



Ignatian Contemplative Pedagogy: Forming Persons for Others

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: There is a growing literature about contemplative pedagogy in higher education, an approach to learning which prioritizes experiential, reflective practices meant to promote autonomy in learning. This essay will explore how Ignatian pedagogy, rooted in the 475-year tradition of Jesuit education, promotes a form of contemplative pedagogy especially apt for what this journal describes as the VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity).

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The essay addresses questions particularly relevant in the wake of the global pandemic: how can education promote greater self-care and self-knowledge? How can it promote greater compassion and care for others, especially the marginalized? How can it encourage people, especially the young, to develop practices that promote lifelong learning, flourishing, and responsibility?

PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The essay will review some of the burgeoning literature on contemplative pedagogy, and draw from the extensive literature about Ignatian pedagogy and especially the latter's strong emphasis on processes of reflection for the sake of just action.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The essay will show that there is a rich well of resources in the Ignatian spiritual and pedagogical traditions that promote contemplative pedagogy, and that application of these resources in contemporary educational and formational contexts will help promote lifelong learning, flourishing, and responsibility towards others.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Educators are encouraged to introduce or develop contemplative practices such as journaling, guided meditations, focused conversations among peers, reflective critical writing, and others.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **CONTEMPLATION, DISCERNMENT, REFLECTION, FORMATION, OBJECTIVISM**

STRESZCZENIE

Ignacjańska pedagogika kontemplacyjna: formacja ludzi dla innych

CEL NAUKOWY: Pojawia się coraz więcej literatury dotyczącej pedagogiki kontemplacyjnej w edukacji uniwersyteckiej. Jawi się ona (pedagogika kontemplacyjna) jako podejście do uczenia się, w którym priorytetem są praktyki oparte na doświadczeniu i refleksji, mające na celu promowanie autonomii w uczeniu się. Artykuł przedstawia, w jaki sposób pedagogika ignacjańska zakorzeniona w 475-letniej tradycji edukacji jezuickiej promuje formę pedagogiki kontemplacyjnej, szczególnie odnosząc się to tematu wiodącego numeru – rzeczywistości VUCA (zmiennność, niepewność, złożoność i niejednoznaczność).

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Artykuł podejmuje kwestie szczególnie istotne w obliczu globalnej pandemii: w jaki sposób edukacja może promować większą dbałość o siebie, samopoznanie i samoświadomość? Jak może promować większe współczucie i troskę o innych, zwłaszcza tych wykluczonych? Jak może zachęcać ludzi, zwłaszcza młodych, do rozwijania praktyk, które promują uczenie się przez całe życie, rozwój i odpowiedzialność?

PROCES WYWODU: W artykule dokonany zostanie przegląd rozwijającej się literatury na temat pedagogiki kontemplacyjnej oraz wykorzystana została obszerna literatura dotycząca pedagogiki ignacjańskiej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem procesu refleksji w celu podjęcia właściwych działań.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: W artykule zostanie wykazane, że w ignacjańskiej tradycji duchowej i pedagogicznej istnieje bogaty zasób środków, które promują pedagogikę kontemplacyjną, i że zastosowanie tych środków we współczesnych kontekstach edukacyjnych i formacyjnych pomoże promować uczenie się przez całe życie, rozwój i odpowiedzialność wobec innych.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE: Nauczyciele, pedagodzy są zachęceni do wprowadzania lub rozwijania praktyk kontemplacyjnych, takich jak prowadzenie codziennej refleksji w formie dziennika, medytacje prowadzone, pełne skupienia rozmowy w gronie rówieśników, refleksyjne pisanie krytyczne i inne.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **KONTEMPLACJA, ROZEZNAWANIE, REFLEKSJA,
FORMACJA, OBIEKTYWIZM**

Introduction

The physicist and pioneer in contemplative pedagogy A. Zajonc has suggested that there is a quiet revolution in higher education. This revolution seeks to transform an overly objectivist approach to learning in favor of an approach which “seeks a comprehensive and deep understanding of self and world” (Zajonc, 2013, p. 91). The objectivist approach, which may be described using Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy (Anderson, 2013), emphasizes reason, logic, analysis, and critique. While these are important skills, they constitute only a fraction of the goods to be achieved in the formation of persons. Also

important are affective goods such as believing, prioritizing, imagining, choosing, and appreciating (Krathwohl & Bloom, 1999; Sadd, 2018). Zajonc argues that contemplative pedagogy fosters a learning which aims at dispelling ignorance and ending suffering and evil (Zajonc, 2013, p. 93) through penetrating insight and deep understanding.

While it is true there is a beneficial, growing movement to embrace contemplative pedagogy in education,¹ this movement is far from new. Ignatian pedagogy, rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and in the *Ratio Studiorum* (“plan of studies”) of the earliest Jesuit colleges of Europe (16th century CE), is rightly described as a contemplative pedagogy.² Ignatian contemplative pedagogy, like other forms of contemplative pedagogy, entails “aesthetic and moral dimensions as well as cognitive ones” (Zajonc, 2013, p. 91). It too involves contemplation and introspection (Barbezat & Bush, 2014), and experiential and reflective components (Sadd, 2018). It is like other forms of contemplative pedagogy, “an approach to teaching and learning with the goal of encouraging deep learning through focused attention, reflection, and heightened awareness” (Columbia University, n.d.). There are, however, important distinctions which will be elucidated later.

This essay will argue that Ignatian contemplative pedagogy (ICP) is an especially apt paradigm for the formation of students in the context of what this journal describes as the VUCA world, that is, a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. It will begin by sketching the limits of objectivism, and suggest that contemplative pedagogy broadly has sought to expand attention on the knower in addition to the object of knowledge. It will then explore the roots and contemporary practices of ICP, and focus on the way that ICP prioritizes the formation of the whole person in society, including cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. It will argue that Ignatian contemplation, rooted in a particular theological context rightly described as a kind of humanism (Modras, 2004), invites students from all backgrounds and religious/spiritual/intellectual/moral commitments through its emphases on practices including memory, reflection, repetition, and discernment, for the sake of promoting justice (Kolvenbach, 2000). It will conclude with recommendations to educators for integrating ICP into their teaching.

¹ Examples include the Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics at Emory University, the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University, the Contemplative Education curriculum at Naropa University, Contemplative Studies at Rice University, Contemplative Education at the University of Redlands, and the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia.

² Compare Chien (2020, p. 2): “Importantly, there is much common ground between CP [contemplative pedagogy] and this signature pedagogy, the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP). Given that the IPP is derived from the *Spiritual Exercises*, a contemplation guide composed by the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the IPP can be broadly regarded as a Jesuit contemplative pedagogy.”

The limits of objectivism

Parker J. Palmer suggests that objectivism has “deformed” education (Palmer, 2014, p. vii). Objectivism, Palmer writes, begins as an epistemology and a false science that separates the knower from the known. In education, the application of this epistemology means that learners must remain detached from their object of inquiry. More broadly, Palmer argues, an objectivist model of education leads to an “ethical gap” between the educated person and the community in which the person is a moral actor who has responsibilities toward others in society.

Zajonc (2006) and Francl (2016) argue that even in the sciences, rooted as they are in an epistemological framework that prioritizes empirical discovery and critical distance from the object of inquiry, extreme objectivism can obscure discovery. Zajonc follows Schrödinger’s (1956/1967) description of science disengaging itself from phenomena in order to objectify nature. By contrast, Zajonc argues, contemplative inquiry approaches phenomena respectfully and even intimately. Francl similarly observes that scientists use methods that “subdue the personal and the subjective” (Francl 2016, p. 21). Yet Francl points out that the roots of modern science point to contemplative practices, using the Augustinian friar Gregor Mendel, the founder of the science of genetics, as an example. Drawing from the writing of Burghardt (2008), who described contemplation as “a long, loving look at the real,” Francl observes that many scientists would agree with that description applied to their work.

Objectivism seeks “the real,” while contemplation emphasizes seeking it lovingly. Barbezat and Bush (2014) describe contemplative pedagogy as correcting the overemphasis on the goal of “the real” to the point of ignoring the knowing subject. Education, they argue, must involve cultivating in students not only an appreciation of objective truth, but also “an awareness of their experience and their own thoughts, beliefs, and reactions to the material,” as part of their discernment as persons (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 4).

Francl (2016) in particular suggests that the Ignatian way offers contemplative practices that cultivate self-awareness. Burghardt’s (2008) seminal description of contemplation as a “long, loving look at the real” describes a consequence of adopting the Ignatian way, by appropriating practices which help the knowing subject to move beyond what he describes as a utilitarian model of engagement with reality.

The Roots of ICP

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), did not aim to involve himself in education until late in life. The first Jesuit college was founded in Messina, Sicily, in 1548, not as the result of careful planning by his nascent religious order, but rather as the result of invitation and opportunity (O’Malley, 1993). Ignatius’ pivot to education, and the subsequent development of an educational paradigm described as “Ignatian,” are reflective of his more fundamental turn toward contemplative practices

that foster a deeper knowledge of the self. Ignatius' publication of his book *Spiritual Exercises* (1548; Ganss, 1991), and his willingness to enter into the ministry of education late in his life, reflected his desire that others might benefit from the fruits of contemplation.

It is helpful to acknowledge this historical "backing into" education in order to emphasize that ICP is not fundamentally an educational paradigm, but rather an invitation to self-discovery applied to the context of formal education. To use language more common among theologians, ICP is rooted in Ignatian spirituality, which in turn is rooted in contemplative practices developed over the course of Christian history.

The word *pedagogy* in ICP refers to the fact that within several decades of the Jesuits' foundation of colleges, there developed a pedagogical guide called the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu* (The Official Plan for Jesuit Education), usually shortened to *Ratio Studiorum* (1599; Farrell, 1970), designed in consultation with Jesuit educators around Europe to standardize pedagogy across the 245 Jesuit colleges opened by 1599 (Farrell, 1970, p. iii). That so many of these institutions had been founded within five decades of the first foundation in Messina is a testament to their success and influence.

The pedagogy reflected in the *Ratio* draws from the language and goals of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius describes the Exercises as being designed "to overcome oneself, and to order one's life," (Ganss, 1991, p. 129) to make wise decisions that are not influenced by unreflective (and therefore potentially harmful) desires. The Exercises are built upon a foundation or *fundamentum* (Tetlow, 1989; Muldoon, 2005), which may be described as a willingness to cooperate wholeheartedly with God's unfolding project in the world. Practically, the exercises are various applications of memory, imaginative prayer with Biblical texts, repetition, and other physical, cognitive, affective, and imaginative practices (Lonsdale, 2000; Gallagher, 2007; Fleming, 2008; Traub, 2008; O'Brien, 2011).

In its earliest form, the *Ratio* reflected the Ignatian vision of the human person as created to do some good in the world, carefully discerned through contemplative practices. Jesuit pedagogy in its earliest days was dedicated to forming all the powers and potentialities of the individual person (Farrell, 1970, p. 114), which involved a particular stress on the liberal arts. To be sure, the aim of Jesuit education was explicitly Christian and deeply theological. Still, that theological vision evinced a profound humanism: "The rector's first concern should be the spiritual development of the young men committed to his care," including "the greatest possible progress in the development of character, literary skills, and learning" (Farrell, 1970, p. 113). The successful training of the person involved not only the training of the mind, but also the formation of the student's spirit and values (Farrell, 1970, p. 114) through contemplative practices.

Contemporary Practices of ICP

In a seminal address about Jesuit education in the 21st century, the then-Superior General of the Society of Jesus invoked the legacy of the *Ratio* and the task of Jesuit education forming people for others (Kolvenbach, 2000). He recalled the "composition of

place” in Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, a practice of imagining a Biblical scene or some other context apt for prayer. Kolvenbach exhorts his listeners to use this technique, described as “prayerful contemplation in concrete human circumstances” in order to approach the world today with generosity and a spirit of discernment.

This posture of prayerful contemplation and discernment are hallmarks of contemporary Jesuit education. Kolvenbach invokes its long history in his address, arguing that this pedagogical tradition is about forming whole persons intellectually, professionally, psychologically, morally, and spiritually. He goes on to argue that a contemporary understanding of the whole person must involve what he calls “a well-educated solidarity,” calling to mind an address of Pope John Paul II to the Catholic University of Milan in 2000 (John Paul II, 2000). The pope had suggested that solidarity is learned through contact, not concepts, reflecting many of his earlier writings on this theme which had become a leitmotif of his papacy (Baum & Ellsberg, 1989; Juśkiewicz, 2002; Njoku, 2006).

That theme of well-educated solitary learned through contact with the lived reality of persons is consistent with recent calls by the present Pope Francis, a Jesuit, to a culture of encounter (Francis, 2014; Wallenfang & Cavadini, 2018). In a 2021 general audience, he describes contemplation as a way of being rather than doing, of coming from the heart rather than the eyes (Francis, 2021). His language reflects what Ignatius of Loyola calls, at the conclusion of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the “contemplation to attain love” (Ganss, 1991, p. 176), a kind of summation of the purpose of the Exercises, to form the heart for relationship with God and to be disposed to serve God through loving encounter with people.

The practices of ICP reflect this broad and deep summons to enlarge the heart and to free oneself of attachments that hinder loving service to others. John Paul II, Kolvenbach, Francis, and thousands of educators committed to Ignatian pedagogy are steeped in a model of learning which, in the imitation of Jesus, prizes the formation of the heart for deliberate, strategic, reflective practices of love of neighbor.³ In its 2019 document *Jesuit Schools: A Living Tradition in the 21st Century*, the International Commission on the Apostolate on Jesuit Education (ICAJE) reflected on the task of Jesuit education in the 21st century (ICAJE, 2019). Complementing earlier efforts in 1986 (the 400th anniversary of the *Ratio Studiorum*) and again in 1993, ICAJE articulated the features of the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm which were especially needed in the contemporary world. The challenges of Jesuit education today, they write, involve both contemplating the goods of the world while at the same time attending to violence, exploitation, and injustice (ICAJE, 2019, p. 15). Drawing from Ignatius’ instruction in the *Spiritual Exercises* to imagine contemplating the world as the Holy Trinity did, choosing to save it by sending the second person of the Trinity (Ganss, 1991, p. 148), the document invites Jesuit educators to consider whether their graduates respond to the needs of people at the family, local, regional, and global levels (ICAJE, 2019, p. 84). Jesuit education

³ The Jesuit Global Network of Schools lists just over 2500 educational institutions as of its 2019 count, with some 51,000 educators and over 850,000 students. <https://www.educatemagis.org/blogs/the-2019-map-of-the-jesuit-global-network-of-schools-is-here/>

is fundamentally contemplative because it involves seeing the world as God does, and acting as Christ did with generous love.

Conclusions and recommendations

This essay has argued that Ignatian contemplative pedagogy is not only a set of practices or skills that educators cultivate in students. It is rather a formative process by which the educator lovingly shares with students a way of seeing the world with love, and dedicating oneself to serving it so that it may flourish. There will certainly be significant overlap with other forms of contemplative pedagogies at the level of practice: quiet reading, reflections, repetitions, use of imagination, empathetic listening, and so on. Any and all of these practices are to be lauded for the purpose of deepening student learning beyond the limits of an objectivist model.

Ultimately, though, what distinguishes ICP, in a phrase that resonates with the long tradition of Christian spirituality that includes Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, is the imitation of Christ. Ignatian contemplative practices are oriented toward sharing the mission of Christ to heal the world. Educators are invited to help students to take a "long, loving look at the real" in order that they might find stirring in them great desires to serve its greater good.

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