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Overcoming Student Resistance to Discussing the Jesuit Values in Graduate Education Curriculum by Accessing the Values' Universality

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the issue of Regis University graduate education student reluctance to address the Jesuit values in their coursework. It is an examination of student explanations for their reticence as well as an attempt to use the universality of the values to make them more accessible to education students. These strategies may be applicable to other disciplines as well.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine student resistance to discussing the Jesuit values as it has arisen in graduate foundations of education, adult education, research methods, capstone, and thesis courses in the Department of Education at Regis University. It is hoped that strategies for overcoming resistance in these contexts will prove useful in education and other disciplines and that further dialogue around this topic will be evoked.

The Jesuit values articulate a philosophical framework for Jesuits worldwide. Although not every Jesuit institution emphasizes the exact same values, most schools have at least a few in common. At Regis University, in Denver, Colorado, the values celebrated are:

- *Cura personalis*
- *Magis*
- Men and women for and with others
- Contemplatives in action
- Unity of heart and mind
- Finding God in all things¹

The Jesuit values reflect the core philosophies of Regis University. They are intended to foster reflective learning and conscious participation in the world, and to encourage staff, faculty, and students to strive towards excellence, the pinnacle of which empowers others as well, especially with regard to social justice and equity. These values are expressed in various ways across campus (banners, art work, pamphlets, and more) and

woven into reflective assignments in our curricula. Despite the fact that Regis graduate education students are cognizant of attending a Jesuit institution of higher learning and are exposed to many expressions of its values throughout campus, literature, and events, they sometimes outright object to being asked to discuss these values in their assignments! Students may value the high quality of a Jesuit education without wanting to examine closely the operational philosophy inherent in that institutional environment.

Student resistance to discussing the Jesuit values

Student opposition to discourse on the values ranges from citing agnosticism, atheism, or religious affiliation as barriers to their consideration of the values, to expressing reluctance to discuss spiritual issues related to their experiences and/or research projects, feeling that these need not be related. Some feel it is an invasion of their spiritual privacy to be asked to divulge their thoughts on these matters. Others express bewilderment at encountering the values in coursework when they have not previously been asked to reflect on them in other classes. Occasionally, a student will say s/he objects to being asked to proselytize Catholicism, so will refuse to discuss the values at all.

Avoidance of the values is most often demonstrated by students simply failing to include discussion of the Jesuit values in an assignment where it is an articulated requirement. An example

of how the Jesuit values are encountered in the graduate education curriculum might be in discussion questions, such as this from Adult Education and Training (ADET) 697: *Looking at the progress you made on your capstone/thesis proposal, what new insights did you gain into: (a.) your topic; (b.) how your topic addresses Jesuit values?* Another example, from ADET 606 is: *In what ways did formative feedback not only improve the quality of your Literature Review but also allow you to enact magis in the process?*

The reluctance to discussing the values is so great that some students will completely forego earning points associated with addressing them in their work. Other students will give the values a superficial nod in their assignment responses, exhibiting little understanding of the values or detailing minimal correlation between values and their work. When drafts are returned to students with the request that they include and/or flesh out that discussion in the next draft, students usually voice their opposition via email or give superficial treatment of the values in the next draft of that work. Clearly, some students are uncomfortable about broaching the subject.

Strategies to encourage student engagement with the values through value universality

Student resistance to discussing the values has become commonplace enough that it has become necessary to anticipate and attempt to alleviate some of the student resistance to reflecting on and writing about the Jesuit values. When providing a course overview, sometimes via a Screen-cast-omatic audio-visual tour of the syllabus and course materials, time is allocated to telling students that when they are asked to discuss the values, to please take the request to heart, spend some time pondering the questions, and answer thoroughly. This is later reiterated, also, at the relevant moments in the course where the Jesuit values are included. Clarification is provided that students are not being asked to advocate Catholicism by addressing the values, and that the values are meant as reflective elements to bring more meaning to contemplation of their work.

For graduate education students, not only are they completing course readings and assignments, but they may be observing classrooms and completing

practicums to achieve teacher licensing. Additionally, they may be contributing to or conducting research in service learning environments, serving marginalized students. Ignatian pedagogy requires that Regis students open themselves to learning experiences, and reflect on, take action, and evaluate their actions in their learning contexts.² The Jesuit values serve as catalysts for deepening the student journey through the steps of Ignatian pedagogy and its inherent reflexive moments.

The most successful strategy in alleviating student anxiety about discussing the values is in presenting the Jesuit values as universal concepts, separate and apart from religious language if necessary. The values lend themselves well to this. This is not meant to be apologetic-for the spiritual aspect of the values, or for Catholicism in general, but to improve accessibility for the student who is uncomfortable with injecting spirituality or religiosity into his/her academic realm. This strategy levels the playing field for all students to participate equally.

Cura personalis

In the context of studying education and earning licensing, some of the Jesuit values are natural correlatives to what Regis students are experiencing in their training. If they do respond to assignments reflecting on the Jesuit values, education students are most likely to seize upon as relevant to their work the values of *cura personalis* and *magis*. The value *cura personalis*, for example, which means *care for the person* is easily identifiable as what great teachers do for their students. Teachers attend to the development of the “whole person” through his/her “mind, body, and spirit,” respecting that individual’s “dignity” and the inherent validity of that individual’s process or journey.³ When other students say the Jesuit values are not relevant to their work, this is the easiest value to suggest as a starting point for them to find a connection. Reluctant students can be prompted to reflect on how their work with others exemplifies care, respect, and encouragement of others’ dignity, development, achievement, and well-being. How do they achieve the best outcomes while honoring the individuals with whom they work?

Magis

Seeking the best outcome is a key concept underpinning Ignatian thought. Many Regis education students readily apprehend *magis*, meaning *more* and representing a “striving for excellence” as related to their work to attain a degree or licensing, but also because they are often planning research, thesis, or capstone projects that seek to identify issues impeding their students’ success, in order to improve conditions or learning situations. In practicums and service learning, Regis teachers in training are helping students overcome barriers to their learning while also honing their own skills as instructors. So, the Jesuit value of *magis* applies to multiple facets of their experiences. In the Jesuit tradition, this striving represents the human potential to glorify God through service to others. For the aspiritual student, however, God may not fit into his/her notion of the purpose of the work at hand. So, to prompt this student, one might ask how the student is striving towards realizing something better in a given situation or in a non-material context? How does his/her work evoke the uplifting—and serve the greater good—of others? How does this work foster a sense of community and progress?

Men and women for and with others

In a similar vein, the value *men and women for and with others* is about advocating for those who are marginalized or poor. At service learning sites, Regis graduate education students take on various roles in communities to which they may never have been previously exposed or connected. Students overcome anxieties and find ways to be effective in these new settings, offering their unique talents to contribute to community efforts through tutoring, coaching, teaching life skills, or any number of educational activities. While it may be a spiritual mission for some, students who are not inclined to this perspective might be prompted to ponder the value by being asked how they ensure that others enjoy the same rights and have access to the same social benefits as do they? In what political or grassroots movements has the student been proactive to raise consciousness about a social cause or champion rights for others? Some students may not have previously seen their actions as social or justice oriented.

They might be asked to reflect on how their contributions to a situation empower others and alleviate social ills, even in small ways and/or through daily activities.

Contemplatives in action

Much of the purpose of the Jesuit values is to provoke reflection on one’s actions and one’s role in community and in communion with God. The value of *contemplatives in action* exemplifies this. The idea is that once a situation is ascertained to require action, that the action taken be thoughtful, constructive, and in alignment with spiritual considerations. For education students, this action may be to seek positive solutions for something, such as curbing students’ disruptive or off-task behaviors, or to address a gap in the scaffolding of skills students need to master a task. The idea is to find ways to achieve a solution that honors the dignity of those involved and adheres to what is right. For the aspiritual student, this value can be presented as promoting action that is not rash or reactive, but is carried out only after some careful consideration of the context, outcomes, and impact on those affected by the action. The student may contemplate his/her role in a situation and how to leverage the best effect on it without violating others or his/her own sense of what is right.

Unity of heart and mind

The idea that the individual should endeavor not to violate ethical, religious, or moral principles is another key element to Ignatian thought because by remaining aware of these while acting in an ever-accelerating world, the individual acts in a way that is “authentic” or true to self.⁴ An example might be the modern interpretation of the value *unity of heart and mind*. Ignatius Loyola’s original notion of *unity of heart and mind* was actually about Jesuit alignment with their mission and adherence to its guiding principles when in far flung and isolated missions around the globe.⁵ Its interpretation has evolved in modern contexts to reflect action that is morally and ethically aligned with God’s will and love of humanity. Many Regis graduate education students find the value *unity of heart and mind* applicable to their graduate work as they grow professionally in their fields, quelling doubts they had about goals and abilities, and

finding their desired niches. They may also feel that work as educators fulfills their needs to not only pursue a profession but to attain one that is in service to others. For the resistant student who examines this value, a starting point might be to ask if his/her current academic path and related endeavors are being undertaken with clarity of intent, absence of internal dissonance, and a sense that s/he is moving forward in harmony with his/her own set of ethical and moral standards. Have there been moments when this sense of alignment was jarred? What happened and how did the student resolve the disharmony? This can be a moment for the student to consider what elements are in alignment and how to correct those that are not.

Finding God in all things

The quintessential Ignatian value *finding God in all things* may be the one with which the agnostic, aspiritual, or atheistic student finds hardest to grapple. It is about the celebration of God's spirit manifest in all aspects of living. Graduate education students often refer to this value when discussing how their spiritual beliefs guide their decisions and responses to classroom situations and people with whom they work. They often find that their work results in a renewed and joyful sense of purpose and connection with what really matters to them. At its heart, this Jesuit value is about the unified nature of all creation. So, when students ask how to approach this value without explicit reference to God, they can be encouraged to consider where and when they experience a sense of unity with fellow beings. What moments arise when they have a sense of community with those around them or people and creatures around the planet? When do they experience a transcendent awe and joy about the nature of the universe and their place in it? How does their sense of connectivity inspire them to greater things? Most students will have had some experience of this that they can use to interpret this value.

Conclusion

More understanding needs to be achieved with regard to how/if students frame the values in their daily lives and academic and professional development at Jesuit institutions. Because faculty

members often facilitate examination of the values, further research could explore how faculty members perceive the relevance of the values to their curriculum and students' educational growth. It is hoped that faculty in all disciplines at Jesuit institutions will share their experiences of and strategies for incorporating the Jesuit values into course curriculum and the values' relevance in the variety of educational contexts. What strategies do we have to make the values more accessible to all of our students?

While not every student will feel entirely comfortable discussing the Jesuit values in his/her academic discipline, the values can be powerful moments for self-realization and insights in our students' journeys. Making the values more accessible to students who have their own belief systems invites meaningful reflection that can result in deeper learning. It also promotes inclusiveness and connectivity for students who may feel themselves outsiders with regard to the Catholic identity of the university. The universality of the Jesuit values makes them accessible to all. That accessibility may just be a matter of finding wording that catapults the concept over the barrier of -isms. ☩

Notes

¹ Regis University, "Key Jesuit Values," accessed July 12, 2017, <http://www.regis.edu/About-Regis-University/JesuitEducated/Key-Jesuit-Values.aspx>

² International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE), "Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach" (1993), 32ff, accessed 12 July 2017, http://www.rockhurst.edu/media/filer_private/uploads/ignatian_pedagogy_a_practical_approach.pdf

³ Regis University, "Key Jesuit Values."

⁴ Andrew Dwight, "Authentic Human Development and Vector Forces in Education: Drawing on the Thought of Bernard Lonergan, S.J. in Addressing Some Key Issues in Educational Philosophy," *Jesuit Higher Education* 1, no.1 (2012): 40.

⁵ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 285-286.