

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 47 *The Spiritual Exercises as Foundation for
Jesuit Higher Education*

Article 22

March 2015

Is Retreat Directing a Model for Teaching? Questioning the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm

Stephen Rowntree S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Rowntree, Stephen S.J. (2015) "Is Retreat Directing a Model for Teaching? Questioning the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 47, Article 22.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol47/iss1/22>

For Ignatius, the vital dynamic of the *Spiritual Exercises* is the individual person's encounter with the Spirit of Truth. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find in his principles and directions for guiding others in the process of the *Spiritual Exercises*, a perfect description of the pedagogical role of the teacher as one whose job is not merely to inform but to help the student progress in the truth" (From *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach 1993*, #26, in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. by Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 46.)

At first glance directing retreatants and teaching students seem quite different activities with quite different purposes. However, Ignatius's own remark that at Manresa "God was dealing with him in the same way a school teacher deals with a child while instructing him" (*Autobiography* no. 27, Tylenda trans.) suggested that directing the Exercises and teaching might have important similarities: the retreat director sets the matter for prayer just as the teacher assigns the matter for study. And as a retreatant's own prayer activities (meditations, contemplations, repetitions, petitions, and colloquies) are essential to "making the Exercises," so too the student's own activities (reading, reflecting, writing, and reviewing) are essential to learning. And just as retreatants meet with the director to report the thoughts, emotions, intentions that have been elicited in the prayer periods, so too students must make known to the teacher their understanding and appreciation of the matter studied.

While we can find such similarities between retreat director/retreatant and teacher/student relations, there are major differences: A director of the full thirty-day Exercises can direct relatively few retreatants at a time. An experienced and energetic director with as few as six or seven directees has most likely reached the maximum number that she can effectively direct. On the other hand, college teachers who may be teaching three courses per semester often have a total of sixty to ninety (or more) students. Learning students' names can be a challenge, never mind learning their individual personal, family, and educational histories. The lack of such knowledge precludes teachers from designing learning exercises tailored to individuals' particular needs and capacities. Furthermore, the sheer number of students renders utterly impossible a daily hour-long conversation with each student such as the director has with each retreatant.

Mass education is based on broad generalizations about students at different ages, and about the subject-matters they need to master (reading, writing, arithmetic) and the order in

which they need to learn these subjects, moving from simpler content to more difficult. As historians have noted, Jesuit schools, as well as other schools founded in the 16th century, introduced into humanities curricula order and sequence (which characterized the arts curriculum at the University of Paris where Ignatius and his early companions studied).

By now, the order and sequence for achieving a mastery of basic academic subjects have been well established. Teacher education is based on this knowledge. Aspiring teachers choose to major in early childhood education, or kindergarten education, or elementary education, or secondary education, to mention only the broadest of categories. And subject matters are similarly age specific, for example elementary science education, is different from high school physics or chemistry.

The director/retreatant dynamic can be more closely

realized in senior theses, capstone projects, and collaborative research, which involve students working one on one with faculty. Such activities are typically reserved for advanced third-year and fourth-year students since they presume significant prior learning.

Applying the model of director/retreatant means that it is teachers who must meet the particular personal and educational needs of students. Today, however, many such student needs are met by specialists in counseling, writing, and other such centers (e.g. tutorial and other extra help for students doing poorly or students with special education needs). The individual faculty member should be alert for signs that a particular student might need or benefit from a particular service. The faculty member's role typically is to refer students to those trained to give the particular assistance needed. Thus in schools and colleges, many typical individual needs of students are met not by teachers but by trained professionals working together in counseling and other such centers. Attention to individual student needs is typically realized by many divisions, offices, and centers, each staffed by experts at meeting particular needs. Many have the opportunity to make significant contributions to students' intellectual and spiritual development, teachers for sure but also many others. Indeed, "It takes a village." ■

Is Retreat Directing a Model for Teaching? *Questioning the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm*

By Stephen Rowntree, S.J.

Stephen Rowntree, S.J., is an associate pastor at the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus in New Orleans; he is a former professor of philosophy at Loyola University and is currently secretary of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.