

January 2014

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Recommended Citation

Connor, Kimberly R. (2014) "Accompanying the Student: the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm and Prior Learning," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol3/iss1/1>

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Accompanying the Student: The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm and Prior Learning

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Abstract

At the University of San Francisco's School of Management (SoM), working adults enrolled in our Bachelor of Science in Management degree completion program participate in a process of experience and reflection that prepares them, as our slogan proclaims, to "change the world from here." Before our working adult students take a management or business class, they are introduced to a process we call the Interdisciplinary Studies Assessment (ISA), a prior learning opportunity that is distinctive for how it works within an Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) that recognizes that learning is a lifelong journey that can take place in a variety of settings. Through the ISA, students get credit not for life experience but credit for learning from life experience as demonstrated in the composition of course equivalent essays.

An important scene in *Cloudsplitter*, Russell Banks' monumental novel about the abolitionist John Brown, establishes the Brown family's commitment to abolishing slavery when the family assembles to read from a text of slave testimony. As son Owen relates to a presumptive biographer of his father: "There is a particular, important book in our life as a family.... The book is called *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*."¹ Owen proceeds to describe how his father would initiate reading from the text and pass it around so that everyone in the family had to read, reflect, and comment on a portion, suggesting to the biographer that she should read the book "so that you will have a more exact idea of how it was for us."² In preparing themselves for their public roles as citizens actively engaged in the abolition of slavery, the Brown family practiced an ethical form of personal education advanced by Frederick Douglass in his first autobiography where he challenged readers to awaken to the experience of slavery in the most available way possible: "To understand it one must needs experience it; or imagine himself in similar circumstances."³

In this scene the author affirms several principles relevant to appreciating the value of

prior learning as it relates to a Jesuit education. Through the Brown family ritual, Banks develops the importance of experience—actual or empathetic—as a valid tool for educating people about important issues like slavery that call for a moral response. After carefully creating the conditions and laying the foundations for the family's joint participation in their experiential education, they affirm the value of accompaniment as necessary for a successful outcome. At the same time, the author underscores the necessity for reflecting and developing a coherent narrative out of the fragmented documentation of human lives in order to make sense of this experience and to prepare for constructive engagement in the world. Banks positions Brown as a model educator whose pedagogy positions him as accompanying his progeny through their experiential learning.⁴

At the University of San Francisco's School of Management (SoM), working adults enrolled in our Bachelor of Science in Management degree completion program participate in a similar process of experience and reflection that prepares them, as our slogan proclaims, to "change the world from here." Before our working adult students take a management or

business class, they are introduced to a process we call the Interdisciplinary Studies Assessment (ISA), a prior learning opportunity that is distinctive for how it works within an Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) that recognizes that learning is a lifelong journey that can take place in a variety of settings. Through the ISA, students get credit not for life experience but credit for learning from life experience as demonstrated in the composition of course equivalent essays.

Recognizing that the universal curriculum for Jesuit schools recommended in the original *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599 would need adapting for the modern era, the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) was developed by the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE) in 1993 as an outgrowth of the tenth part of a 1986 initiative, *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*. ISA students enact each dimension of the IPP as set forth in five movements—context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation (ICAJE). The ISA validates the student's *context* and point of view as a site where education begins; we recognize this principle by offering prior learning credit. The ISA recognizes a broad range of *experience* as being educational and illustrative of higher-level skill development by developing course equivalent outcomes that measure the experience. The ISA encourages the possession of knowledge as formulated through *reflection* that our students experience while composing their course equivalent essays. The ISA identifies *action* as the interiorized choice and external manifestation of educational experience as our students proclaim in their written demonstration of prior knowledge. And the ISA concludes with an *evaluation* that confirms learning, validates commitment, and recognizes transformation expressed by awarding academic credit.

Just as the IPP derives from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the ISA represents for prior learners a condensed version of experience and learning in much the same way devotees of the Exercises have adapted them using the 19th annotation. Just as St Ignatius

realized that going away for thirty days on silent retreat to practice the Exercises was an option not available to everyone and suggested that the same experience could be gained by remaining at home and continuing with the business of daily life—the 19th annotation—so, too, do educators at the School of Management recognize their students in context and provide them the opportunity for transforming their daily, lived and worked experience, by way of reflection while also concretely improving their ability to be men and women for others by acquiring academic credits toward graduation.

By offering the opportunity to demonstrate prior learning for college credit, USF shows how true “personal care and concern for the individual” continues as a hallmark of Jesuit education. As an active learning technique, students writing for ISA credits enact the experiential dimension of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm on two levels. The first is the level of reflection on and validation of past experience as students re-experience their engaged learning through *reflection*; second is the level of present experience that enacts a shaping of that reflection by applying the tools of academic analysis so that the student goes more deeply into the experience, a process that also requires a student to *evaluate* benefits and challenges. Using the tools of discernment—memory, understanding, imagination, and feelings,—to find a connection between their experience and its academic content, students produce an *action*—the creation of an essay that gives narrative shape and interpretative power to the lives they lived. The action continues as the student progresses in the program until she completes her degree. All in all, the ISA gives shape and form to the IPP, embodies its process, and designates a tangible outcome.

Because the ISA is supported by principles of the IPP, working adult students who advance their progress in the degree completion program see the concrete, evidence based validation of a Jesuit education when they participate in the ISA process and earn up to twenty-one credits for learning acquired

outside the traditional classroom. The essays they write to earn these credits in a variety of areas of course-equivalent learning are identified in a SoM-authored text:

Interdisciplinary Studies Assessment: Essay Submissions Handbook. The ISA Handbook contains course equivalent learning outcomes for a variety of academic disciplines from which students make selections based on their past experience that they judge to be substantial enough to meet the learning outcomes of course equivalents. ISA course equivalents are formalized accounts in essay form of experiences adult students have had throughout the course of their lives that yield knowledge equivalent to college level course work. Students write experience-based research essays to earn prior learning credit and in the process develop the critical reasoning and writing skills they need to successfully complete their bachelor's degree in management. Experience alone does not earn credits. The student must demonstrate the ability to explain the experience in a research-based critical essay; credit is awarded for learning, not just for experiencing.

Experience-based essay credit, therefore, comes from demonstrating several skills. The key elements include describing personal experience with the subject and integrating scholarly resource material appropriate for college-level learning with that personal experience in an analytical fashion. Ideally performed, the essays should both tell the story of personal experience and analyze that experience based on the chosen academic resources, in some cases exploring other options and opinions to provide a balanced analysis. The personal experience and analysis need to be integrated throughout the essay, with frequent reference to cited material that supports the analysis. Essays that primarily relate personal narratives without academic analysis or those that are weak in integrating resources with the personal experience will not receive credit. Essays with no substantial personal experience with the subject or those without scholarly resources on the subject will receive no credit.

Informed by the IPP, the ISA recognizes that learning is a lifelong journey that can take place in a variety of settings. Here follows a more detailed description of how the ISA accomplishes Ignatian goals by engaging the five key teaching elements that make up the IPP: *Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation*. This dynamic five-step method for building a relationship with students, along with an Ignatian vision of the human and the world to "accompany the learner in their growth and development,"⁵ are embodied in the ISA process by every measure. The IPP and the ISA both:

- 1) Validate the student's context and point of view as a site where education begins;
- 2) Promote a broad range of experience and apply complex skills to the process of learning;
- 3) Encourage the possession of knowledge as formulated through reflection;
- 4) Identify action as the interiorized choice and external manifestation of educational experience in service and;
- 5) Conclude with an evaluation that demonstrates learning and validates commitment.

Context: The context in which the learner finds himself or herself is important. This is partly the real circumstances of a student's life that include family, peers, social situations, the educational institution, politics, economics, cultural climate, and so forth; prior learning is part of the context. Points of view and insights acquired from earlier study or spontaneously acquired from their environment are part of the context. Their feelings and attitudes regarding the subject matter also form part of the real context for learning. The ISA demonstrates that USF understands "the life experiences of our learners," because we have adapted our pedagogy to involve students in discerning the educational path that matches their context. By offering the opportunity to demonstrate prior learning for college credit, USF shows how *cura personalis*, true personal care and

concern for the individual, continues as a hallmark of Jesuit education.

Experience: The learning experience is expected to move beyond rote knowledge to the development of the more complex learning skills of understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The IPP understands experience to describe any activity in which, in addition to a cognitive grasp of the matter being considered, the student registers some sensation of an affective nature. The active learning technique--the experiential dimension of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm--is enacted in two dimensions when students are writing ISA essays. First, students engage their past as the site for reflection on and evaluation of course equivalent learning; second, students engage their present context as the site for the action of shaping that reflection by applying the tools of academic analysis, enabling the student to go more deeply into the original experience.

Reflection: This is the fundamental key to the paradigm. This is how the student makes the learning experience his or her own and obtains the meaning of the learning experience for herself and for others. Reflection means thoughtful reconsideration of subject matter, an experience, an idea, a purpose or a spontaneous reaction, that its significance may be more fully grasped. Reflection is how meaning becomes apparent in human experience. Memory, understanding, imagination and feelings are used to perceive meaning and value in the subject matter, and to discover connections with other forms of knowledge and activity, and to understand its implications in the further search for truth. Experience and reflection are intertwined and ongoing attributes of engaging in the ISA process.

Action: Action describes how the learner's internal state--attitudes, priorities, commitments, habits, values, ideals, and growth--flow out into actions for others. The goal is not merely to educate the mind, but to change the person into a better, more caring human with a developed conscience. Using

memory, understanding, imagination, and feelings, to find a connection between their experience and its academic content, students produce an action--the creation of an essay that gives narrative shape and interpretative power to the lives they have lived. The action continues as the student progresses in the program until she completes her degree and enters the world to serve others.

Evaluation: In the paradigm, evaluation measures more than intellectual success. Evaluation is to assess academic achievement, but it is also to produce an awareness of the real needs yet unmet, as well as to understand the learner's own moral growth. By submitting their work to be assessed for college credit, students begin this ongoing process of evaluation as initiated by the professionals who read their essays, assign value equivalent to course credit, and prepare students to complete their degree. The Interdisciplinary Studies Assessment gives shape and form to the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm because it embodies its process, and designates tangible outcomes students can achieve in the essays students write, the credits they earn, and the degrees they earn. By providing a prior learning opportunity, the School of Management accompanies its students in their discernment of the value and meaning of their experience. The ISA demonstrates the university's commitment to Ignatian pedagogy because we have adapted our pedagogy to involve students in discerning the educational path that matches their context.

Enjoying an eighty per cent success rate in earning academic credits, working adult students at the University of San Francisco have their outside-the-classroom context affirmed as a site of experiential learning. Moreover, they are now poised to continue their academic careers in management with a disposition inclined to continue applying this perspective on experience as an ongoing opportunity for acquiring, interpreting, and applying intellectual and practical knowledge. The ISA program is distinctively Jesuit in setting "higher standards for higher education" because it recognizes the stressful practicalities of working adult students--their

context--where Ignatian pedagogy begins. As a student-centered process, the ISA addresses significant challenges current students face, especially those already accepting the reality that they cannot go to school full-time or at a standard pace. The ISA functions as form of financial aid, saving students thousands of dollars; but it is also a potent psychological and spiritual aid that boosts students' confidence just as they are returning to school, thereby improving their chances for success. By encouraging students to reflect substantively on that experience and by awarding three credits for those who do so in a professionally and academically directed manner, we accomplish more than just saving them money and moving them along in the program, although those are important real world benefits. We affirm that they have been educated in some manner and that past education/context/experience is part of what led them to a formal completion of their education through a degree program.

USF has offered a version of the ISA to its degree completion students for over thirty-five years but the practice of granting college credit for learning and knowledge gained outside the traditional academic setting goes back decades, with roots in the G.I. Bill and World War II veterans who earned credits for military training. Today one in five Americans of working age has some college credits but no degree. For these forty million or so non-traditional students, prior learning is a form of financial aid, but also a validation that their winding path to a college degree merits recognition as an achievement.⁶

Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs) similar to the School of Management's ISA are used by colleges and universities around the world to evaluate learning acquired outside the classroom for the purpose of assigning academic credit. Common ways individuals have acquired college-level learning include corporate or military training, work experience, civic activity, travel, open source courseware, and independent study. Methods to assess prior learning are varied and can include standardized exams, American Council on Education (ACE) credit

recommendations for civilian and military training programs, and portfolio assessments of experiential learning similar to the ISA. More than half of U.S. colleges and universities accept some form of prior learning credit, indicating not just an expansion in unconventional practice but also a change in demographic. The students primarily benefiting from prior learning credit are working adult, degree completion learners. "What we used to call 'nontraditional' students—older, working, married, and maybe still living at home—now constitute a large and growing percentage of those attending college in the United States," according to Rob Jenkins, writing for *the Chronicle of Higher Education*.⁷

In fact, they are fast becoming the new traditional. As Jenkins observes, "The National Center for Education Statistics reports that of the 17.6 million people enrolled in college in the fall of 2011, only 15 percent were attending a four-year college and living on campus. Thirty-seven percent were enrolled part time, and 32 percent worked full time. Forty-three percent were attending a two-year college. More than a third were over 25, and a quarter were over 30. By 2019, the percentage of those over 25 is expected to increase by more than 20 percent."⁸ To meet the demand to educate all these degree candidates and to offer curricula that recognizes them in context and also gives them opportunities for success, several recommendations stand out as reflected in the ISA and the IPP.

These recommendations include recognizing the special needs of working adult students and demonstrating relevance, both of which are offered through prior learning opportunities and illustrated by demonstrated benefits. For example, students who choose PLA save time and money, according to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's recent study.⁹ PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many shortened the time required to earn a degree and had a higher degree-earning rate than non-PLA students.

56 percent of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so.

Anya Kamenetz expands on the benefits and reminds educators that in order to understand the importance of prior learning credits, “we must stipulate two truths: most students don’t start and finish at the same college and lots of important learning takes place outside of school,” conclusions Kamenetz supports with additional data.¹⁰ Successful prior learning students, she observes, receive multiple benefits in addition to saving time and money as described above. Perhaps as important but less quantifiable, students gain understanding by way of reflection and validation of their experience. As Kamenetz explains: “The process of reviewing credits for prior learning, especially when students put together a portfolio that demonstrates that learning is valuable in intangible ways. Students take the time to reflect on, assimilate, and integrate what they’ve learned and to think about how it fits with their future goals.”¹¹

Developing these skills follows an important trend in higher education in business and management that recognizes the liberal arts foundation of most learning, including professional and applied forms of education. Reporting on a two-day session organized by the Aspen Institute’s Business and Society program, which brought together nearly 100 deans and professors from business schools and liberal-arts departments from across the country, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* identifies this meeting as part of a broader effort to better integrate the liberal arts and sciences into undergraduate business and management education. Among the conclusions the participants agreed on are principles that support both the ISA process and the IPP technique, both of which call upon the traditions and ways of thinking fostered by the liberal arts that improve the ability of students to reflect and think critically in more nuanced ways from multiple perspectives.

Transformational effects emerge from applying the IPP, including a deepened sensitivity to and awareness of self, society, world, and God, and responding to these effects advance skills traditionally developed in liberal arts courses and reinforce Ignatian values but in the context of earning a degree in management. As one researcher studying prior learning affirms, “Across the board what we’ve found is that clearly students who are participating in PLA have greater reflection skills, better problem solving skills, more tacit knowledge, more self-regulated learning, more self-direction, better study skills, and a better understanding of the role of the faculty,” as well as feelings of pride and accomplishment from the process of reflecting on their prior learning.¹²

These humanities-based traits are a special benefit to students in business and management who otherwise might not enjoy as many opportunities to develop them. So too are the findings of a recent study that found that about 600 corporations, professional associations, labor unions, and government agencies have used ACE’s credit evaluation service, ranging from Starbucks and Jiffy Lube to the National Security Agency and the Federal Aviation Administration.¹³

Among the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities, less than half offer a prior learning opportunity for college-level equivalency. Of those that do, the University of San Francisco is the only institution to explicitly link the process with the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm. Many universities decline to offer an elaborate rationale for offering prior learning credit, but those that do typically base their educational rationale on Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model, developed by a professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University. In 1984 Kolb popularized experiential learning as the most efficient method for mastering new concepts and developed a model to describe the process of transforming learning into knowledge. According to Kolb, knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it

through four distinct stages of learning: description of concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualization through generalizations, principles, and theories; and active experimentation through testing and application. Offering a holistic perspective that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior—or Do, Observe, Think, and Plan—Kolb’s stages of learning map well with the IPP but lacks a values-based approach that implicitly engages an ethical assessment of the experience being described and interpreted. His model also seems to work best as a preparation for experiential learning rather than as an assessment of prior learning. Urban Whitaker’s 1989 study *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures for Good Practice*, identified 10 quality standards to deal with academic assessment policies and administrative procedures for institutions involved in PLA activities, all of which reinforce academic rigor but which do not take into account a key provision of the IPP—recognition of the student learner as the starting point for developing an educational model.

The IPP can be adapted to any content because its primary focus is not on what is taught but how it is taught. Because there is no formula, no blueprint, for an education that is distinctively Jesuit but rather a set of guiding principles and practices that invite adaptation, Jesuit education can aim to produce technically competent, skilled professionals. But that is only part of the mission. A distinctively Jesuit business education should also reflect Catholic Social Teaching, Jesuit spirituality, and the moral vision of Ignatius. It should seek to engage our students in the reality of the working world, with all of its promise and its challenges, so they may engage it constructively to serve the common good.

In its Ignatian form, the ISA helps the School of Management meet goals similar to those set forth by one of the best minds in management education. In a July 2011 interview with the *New York Times*, Nitin Nohria, Dean of Harvard Business School,

established an astonishing goal for his graduates: “What we are trying to do is to allow our students to develop moral humility.” He continues to describe a process for achieving this goal that offers education as: “a concentrated opportunity to think about the challenges of leadership in a wide variety of ways. We hope to give people a starter kit for thinking about decision-making and the complexity of decision-making, and that students will learn a lot about what makes an effective team and how other people relate to them.”¹⁴

Recast in Ignatian terms, Nohria wants students to confront the fundamental question in discernment that the ISA also asks: “Where is this impulse from--the good spirit [of God/good] or the evil spirit [leading one away from God/good]?” A key to answering this question, says Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*, is in our actions. In the case of a person leading a basically good life, the good spirit gives “consolation”--acts quietly, gently, and leads one to peace, joy, and deeds of loving service--while the bad spirit brings “desolation”--agitates, disturbs the peace, and injects fears and discouragement to keep one from doing good. Discernment, in other words, teaches us how to lead. By following the ISA process as it tracks the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, students identify and interpret the good in their lives and use it for their benefit as they progress in their education.

Nohria is explicit in rejecting the claim that character cannot be taught. How he sets forth the process of developing character resembles an Ignatian approach to decision-making and identity formation grounded in *magis*: “Some people are able to measure up to new responsibilities and challenges and pressures, and some people are not. And this is not so much because they were good or bad people, but because the pressure they were under either brought out their best selves or brought out their worst selves, and we all have both those selves in us.”¹⁵ Prior learning opportunities give educators the privilege of accompanying our students in the symbolic transformation of their experience that

prepares them to choose as discernment directs. Eventually, our students will become those who accompany others because they will have acquired “a certain light, experience, and the necessary resources to help others who are being accompanied.”¹⁶

Notes

¹ Russell Banks, *Cloudsplitter* (New York: Harper, 1998), 67.

² Ibid.

³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981 rpt), 144.

⁴ George W. Traub, S.J., *A Jesuit Education Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 281.

⁵ International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE), *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach*, accessed April 23, 2013, http://www.rockhurst.edu/media/filer_private/uploads/ignatian_pedagogy_a_practical_approach.pdf, 240.

⁶ Rob Jenkins, “The New Traditional Student,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (15 October 2012), accessed April 23, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Traditional-on/135012/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes,” accessed April 23, 2013, http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA_Executive-Summary.

¹⁰ Anya Kamenetz, “The Transformation of Higher Education through Prior Learning Assessment,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, (September-October 2011), accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/2011/September-October%202011/transformation-full.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Paul Fain, “Prior Learning Assessment Catches On, Quietly,” *Inside Higher Ed*, (7 May 2012), accessed April 23, 2013,

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/07/prior-learning-assessment-catches-quietly>.

¹⁴ Adam Bryant, “Looking Ahead Behind the Ivy: Q & A with Nitin Nohria,” *The New York Times*, (22 July 2011), accessed April 23, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/education/edlife/edl-24Harvard-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Simon Decloux, “How God Accompanied Ignatius: A Paradigm for Us in ‘Helping Souls’,” accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.sjweb.info/documents/cis/pdf/english/200510802en.pdf>.