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Assessing and Increasing Graduate Students' Use of Reflective Practices: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

The Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm (IPP) has primarily been conceptualized and applied with regards to high school and undergraduate education. However graduate students constitute one-third of the total enrollment at Jesuit universities in the United States. This article describes an initiative to infuse one aspect of the IPP – namely, reflection – into the curricula of three graduate programs, and the development of a brief self-report measure of reflective practices. Self-report data collected from 130 graduate students in three human services programs (pastoral counseling, psychology, and speech/language pathology) indicated that their understanding and use of reflection as a pedagogical tool increased significantly during their first year in their respective programs. This article discusses future plans to continue infusing the IPP into graduate curricula.

Introduction

Jesuit institutions have a global reputation for intellectual rigor and education of the whole person, seeking to develop men and women of competence, conscience, and compassion.¹ There are over 150 Jesuit institutions of higher learning worldwide and 28 in the United States. While many think of high school or undergraduate studies as the mainstays of Jesuit education, graduate alumni in the United States number more than 500, 000 and graduate students constitute 37% of the total enrollment at Jesuit universities.² Most of these students are pursuing degrees in business, education, health/medicine, and the social sciences. The graduate programs' emphasis on the values of academic excellence, service to society, and ethics mirrors that of the undergraduate schools. But Jesuit graduate programs also seek to foster

experiential learning and the development of professional skills, training their students to be leaders in their respective fields.

St. Ignatius's writings, concerning both education and spirituality, are a source for understanding the origin and evolution of his teaching philosophy. The *Constitutions for the Jesuit Order* described not only the governance structure of his new order of priests, but also laid the foundation for the curriculum the Jesuits would adopt when they began to establish schools for lay students. The *Ratio Studiorum*, which in the 16th century standardized the Jesuit educational system, grew out of this and is often viewed as a framework for the content and values of the undergraduate core curriculum at today's Jesuit universities.³ During the late twentieth century, what has been termed the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) emerged,

combining Ignatian ideas from both the *Ratio* and the *Spiritual Exercises* together into a “practical teaching framework.”⁴ The IPP includes five elements: context, or understanding the world in which the student lives; experience, the actual learning materials presented to the student in concert with what the student brings from past learning; reflection, a “thoughtful reconsideration” of the experience on a number of cognitive and affective levels;⁵ action, efforts to make changes in society based on learning; and evaluation, an opportunity for students and teachers to understand their own growth and amend the learning process to address unmet needs. All of these elements set up an environment in which the instructor and the student are fully engaged, both cognitively and affectively, in the learning process.⁶

Reflection is an aspect of this paradigm that is of special interest to human service disciplines at the graduate level. St. Ignatius notes in the annotations at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises* that reflection includes both “insight and judgment,” that the focus is for student and teacher to “offer all of his or her attention to the enterprise” at a pace that matches the student’s connection to the material.⁷ In particular, students are encouraged to go beyond their comfort zones and be willing to share the challenges inherent to the learning process. Both imagination and affect are considered key to the process.⁸ The teacher encourages the student focus on strengths, rather than deficits.⁹ Such goals are extremely relevant to the training of therapists.

One of the principal goals of clinical training is the formation of the student’s professional identity, including both appropriation of the material and developing the competence to form genuine, empathic relationships with those who are seeking services. Growth in self-awareness, which is central to Ignatian spirituality, is also essential for the student-practitioner, whose way of being and acting will influence his or her clients in both positive and negative ways. Clinical supervision, either individual or group, fosters

not only transfer of content knowledge, but also identity development.

The goal of this study was to develop a brief measure of reflective practices that could be used to assess first year graduate students’ use and understanding of reflection as a pedagogical tool, and to examine changes in reflective practices from the beginning to the end of the academic year. Participants included full-time or part-time graduate students in three human services fields, who were encouraged to use a variety of reflective exercises as part of their training at the Loyola Clinical Centers, a university-based, interdisciplinary graduate training facility. Because graduate students seem to choose Jesuit universities more for the very discipline-specific training and professional development experiences offered than for the distinctive nature of Jesuit education, we expected that students would enter their respective graduate programs relatively unaware of the nature and benefits of reflection as a pedagogical tool. Recognizing this, faculty members at Loyola University Maryland (LUM) developed an initiative to increase students’ understanding of the IPP, focusing initially on efforts to increase their use of *reflection*. These faculty targeted graduate programs in Pastoral Counseling, Psychology, and Speech-Language Pathology for this initiative for two primary reasons: the human service nature of these fields provided a natural bridge to Jesuit values, and these programs shared an on-campus training clinic that brought students together for orientation and data collection opportunities.

Method

Prior to beginning the initiatives to increase graduate students’ use of reflective practices, the authors developed a simple, face valid measure to assess students’ progress in this area. This measure, shown in Table 1, consisted of six forced-choice questions and one open-ended question designed to assess students’ knowledge and practice of reflection, specifically as conceptualized in the IPP. Following approval by LUM’s Institutional Review Board, this measure was

Table 1: Assessment of Reflective Practices

1) How much do you know about reflection as part of the Ignatian way of learning?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	
never heard of it	very little knowledge	some familiarity	very familiar	extremely familiar	extensive knowledge	
2) Please describe your current understanding of the Ignatian tool of reflection.						
3) How often has reflection been part of your personal life?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
never	rarely	sometimes	frequently	almost always	always	
4) How often has reflection been part of your course work in the past year?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
never	rarely	sometimes	frequently	almost always	always	
5) How often have you seen reflection infused within the Loyola community at large?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
never	rarely	sometimes	frequently	almost always	always	
6) How often has reflection been part of your clinical work?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
never	rarely	sometimes	frequently	almost always	always	
7) How often has reflection been part of your supervision?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
never	rarely	sometimes	frequently	almost always	always	

administered to graduate students during orientation at the start of their first year in the program (August), and again via an on-line survey at the end of their first year (May). Changes in reflective practices were examined by calculating changes in students' responses to the survey questions from the beginning to the end of the first year.

Over the course of two academic years (2011-2012 and 2012-2013), a total of 130 first-year

graduate students completed baseline data collection and 62 (48%) completed the follow-up assessment. Table 2 presents demographic characteristics of the student participants. As shown, the majority of students were from the masters' program in Speech/Language Pathology, and were Caucasian, never-married females, with an average age of 25 years.

In 2010 and 2011, faculty who supervised graduate students' clinical work attended a

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Total Sample (N= 130)	
	<i>N</i>	%
Cohort		
AY 2011-2012	62	48
AY 2012-2013	68	52
Completed follow-up survey	62	48
Gender		
Female	118	91
Male	11	9
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	108	83
African American	8	6
Asian	5	4
Hispanic	3	2
Mixed/Other	6	5
Marital Status		
Never married	106	82
Married	19	15
Divorced/Separated	5	4
Graduate Program		
Speech/Language Pathology and Audiology (MS)	94	72
Clinical Psychology (PsyD)	29	22
Pastoral Counseling (MA or PhD)	7	5
Religion		
Catholic	50	39
Other Christian	41	32
Jewish	14	11
Muslim	4	3
Other Non-Christian	4	3
None/Undecided	17	13.1
Attended Prior Jesuit Institution	29	22
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (years)	25.3	6.5

continuing education workshop designed to increase their understanding and use of Ignatian reflection in their teaching and supervision. Faculty then encouraged (and for some classes, required) graduate students to engage in reflection throughout the academic year through a variety of assignments, including assigned reflection papers, use of a reflection journal, and small-group meetings of students who chose to discuss their journal entries.¹⁰ Caruana¹¹ described a similar initiative in a special education graduate program at Regis University. During their first year in these programs, students were engaged in both traditional classes and experiential learning at Loyola's interdisciplinary training clinic, where they provided direct services (e.g., assessment, counseling, speech therapy) to community clients under the supervision of licensed faculty members.

Results

Table 3 shows mean ratings for each item on the reflection survey. At baseline (beginning of their first semester of graduate school), students on average reported “very little” to “some” knowledge of reflection as part of the Ignatian way of learning (a mean of 2.7 on the 6-point scale where 1 indicated ‘never heard of it’ and 6 indicated ‘extensive knowledge’). They reported only “sometimes” seeing reflection infused within the Loyola community (a mean of 3.4 on the 6-point scale), although it should be noted that unless

they had attended Loyola as undergraduates, students had just begun their program at Loyola and would not have been expected to have been exposed to the IPP. Finally, on average they “rarely to sometimes” used reflection in their personal life (mean of 3.5), course work (3.0), clinical work (3.1), or supervision (3.1).

Qualitative comments provided at baseline echoed these quantitative results. For example, students commented “I don't know anything,” “I've just heard it's part of Jesuit education,” “Reflection is used to evaluate yourself in relation to the world and the community. Reflecting on how you can improve to be better for yourself and others.” These responses indicated that students either knew very little about reflection or had a somewhat secular sense of the term.

When changes in levels of reflection from the beginning to the end of the academic year were examined (among the 62 students who provided data at both time points), as hypothesized, students reported significant increases in reflection in all areas assessed, including their knowledge of reflection specifically as it pertained to the IPP, and their use of reflection in a variety of contexts including course work, clinical work, and clinical supervision. As shown in Table 3, results of paired sample t-tests indicated that these increases were all statistically significant, demonstrating that these changes were reliable and not due to chance. The largest

Table 3: Self-Reported Knowledge and Use of Reflection at Baseline and Follow-up

	Baseline (N=130)	Follow-up (N=62)	t score	p values
Knowledge	2.59	3.56	5.99	<.001
Infused in Loyola community	3.06	3.71	2.37	.03
Part of personal life	3.47	3.84	2.12	.04
Part of course work	2.66	3.66	4.69	<.001
Part of clinical work	2.93	3.63	2.04	.05
Part of supervision	2.96	3.57	2.04	.05
Average reflection score	3.04	3.72	3.86	<.001

Note: Table values are means.

T values are based on paired sample t-tests comparing baseline and follow-up score; significant levels are based on one-tailed tests.

Changes in Knowledge of Reflection

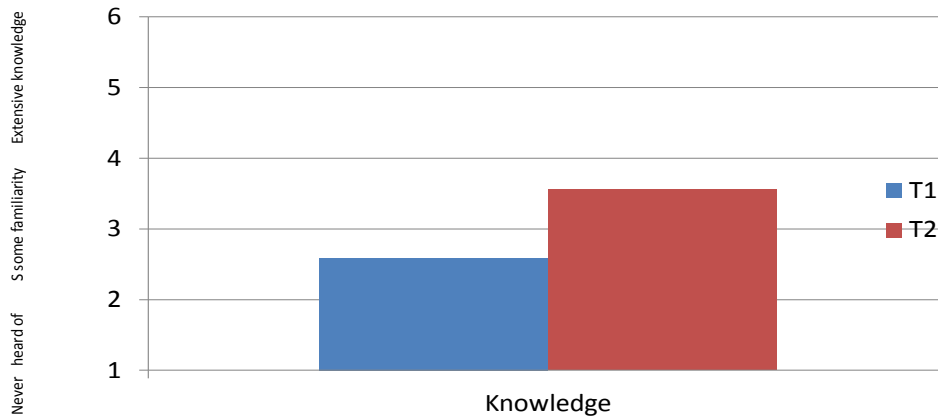


Figure 1: Changes in knowledge of reflection over the course of students' first year of graduate training

Changes in Use of Reflection

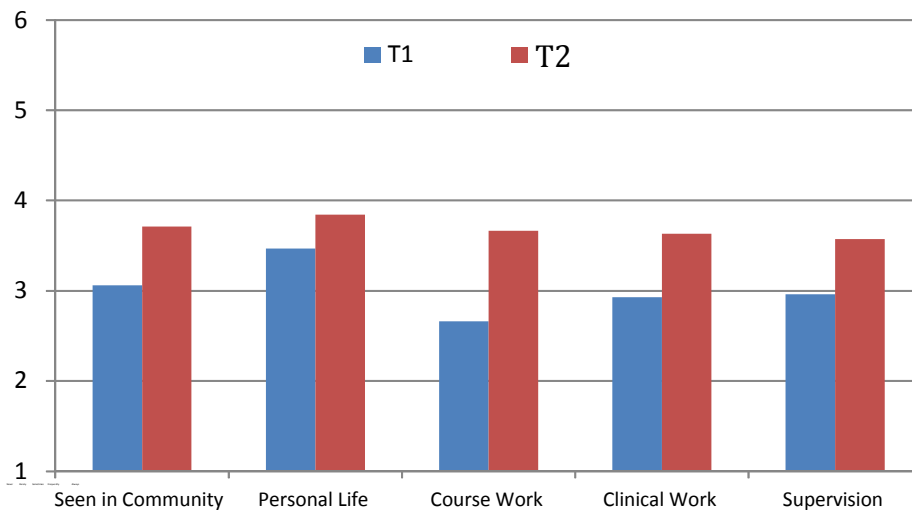


Figure 2: Changes in use of reflection over the course of students' first year of graduate training

gains were reported in knowledge of reflection as part of the Ignatian tradition (see Figures 1 and 2). Specifically, students reported that their knowledge increased by almost a full point on the six-point scale (means of 2.59 at baseline and 3.56 at follow-up, $t=5.99, p<.001$). Next we attempted to create a summary measure of reflection by averaging responses to the six forced-choice items. Analyses of baseline data indicated that the measure was reliable, with internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of .93 at baseline and .83 at follow-up. Therefore, we averaged the six items together to create a summary score. Analyses indicated that of religiosity or spirituality, whether they had attended a Jesuit school prior to attendance at Loyola, and in which graduate program they were enrolled. In other words, the significant increases in reflective practices were experienced across all subgroups of students. ourselves and to serve others," and "Reflection allows people to think about their actions, experiences and life and then be able to share those thought with others. It allows us to not only reflect on experiences outside of the clinic, but also within the clinic. It enables us to improve ourselves and our interactions with others." These responses indicated that students had gained a deeper and more nuanced understanding of reflective practices.

Summary and Conclusions

Graduate students represent over one third of the enrollment in Jesuit universities in the United States.¹² The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm offers a natural framework by which to infuse Jesuit principles into graduate students' course work, clinical training, and professional development.¹³


This study reports on the development of a brief measure of reflective practices, as well as the results of an initiative to increase graduate students understanding of the IPP, specifically with regards to reflection. One hundred thirty graduate students in Pastoral Counseling, Psychology, and Speech-Language Pathology completed the survey at the start of their first semester of graduate school; 62 of these also

students reported a significant increase in use and understanding of reflection based on this summary measure as well (see bottom row of Table 3).

Finally, we conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether certain subgroups of students reported greater gains in their use and understanding of reflective practices, based on scores on the summary measure. These analyses are not included in a table, yet indicated that increased reflection was unrelated to students' self-reported age, gender, ethnicity (Caucasian vs. others), level

Qualitative comments provided by graduate student participants at follow-up echoed these quantitative results. For example, students commented "[Reflection] helps us understand our experiences and what we've gained and could change. It helps us become better for completed the survey at the end of their first year. Responses indicated that the six-item measure was reliable (internally consistent).

Graduate students arrived at Loyola with some understanding and use of reflection; however, this often reflected a general, secular view that did not correspond to the IPP. During their first year of graduate study, faculty exposed students to a variety of reflective tools (papers, journals, brief written exercises, and the opportunity to join a discussion group) designed to deepen their understanding and learning in their coursework and clinical work. Following these activities, students reported significant increases in their understanding and use of reflection, in a variety of pedagogical contexts including the classroom, their work with clients, and their supervision with faculty. A strength of this study is the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data measuring students' use and understanding of reflection. Results emphasize the importance of exposing not just undergraduate students, but also graduate students, to the distinctive character of the IPP, and indicate that within one year of graduate training, students increased their use and understanding of reflection. Future initiatives will target additional components of the IPP including context, experience, action

and evaluation, and will also explore students' reflective practices in their personal lives. In addition, dissemination of the assessment tool may encourage others to evaluate their students' use of reflective practices. The current research had a number of limitations. First, use of reflection was assessed only via self-report, not by direct evaluation of students' coursework or clinical work. Second, it was difficult to obtain follow-up data because students were not together at the end of the year as they were during orientation. Third, the sample was homogeneous with respect to age, race/ethnicity, and marital status. Finally, students were aware of the researchers' desired results and thus demand characteristics may have influenced them to provide follow-up responses that would document increases in reflection. Future research on this topic should assess reflection from multiple perspectives and follow students for a longer period of time, perhaps into their early professional careers. Still, preliminary work shows that Jesuit values can be a distinctive and important component in graduate education. 

Notes

¹ Sharon J. Korth, "Precis of Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach," in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, ed. George W. Traub, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 280-284.

² Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, unpublished data tables, 2013.

³ Vincent J. Duminuco (ed.), (2000). *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*. New York: Fordham University Press.

⁴ Korth, "Precis."

⁵ Ibid., 280.

⁶ Vicki Caruana, (2014), "Using the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm to Frame the Reflective Practice of Special Education Teacher Candidates," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 3, no.1 (2014): 19-28.

⁷ Brian O. McDermott, "A Jesuit Approach to Education," unpublished manuscript, 2010.

⁸ Korth, "Precis."

⁹ Kurt. M. Denk, "Making Connections, Finding Meaning, Engaging the World: Theory and Techniques for Ignatian Reflection on Service for and with Others," unpublished manuscript, 2006; Janet Preis and Erin Stauder, "Reflective Writing: From Pedagogy to Practice in a Jesuit University," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 3, no.1 (2014): 29-39.

¹⁰ Mary Jo Coiro, A. M. Thomas, and J.S. Schreck, "Commitment to Justice at the Loyola Clinical Centers," paper presented at the National Jesuit Justice Conference, Omaha, NE, August 2013.

¹¹ Caruana, "Using the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm."

¹² ACJU, 2013.

¹³ Caruana, "Using the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm."