

Service Learning and the Challenge of Jesuit Education

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We Jesuits love teaching! We are alive when we are in the classroom. The art of teaching—and it is an art in the truest sense—is a medium in which we can create. “When it is most radical,” as Madeleine Grumet has so eloquently observed, teaching as a “work of art simultaneously draws the viewer to it, engaging expectations, memories, recognitions; and then interrupts the viewer’s customary response, contradicting expectations with new possibilities, violating memories, displacing recognition with estrangement.” This is what the learning process can be: seductive, surprising, and transforming.

The process of education at our Jesuit institutions and universities will always include challenging students’ preconceived notions and forcing them to rethink their long-held conceptions of the world. If our schools are to live up to this potential, they will hang in a continual tension between the old and the new, the comfortable past and the uneasy future. Suspended within this tension, however, the educational experience rests on the idea that our students are capable of a learning brought about by a free and active engagement in the world. As J. Kavanaugh writes in the book *Jesuit Higher Education*, “the meaning and purpose of education is justice itself. Human dignity is its premise. Human freedom is its goal.”

This concept of learning comes from a basic understanding of “epistemology,” which is the study of the nature of the grounds of knowledge—the way we know what we know. The word epistemology itself comes from two Greek words: epi + histanai—“to cause” and “to stand.” In a very real way, then, when someone knows something, they are able to stand on their own. The learner, after the learning takes place, is freer (better able to stand on her own). If the learner is not liberated by way of the learning process, then learning has not really occurred.

In light of both the needs of our world and the Jesuit mission in higher education (especially the mission of Santa Clara University), service learning offers a potent and engaged pedagogy consonant with the long and successful history of Jesuit education, consistent with the central tenets of Ignatian spirituality, and compatible with the Jesuit focus on educating students for a just society.

Service Learning and the History of Jesuit Education

Throughout our nearly 500-year involvement in education, Jesuit institutions have been noted for their ability to select the more useful pedagogical techniques—ways of teaching—from the contemporary array available. Ours is a history stretching from the *Ratio Studiorum* (the traditional handbook of Jesuit pedagogy), which brought about the first organized system of education in the Western world, to the current national interest for the integration of service learning into the university curriculum. Santa Clara University (SCU) is one of the many Jesuit universities in the United States that is continuing its fidelity to this tradition of educational excellence by examining the possibility of improving its educational programs by further integrating service learning into the curriculum.

As was true at the founding of the original Jesuit schools, today we continue to employ the best available pedagogical methods of the age. There are several different pedagogical techniques such as lectures, laboratories, or case studies that—depending on the subject matter—may be more appropriate for a particular educational goal. If the educational goal at SCU is to educate students of conscience, competence, and compassion, then what form of teaching will best meet that goal? Service learning seems to fit this need. As Fr. Martin-Baro, one of the Jesuits martyred in El Salvador, once remarked: “The more active, critical, community-oriented, and dialectical that a pedagogical method is, the greater chance it will have of being able to affect consciousness.”

This is not to suggest that we should soften our demand for excellence in education. As Fr. Kolvenbach (the Superior General of the Society of Jesus) said in Vienna in 1987: “You would not attract outstanding, talented young people if you did not offer them the prospect of academic excellence. But you would not respond to their deepest, though often poorly verbalized, aspirations if you did not carry them beyond academic excellence.”

Service Learning at SCU

The idea of service learning has been a part of American campus life for more than 30 years. At the University of Pennsylvania, it is called “academically-based community service”; at Portland State University it is called “community-based scholarship”; at SCU its closest parallel is the Eastside Project, which was begun more than 15 years ago as a pedagogical tool aimed at fostering “a paradigm shift in the minds of the [SCU] students” to yield a “significantly altered world view. The participants of the Eastside Project go into the community as students, not as volunteers. What they are doing is not community service.” The Eastside Project wants students to “wrestle with questions that are not necessarily in the purview of the volunteer” and to engage in rigorous analysis of the situation in light of the classroom lectures, discussions, and assigned reading for the course. The goal is to link the service in the community with the learning in the classroom.

The Corporation for National Service defines service learning as “a method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, that are integrated into the students’ academic curricula, and provide structured time for reflection while enhancing what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community.”

Service Learning and Ignatian Spirituality

In the most traditional view of university education, knowledge is generated through experimentation and research and then transferred to the students in lectures and readings. If the community is used at all in college training, it usually serves as a place in which students can apply new knowledge that they’ve learned in the classroom. Service learning offers the community as a setting not only for the application of knowledge but also for its generation. The idea of service learning grows out of a concept of learning “that takes fuller account of the competence practitioners sometimes display in situations of uncertainty, complexity, uniqueness, and conflict.” Theory and practice meet—what students read in class is contemplated in light of the experience they have in the community.

For Jesuits (as stated in the Documents of the 32nd General Congregation), “contemplation flows into action regularly and we realize, to some extent, our ideal of being contemplatives ‘in-action’.” This concept of contemplation in action also has its parallel in the world of general education. It finds its embodiment in Donald A. Schon’s idea of ‘reflective practice.’¹⁰ Action—not solutions—is at the heart of reflective practice. Certainty is replaced by paradox. Knowledge deepens with action and is intimately joined to it.

In a similar way, the American educational philosopher, John Dewey, offered one of the clearest articulations of active reflection on experience:

In unfamiliar cases, we cannot tell just what the consequences of observed conditions will be unless we go over past experiences in our mind, unless we reflect upon them and by seeing what is similar in them to those now present, go on to form a judgment of what may be expected in the present situation.

This active reflection may take place in seconds. It may proceed in leisurely fashion over the course of several weeks or months. It may even ebb and flow for years. As Schon describes, “the pace and duration of episodes of reflection-in-action vary with the pace and the situations of practice.” Students come to understand by doing, by being involved in the activity, and by reflecting on their experience in light of the readings used by the professor and the class discussions. Reflection on experience has always been basic to Jesuit pedagogy. According to John English, S.J., “the Ratio Studiorum was just a technique to move people through experience to reflection, to articulating, to interpreting, and to deciding.”

Service Learning and the Jesuit Focus on Education for Justice¹⁵

The Ratio Studiorum was and remains a very important document for Jesuits who are involved in education. There are other documents of equal importance. From time to time, over the course of life of the Society of Jesus, representatives of the different provinces from around the world meet in Rome to discuss the work of the Jesuits—these meetings are called General Congregations. Following each of these international meetings documents of the proceedings are published, which help to guide the work of the Society of Jesus around the world. On a worldwide scale most of the documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations (GC 31 & GC 32—in 1965 and 1973 respectively) were accepted without much question. However, there was one decree, Decree 4 of GC 32, that touched off heated debates at most Jesuit institutions. This Decree states that:

The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement....There is a new challenge to our apostolic mission in a world increasingly interdependent but, for all that, divided by injustice: injustice not only personal but institutionalized: built into economic, social, and political structures that dominate the life of nations and the international community.

This is not to say that we should walk out of our existing educational apostolates because they might have institutionalized some injustices. Quite the opposite; these schools can be the vehicles for change in the world. Continuing our commitment to education at all levels can be a very effective way to help reform social structures in favor of justice. We can not simply expect justice to happen, we must work for it. Consciousness-raising education needs intentionality, and if such education is taken for granted it is likely not to take place. Our hopes are not that people simply understand justice, but that they live justly. The history of Jesuit education, while connected with the scholastic method, is also intimately tied to the humanistic ideal that “education was to prepare the individual for the ‘active life’ of service to the common good of society and, in a Christian context, of service to the church”.

Service learning can be a useful tool in this task. Students at SCU are challenged to view the world through another person’s eyes. They are given an academic structure in which reflection and action intermingle. They are encouraged to focus both theory and practice on questions of justice.

An Engaged Pedagogy

Knowledge gained from participation in service learning classes at SCU is a special type of knowledge: a critical/emancipatory knowledge which necessarily leads the learner to a greater freedom after the learning. It requires challenging power, seeing both sides of an issue (especially the side of the oppressed), critical self-reflection, and discourse. Students’ preconceived notions are tested by what they discover through their experience.

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks calls this an “engaged pedagogy”—a liberatory education that “connects the will to know with the will to become.”¹⁹ This inclusion of the will in the learning process makes the experience a transforming one—the learner is changed after the learning has taken place. As hooks argues, when this ontological change occurs, “when our lived experience is fundamentally linked to a process of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice.”²⁰ Service learning that includes reflective practice is a form of engaged pedagogy by which the students of Santa Clara University are continuing the long tradition of Jesuit education for justice.

<http://www.scu.edu/SCU/Centers/BannanInstitute/ExploreSpring1999/ServiceLearning--text.html>