

Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal

Volume 9 | Number 2

Article 2

November 2020

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Rebecca Murray

Creighton University, rebeccamurray@creighton.edu

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Recommended Citation

Murray, Rebecca. "Ignatian Leadership and Place-Based Learning." *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 9, 2 (2020). <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol9/iss2/2>

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Ignatian Leadership Collection

Ignatian Leadership and Place-Based Learning

Rebecca K. Murray
Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Creighton University
rebeccamurray@creighton.edu

Abstract

In “An Ignatian Method of City Dwelling,” John M. Staudenmaier, S.J. notes that “Ignatius teaches that prayer is geographical at its core.”¹ On his own journey of leadership, Ignatius learned much about the lives of others, and of himself, through the particular places he visited (often for much longer than he intended). By focusing on a specific geography, place-based community engagement can foster Ignatian leadership as it encourages faculty, staff and students to journey with a community in their own home. Because this unique way of engaging the community emphasizes depth of engagement over breadth, it is an opportunity to better understand the history, future, and current reality of a neighborhood, and to allow that place to transform one’s self. Place-based learning encourages us to see a place with new eyes and discover important aspects of what it means to be an Ignatian leader *for and with others*.

Introduction

The earliest Jesuits were sent out “into the world” to gain converts and save souls. The first companions aspired to evangelize the world as a call similar to that of the first disciples. In fact, the “fourth vow,” which promised special obedience to the pope with regard to missions, was a particular call for Jesuits to be available and ready to travel to unknown lands to save souls within an unknown context. Indeed John O’Malley, S.J., notes that the fourth vow was “in essence, a vow of mobility, that is, a commitment to travel anywhere in the world for the help of souls.”² This was a critical and important departure from monastic orders, for whom a vow of stability ensured a life of geographic inertia in order to concentrate on personal sanctification. The early Jesuits’ call was uniquely *in the world* rather than separate from it.

For Ignatian leaders in formation, learning to fully be in the world can be challenging, despite the increasing call for high school and college students to log community service hours. More specifically, while very used to high-impact learning experiences including service, young people seldom identify their experiences from the perspective of the community itself. This is perhaps not surprising; most service efforts,

including service-learning courses, prioritize student outcomes over community needs. So, while students may be used to using the world as a classroom, and are more and more adept at analyzing social problems, there are few opportunities for these students to experience the world as the early Jesuits did—simply put, to allow themselves to *fall in love with a place*.

Jesuits and Geography

In “An Ignatian Method of City Dwelling,” John M. Staudenmaier, S.J., notes that “Ignatius teaches that prayer is geographical at its core.”³ On his own journey of leadership, Ignatius learned much about the lives of others, and of himself, through the particular places he visited (often for much longer than he intended). And although the primary goal of the early companions was conversion of individuals and the spreading of the Gospel message, it seemed clear that they were also able and willing to recognize the marvel of the places they encountered—which of course, became their home. For them, being a part of the community (because they lived in the community) meant that they were able to deeply know and understand the community’s needs and assets and engage them accordingly.

Accommodation was an important component of the Jesuit engagement in the world, most often described through the Spanish proverb that Ignatius liked to quote, of “going in by their door to come out by ours.”⁴ While, as demonstrated in the quotation, the primary reason for accommodation was to gain converts to the faith, the mere notion that native populations’ wishes should be heard and attended to was quite radical for this period of history. Indeed, the Jesuits were widely criticized for the practice, especially by other religious missionary orders, who noted that allowing individual preference for clothing, food, or style of worship seemed to condone the idea that local community members knew what was best for their community.⁵

For Ignatius, accommodation stemmed from the idea that God dwells directly in the individual, who of course had unique circumstances. These distinctive circumstances, only known to the individual and God, meant that persons themselves were the best source of information for what they truly needed to maximize their spiritual health, so it was important for those bringing the Word of God (the Jesuit missionaries) to listen and accommodate their specific needs. This was especially the case regarding the Mission strategies in South America, where the Jesuits “usually had a more prolonged exposure to native cultures and to the realities and needs in the missionary field.”⁶ This founding concept is important in that it set the stage for the idea that individuals who inhabit a place are the best source of information for what they need—and indeed, are better than those who come in from outside that place. Again, the larger goal in accommodation was finding the most successful way to increase converts to Christianity, so in many respects place-based learning is quite distinct from the proselytizing that was at the center of the early Jesuit missionaries. However, the broader concept of accommodation can give some important guidelines for place-based community engagement in the Jesuit context. More specifically, it provides a framework that encourages a deliberate deference to the customs, histories, and context of the individuals who are actually from the community.

For young people learning to lead in the Ignatian tradition, there are a number of ways that leadership can be fostered through place-based

learning. Indeed, the process of building community partners, participating in communal events, and learning to hear the voices of community members can be groundbreaking in forming young leaders “for and with” others. And although the early Jesuit missionaries had a vision and goal that was very different from place-based learning, some of the ways in which these early leaders engaged their community can provide some guidance for this unique type of community engagement. After all, although these early Jesuits were leaders in *their* (religious) community, many of them quickly learned that leadership in an unfamiliar physical community meant adopting a different kind of leadership style to be effective. This type of leadership is not directive, but invitational; it requires listening, learning and an openness to understanding. Perhaps most importantly, this type of leadership entails a willingness to be vulnerable to the emotions and complexities of being a true part of a community.

A more recent conceptualization of accommodation is *accompaniment*, which still stresses the wisdom of local culture and knowledge, but also recognizes that the journey towards God is more dynamic, and involves not simply the conversion of others, but rather the “nakedness of the encounter of human with human, when persons discover their shared humanity and celebrate their coming to know one another... We accompany others and let ourselves be accompanied.”⁷ This updated approach requires all of the attentiveness and deep care for people that was exhibited in many of the early Jesuit missions, but also requires from Jesuit leaders a vulnerability and openness to be changed along with those they are leading. Place-based learning can be a manifestation of accompaniment for Ignatian leaders. In short, is an invitation to students hoping to lead in this tradition to accept the challenge of journeying with others, including (and perhaps most importantly) the personal change it will bring in their own lives.

Place-Based Learning and Jesuit Leadership

Place-based learning is one way that students can begin to build a true relationship with a community. It can give students not only an insight into what they might learn from community engagement, but also an awareness of

the desires of a community for their own growth and progress. It can allow students to understand community work from a holistic perspective, and to be sensitive to community assets as well as community needs. And it can set the tone for students to become true servant leaders in the Ignatian tradition. This type of leadership differentiates leaders that are in positions of authority from those who “engage in a process of initiative and influence as they interact with others in working toward common goals, regardless of formal position.”⁸

Place-based learning takes place within a geographically bound area and includes a commitment to a community that offers a wide variety of ways for students to participate in community efforts. It may include community-engaged (or service-learning) courses, but is also likely to include research projects, civic engagement and simply *being with* the community. At its core, place-based learning invites student leaders to form a rich relationship with a community over time and encourage similar relationships wherever they go.

Place-based learning experiences share a number of common features, but the specific types of place-based learning can vary a great deal. Some are large, multi-dimensional efforts with many partners that target a variety of needs for all neighbors in a specific area. The York Road Partnership, which includes Loyola University Maryland, is one such effort.⁹ Others, such as the Seattle University Youth Initiative, are comprehensive university-wide programs that focus on a specific segment of the population (namely, youth and families) but that address a wide range of needs, including health, education and crime.¹⁰ Still others, such as Loyola Chicago’s University-School Partners, are very specific, working with a singular school and directed toward specific learning goals.¹¹ Creighton University is unique in that, while it explores a place-based engagement option with its contiguous neighbors in Omaha, it also engages in place-based learning outside of their primary campus, in the Dominican Republic, through the living/learning community, Encuentro Dominicano.¹²

Although the term “place-based learning” specifically speaks to a student perspective, it is inextricably tied to the idea of “place-based community engagement,” a broader concept that identifies the commitment of the *entire university* to a particular neighborhood. Place-based community engagement encompasses all areas of a university, from students to faculty, staff, and alumni, and often will provide opportunities for students and faculty to work in tandem with community members and leaders. Place-based learning is most successful when the university where it occurs has adopted one or more place-based initiatives through place-based community engagement. Erica K. Yamamura and Kent Koth note the following as critical components of place-based community engagement, which are also integral to place-based learning: geographic focus; equal emphasis on campus and community impact; long-term vision and commitment; engagement that animates the mission; and an emphasis on collective impact.¹³ Each of these components is discussed below, specific to how they help to define place-based learning for students in a Jesuit context, and the particulars about how each of these can fit into a model of Ignatian leadership.

A Geographic Focus That Leads to Familiarity with One’s Self

A geographic focus suggests that place-based learning should take place in a specifically identified place, rather than in various locales. Typically, students “tend to be more concerned with how they are spending their time than with the place in which they are located.”¹⁴ Therefore a focus on a well-defined geographic area enables a different type of learning environment than what students may be used to, encouraging richer attention to the learning process. More specifically, it enables students to take a deeper, rather than broader, approach to learning about a community. Knowing the history, landmarks, and even the ecology of a designated neighborhood is both easier and more meaningful when the area is contained. Additionally, focusing on a clear and definable geographic space gives students a limited array of projects and organizations, which may keep students from being overwhelmed by countless opportunities to become involved. And finally, zeroing in on a clearly demarcated area for

community-based learning will make measuring progress across a number of different initiatives (such as collective impact, discussed below) more manageable.

Perhaps more importantly, a space that students can come to know well can help to ignite change within themselves and in their personal relationship with God. “If prayer is a personal encounter of the human person with God, the composition of place is a special occasion for facilitating this encounter.”¹⁵ The power of specific place is well-documented in the Spiritual Exercises, where Ignatius seeks to engage the exercitant’s imagination to transport themselves into the gospel’s surroundings. “The goal of the Composition [of place] is to make the exercitant aware that this mystery brought to the mind very much concerns him or her.”¹⁶ In the same way, becoming more familiar with a specific place, especially by learning about a number of facets that make up that place, allows students to share in the spiritual relationship that exists there. In other words, learning to know a place can help serve as a springboard for learning about one’s self, identifying one’s *inner stirrings*, or “discernment of spirits”¹⁷ and becoming more aware of one’s own relationship with God. Becoming familiar with engaged with God is particularly critical for the young Ignatian leader, as they discover that a critical piece of the process of “leader self-development” is an “explicit focus on higher purpose through spiritual engagement.”¹⁸ Indeed, crucial aspects of leadership such as resolve, steadfastness and confidence in one’s choices can be developed as one becomes familiar with God’s desires for them.

Leadership cannot be authentic without deep familiarity, both of the environment where one is leading, and of one’s self. Knowing a community—including its strengths and struggles, its history and hopes, is the first step to working with others to initiate change—particularly change in one’s own perspective of that place. Familiarity tends to encourage us to look at things in a different way: The overgrown lot becomes the place where the neighborhood kids play soccer, the run-down coffee shop is the information hub for older folks in the community. Recognizing the way community is viewed by those who live there

is integral to becoming a leader formed in the Jesuit tradition.

Considering Community Perspective as an Example of Servant Leadership

Seldom do students learn in an environment where they must consider the consequences of their learning for others, in addition to themselves. Indeed, the college atmosphere seems designed for students to address their education in a particularly inward-facing manner. Place-based learning is unique in that it places equal emphasis on student learning and community impact. What this means is simply that, in a place-based environment, the outcomes for a neighborhood *are as important* as the learning outcomes for students. And while this approach may not seem to fit into many schools’ pledges to “put students first,” it is critical in order for place-based community engagement to work well. It allows community partners a real voice in strategies and builds trust between neighborhoods and college campuses. Burgeoning student-leaders who can observe and participate in this process gain invaluable insight into how leadership can and should be shared when working with others who have a stake in the outcome.

The idea of education that is beyond the borders of a school is parallel with the formation that Jesuits themselves receive. Their commitment, often early in their formation, to go wherever they are called indicates that service to others is an integral component to individual formation. In his book, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads*, Chris Lowney notes Pope Francis’ call that “the Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be,”¹⁹ suggests that a true commitment means committing to going wherever one is needed. Getting outside of one’s self is also an important component of Jesuit-educated leaders—outside of one’s plans for further education, or plans for a career and a comfortable life, or even outside of one’s expectations of how they will learn. This equal emphasis on community and campus/student outcomes is perhaps one of the more difficult aspects of place-based engagement but can be one of the most important in building strong Ignatian leaders who put aside an emphasis

on themselves and to begin to turn their focus to others.

This is not to say that place-based learning does not *also* emphasize important learning objectives for students. Indeed, emphasizing community outcomes *as* learning objectives for students is one of the more innovative ways to maximize both simultaneously. And while this is definitely stepping “outside the box” of normative teaching, it also begins to teach students that, like early Jesuit leaders, they themselves have a real stake in what is best for the community. Lowney also notes the importance of leading outside one’s self: “The new leader has to find within himself or herself the strength to resist the poisonous pull of the me-first culture, inside and outside workplaces and organizations. That’s why our most important leadership formation is the personal, too-often neglected inner work of forging the convictions today that will guide our behavior tomorrow, like making the commitment to serve.”²⁰

Understanding Long-Term Commitment as Leadership for the Future

Related to deep familiarity of a place is the idea that place-based learning is not instantaneous or confined to a semester, but that it should continue on, regardless even of one’s physical proximity. True leadership must be a sustained effort. Long-term vision and commitment can also be tricky when considered in the context of an undergraduate population that is largely transitory. “When students see the point of education as helping them to move on (and move up), it becomes natural and normal for ... learning to be temporary and transactional.”²¹ Building a long-term commitment to a community, however, cannot be temporary. In order for this aspect of place-based learning to be fulfilled, the university community as a whole must commit to a sustained relationship with a neighborhood, one that extends well beyond the four years of an undergraduate’s career. This means that students that engage with the community will be entering into a relationship that has been supported and existed both before and after the students’ time in the university. “This sense of permanency enables all campus and community stakeholders to change and adapt to new opportunities and emerging challenges, knowing that a steadfast pursuit of

shared goals will remain.”²² Place-based learning also means that students can have a commitment to change that will continue beyond their own engagement.

Staudenmeier ties in the Ignatian ideal of *repetition* to a broader sense of “getting used to” a community, to the point where we can begin to view the community as the place where we can better know ourselves.²³ This is something different than a place where one feels comfort and peace, but rather a familiar home that has its benefits and problems, but above all, where a person *belongs*. As Jesuit leaders, the practice of engaging again and again not only helps students to become better acquainted with a place, but also themselves. Repetition is often used in Ignatian spirituality in order to “engage mystery, center on the depth of riches within revelation, and to discover how God specifically invites a particular man or woman to find the meaning of a gospel event for him or her.”²⁴ Repetition in Ignatian prayer often involves repeated “journeys” to Gospel scenes or other locations of contemplation. As such, repeated journeys to a very real location can help students to use their familiarity as a center of their own contemplation.

Nullins draws several parallels to the different aspects of Ignatian leadership and a well-known secular theory of leadership, *Theory U*, developed by C. Otto Scharmer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.²⁵ Nullins notes that leadership, like familiarity with a place, is enhanced through a repetitive practice: “a continued training is required to overcome superficial listening (downloading), suspend judgment, abandon cynicism and fear and to go to generative listening. It is not a onetime event, but a training; repetitive exercises that lead to a change of habits.”²⁶ Returning again and again to a place helps us to begin to identify that very place as something that is not apart from ourselves but occupies an important piece of who we are. It is the same way in which we often describe where we are from when we are asked to describe ourselves, and it is this familiarity that can make leadership so powerful. As we begin to deeply know someone or something, it becomes clearer the best course of action for them/it, which can ground leadership decisions. Of course, the type of repetition needed to build familiarity with a

place takes not just commitment, but also time, which many students may not have. Nevertheless, the process of building this long-term commitment is important for students to understand in place-based learning, even if they are not able to fully achieve it when they are in school.

Mission Authenticity That Keeps Leaders Centered

Most colleges and universities have missions that indicate their desire to make the world a better place through the education of their students. Often, the realization of this mission is not seen until students graduate and make their way into the world. Place-based community engagement, however, allows a space for animation of the mission much earlier, even before students have graduated. This is especially the case for young Ignatian leaders. Teaching students how to positively engage with their community while simultaneously offering them an opportunity to do just that can truly embody this mission and improve the chances that they will continue to live the mission after graduation. Animating the mission through place-based learning means that it cannot be confined to a singular class or project, but that it must become a part of the fabric of the university itself, ideally offering students opportunities for research, volunteerism, co-curricular projects, and service-learning.

For Jesuit institutions, engagement that animates the mission is perhaps the most straightforward aspect of place-based learning, because their missions don't simply ask them to impact the world, but to live in the world and attend to those on the margins. Indeed, the call to go into the world, to be people for and with others, or to strive for the *Magis* are all core elements to place-based community engagement. The call for young people to attend to the needs of, as well as recognize the assets of, communities in which they participate, is part and parcel of any Jesuit university's mission. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., speaks to the mission of all Jesuit schools when he noted that the idea of men and women for others was "the paramount objective of Jesuit education."²⁷ This statement is well-known, often repeated and fits perfectly within place-based learning. To know and understand what a community needs is critical

to determining the best way to be a person for others, and forming a deep and lasting relationship with a community is central to identifying these needs.

Understanding the Gifts of Many and Tracking Progress Collectively

One important aspect of learning is measuring the impact that learning has had, both in terms of the skills developed and how our students change as people. The concept of collective impact helps students to also measure change outside of themselves and begin to identify both the successes and shortcomings of their (and others') efforts. In short, collective impact is an assessment of place-based engagement. It evaluates the collective work done by students and faculty and community leaders and others who have attended to the needs and elevated the assets of a community. Collective impact can be one of the more complex and even frustrating aspects of place-based learning for students, because it involves long-term tracking and sometimes minimal (or negative) results. However, it can also impress upon students the reality that their work in a place is part of a much broader, longer effort, and when it "syncs" well with complementary efforts, the results can be multiplied. As leaders, it is critical to know the benefits that others may bring to the table, and to view with the broadest angle. Not only can this eliminate redundancies in efforts, it emphasizes that a leader must have a vision that is inclusive.

The idea of collective impact dovetails with the liberal arts focus of most Jesuit universities. For many students, the reality that there are multiple angles, facets, and threads to issues is not a surprise. The idea that there must also be a variety of ways to address social realities seems to be a logical next step. In fact, the notion of collective impact, which was first noted in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, in many ways describes the Society itself, with its emphasis on using the unique gifts and talents of the various companions to work toward a common goal.²⁸ Ultimately, it means learning to trust others who are working towards the same end but are getting there by different paths.

In many ways the idea of collective impact links beautifully with the concept of *solidarity*, a critical concept for leaders that allows them to suffer with those they are leading, described well by Lowney as a “sensitivity of compassionate unity.”²⁹ This compassionate unity is what sets true leaders, Ignatian leaders, apart, as they become embedded in the places (and with the people) they lead. Collective impact as a concept strives toward the idea that individual efforts, whether they are projects, classes, or service, often make little difference in “moving the needle” toward transforming communities. Any progress that *is* made is often difficult to measure, because it may be small and conflated with other things that are happening. Looking at a number of initiatives together, however (especially in a confined geographic area), means that that a larger effect can be identified and measured. In the same way, many of the Jesuits’ individual efforts seemed slight, but when combined with the whole work of the society, had a huge impact on the world. Leadership that involves collective impact also means improved outcomes for communities. Yamamura and Koth found that campus-led initiatives were most successful when leaders “worked collaboratively with campus and community partners to identify need, assets and

strategies to improve community outcomes in their respective geographic areas.”³⁰ As such, collective impact can act as both a tool of leadership that engages others, as well as an assessment of the impacts of leadership efforts.

Conclusion

While place-based community engagement is becoming more common across a number of college campuses, the benefits of this can be uniquely useful for student leaders on Jesuit campuses. The history of the early Jesuits speaks to the willingness of this faith tradition to honor the uniqueness of unfamiliar places, and to recognize the perspective of those who inhabit them. Place-based learning allows young people to engage in self-reflection and better know themselves as they learn about the facets of a particular neighborhood. It gives them an opportunity to gain hands-on experience as a servant leader, emphasizing the importance of deeply listening to a community while learning to understand its assets and challenges. Engaging in this type of learning can be daunting, to be sure, but can also provide a complex and rich experience for young leaders. ■■

Notes

¹ John Staudenmeier, S.J., “An Ignatian Method of City Dwelling” (Paper presented at the Heartland Delta Faculty Conversations, Detroit, MI, April 2011), 1.

² John O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 299.

³ John Staudenmeier, S.J., “An Ignatian Method of City Dwelling,” 1.

⁴ O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 112.

⁵ Andrés I. Prieto, “The Perils of Accommodation: Jesuit Missionary Strategies in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4, no. 3 (June 2017): 395-414, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00403002>.

⁶ Prieto, “The Perils of Accommodation,” 406.

⁷ Social Justice Secretariat at the General Curia of the Society of Jesus, “Renewing Our Commitment to a Faith That Does Justice,” *Promotio Iustitiae* 120, no. 4 (2015): 1-38; Social Justice Secretariat, 1.

⁸ Teresa Rothausen, “Integrating Leadership Development with Ignatian Spirituality: A Model for Designing a Spiritual

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¹³ Erica K. Yamamura and Kent Koth, *Place-Based Community Engagement: A Strategy to Transform Universities and Communities* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing LLC, 2018), 20.

¹⁴ Robert Brooke, *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place-Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 110.

¹⁵ Juliano Ribeiro Almeida, “‘Composition of Place’ and ‘Application of the Senses’ in Ignatian Prayer,” *The Downside Review* 137, no. 2 (2019): 48.

¹⁶ Almeida, “‘Composition of Place,’” 49.

¹⁷ “Discernment of Spirits,” IgnatianSpirituality.com, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/>.

¹⁸ Rothausen, “Integrating Leadership Development,” 814.

¹⁹ Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2013), 17.

²⁰ Lowney, *Pope Francis*, 17.

²¹ Brooke, *Writing Suburban Citizenship*, 110.

²² Yamamura & Koth, *Place-Based Community Engagement*, 20.

²³ Staudenmeier, “An Ignatian Method of City Dwelling,” 1.

²⁴ George W. Traub, S.J., *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader: Contemporary Writings on Ignatius of Loyola, the Spiritual Exercises, Discernment and More* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 48, 68.

²⁵ C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading From the Future as It Emerges: The Social Technology of Presencing* (San Francisco, CA, Berrett-Koehler, 2016); P. Nullins, “From Spirituality to Responsible Leadership: Ignatian Discernment and Theory-U,” in *Leading in a VUCA World. Contributions to Management Science*, eds. J. Kok, S. van den Heuvel (New York: Springer, 2019), 193, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98884-9_12.

²⁶ Nullins, “From Spirituality to Responsible Leadership,” 193.

²⁷ Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “The Promotion of Justice and the Formation in the Alumni Associations,” (address at the Congress of The European Jesuit Alumni, Valencia, Spain, July 29–August 1, 1973).

²⁸ John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#.

²⁹ Lowney, *Pope Francis*, 66.

³⁰ Erica K. Yamamura and Kent Koth, “Leadership Practices for Place-Based Community Engagement Initiatives,” *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 23, no. 1 (2019): 185.