatius did not plan to start a system of schools, by 1543 a few Jesuits led by Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier had been teaching reading, writing, grammar, and catechism in Goa, India, to about 600 elementary-aged male students (O’Malley, 1993, p. 203). In 1548, the Jesuits opened a school for lay students in Messina, Italy, and Jesuit education soon spread throughout Europe and eventually into Asia and the Americas (O’Malley, 1993, p. 204).

In response to this rapid growth, in 1599 Jesuit collaborators developed the *Ratio Studiorum*; its purpose was to spell out the goals, structure, and modes of the Jesuit educational experience. The *Ratio* prescribed pedagogical choices relating to administration, roles of teachers and students, and classroom practices like disputations, debates, repetitions, exercises, contests, awards, plays, and pageants (Farrell, 1999, p. ix). It also set forth the curriculum: a blend of humanities, the arts, the classics, and physical sciences as well as theology and philosophy. However, the *Ratio* does not elaborate on a pedagogical method that would join spiritual and moral formation to intellectual development. For that we must turn to the *Spiritual Exercises*.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius described and codified his own process of formation as a means of guiding the spiritual formation of others. Ignatius believed that deep reflection on one’s experience was a key to discernment, knowledge, and growth. The ideal format for “doing” *The Spiritual Exercises* is a 30-day silent retreat in which retreatants meet daily with a spiritual director who guides them through a sequence of meditations<sup>2</sup> on key moments in the Gospels, using their imaginations; they use their senses to relive the stories and make connections to their own story and need for mercy, healing, forgiveness, love, a sense of call and mission, and so forth.

Particularly important for our purposes is the daily reflection portion of the exercises called the “*Examen of Consciousness*” or *Examen* for short. This practice in conjunction with the meditations is meant to lead persons to better awareness of their own life directions and choices, both simple as well as significant decisions. The *Examen* trains users to reflect in a very direct way

using senses, as well as powers of attention and affect. The *Examen* consists of a few simple prompts:

- Become aware of God's presence. Quietly center yourself.
- Review the day with gratitude.
- Pay attention to your emotions, especially the desolations and consolations of the day. Where was I buffeted by sadness or anxiety? What did I find consoling (where have I become aware of the presence of God in joy)?
- Choose one feature of the day: Focus on it, pray from it. Where could I have responded differently?
- Look toward tomorrow. How will I be responsive to those around me? (Hamm, 1994, p. 23)

The practice of the *Examen* is not navel gazing. Instead, these questions suggest four distinct but interrelated processes: Participants must attend to and recollect the *experience* of the day fully, then they must *reflect* on that experience, in order to formulate a course of *action*, which they can later *evaluate*.

To the extent that a signature pedagogy of Jesuit education has been identified, it has been located in this process of experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. In 1986 the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE) published *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*. This document took a broad scope, identifying 10 characteristics, including "care and concern for each individual person" and "lay-Jesuit collaboration"; it also drew an extended parallel (paragraphs 154–160) between the *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatian pedagogy. In an effort to make those characteristics more accessible and practicable for teachers in the classroom, the ICAJE later published *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach*. This document introduces and discusses the "Ignatian pedagogical paradigm"—a paradigm quite explicitly linked to the *Spiritual Exercises*.

A distinctive feature of the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm is that, understood in the light of the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, it becomes not only a fitting description of the continual interplay of experience, reflection and action in the teaching learning process, but also an ideal portrayal of the dynamic interrelationship of teacher and learner in the latter's journey of growth in knowledge and freedom. (ICAJE, paragraph 23)

The *Examen* is at the heart of Ignatian pedagogy. Its activities constitute a signature pedagogy that can be employed by any educator in search of a means to help students link moral discernment and intellectual excellence. Its focus on learning to pay attention, developing the ability to reflect on one's experience, and then acting and evaluating or questioning one's presuppositions are key learning events appropriate for any educational endeavor—religious or secular—committed to a student's intellectual and moral development.

### Key Principles of a Signature Ignatian Pedagogy

We began the chapter by questioning the degree to which a signature pedagogy grounded in a program of religious formation can be adapted for use in contemporary, secular classrooms. To grapple with that question, we unpack the five key terms in the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm—*context*, *experience*, *reflection*, *action*, and *evaluation*—and describe how they can engage students in deep learning across the curriculum.

#### *Context*

At the center of the Ignatian paradigm is “context.” Historically, this is a legacy of the Jesuit awareness that adaptation to different cultures is crucial. We understand “context” in two dimensions. There is the context of the student's own life situation, who he or she *is* coming into the classroom. This can include a sense of self-identity as well as the student's personal context: economic pressures, relationships with loved ones, and so on. In addition, a larger context surrounds the student in concentric circles: classroom, institution, local, national, and global issues.

An increased awareness of context is relevant not only for teachers (who seek to meet their students where they are) but also for students for whom “the unexamined life” severely limits their choices. As we discuss in the section on reflection, students engaged in this signature Ignatian pedagogy enter into a process of learning to be more attentive to their own experiences. Ultimately, however, the aim of this pedagogy is to help students move beyond a preoccupation with individual context and become responsive to larger social contexts and to the needs of others.

## *Experience*

What does it mean to emphasize the role of student experience in the learning process? In many traditional courses, students sit with their notebooks, writing down what someone else tells them. The Ignatian emphasis on student experience—like so many other critical pedagogies—shifts the focus of the course: The content of the class resides not in the teacher's wisdom but in the breadth of students' learning experiences. For some instructors, experience might mean an out-of-the-classroom experience: service-learning, field trips, clinicals, internships. Other instructors might invite students to participate in research—in the lab, in the field, in the library. Yet other students might be invited to experience a text, to see that text not as a series of pages to be skimmed quickly, but as an opportunity to encounter the ideas and values of another person, removed in time and space.

This broad definition of experience is necessary for a pedagogy that stretches across disciplines. The clinical experiences of a nursing student will be vastly different from the experiences of a chemistry student conducting an experiment or a communications major completing an internship or a philosophy student's encounter with Heidegger. In all these cases, however, experience resides in the student's encounter with people, places, events, and texts that stretch them beyond prior knowledge and experiences.

## *Reflection*

In the original Latin, the term *reflection* (*reflecto*) means literally "to bend back"; it is linked, in sound and in concept, to *respectus*, which means "to look back." The process of reflection demands that our students look back on their experiences with the goal of shedding light on them to understand them better. As instructors, we must help students parse their experiences, asking questions that lead students to attend carefully to their own experience.<sup>3</sup>

Instructors can coach students through the process of reflection in several ways. Instructors can create time and space in what are often overcrowded courses, embracing what Mark Cladis (2006) has termed *slow teaching*. In addition to creating curricular space, instructors can provide writing prompts that encourage students to be attentive. Instructors committed to an Ignatian pedagogy can also return to Ignatius' method in the *Examen* by using sense questions: What did you see, sense, taste, smell, hear?

Some instructors might dismiss such questions as too “touchy-feely”—but an Ignatian pedagogy invites a decidedly corporal revisiting of experience. In the Ignatian classroom, as in the *Examen*, an individual is encouraged to look back on experience—in the clinical, in the lab, in the office, in the text—not simply as a brain disconnected from the world, but as a person living in the physical world with other individuals, many of whom have needs that call out for attention.

### *Action*

Action, as conceived in the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm, is not simply a “to-do” list. When students learn something by reflecting on their experiences (whether reading a text, tutoring in the community, conducting a physics experiment, or learning to balance an account on a spreadsheet) that new-found knowledge leads to some action. Actions might manifest as a concrete activity, but they might also take the form of an understanding, a disposition, a decision, a belief, a commitment, or simply the impetus to try something else (like another experiment) that would build on the previous knowledge. The mental and spiritual movement toward a richer understanding of others is, in the Ignatian paradigm, a valuable action. Action, in short, is the appropriation of the learning that transforms the learner.

As we imagine the implications of this signature pedagogy for secular classrooms and instructors, we recognize that some actions lack any clear moral charge. For instance, if a physics student fully attends to the experience of the lab and reflects carefully on what she observed, her action might simply be an enhanced understanding of Hooke’s Law. But, in truth, there’s nothing “simple” about such an enhanced understanding. The type of knowledge-in-action encouraged by the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm is the type of deep understanding that enables students to do more than memorize formulas; such action is the mastering of a topic that helps students move from being mere consumers to becoming producers of knowledge. Furthermore, this focus on knowledge-in-action—a value shared by many feminist pedagogues (see, for instance, Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman 1987)—also helps to highlight an important resonance between the values of Ignatian pedagogy and the commitments of other broad categories of instructors who are neither Catholic nor employed by a Jesuit university.

## *Evaluation*

So far we have described a series of stages in which students have an experience, reflect on that experience, then act (whether through action or by making a mental shift) inspired by their reflection on the experience. One additional, crucial element of this paradigm is a process of 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. Thus periodic evaluation of the student's growth in attitudes, priorities, and actions consistent with being a person for others is essential. (ICAJE, 1993, paragraph 64)

When students themselves engage in this evaluation, they are, in essence, reflecting on their process of reflection (which in turn mediates experience and action)—making the stage of evaluation a type of meta-reflection.

Although the importance of evaluation/meta-reflection is widely recognized (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Yancey, 1998), it is something most instructors are reluctant to grade—perhaps because it is such a deeply personalized process. Instructors do the principle of meta-reflection a disservice by relegating it to an occasional ungraded and largely ignored journal entry. For evaluation to serve its proper role as a key principle of Ignatian pedagogy, instructors must embrace meta-reflection as something that students can do with more or less success and therefore as something that instructors are responsible for coaching and (on some occasions perhaps) even grading. Coaching students on the process of meta-reflection—probing their ideas with them, encouraging them to go beyond a glib “I learned a lot”—is new and, quite frankly, scary for many instructors. We have no easy answers, and no one size fits all portable rubrics.

We do, however, believe that efforts to coach students' meta-reflective processes will benefit from a community of teachers working together. Knowing that a team of like-minded instructors are also assigning and coaching meta-reflective work can help teachers keep the courage of their convictions.<sup>4</sup> What's more, when a cohort of instructors begins to take this approach to evaluation, they might transform their students—and perhaps themselves. Collectively a group of teachers can work to give students practice over time and different contexts and to provide a coherent message that although meta-reflection can be hard work, it can be done well. Although

we have located no published scholarly inquiries into the effectiveness of this pedagogy over time at Jesuit institutions (an absence that suggests the need for future research), the broader scholarship on the positive effects of metacognitive reflection (see Chick, Karis, & Kernahan, 2009, for a summary) suggest the promise of this approach.

## Conclusion

On our own Jesuit campus we have pockets of faculty in many disciplines committed to enhancing their courses with Ignatian pedagogical practices. We find evidence—in published scholarship (Chubbuck, 2007; Van Hise & Massey, 2010) and through less formally shared inquiries and reflections (e.g., Coppard, Dickel, & Jensen, 2009)—that the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm shapes instructor practice at other institutions as well. However, as Defeo (2009) notes, although knowledge of Ignatian pedagogy is common in certain pockets of Jesuit campuses (such as centers for teaching and learning), it is not ubiquitous. Why would that be, and why would anyone not at a Jesuit institution consider adopting this signature pedagogy?

The relatively low profile of the signature pedagogy that we have described in this chapter can be attributed in part to a lack of education: Some faculty who might adopt it are simply not aware of it. But we also recognize that some faculty are reluctant to adopt it because of its religious origin. Nevertheless, we hope to have demonstrated that this pedagogical approach has relevance not only for teachers who fully accept Ignatius' First Principle: to "want and . . . choose what better leads to the deepening of God's life in me"; it can also be a meaningful pedagogy for instructors who—whatever their own religious (non)beliefs—are committed to their students' moral and spiritual development. One of the goals of the AAC&U's LEAP initiative, for instance, is to promote the development of "ethical reasoning and action" (AAC&U, 2011). Similarly, Parker Palmer's (2007) focus on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning has been well received across the academy. An Ignatian pedagogy grounded in the methods of the *Spiritual Exercises* can help students and teachers work toward such goals; it is, to answer the question we posed in our introduction, an eminently adaptable pedagogy.

But if this is a pedagogy that is easily transformed, it is also a pedagogy that is radically transformative for teachers and students alike. In its fully

religious dimensions, it invites instructors to reflect on the consolations and desolations of teaching and to see God in all people, all places—including the most inscrutable or frustrating students. But even in its more secular manifestations, this pedagogy directs instructors' attention to the process of student learning: planning a series of experiences, scaffolding a process of reflection, encouraging action, coaching students in a process of meta-reflection. The gift of this pedagogy transcends the boundaries of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and provides guidance for teachers in any profession or discipline committed to the intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth of their students.

## Notes

1. See O'Malley (2006) for a delineation of this concept. Reflection on their "way of proceeding" has been key to the Jesuit and Ignatian identity sustained over time.

2. Anticipating that few lay people would have 30 days for such a venture, Ignatius provided for the free use of "adaptations." Some individuals complete the exercises over months or even a year; others participate in abbreviated 5-day, 8-day or weekend retreats.

3. The Ignatian concept of reflection is closely linked with, but not identical to, the type of metacognitive reflection that is often referred to in SoTL literature (see, for instance, Chick et al., 2009; Tsang, 2011). The Ignatian focus on "evaluation" more closely approximates the type of thinking about thinking that characterizes much talk about reflection common in SoTL scholarship. In contrast, the type of reflection we focus on here describes the simple but powerful experience of revisiting one's experiences deliberately and in detail.

4. At Marquette, a faculty learning community focused on Ignatian pedagogy (called Companions in Inspiring Futures) has been wrestling with these very issues. As faculty from disciplines as diverse as nursing, physics, communications, history, philosophy, theology, and engineering come together to imagine visions of the possible, some of our most animated discussions have focused on this process of coaching students in the metareflective, evaluative process.

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