



THE JESUIT EDUCATIONAL TRADITION

A Personal View

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DESPITE MY LONG ASSOCIATION WITH JESUIT EDUCATION IN PARTICULAR AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN GENERAL, I'VE COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT I DON'T REALLY KNOW MUCH ABOUT IT—PROBABLY BECAUSE OF THAT LONG ASSOCIATION. I first met the Jesuits (and Jesuit education) when I turned 14, enrolling in a Jesuit high school; my undergraduate and master's degrees were in that tradition, with the only exception being my Ph.D. studies at a large state university. Like many of us, I never really thought about what surrounded me—a variation of the theme that fish don't notice water nor do we pay much attention to air. That's the world we take for granted, at least until something happens to get our attention.

So, what is this phenomenon we call the Jesuit or Ignatian educational tradition? Here's a rather personal account.

When Ignatius Loyola and his companions from the University of Paris decided to join together in a religious order in the 1530s, they called themselves the Friends of Jesus, a name that worked its way from Spanish to Latin and eventually to English as the Society of Jesus. (The nickname "Jesuits" came later.) Envisioning a different kind of religious order, they saw themselves as a kind of Renaissance jack-of-all-trades community, ready to do whatever work the Church asked, consistent with the ministry of the word of God and the helping of souls. They summed up their guiding principle for

choosing what to do in Ignatius' phrase as *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (for the greater glory of God). Given a choice between two good things, they would choose the one that led more to God's praise and service. Not only did this express their religious aspiration, it also summed up their decision-making—what they called a discernment process, since they echoed the biblical language of discerning God's will.

“JESUIT EDUCATION INCLUDED A SENSE OF FORMATION: TEACHERS HELPED FORM STUDENTS AS CITIZENS WHO WOULD SERVE THEIR COMMUNITIES.”

By 1548, responding to requests from many of the local communities in which they worked for the Counter Reformation religious revival, they found themselves starting and running schools, an enterprise that led from Europe to Asia and the Americas, carried along by another request—to serve as missionaries in the European encounter with the wider world. Schools, they reasoned, praised God by serving as a lever to change society. But what kind of schools? By 1600, a group of Jesuits working to codify their plan of studies (or *ratio studiorum*) opted to follow the Paris model of education. That model specified the subjects of study and the methods of lecture and disputation that focused on clear thinking, oral disputation, and written presentation. They also stressed civic participation (as a way to serve one's neighbor) and learning the social graces needed to play a role in contemporary society (yes, dance and drama had places in the Jesuit curriculum). The residential schools were both classrooms and apprenticeship sites.

Their early model for schools differed from today's universities in several important aspects: They were largely colleges in the European sense (closer to today's high schools); they stressed rhetorical

education as well as practical subjects; well into the 20th century, they eschewed high decrees of specialization; they kept a door open to adaptation to local needs; and they originally aimed to educate seminarians, later expanding to children of the nobility or of townspeople (those likely to have an outsized influence on their communities). These origins incorporated elements that still play a role today. Jesuit education included a sense of formation: teachers helped form students as citizens who would serve their communities. Jesuit education taught students their model of discernment: to seek God's glory in what they did.

Those origins still influence what we do in the Jesuit and Ignatian educational institutions today. The idea of *cura personalis* (care for persons), for example, directly flows from the seminary principles of formation, including care for boarding students and children—unlike cathedral schools, almost all the Jesuit schools were residential establishments. Education built on bonds of friendship, between faculty as well as with students.

Those bonds of friendship subtly change the dynamic of teaching. Let me add an example from my own field. A longstanding “axiom” in communication studies holds that every communication exchange simultaneously expresses both some content and a relationship. Communication, by its very nature, brings people together, even in the simplest forms. For example, when a parent tells a child, “It's time for bed,” that parent is not simply making an observation about the hour of the evening, but also asserting a parental relationship—“I am your parent and I care for you; I know what is healthy for you; you need to obey me.” This somewhat sweeping example models all the rest. When I ask a clerk the price of an item, I ask both information and assert a relationship of client to salesperson. The same thing happens in schools. Whenever a teacher and student engage each other, they create a relationship, though one should guard against that relationship becoming one of unbalanced power. The Jesuit or Ignatian tradition seeks to moderate the power imbalance through personal engagement at all levels: intellectual, spiritual, emotional—the “education of the whole person”—through an interpersonal care for all the qualities of being human. The Jesuit or Ignatian tradition proposes education through relationships.

In the basics—subject matter expertise, for example—the Jesuit or Ignatian education tradition does not differ dramatically from other educational traditions. But it does differ in emphasis. Here are four components that seem to me where educational

practices are different from the U.S. mainstream: in their academic approach, in their personal component, in their community component, and in their social justice component. All of these flow out of an interpretation of the University of Paris experience filtered through generations of Jesuits and, more recently, through faculty and staff at Jesuit universities and high schools.

The Academic

Education in the Jesuit and Ignatian tradition includes a clear focus on its goals. While in many ways the tradition resembles college curricula in other places and includes the culturally common components of education—critical thinking and reading, mathematics and science education, social sciences, languages, ethics, and so on—it adds something to that larger context. It has, as Neil Postman points out in his 1995 book *The End of Education*, a clear purpose. Postman explains this in his first chapter, “The Necessity of Gods,” which merits a long quotation:

To become a different person because of something you have learned—to appropriate an insight, a concept, a vision, so that your world is altered—that is a different matter. For that to happen, you need a reason. ...

A reason, as I use the word here, is different from a motivation. Within the context of schooling, motivation refers to a temporary psychic event in which curiosity is aroused and attention is focused. I do not mean to disparage it. But it must not be confused with a reason for being in a classroom, for listening to a teacher, for taking an examination, for doing homework, for putting up with school even if you are not motivated. ...

For school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve, or, even better, several gods. If they have none, school is pointless. Nietzsche’s famous aphorism is relevant here: “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*.” This applies as much to learning as to living.

To put it simply, there is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end.

By a god to serve, I do not necessarily mean *the* God, who is supposed to have created the world and whose moral injunctions as presented in sacred texts

have given countless people a reason for living and, more to the point, a reason for learning. In the Western world, beginning in the thirteenth century and for five hundred years afterward, that God was sufficient justification for the founding of institutions of learning, from grammar schools, where children were taught to read the Bible, to great universities, where men were trained to be ministers of God. Even today, there are some schools in the West, and most in the Islamic world, whose central purpose is to serve and celebrate the glory of God. Wherever this is the case, there is no school problem, and certainly no school crisis. There may be some disputes over what subjects best promote piety, obedience, and faith; there may be students who are skeptical, even teachers who are nonbelievers. But at the core of such schools, there is a transcendent, spiritual idea that gives purpose and clarity to learning. Even the skeptics and nonbelievers know why they are there, what they are supposed to be learning, and why they are resistant to it.¹

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Because the Jesuit tradition emerges within that Western world where “God was sufficient justification for the founding of institutions of learning,” the academic parts of Jesuit or Ignatian education flow from a Christian vision of the world in which people love their neighbor, learn to put others’ needs before their own, recognize the differences between their motivations, and practice a kind of discernment. The roots of all this learning lie in a Christian humanism articulated in the Renaissance schools, particularly in 1530’s Paris, where Ignatius and his companions found a way to

blend faith and an understanding of the importance of humanity. The religious decision-making principle of the Jesuits runs implicitly through the educational tradition: Education should serve the “greater glory of God.” Not everyone connected with education in this Jesuit or Ignatian tradition needs to share the belief; but the tradition anchors common purpose of education.

No surprise, then, that faculty pay attention to things like a core curriculum. In schools that share a common end of education, it matters deeply that students learn more than what Postman calls the mechanics—the basic skills that must be taught. Instead, education also teaches how to live in a reflective, analytic, and humanly affirming way. The approach includes not only competence (as any education must) but as Santa Clara puts it, compassion and conscience as well.

The tradition draws on what those early Jesuits found especially helpful in their University of Paris

experience—the mode of education. This education featured disputation and debate: a 16th-century active education: not rote learning but framing arguments, matching the needs of hearers. For a preaching-minded community, this made their theology come alive in the Counter Reformation. While the world has changed dramatically, the idea that teaching should engage students with a purpose remains a solid commitment.

The Personal

What the Jesuit and Ignatian tradition refers to as “the education of the whole person” reflects a concern that goes beyond the academic. The origins of Jesuit schooling in the 16th and 17th century meant that the students lived at the school, many of them enrolling as young teenagers, and the faculty had charge not only of an academic curriculum but also of the welfare of their students. They saw the students as preparing for life, not necessarily as academics



Brianna Roberto, *Wanderlust*, 2021.

or clerics, but as civic leaders. They taught an education for public life, including its public aspects, exemplified by Jesuit drama and other performance-type behavior as was expected in royal courts, courts of justice, and public charities. Beyond that, the schools also had to deal with the social and emotional and religious growth of their young charges. Such comprehensive education meant a preparation for personal and social engagement.

While we often see the notion of “education of the whole person” today as an emphasis on academics plus emotional growth plus physical health plus mental health, such a view divides integral aspects of human life too much from one another. Education of the whole person means precisely the whole person. Every aspect of human identity is inextricably connected to the other parts, and Jesuit schools have over the centuries wrestled with how that education should take place. Students do not separate what university organizational charts do: student life, athletics, social activities, clubs, politics, activist concerns, and majors and minors happen together. Jesuit schools today search for ways to put what national educational traditions had separated back together. Education of the whole person reflects an understanding of the unity of how people live in the world. But, often, following disciplinary specialization, education only implicitly recognizes the complexity of the student.

To do this well, universities should be small enough for faculty, staff, coaches, and students to know one another and to know what each other does. Those with leading roles in this educational tradition (coaches, staff, faculty) must themselves model that education of the whole person. Jesuit schools have produced a wonderful number of faculty, staff, and administrators who think creatively about how to educate the whole person. A number of Jesuit/Ignatian schools (both secondary and tertiary) have experimented with and established new models of education.

The Community

One more recently articulated part of the education of the whole person emerged in the United States as community-based learning or service learning, which involves the students’ interacting with their communities. The idea of including outside activities into classroom learning goes back at least to John Dewey² and typically appears in things like internships.

To truly work from a Jesuit or Ignatian perspective, the idea of service learning begins in the education of the whole person. In this sense,

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the “whole person” must include the community in which that person lives and studies. So, education becomes a function of that larger community. Service learning begins as an insertion into the local community, to give both students, faculty, and staff a better sense of the situation of the university.

By the 1990s, more and more colleges (often led by Jesuit colleges and universities) saw the value of connecting their students with their local communities. “The 1990 Community Service Act defines service learning as a method of learning in which students render needed services in their communities for academic credit, using and enhancing existing skills with time to ‘reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.’”³

Rock explains that this can occur in several ways: Bringing community into the classroom manifests typically in one of two ways, with lines between the two often blurred. The first is as place-based learning communities, in which cohorts of students are engaged with local community issues through a series of courses, using the community as laboratory and lens, and developing place attachment in the process ... The other is through community-engaged course work in which students work directly with community organizations to identify and develop solutions for those issues.⁴

In addition to this two-fold practice of community-based learning, Jesuit schools have

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incorporated an awareness of two challenges arising from the Ignatian self-understanding: separating community-based learning from simple volunteer work and protecting the local community.

Volunteer work, while valuable in itself, carries the subtle implication that volunteers approach others as people who need their help and that they (the students) possess a resource, an expertise, or even power that local people do not. Many of the discussions about “service learning” and even the label itself suggests this: The learners provide a service that the communities cannot provide for themselves. To focus on the fact that the students enter the community not to do something for it but to learn from it, Jesuit school programs typically use the “community-based learning” name. Here the emphasis lies on seeing community members as having knowledge, an understanding that community and students help each other, and acknowledging that both groups learn from each other. But this raises the second challenge: protecting the community. This is a need that arises from an understanding of the role of the community. The danger here is that the community, and often the marginalized parts of the community, end up serving the privileged student group. And so, a part of the education of the whole person must involve a growing understanding of oneself, one’s motives, one’s prejudices, one’s privilege.

Done well, this aspect of learning highlights something that St. Ignatius had clearly understood. Modeled on the Christian understanding of the incarnation, as expressed in the Christological hymn in the Letter to the Philippians that the redeemer emptied himself and took on all of human existence including its suffering, those who follow the Christian way must also set aside a privilege and temper their pride to understand themselves as called to service.

This emphasis, rooted in the approach to education, carries on after graduation, with alumni, individuals, and groups maintaining a focus on service.

Social Justice

Both in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and in his letters, St. Ignatius of Loyola’s advice for choosing ministries included what we might call a preference for the multiplier effect—that is, choosing ministries that would glorify God, have the greatest effect on society, and go to those in the greatest need, that is, to those not already served by the Church or other groups. In the educational realm that meant, in effect, educating those individuals who had the potential to have a significant impact on others: typically these influencers included clergy, members of the nobility, and children of civic officials and successful business people.

Adjusted over time and in different circumstances, that changed dramatically in 1975 at the Thirty-Second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (the highest policy-making or governing body of the Jesuits). Taking the lead from encyclicals of John XXIII and Paul VI and the Synods of Bishops in 1971 and 1974, the Congregation’s Decree ⁴⁵ stated, “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. For reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another” (#2). This focus on justice quickly became part of the educational work of the Jesuits, along with the focus of research, the content of education, and the selection of the student body. “From the point of view of [a] desire for the more universal good is perfectly compatible with the determination to serve the most afflicted for the sake of the Gospel” (GC 32, Decree 4, #41). Further, the Congregation understood “a commitment to

promote justice and to enter into solidarity with the voiceless and the powerless” (#42). It also noted that people needed to help each other “overcome the reluctance, fear and apathy which block us from truly comprehending the social, economic, and political problems which exist in our city or region or country, as well as on the international scene” (#43).

More formally, this legislative body of the Jesuits committed the Society of Jesus to several things that have an impact on education:


- Greater emphasis should be placed on the conscientization according to the Gospel of those who have the power to bring about social change, and a special place given to service of the poor and oppressed.
- We should pursue and intensify the work of formation in every sphere of education, while subjecting it at the same time to continual scrutiny. We must help prepare both young people and adults to live and labour for others and with others to build a more just world. Especially we should help form our Christian students in such a way that animated by a mature faith and personally devoted to Jesus Christ, they can find Him in others and having recognized Him there, they will serve Him in their neighbor. In this way we shall contribute to the formation of those who by a kind of multiplier effect will share in the process of educating the world itself. (#59).

With this, both the Jesuits and the Ignatian tradition of education recognized an obligation to promote justice and to provide greater access to education for poor students. This has taken many forms, from a commitment to socially engaged research and teaching (addressing the first goal) to increased scholarships and the founding of innovative colleges and high schools in the United States.

In Postman’s words, this emphasis becomes the end of education that, interpreted by those participating in Jesuit or Ignatian educational institutions, serves as the reason that makes education worthwhile.

Conclusion

Several things stand out for me in my attempt to figure out what I take for granted. First, even if all of us involved in this educational tradition do not agree on all the parts, we agree on enough that students have a coherent experience. Second, people feel a freedom in the tradition to experiment with new ways to accomplish the goals; Jesuit schools have introduced a fair amount of new ideas into

the curriculum and into its pedagogy. Third, the language of “education of the whole person,” “discernment,” “service,” “community engagement,” “social justice” and so on may be new in the 400-plus years of the Jesuit or Ignatian tradition, but it clearly fits into that tradition. Fourth, the tradition has a recognition factor—it brings people together from different regions, countries, and cultures who teach in the Jesuit or Ignatian tradition, and they immediately understand each other and what they do. They also offer a hand of friendship to one another and look for ways to collaborate. Fifth, those emerging from Jesuit and Ignatian schools—alumni, faculty, administrators, staff, coaches—are generally a hopeful group. What we do matters. 



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NOTES

- 1 Postman, N. (1995). *The end of education: Redefining the value of school*. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 8–9.
- 2 Mooney, L. A., & Edwards, B. (2001) Experiential learning in sociology: Service learning and other community-based learning initiatives. *Teaching Sociology*, 29(2), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1318716>, pp. 181–194.
- 3 Bringle, R., & Hatcher, J. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education* 67(2), pp. 221–239; p. 186.
- 4 Rock, A. (2022). Bringing geography to the community: Community-based learning and the geography classroom. *GeoJournal*, 87(Suppl. 2), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-021-10408-3>, pp. S236–S237.
- 5 Thirty-Second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. (1975). *Decree 4: Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice*. Rome: Institute of Jesuit Sources. Retrieved April 6, 2023 from <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/stories/decre-4-gc-32-service-of-faith-and-the-promotion-of-justice.html>