

## **Encouraging *eloquentia perfecta* and ethical reflection: Incorporating Jesuit principles into communication arts writing assignments**

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The goal of this project was to encourage *eloquentia perfecta* among students in introductory communication arts classes by implementing assignments guided by Jesuit values. An important part of being an effective communicator is being a clear, concise writer. Student communicators at Xavier are also directed by five Jesuit principles: reflection, discernment, solidarity and kinship, service rooted in justice and love, and mission. The current project is an attempt to incorporate these values into writing assignments in introductory classes.

The two classes chosen were Principles of Strategic Communication (COMM 270) and Writing for the Media (COMM 206). COMM 270 is the first course many public relations and advertising majors take and COMM 206 is the introductory writing course required of all communication arts majors. Both classes present students with fundamental communication skills and introduce students to professional ethics. As many communication arts classes do, these two classes required a substantial amount of writing. Thus, these classes were chosen for this project.

Assignments that had been previously used were rewritten to emphasize the five Jesuit principles and to help students relate course material to the foundation of their education. Students' ethical reflection skills and perceptions of how the class was related to Jesuit principles were measured in a pretest-posttest, quasi-experimental design. Ideally, students' ethical development would increase and their perceptions of how the class related to Ignatian values would become more accurate. By implementing the writing assignments in two classes, comparisons of ethical development and perceptions can also be made.

### Method

#### **Procedures**

At the end of the first week of the semester, after the introductory lecture, students were asked to complete the shortened version of the Defined Issues Test (DIT-2; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thoma, 1999) and to answer open-ended questions about their perceptions of the course. The DIT-2 was chosen because it measures ethical development. Students are presented with short scenarios and are asked to rate how much they considered several ethical questions designed to help them determine a proper course of action. Two scenarios were used in this project because they were relevant to the courses students were taking. The first scenario describes a reporter deciding to report a story (relevant to COMM 206) and the second describes a school board president deciding the course of action in relation to public opinion (relevant to COMM 270).

At the end of the semester, after completing the majority of the writing assignments, students completed the open-ended questions part of the posttest. During their final exam period, they completed the DIT2 part of the posttest. The open-ended questions follow:

#### **Open-Ended Questions:**

- 1) How do you think course relates to ethics? Are ethics a concern?
- 2) How does this class relate to society as a whole?

- 3) How will you apply skills you will learn in this class?
- 4) How is this class applicable to Xavier's Jesuit mission?

**Stimuli**

The stimuli for this project were writing assignment prompts designed to help students enact the Ignatian values of a Xavier education through their writing or their actions. In COMM 270, students completed a series of reflection papers after different class discussions. COMM 206 students were required to work on developing a writing portfolio for an on-campus client, to learn and write about another individual in the class, and to write a code of ethics to guide their work on all class assignments. More detailed descriptions are provided below.

<b>IGNATIAN PRINCIPLE</b>	<b>COMM 270</b>	<b>COMM 206</b>
<i>Reflection</i>	Series of papers asking students to reflect upon different course topics incorporating the other Ignatian values	Completing writing assignments that incorporated the other Ignatian values
<i>Discernment</i>	Find one example of PR or advertising and explain why it is or is not ethical. Make connections to and properly cite your textbooks and course readings. (This prompt was assigned while the class examined industry codes of ethics. The goal was to have students apply those codes and principles to determine whether an example was ethical.)	Create a unique “Mediawriters’ Code of Ethics” based upon ethical codes from major communication professions. Written as a class and used to guide future assignments.
<i>Solidarity and kinship</i>	Are you represented in any modern advertising or PR? Do people look like you or act like you? Do they share similar values? What does it mean if advertising or PR does not accurately represent individuals? (This question was assigned during the discussion about stereotypes and audience segmentation.)	The “My New Friend” assignment paired students together to complete a series of assignments. Students interviewed, outlined stories about, and wrote a feature story about one another. They also critiqued the final feature story and whether it followed basic writing principles. The goal was to help students learn about each other, to apply class concepts, and to reflect upon the experience.
<i>Service rooted in justice</i>	Thinking about research perspectives and methods we discussed in class this week, answer the following questions: (1) Which of these perspectives are most effective at helping strategic	To develop a writing portfolio for an on-campus client. Students completed a variety of writing assignments for the client. Ideally, the client can then use the final versions of the assignments as a

	communicators at understanding their audiences? (2) Which can be easily misinterpreted? (3) How can they be used to fix a poor strategic communications decision? (This prompt was assigned during class lectures relating to research.)	way to promote themselves within the Xavier community.
<i>Mission</i>	How can strategic communication serve others and be of benefit to American society? (This prompt was assigned at the end of the semester after students discussed their final papers with each other.)	To develop a writing portfolio for an on-campus client. Students completed a variety of writing assignments for the client.

## Data Analysis and Results

### Participants

A total of 83 surveys were collected, 44 during the pretest and 39 during the posttest. Fifty participants were from COMM 270, and 31 were from COMM 206. (See table 1 for a complete breakdown.) Statistical analyses do not likely have sufficient power because of the small sample sizes in each group.

Demographic data were collected only during the pretest. Participants' mean age was 20.25 years. Of the 44 pretest participants, 2 were freshmen, 17 were sophomores, 20 were juniors, and 5 were seniors. Nine of the students were not communications arts majors.

Table 1

*Number of Pretest and Posttest Participants from each Class*

	COMM 270	COMM 206
Pretest	27	17
Posttest	23	16

*Note.*  $N = 84$

### Ethical Development

The scoring for the DIT and DIT-2 is proprietary. As such, scoring of the scale was improvised based upon available discussion of the scoring (c.f., Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, Bebeau, 1997). The researcher used her expertise to choose the five most relevant ethical questions (from the 12 provided) for each scenario. The scores for those five items were averaged to create a mean ethical development score for each student. Students ranked how much consideration they gave each statement when making their decision on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "great" and 5 being "no." Therefore, the lower the ethical development score, the more the student considered the statement and the higher their ethical development. Data were cleaned and analyzed using Excel2008 for Mac. Average ethical development scores were calculated for the pretest and posttest for students in both classes, and *F*-tests were used to determine any statistically significant differences between means.

In short, there were no significant differences between or within classes or between or within pretest and posttest scores (See Table 2). It does not appear that the writing assignments

increased ethical development. However, this is not a distressing finding. Students in the sample had completed a mean of 1.8 philosophy classes, 4.3 communication arts classes, and 56% of the students had completed their E/RS sequence. Their ethical reasoning and communication skills were already high.

Table 2  
*Means Scores on Selected DIT2 Items*

Test	<u>Both scenarios</u>		<u>Reporter scenario</u>		<u>Public opinion scenario</u>	
	COMM 270	COMM 206	COMM 270	COMM 206	COMM 270	COMM 206
Pre	2.34	2.26	2.24	2.22	2.44	2.29
Post	2.34	2.46	2.21	2.40	2.48	2.52

### Perceptions of Each Course

The responses to each of the four, open-ended perception questions were qualitatively analyzed. The top three phrases that became redundant were included. If there were less than three phrases, only those phrases that were redundant were included. (See table 3).

Table 3  
*Redundant Phrases in Responses to Open-ended Perception Questions*

	<u>COMM 270</u>		<u>COMM 206</u>	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Question 1	Ethics of persuasion Message integrity Not sure	Ethical decision-making Persuasion techniques Analyze ethics of PR and advertising examples	Ethics are always important Report issues ethically	Be truthful and honest in our work Implement ethics Create own, unique work
Question 2	Relates to everyday life Ads and PR seen constantly	Representations of people Advertising reflects and shapes society Reaching people daily	Writing about impact of events Effectively inform public	Analyzing events Act as gatekeepers How to use different communication strategies
Question 3	Not sure Better communication with others	How to be ethical professionals How to implement the mission in my future Teaches students not to judge so much	Promotes honesty Not sure	Impacts each student Uses writing for social justice Writing style appeals to values
Question 4	In my future job Enhance persuasion skills	Look at issues without bias Use in upper-division classes In future job	Better my writing skills	Proofread papers Staying honest More efficient writer

### Discussion

Although students did not further their ethical development through the implementation of the writing assignments, their reported perceptions of how both classes fit within Xavier's Jesuit mission and Ignatian values did improve. Because the writing assignments were part of the larger discussion in both classes, it is difficult to attribute the qualitative improvement to only the writing assignments. Lecture and discussion certainly also had an impact on perceptions.

Interpreting both types of data together suggests that students in introductory communication arts classes understand ethics and are well trained at applying a variety of ethical standards to different situations. When students were presented with specific communication scenarios, they were easily able to apply ethical principles to analyze those scenarios. Those ethical principles were primarily communication industry standards, which, to the researchers knowledge, are not discussed in introductory philosophy or E/RS elective classes. Students were adept at applying newly learned ethical standards to answer the writing prompts. This is a testament to the training they receive in philosophy and E/RS classes, as also evidenced by the number of students who had completed the E/RS sequence and an average of almost 2 philosophy classes.

The qualitative responses also suggest that ethical learning relative to Ignatian values also occurred in the introductory communication arts classes. In particular, the change in responses to Question 3 (how does this class apply to Xavier's Jesuit mission?) suggest that students move from being "not sure" to a clear understanding of how both classes are relevant to social justice and solidarity and kinship. Likewise, students look toward applying these ideas in their future careers. Answers also moved from generic responses, such as "ethics are always important" or "relates to everyday life," to defined ideas or techniques that students recognize, such as "be truthful and honest in our work" or "advertising reflects and shapes society."

Although the targeted writing assignments cannot be the only cause of this qualitative change, they were an integral part of both courses and can be considered to have had an impact. Students left both introductory communication arts classes with a more defined understanding of what the Ignatian mission is and how communication arts classes can enact different Ignatian values.

#### References

- Rest, J., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M. J. & Thoma, S. J. (1999). DIT-2: Devising and testing a new instrument of moral judgment. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(4), 644-659.
- Rest, J., Thoma, S. J., Narvaez, D. & Bebeau, M. J. (1997). Alchemy and beyond: Indexing the Defining Issues Test. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(3), 498-507.