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Cover Page Footnote

The author is grateful to all her colleagues at Xavier and elsewhere in the Jesuit network who have been part of the Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability project and who have influenced her teaching in countless ways.

Bicycling Seminar and Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability



Ignatian Pedagogy
for Sustainability

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Abstract

In a bicycling First Year Seminar at Xavier University, students experience and respond to the Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability (IPS) in their final assignments. The IPS is derived from the Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm of context, experience, reflection, action and evaluation and is being applied to interdisciplinary sustainability teaching in a number of Jesuit institutions currently.

I am a professor of history and sustainability at Xavier University in Cincinnati where I teach an experiential First Year Seminar titled Bicycling Our Bioregion. As a founding member of the Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability (IPS), the IPS is both what I have been doing and something new.¹ Some of the pieces or themes of the IPS have been emerging in my teaching for some time, but the pedagogy as a coherent whole of interconnected pieces is new to me and my students.

IPS is a means to balance honesty and hope at a time of great political, economic and ecological uncertainty. It also offers deeper engagement with the Jesuit mission by engaging the Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm (IPP) through the lens of interdisciplinary sustainability teaching.² I am aware, like others in this journal, of the general lack of faculty engagement with the IPP and count this as a loss for both faculty and students who often respond to these elements whole-heartedly.³

The five themes of Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability come alive for students in this eight-week course (see Table 1). Each week they travel to an interesting place and learn about its history and ecology. One of Xavier University's requirement for First Year Seminars is that they be interdisciplinary. I have added the experiential biking component for a number of reasons. Like

colleagues elsewhere, I am aware that physical activity promotes increased brain health and learning as well as overall physical and emotional well-being—all facets of human experience that aid in meeting learning goals.⁴ There are other faculty experimenting with physically-engaged learning. A political science professor at Harvey Mudd College in Los Angeles teaches students about bicycling advocacy and the politics of social change while traveling to communities by bike and meeting with local officials.⁵ Professors at several institutions in Sweden introduced small group walking in their seminar courses in computer science. Participants, students and teachers alike, reported that the discussions, quality of the class, and individuals' sense of well-being all improved.⁶

Due to the already significant requirements for the seminar, I did not introduce the IPS explicitly to the students but, instead, used it to implicitly shape the syllabus and course activities and assignments. I evaluated students' learning of the five themes through two related final assignments. The first was a final presentation and the second a final paper, both framed around three student self-identified learning outcomes from the course. In the results section of the paper, I will use their self-identified outcomes to illuminate the ways the five IPS themes came alive for them in the seminar.

Table 1. Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm and Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability

Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm (IPP)	Ignatian Paradigm for Sustainability (IPS)
Context	Truth, honesty and humility (truth)
Experience	Multiple modes of knowing (knowing)
Reflection	Time, concentration and imagination (time)
Action	Community, service and obligations (community)
Evaluation	Integrity with nature (nature)

Why this course

This course, like all my courses, comes out of my professional and personal commitment to continue to learn myself. Bicycling Our Bioregion combines my love of biking, exercise, and seeing the world at a slower speed with my desire to give students the tools, experiences and ideas with which to create their own framework for countering current ways of operating that are destroying our planet and humanity. New ways of operating will require, as Pope Francis predicts, “a long path of renewal.”⁷ My purpose in teaching is to introduce students to means by which they can envision and enact both personal and communal renewal. As a historian, I want students to think of themselves as an integral and invested part of the human community; to understand who we are as humans; what our past has been like because of how it shapes us now and in the future but also as a laboratory for what is possible in the future; and how people in different regions are addressing large-scale economic, ecological, and social problems that we face. Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato Si’* notes a similar need:

We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes, and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.⁸

In this spirit, the course literally requires students and teachers’ full engagement, something that all pedagogical literature attests to as a highly effective way to learn—incorporating intellectual, emotional, and physical learning (among others).⁹

I co-teach the course with Joe Humpert, a former teacher, bike mechanic, coffee shop owner and now cabinetmaker and woodworker for a local brewery. He commutes and travels primarily by bike and provides maintenance support in addition to delivering content, assistance with evaluation, and other logistical support.

There are three main questions that drive the course and derive from four layers as a means to understand the history of a place and thus, our role in it. The four layers are: the region’s ecology (particularly riverine), Native American settlement, early European settlement, and current attempts to promote a more sustainable kind of human settlement. The three questions are: what does it mean to be human and why does it matter for a sustainable future? How are humans and their societies shaped by nature and how have they shaped nature? What was the Ohio River valley landscape like prior to European settlement and how have humans shaped it and been shaped by it?

As the course has evolved, I have written a book of bicycling tours that initially came out of the course. In turn, as the book has taken shape, new tours have been integrated into the course. The primary text for the course is now this book of ecological and historical cycling tours of Cincinnati that I am co-authoring with Chris Hanlin, called *Bicycling Through Paradise*. There are three reasons we have given the book the title we have and these ideas also now influence and intersect with the other themes and questions of the course. If paradise is perhaps unachievable, it at least points to aspirations that many of us have for a better life. The bicycling tours emphasize the following approaches to a better life: early peoples (Native Americans and Europeans) found the bounty of resources and multiple rivers of this area a rich landscape in which to make a living;

learning about the history, ecology and geography of our particular places is interesting, if not fascinating, and promotes a sense of belonging that makes us feel more connected; and exercise, sunshine, slowing down, and fresh air all make us happier.¹⁰ Table 2 visibly demonstrates the ways in

which the four layers, three questions and meanings of paradise all interweave, promoting multiple ways of thinking about riverine ecologies, early settlement (both European and Native American), and the benefits of sustainable living.

Table 2. Course Themes

Four Layers of History (how to experience a landscape)	Three Course Questions (sustainability and history)	Three Meanings of Paradise (gifts of place and a sense of place)
Cincinnati's riverine ecologies	What was the Ohio River valley landscape like prior to European settlement and how have humans shaped it and been shaped by it?	Learning about the history, ecology, geography and quirky historical figures of our particular places promotes a sense of belonging that makes us feel more connected.
Native American settlement	How are humans and their societies shaped by nature and how have they shaped nature?	Early peoples (Native Americans and Europeans) found the bounty of resources and multiple rivers of this area a rich landscape in which to make a living.
Early European settlement	How are humans and their societies shaped by nature and how have they shaped nature?	Early peoples (Native Americans and Europeans) found the bounty of resources and multiple rivers of this area a rich landscape in which to make a living.
Current attempts at sustainable living	What does it mean to be human and why does it matter for a sustainable future?	Exercise, sunshine, slowing down, and fresh air all make us happier.

How it works

This course takes place over the first eight weeks of the students' first fall semester at Xavier University. It is condensed in this way to maximize warmer weather. We meet Monday mornings on our bikes and Wednesday mornings outside (weather permitting) to discuss readings and logistics. We finish the course with a three-day fall break trip in mid-October when we travel from campus to Morrow, Ohio via rail-trail (about 40 miles one way).

On Monday students come prepared to ride and learn for four hours, with their bikes and bodies in good riding condition. The only time class is cancelled is if the forecast is for non-stop, heavy rain and/or the temperature is below 40 degrees. We begin by reviewing the questions at the heart

of the course, highlights from the reading for the day and then set off for a tour of 6-18 miles depending on the day. Often we have another faculty or staff member with us who is interested in cycling, local history, etc. and who serves as additional logistical and safety support. This additional person provides another entry point into vocation, which is one of the goals of the First Year Seminar. As students travel throughout the city, we meet with individuals who are engaged in a particular project or vocation and learn about his or her passions and involvement, adding to students' developing sense of place and community. For example, a colleague, Adam Konopka, leads the Path Dependency Tour along the Mill Creek and narrates for students, at various points along the way, how he and his children fish in this reclaimed waterway because the organization he belongs to has helped to restore

the biodiversity of the creek over the last few years. Once at a site, we stop and talk about its significance, as students chime in from the reading and their own experiences. Every day we have at least 15 minutes for journaling, but strive for 20-30 minutes. During this time in a park or other quiet setting, students digest what they have been hearing (they do not take notes as we stop along the way), what they have been feeling and experiencing, and how it relates to the readings, ideas and questions already discussed in class.

On Wednesdays we meet outside on campus. Students come prepared to discuss the reading material, drawn from a variety of disciplines—such as Albert Borgmann’s focal things and focal practices as ways to deeply consider the appropriate role of technology for maximum human engagement; Kelly Lambert’s discovery of a positive emotional neural pathway in the brain that is connected to using our hands for meaningful labor; and Keith Basso’s account of the Apache’s use of place names and the stories associated with them to recall history and educate the community about values.¹¹ Each reading is meant to connect both intellectually and bodily with what they are experiencing in the course.

Students are evaluated by their participation (verbal, physical, and emotional); writing (three short papers and a longer final paper); and an oral presentation at the end of the course. Successful writing and oral presentations require assimilation of a fair amount of aural (while cycling) and written material (read on their own and discussed on both Mondays and Wednesdays). The instructors emphasize the aural aspect since it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to take notes or to return to PowerPoint slides after a ride. So students must learn to capture themes and ideas shared during breaks in the riding during the daily journaling sessions. These sessions generally occur toward the end of the day’s ride. After wrestling with layers of history, questions from the course, and ways of thinking about paradise, students are asked in the final two assignments (written and oral) to create their own individualized learning outcomes. They are derived from course elements but allow students to take the matrix elaborated in Table 2 above and make sense of it on their own.

The five themes

From my perspective as an instructor, the five themes of Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability are as crucial to the unfolding of the course as the three questions at the heart of the course; the ways of experiencing paradise; and the layers of history through which we travel most days. Theme 1, a learning *context* of truth, honesty and humility is expressed by the instructors who are not afraid to share with students their own mistakes, concerns, and points of departure for the course. The students also have their points of departure for the course. One obvious way humility is marked is by bicycling with the students and becoming tired and sweaty, frightened by a wayward driver, or exasperated by a road closure or other unexpected event that substantially changes plans for the day. Students, too, are vulnerable—exposed to their classmates in an unusual way. Theme 2, *experience* through multiple modes of knowing, is most clearly demonstrated by spending most of class time on bicycles riding around Cincinnati. Learning through bodies and senses (all of them) is at the heart of the course. Theme 3, *reflection*, time for concentration and imagination comes to life as students pass through landscapes at the speed of 10 miles per hour instead of 30 or 60 mph in a car. It is also demonstrated through journaling time. Theme 4, *action*, community, service, and obligation is demonstrated as students meet Cincinnati Parks employees, a family that runs a canoe and camping operation along the Little Miami, and learn about the ways Native Americans used the landscape as places for region-wide get-togethers. These individuals and others clearly demonstrate a commitment to a place and its welfare through their vocation. Students are encouraged throughout the course to think about their own vocational trajectories as well. Theme 5, *evaluation*, integrity with nature, is experienced by being exposed to the elements as we ride and sit outside for class; as students journal at the breathtaking Eden Park Ohio River overlook; climb the hill to Ault Park and its expansive view of the Little Miami river valley; or learn about edible redbud flowers and seeds. Not only are they immersed in and deeply influenced by nature, they realize: they are nature.

The results¹²

In their final presentations and papers, students expressed all five themes, but some more strongly than the others. Themes of time for concentration, honesty, and humility stood out. On the first theme of truth, honesty and humility, students noted an openness to growth (for instance, acknowledging that college is different from high school). But they also became aware of the magnitude of environmental problems, like water pollution, and the value of learning about one's location through bicycling. Tours of the once very polluted Mill Creek and an old industrial building that now houses an art colony and is LEED certified both gave students a sense of the scale of the problems we are facing as well as the ways in which people have sought to correct them. In a similar way, one student from Cincinnati noted that bicycling was essential to his being able to grasp the magnitude of the problems we faced. Cycling integrated him into his surroundings in a way that made easy departure (mentally or physically) difficult. At the same time, though, he noted that the course taught him that he can bike almost anywhere he needs and that he has agency and a capacity to act. Problems and some solutions are presented at once. Several noted feeling more humble when they finished the course than when they began, likely a result of having to face some fears and appreciate our relative insignificance in time and space.

On the second theme of experience through multiple ways of knowing, students appreciated the way travel by bicycle offered much greater intimacy with the landscape than traveling by car, as their bodies and senses were exposed to the elements and they experienced the hilly terrain of Cincinnati. Some experienced a sense of vulnerability after falling off a bike or spending the night camping out and appreciated the support of their peers at these times. One student noted that when he travels by car, the only thing on his mind is his destination. The landscape through which he moves is of no consequence, so he puts on music and "drowns" everything else out. Another wrote that there was "nothing to see, hear or feel or, even if there is I am driving too fast to notice it." A related idea was the way in which bicycling made students feel more alive, less stressed. One wrote, "Even dealing with extremely

hot days or ... cold and rainy days, it is all worth it because of the feeling of accomplishment and lifting of my spirit." This sense of accomplishment, after 15 miles or 40, was noted by many students. And more than one recognized a need to eat well before the class and to stay hydrated, paying more attention than usual to diet and health.

The third theme of reflection and taking time for concentration and imagination was most clearly expressed by the students' overwhelming appreciation for time to journal during every bike excursion. They came to appreciate the capacity to catch up on what they were learning aurally and to connect it to what they had read for class or learned on a previous trip. They recognized it as essential in this "new way of learning." They also appreciated it for a variety of reasons, only some of which, I assume, they told me about. One student wrote that time to journal allowed him to relieve "anxieties, fears, and stresses." This particular student noted an overall reduction in his stress level as a result of the course.

But they also noted that there was freedom and reflection to be had in making use of a technology (bicycle vs. car) more suited to traveling short distances, establishing connections, observing one's surroundings and getting in touch with one's own feelings and capacities. Several noted that after weeks riding through the city and its various neighborhoods, they could more easily imagine building the sustainable communities described in the readings. On their bicycles, they were not on their phones and noticed a holistic difference; disconnecting from their technology for a time left them feeling more human. Two, in particular, noted a deep sense of contentment on the three-day bike trip. One established a renewed emotional connection to a deceased grandmother and another to his deepest desires.

The fourth theme of action and community orientation was expressed in a couple of ways, first, an appreciation for the city and its history. One student, from Cincinnati, noted that the class helped him take more pride in the city. Another, also from Cincinnati, observed that the city felt like home for the first time. Others commented more particularly on the way in which people with a strong belief or concern can bring others to the

cause, such as building a park system or a transportation hub. Another wrote that “when someone believes in something bigger than themselves (nature or God), he or she can dedicate his or her time toward the greater good.” Another was impressed by the naturalist from Cincinnati Parks who gave them a tour of Eden Park. The naturalist’s enthusiasm for the park and the city was clear and made him want to have a job that he loved just as much. More than this, though, multiple students noted that a sustainable future needed people working together to create the common good, that it was only by making decisions and leveraging the strength of community that they would be able to do the work they wanted. This is a clear expression of the aim of the early Jesuits to create responsible citizens.¹³ Finally, students also appreciated the sense of community that developed within the class.

The fifth theme seemed almost obvious to the students in its outcome: they grew to have a greater appreciation for nature and for the ways in which connections to nature made them feel more whole – physically, mentally, and spiritually. Several noted that when we rode, they had a sense of belonging with everything around them. This contributed to their unique responses to the final assignment, the crafting of their own learning outcomes, which suggests a healthy ability for self-evaluation.

Though there were many positive outcomes, there were some things that could be improved in the future. For example, students’ openness to new experiences ran up against their particular backgrounds and experiences. The result, at times, was a fear or unwillingness to try new things. For example, they were frightened to be sharing small rustic cabins with harmless insects; did not readily take to cooking food outside; or to eating food that had been carried by bicycle and stored for a day in the cabins because this was outside their comfort zone. This suggests that the instructors need to do more work to establish the context of the students prior to their taking the course.

Students also did not always appreciate multiple modes of learning; rather than complement each other, the multiple modes competed with each other. For example, many students had a hard

time integrating what they learned from cycling through various neighborhoods and landscapes and from guests in the course, with the assigned reading. The former, I suspect, felt like a high school field trip and, thus, was very different from classroom education (which they know and understand) and the latter was well understood but not always point by point applicable to a particular bicycling tour. This was particularly clear in the writing assignments where students struggled with applying their bodily learning, classroom discussions, and readings. In order to respond to this, the instructors will be more explicit about learning how the appeal of being outside the classroom and on “field trips” might feed into their approach to the course and its material.

Conclusion

Students and two faculty involved with the course feel drawn to its content and experiences for reasons that are easy to articulate and some that are not as clear to articulate. Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability as a way of structuring the course is resulting in significant learning and helps students articulate intersections with ideas and questions at the heart of the course. Without explicitly introducing students to the IPS, they have gained an appreciation for all the elements involved in it and, as some of their comments indicate, they sense them as interdependent. As we continue to restructure the course, I am considering sharing the paradigm with the students up front so that they might also respond to it as a means of self-evaluation. This will mean re-aligning the questions at the heart of the course, the four layers, and the three meanings of paradise so that some of these become more implicit than they are now in order to make way for the more explicit attention to the IPS. One way to do this would be to assign a theme to each question, for example. At this stage, what is most gratifying is that students do have a strong sense that much of what they learn and experience in the course matters to them personally and as members of a community. 

Notes

¹ James L. Leighter and Kathleen R. Smythe, "Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability: An Overview," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 8, no.1 (2019).

² Jesuit Institute, "Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach," accessed April 26, 2019, [http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Ignatian%20Pedagogy%20\(I%20Edition%202013\).pdf](http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Ignatian%20Pedagogy%20(I%20Edition%202013).pdf).

³ Maureen E. McAvoy, "Training Faculty to Adopt the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, IPP and its Influence on Teaching and Learning: Process and Outcomes," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013).

⁴ Olle Balter, Björn Hedin, Helena Tobiasson and Susanna Toivanen, "Walking Outdoors during Seminars Improves Perceived Seminar Quality and Sense of Well-Being among Participants," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15, no. 2 (2018).

⁵ Maria Klawe, "Bicycle Revolution, A Course on Wheels, Teaches Students About the Politics of Social Change," *Forbes*, March 20, 2018, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mariaklawe/2018/03/20/bicycle-revolution-a-course-on-wheels-teaches-students-about-the-politics-of-social-change/#5ea6037062ac>.

⁶ Balter et al, "Walking Outdoors."

⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si' Encyclical Letter*, (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), accessed December 20, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Schoem, Christine Modey, and Edward P. St. John, eds., *Teaching the Whole Student: Engaged Learning with Heart, Mind and Spirit* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2017).

¹⁰ Chris Hanlin and Kathleen Smythe, *Bicycling Through Paradise: The Cincinnati Bioregion, Its History and its Back Roads* (Cincinnati: Half Nelson Enterprises, forthcoming).

¹¹ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Kelly Lambert, *Lifting Depression: A Neuroscientist's Hands-On Approach to Activating Your Brain's Healing Power* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2010); Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

¹² Quotes in the results section are from student papers.

¹³ Leighter and Smythe, "Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability."