

## **Adaptation of an Ignatian Spiritual Exercise in the Training of Doctoral-Level Psychologists**

### Ignatian Mentoring Program

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June 2020

### **Background**

I am very grateful to have participated in Xavier University's Ignatian Mentoring Program (IMP) during the 2019-2020 academic year. My goal for participating was to deepen my exploration of what it means to work at a Jesuit university, and to benefit from the unique contribution that this community can make to my practice and teaching of clinical psychology. The IMP has certainly helped me to meet this goal.

In addition to opportunities to gather with other faculty interested in learning about Ignatian values, IMP participants were paired with a mentor for guidance. My mentor, Dr. Thomas Knestrict, was supportive, down to earth, and well-versed in the topic of Ignatian pedagogy. During our talks, Dr. Knestrict shared his experience with developing a model for embedding Ignatian values into our work as educators. He emphasized the importance of moving our pedagogical focus from a primarily intellectual exercise toward "a change of heart or even a spiritual experience" (T. Knestrict, personal communication, February 17, 2020). He shared his own personal transformation in this area, which was meaningful for me to hear. These meetings provided me with the motivation and confidence to pursue this project, as well as to seek additional information about how to achieve this "change of heart" for myself and to facilitate this in my students.

Along these lines, I was fortunate to have been invited to attend this year's Heartland Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) conference, hosted by Saint Louis University. The topic was "Under Pressure: Cura Personalis and Apostolica ". This immersive experience provided me with a stronger foundational knowledge of Ignatian spirituality. I came to better understand the language and strategies that would help me to meld the technical aspects of my profession with the values inherent in the Ignatian mission, and to infuse this combined knowledge into my teaching and scholarship.

### **The Role of Reflection in Building Clinical Skills**

A core element of the Xavier mission is preparing students to serve others. Educators of clinical psychologists, as with all health providers, are challenged to provide solid, practical clinical skills for working within the current health care environment while ensuring that students build these skills on a foundation of care and respect for their fellow human being. As an educator, I have an important role in supporting the goals of population health by providing the highest quality training for future helpers. By

the completion of a clinical intervention course, students can successfully articulate a variety of evidence-based approaches that might be used to address psychosocial problems.

A critical element in the process of learning the art and science of psychological treatment is self-reflection. Psychotherapists who achieve mastery report that self-reflective awareness is an essential aspect of this process (Schroder, Wiseman, & Orlinsky, 2009). “The active therapist is always evolving, continuously growing in self-knowledge and awareness. How can one possibly guide others in an examination of the deep structures of mind and existence without simultaneously examining oneself?” (Yalom, 2002, p. 256). As an educator, going beyond the technical aspects of learning our profession is a key aim, as well as a significant challenge. I am consistently searching for ways to assist doctoral students in this process of personal examination and learning.

Self-reflection requires the adoption of a curious focus on one’s internal experience. Engaging in this type of mindful awareness aligns with Ignatian pedagogy, which emphasizes a continuous shifting between experience, reflection, and action. Thus, grounding the process of clinician self-reflection in Ignatian spirituality seemed a clear fit for helping students achieve clarity about their deeper values and to enact those values. I chose a method, detailed below, aimed toward encouraging clinical practicum students’ full presence with their inner experience when reflecting on their recent work with clients.

### **Integrating Reflection into a Clinical Practicum Course**

In the School of Psychology, Clinical Practica are professional development courses which blend didactics and direct clinical training experiences to facilitate foundational knowledge in psychological clinical science. My strategy for enhancing my graduate-level Clinical Practicum courses was to adapt an Ignatian Spiritual Exercise, the Daily Examen, into a psychotherapy-specific reflective practice by using secular terms consistent with concepts taught in their doctoral program. The table below outlines the Examen version used for this project (retrieved from <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>), my adapted reflection for trainees, and examples of written responses trainees provided to encapsulate their experience of this adapted reflective practice. The Daily Examen is a specific five-step technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to “detect God’s presence and discern his direction for us” (retrieved from <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>). The Examen is described as an exercise in the practice of attentiveness, and some suggest that the practice be interwoven into all aspects of Jesuit education (retrieved from <http://jesuitinstitute.org/Pages/Examen.htm>). Hence, I found the Examen to be an ideal template for a self-reflection appropriate for students in clinical training.

<b>Examen</b>	<b>Adapted reflection</b>	<b>Response examples</b>
<p>1. Become aware of God’s presence.</p> <p>Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to you—a blur, a</p>	<p>1. Look back on the client session(s). Breathe deeply and bring your awareness to the breath. Set an intention to “settle the waters” to bring</p>	<p><i>N/A - Requested that trainees sit with, reflect on, and write about their recent clinical experiences using the prompts.</i></p>

<p>jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.</p>	<p>about a sense of clarity and understanding as you prepare to answer the questions below.</p>	
<p>2. Review the day with gratitude.</p> <p>Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.</p>	<p>2. Reflect on a sense of gratitude for your time spent with the client.</p>	<p>"I feel very grateful that we could build a strong and trusting relationship."</p> <p>"I'm grateful that I was able to help the client improve."</p> <p>"I am immensely grateful for my work with this client because they helped me to enhance my confidence."</p> <p>"I am grateful that (the client) showed investment in the treatment and expressed gratitude on her end about our time together. This made me feel like I did something right and it boosted my confidence as a therapist."</p> <p>"(The client) helped me to challenge my simplistic view of this issue and I now have a more complex understanding."</p>
<p>3. Pay attention to your emotions.</p> <p>One of St. Ignatius's great insights was that we detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Confidence? What is God saying through these feelings?</p> <p>God will most likely show you some ways that you fell short. Make note of these sins and faults. But look deeply for other implications. Does a feeling of frustration perhaps mean that God wants you consider a new direction in some area of your work?</p>	<p>3. What did you notice about your emotional responses during your work together?</p>	<p>"I was nervous working with this client at first, but I noticed how easy it was to relate to the nervousness they felt about starting therapy."</p> <p>"I experienced an urge to try to problem solve right away. I sometimes talked a little too much or offered feedback that (the client) wasn't ready for."</p> <p>"My biggest fear starting out was that I wouldn't be able to help this client."</p> <p>"I'm excited to continue to learn more about this specific technique."</p>

<p>4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.</p> <p>Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.</p>	<p>4. What was it about the interaction(s) that presented significant challenges for you? Choose one challenge from your work today and reflect on this.</p>	<p>“I find it hard to be still when my client is feeling intense pain.”</p> <p>“To be honest, I felt intimidated.”</p> <p>“I realize that I need to develop more comfort in working with difficult emotions and sitting with them when clients express them.”</p> <p>“I experienced a surge in unpleasant emotions that I had to manage.”</p> <p>“As much as the client felt challenged by therapy, I also felt challenged when trying new techniques for the first time.”</p>
<p>5. Look toward tomorrow.</p> <p>Ask God to give you light for tomorrow’s challenges. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what is coming up. Are you doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? Allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God’s guidance. Ask him for help and understanding. Pray for hope.</p>	<p>5. How have you changed since you began your work at the site? How will you build upon that change to help the identified client, as well as other clients?</p>	<p>“In a lot of ways, we grew together.”</p> <p>“When I reflect on the times that I was able to sit with the silence, it usually led to an important realization for the client.”</p> <p>“When I became more direct and clearer, it felt like we started to really work together toward a common goal.”</p> <p>“When I started meeting the client where they were instead of prematurely pushing for change, our relationship became stronger. “</p> <p>“As the nervousness started to subside, I realized that being flexible with different techniques in a session helped me feel more confident in my ability to help.”</p> <p>“(The client) showed me that I can learn from my clients just as they can learn from me.”</p> <p>“I learned about how useful mindfulness is, and that I need to use it during my daily life, which is very different than how I felt before starting this process.”</p> <p>“I no longer have imposter syndrome when I refer to myself as a therapist.”</p>

		<p>“This helped me develop confidence and assertiveness skills in executing professional duties in a confident manner.”</p> <p>“This helped me increase compassion for others with a different point of view, which helped me increase my own self compassion.”</p>
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### Conclusion

In sum, understanding Ignatian spirituality has helped me to solidify my foundation as an educator. Psychologists and other mental health professionals learn by engaging in direct clinical work and reflect upon that learning as a means of ongoing professional development. By developing a structured method for clinically relevant self-reflection, trainees can further hone their technical skill alongside their growing sense of compassion. My hope is that this strategy will help them to grow in confidence regarding their service toward others.

### References

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