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"Conversations"

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Reinert CTE Mission Statement

The mission of the Paul C. Reinert, S.J. Center for Teaching Excellence is to support Saint Louis University faculty and graduate students so that they can better serve the intellectual, spiritual, and social needs of all learners.

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Teacher, Researcher, Mentor: The Challenge of Being an Ignatian Educator Today

Excerpts from a speech at John Carroll University, February 19, 2005

Dr. Ronald Modras

Back in the early 1980s, there appeared a quirky art film entitled "My Dinner with Andre." Almost the entire movie consisted of two middle-aged men in a restaurant talking about politics, religion, life, and death. I don't remember much of the conversation (I dozed through some of it). But I remember the opening of the film, the protagonist riding on a subway train to meet Andre. And I remember the way it ended, a subway ride returning home. Though it was the same kind of train, the same sights and sounds, somehow it all seemed different, more colorful, more vibrant, more alive. Was it my imagination? The scenery was the same but the perspective had changed. Sharing life stories over a meal with a friend somehow made it different. That conversation over dinner with Andre had been transformative.

Jesuits have a long-standing conviction about the transformative power of conversation. It goes back to Saint Ignatius. He rarely preached but engaged eagerly in conversation with anyone willing to talk to him about God and spirituality. While at Manresa he learned talking to the women of there that he had something to say that they found helpful. He went so far as to leave rules for conversation: by all means, start off with small-talk but eventually try to get serious. Speak about your hopes and dreams; share what's on your heart and mind.

A recent issue of "Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education," Father Paul Crowley argues that what makes Jesuit education Jesuit is not substance but style, not a what but a how. I agree with him so far as he goes. But I would like to suggest that the style with which we teach, do our research, and mentor

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our students has to do with and is dependent upon our attitudes and intention, and that attitudes and intention have to do with vision or perspective, the way we perceive ourselves as Ignatian Educators.

Along with our colleagues in state, secular, and other non-Jesuit universities and colleges, we teach, do research, and mentor students. But, as Ignatian educators, we do it with a peculiar vision born of a particular spirituality and ethos.

We are inheritors and proprietors of a remarkable heritage with roots in the Renaissance. But we are living in a time when pundits speak of a “clash of civilizations.” We live in a nation of red and blue states, where competing values generate culture wars. We live in a global village where gaps between haves and have-nots grow exponentially. I would suggest that conversation about faith, justice, culture, and dialogue is not only relevant but required -- maybe even for survival.

Let me share with you some thoughts and experiences about what being an Ignatian educator means for my own teaching, research, and mentoring. I do so only to prod your own memories and to invite you to share your own thinking and experiences.

Now, obviously, there are considerable differences among us with respect to our disciplines. I teach and do research in theology. What I do differs from philosophy, history, and English. What we do in the humanities differs from the social and natural sciences. And certainly it would appear *prima facie* that we in the humanities and social sciences have an easier time of integrating Ignatian principles into our teaching and research than you do in the natural sciences. But I would suggest that there is still a lot of common ground among us as well.

1. Mentoring

Take mentoring, for example. Even if you are not in a graduate program in which you mentor master's or Ph.D. candidates, all of us mentor students. I take mentoring in the broadest sense to mean teaching outside the classroom and broader than academic advising. We talk to students about their academic programs, yes, but I hope also about their lives. *Cura personalis* is the Ignatian phrase that comes to mind here. Ignatius wrote into the Constitutions of the Society that Jesuit teachers (here I would say Ignatian educators) were to show *cura personalis* (personal concern) for their students, getting to know them as individuals and being concerned about their development as total human beings. Obviously, if you've got three classes of thirty-five or more students each, you cannot give the same level of *cura personalis* to all of them. But you can be the kind of person in the classroom that shows an interest in them and their lives, that tries to learn the students' names, so that those who need it will feel free to approach you and seek it. Everything I will have to say about teaching pertains as well to mentoring, to teaching outside the classroom.

2. Research

All of us do research, some of it so specific that we have no one to discuss it with even within our own department. I don't want to suggest that some research can be so esoteric that it is unimportant. But I do want to suggest that some topics are more pressing than others, more -- dare I use the word? -- relevant to the problems facing us and our times. There is so much knowledge that we already have and so much more that there is to gain through research. If anything, we are suffering from an overload of information.

Here the pertinent Ignatian principle would seem to be the *magis*. *Magis*, the Latin word for more,

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is related to the Ignatian motto, “*ad majorem Dei gloriam*,” dedication to the “greater glory of God.” That motto and the idea of *magis* are often mistaken to mean that Ignatian spirituality calls for constantly giving more of yourself in a kind of messianic enthusiasm that easily leads to burnout. Nothing is further from the case.

The *magis* has to do with discernment, with discriminating between options and choosing the better of the two. (Burnout is not a reasonable option.) Seeking the *magis* means paying attention to needs and goods, to greater needs and greater goods. It means discerning what in a particular circumstance is *magis*, more conducive toward achieving the greater good.

Research, among all our activities as professional educators, is certainly the most discipline-specific. But even here we can have an eye to needs, greater needs, and the *magis*, the greater good.

3. Teaching

Teaching and mentoring, as I mentioned earlier, are related. Whether inside or outside the classroom, for example, our teaching as Ignatian educators should be student-centered. Our teaching is really about their learning. (Here higher educational accrediting agencies concerned about learning-outcomes and assessment would agree.) But here our Ignatian vision is a little more visionary than that of accrediting agencies.

If there is a motto that should guide Ignatian pedagogy, it is that of teaching the “whole person.” That means an education that is more than cerebral, that communicates ethics as well as information, values as much as vocational skills. There is no such thing as value-neutral education. To take no stand is to take a stand. Our role as professors is to profess. And we cannot be implicit about values and ethical standards. We cannot simply allow the material we teach to speak for itself. We should never forget that leading members

of the Nazi party read Goethe and listened to Beethoven. High culture alone does not guarantee the outcome of a decent person.

Even in the natural sciences we can and, as Ignatian educators, are called upon to profess directly and indirectly -- our values, ethics, and standards. We can and are called upon to speak not only to our students’ minds but their hearts. To appeal to their sense of justice. But there is another dimension of the human person that we also are called upon to address. We are invited not only to promote justice but to serve faith, by which I mean our students’ spirituality.

Now here you may stop me here and say, “hey, that’s for you theology professors and campus ministry. I don’t do spirituality. I’m not even especially religious.” But spirituality is broader than religion. And I would argue that you can do spirituality.

Spirituality in its broadest sense has to do with - - what fills your sails and drives you? What fills your heart and animates you? What makes you excited and alive? What gets you up in the morning? What holds you together and gives meaning to your life? And if you properly note that spirituality should have something to do with God, with the Holy Spirit, then let me cite my favorite quote from Martin Luther, that your god is what you hang your heart on. So what do you hang your heart on?

These are questions our students are asking at this stage of their lives, unconsciously if not explicitly. Have you nothing to say to them but to refer them to the theology faculty and campus ministry? Teaching the whole person challenges us to address every dimension of our students’ lives, including their spiritual lives. One way I do that, by the way, is to enlist the aid of the Jesuits on campus. In my Ignatian Humanism course, I

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require the students to interview someone who has made the spiritual exercises. The most obvious pool of people to interview are Jesuits. If all goes well, what begins as an interview ends up being a conversation about faith and spirituality.

Last fall I assigned my class a conversation outside their comfort zones. Russell, a husky, broad-shouldered college senior from rural Illinois wrote of returning to his apartment near the University late one night after an evening of dinner at a restaurant and drinks with friends. In his own words, “I was happy and feeling pretty good, when a man came walking towards me. I reacted as usual, placing one hand on my pocket knife and my other on my wallet.” But then the man said, “Excuse me, sir, can I talk to you for a second,” and Russell remembered that he had an assignment to talk to someone outside his comfort zone. “Sure,” he said. And Russell began his conversation with Larry, noting that people who live on the streets have names.

Russell’s conversation with Larry ranged from why he was living on the streets, his former life on alcohol and drugs, the current state of America, and even the upcoming national elections. Before he knew it, fifteen minutes had passed. Russell gave Larry a five dollar bill, thanked him for the conversation, and began walking away. But then he realized that what he gave Larry was less than the tip he had given to the waitress at dinner. That didn’t feel right. In Russell’s own words, I then turned back around and called out for Larry, motioning for him to come back. When he did, I gave him the rest of the cash in my wallet which did not amount to much, twelve dollars. What Larry, a man who lives on the street in a life full of problems, said to me

then will always stick with me. Larry took the extra money extended, looked me in the eye, and said, “Hell, there’s enough for me and Jake.” I smiled and said, “Who’s Jake?” Larry smiled back and said, “Just another man who shot craps one too many times.”

Russell concluded his report with the comment, “Sharing when you never know if you’ll have enough for yourself is more humanistic than I’ll probably ever be. Larry . . . now that man’s a humanist.” Humanist or not, Larry taught Russell a lesson about solidarity and survival that night. And there is no doubt that Russell had a transformative conversation.

Conversations in Math and Science

by Dr. Shawn E. Nordell

Have you ever been teaching a concept that appears to have cross disciplinary implications and wondered how or if it is being addressed in other disciplines? Have you ever had a pedagogical insight you would love to share with a broad spectrum of colleagues? While communication is the cornerstone of effective cooperation/collaboration across disciplines, it is often difficult to gather and engage in a dialogue concerning pedagogy. In order to facilitate pedagogical dialogue across disciplines, The Center for Teaching Excellence is sponsoring a continuing series of Conversations for faculty. The goal of the series is to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere in which colleagues with broad mutual interests can gather and engage in pedagogical discussions. The series is loosely based on the concept espoused in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, a publication of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.

The theme of the first Conversation – held on April 18, 2005 – was “Math and Sciences.” Frequently,

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there is a large cohort of students simultaneously enrolled in introductory courses in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics and Computer Science, and Psychology. The goal of this Conversation was to provide an opportunity for the faculty responsible for these courses to discuss their goals and objectives as well as pedagogical strategies in order to identify common ground among the disciplines and encourage pedagogical development.

One topic of discussion was large class sizes and the unique teaching requirements of such classes. Faculty expressed a common concern about the degree to which they could create a learning experience where students feel connected to the class and the instructor in a large course setting. Several suggestions were made for personalizing the learning experience for students, including obtaining pictures to identify individual students and using seating charts. In addition, participants discussed how connectedness to the instructor can be encouraged by prudent self-disclosure on the part of the faculty member.

In discussing the content of courses, participants expressed concerns about the relevance of concepts and materials to the students' lives and with strategies for incorporating critical thinking. Suggestions included using current news articles to illustrate conceptual material. The consensus was that relevance is established through the instructor's excitement and enthusiasm about a topic. That enthusiasm can then be instilled in students by creating opportunities for students to communicate with each other about the topic.

Another common theme was science writing across curriculums. Given that most introductory courses require students to engage in scientific writing, faculty identified a common interest in supporting the development of writing skills and a need to engage in further dialogue across the sciences and with the humanities regarding skill development in this area.

These Conversations will continue throughout the next academic year across all disciplines. Several themes have been proposed, such as teaching capstone courses and projects, how to synthesize writing across the curriculum, and reflections from emeritus faculty. If you have suggestions for a Conversation or would like to be involved in this program please contact Mary Stephen (Director of the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence) or Shawn Nordell (CTE Fellow for Special Projects).

Ignatian Pedagogy and Technology: The Possibilities and Limitations

by Dr. John James

Dr. John James offers his thoughts on a recent issue of Conversations

I had mixed feelings as I read the first two articles in the Spring 2005 edition of *Conversations*. I embraced the notion of distance learning and the notion of using the latest technology to reach my students. However, in the back of my mind I was also feeling a sense of inadequacy as I thought of what colleagues at other universities might be doing that could devastate our "market share" of students. A professor on either coast could offer a highly interactive degree program to people in Saint Louis and teach them "face to face", leading discussions, and providing direction for an

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exchange of ideas among people separated by vast distances of space. At the other end of the spectrum, a degree mill could load a good chunk of curriculum into online courses and satisfy a lot of requirements without any teachers or students actually meeting.

When I got to the third article, by William Evans, I was hopelessly ready for a counter argument. I was moved by his articulation of the power of presence. He writes “In the actual presence of others one feels the blankness of one’s ignorance when one cannot answer well...the dull stares, the nodding or shaking of heads, the looks or murmurs of recognition or surprise, the glance of approval on the face of a friend, none of which is possible online” (Evans, 2005, p. 16). The implications for the teacher are equally immense as Evans relates “By my sense of the mood of the class – and by my sensing the students’ sense of that mood, and their sensing of my sensing of it – I may be able to teach the intellectual and moral virtues in all that I do” (Evans, 2005, p.16).

Teaching and learning is a human-mediated process. It is incarnational and communal. Authentic Ignatian pedagogy recognizes the fundamental dignity and worth of every student and recognizes that God’s grace is alive in every student in a unique and mysterious way. This understanding of education encompasses much more than a “class” in which students discuss in an anonymous chat-room, the readings and online powerpoint presentations downloaded remotely from a professor whom they have never met.

Perhaps I, like many of the authors, am striking a false and stark dichotomy between the two extremes.

Technology is a tool that must be understood and its utility maximized within a proper incarnational understanding of the education process. Another way of framing the issue is how can technology enhance what we do best and open up markets for our unique incarnational understanding of education. I’m sure that many of you will concur with the first part of my statement, but may have found the latter part a bit unnerving; Jesuit education and expanded market share?

Let’s deal with the first part first. If Ignatian pedagogy is truly incarnational and implies human interaction, kinship, and a meeting of souls, then let us use this as a standard for technology use in the classroom. I can’t imagine any Jesuit university providing a degree in which there is no human context for the learning experience. On the other hand, I believe we ought to investigate aggressively two-way live interactive communication methodologies because this technology is of increasing quality, is more ubiquitous, and is becoming increasingly more affordable.

What about the second part of the statement that had to do with opening up markets for our unique incarnational understanding of education. Everyone from the online degree mills to the prestigious universities have access to the same technologies that we do. What I propose is a more idealistic vision based on our Mission which demands that as the world becomes a smaller place, our educational experiences mediate that process by providing a context for global learning, a context that values human dignity above profit margins, a context that embraces God in all people and all things.



The Technology Corner *Sandy Gambill, Assistant Director* Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence

Facilitating classroom conversations is an easy, yet meaningful, way, to start using technology in the classroom. I've often used the online discussion tool in WebCT as a way to enrich and expand upon classroom discussion. The discussion tool takes about 30 seconds to add to a course, and you don't have to use any other feature of WebCT to utilize it. (Complete the form at <http://webct.slu.edu/request.htm> to request a WebCT course.) This tool will let you create different discussion topics and divide your students into small groups.

If you've participated in an online course, you'll understand what I mean when I say virtual conversations can sometimes be as satisfying as face-to-face conversations. Suddenly filters, such as gender, attire, and age don't matter. You get to know fellow classmates on an entirely different level. One strategy I use is to begin a discussion in class, and continue it on the discussion board as a graded assignment. Since the discussion is graded, everyone must participate. This includes "listening" in the form of reading other postings, while providing time to think and frame deeper responses. I ask students to find resources to develop points that came up in face-to-face discussion. Through these techniques, I'm seeing more meaningful exchanges between students, rather than students looking to me to validate their opinions.

Blogs are another simple tool that could be adapted to classroom conversation. A "blog" can be defined as a web-log, or a personal journal delivered in on a web page. Blogs are exciting because they truly

are the first fool-proof, easy way for non-technology professionals to build a website. It takes about 15 minutes to completely create a blog on a service like Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>). Basically, you need to create an account, select a template, and fill in the blanks to create content.

There are several strategies for using blogs in the classroom, but beware not to create a "blog overload". In one of my classes, I had students create their own blogs and make postings on other's blogs. Students were expected to respond to comments if necessary. While this led to some great back-and-forth, it led to untold hours surfing blogs verifying that each student had made the required comments. Perhaps a better method would be a group blog for the class. Students could rotate responsibility for the main weekly posting, while the rest of the class comments.

Explore these websites for some additional ideas about the benefits of virtual classroom conversation

- ***Communication and Student Learning: a 'virtual poster' from The Visible Knowledge Project***

"Online communication fosters student learning by providing a collaborative, proto-public environment in which students can develop personal and academic voices."
http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/themes/poster_showcase_discussion.htm
- ***TILT Exploration Guide for Blogs: an extensive collection of resources and articles***

Be sure to register to be notified of updates.
<http://www.tltgroup.org/ProFacDev/BLOGSetc.htm>



"From the Director"

Dr. Mary Stephen
Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence

An Invitation

The staff of the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence cordially invites you to participate in a campus conversation on teaching and learning. The conversation will occur throughout the 2005-2006 academic year as an underlying theme of Center programs. This current issue of *The Notebook* for the academic year 2005-2006 introduces that theme, *Conversations*.

"Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought." P. 14 This quote is from a delightful little book by Theodore Zeldin titled *Conversation*. Zeldin stresses that an important way to create change within an institution is through meaningful conversation; conversation which is more than simply the exchange of information, but conversation which changes the way we see our world and perhaps even the world itself. It can have the same effect on the way we see our profession of teaching and even the profession itself.

Throughout the coming academic year, the Center will sponsor many occasions for conversations. It is our hope that collectively these conversations will promote a campus-wide conversation on teaching and learning that will not only expand the way we think individually about teaching and learning, but which collectively will impact teaching and learning at Saint Louis University. Please join us.

Zeldin, T. (2000). *Conversation*. Hidden Spring Publishing Company.

Keep the Conversation Going at *Carnegie Conversations*

Carnegie Conversations is a public forum created by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This forum provides an opportunity for you to engage publicly with the authors of *Carnegie Perspectives*, a series of commentaries that explore different ways to think about educational issues. Join the conversation at <http://perspectives.carnegiefoundation.org/>

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