

EDUCATION

Nurturing Ignatian Values: Fostering Increased Self Care and Compassion, Self-Awareness, Attention and Creativity Through Mindfulness, the Arts and Contemplative Practices:

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Balancing the speed of our culture

As an educator, an artist and a Xavier graduate, I am sensitive to how our fast-paced culture causes pressure and stress for both adults and particularly for young students. This sets up a climate that mainly honors production and multi-tasking at the expense of our own well-being and of those around us. Sadly, our children have little control over this aspect of their life, and must conform and measure to adult expectations which are not always developmentally appropriate for them.

By succumbing to the increasing speed of our times, we allow our human needs to go unmet, stripping away our natural opportunities and capacities for reflection and connection, which can foster inner knowledge, awareness, and joy. This deficit of attention and reflection can put a halt to the potential for understanding ourselves and each other, and also to the unfolding nature of our gifts and potential.

I have always been interested in self-knowledge as an important pedagogy and way to live as a person, an educator, and as an artist. I believe that this part of myself was critical in my desire to

bring more authentic presence into the classroom environment so that students felt seen and heard, and to create an environment that made space for mistakes and discovering, which demands time and reflection. I became interested in finding and helping to create a whole-person approach in education that integrated the cognitive (head), the experiential (hands), and the spirit (heart). Xavier's mission includes these things, as do several educational approaches such as Montessori and Waldorf curriculums.

This sacred space of inner knowing, which I liken to communing with the innate wisdom of God as it connects through our own spirit in a unique way, is naturally called upon and culled when we begin to recognize and attune to it. As I have trained in contemplative and mindfulness practice (which is becoming aware of the present moment with intention and without judgment), I have increased this capacity and been able to offer more of myself to my students, colleagues, and family.

Considerable research demonstrates that among other things, these practices foster:

- * Increased attention, focus and clarity
- * Increased emotional regulation and awareness
- * Increased activity in areas of the brain responsible for empathy and compassion
- * Increased capacity for perspective taking of other people's opinions and living with conflict

Slowing down the classroom and focusing on less than more:

The metaphor of the garden is a good one to examine human growth and potential, where nature evolves un-seen below the surface. Some flowers bloom early and some later, but all require patience, different nutrients and different tending in order to unfold. Patience and trust is needed for this divine order.

When we create space to intentionally slow down, we can offer opportunities for depth in the classroom by incorporating mindful listening and mindful seeing, multiple modes of reflection including regular journaling to encourage deeper learning, first-person experiences and expression. This creates an intimacy that is critical for sharing authentic relationship with ourselves and others.

Integrating with the mission:

One of the ways I bring the Mission into my teaching has been by integrating this new awareness and the practices into the class: Arts in Middle Childhood. I wanted to enhance it by incorporating different forms of mindfulness and contemplative practices for wellbeing and compassion, focus and attention, and perspective-taking, which highlights the natural connection with Ignatian principles.

I have found that these elements give students a deeper, more meaningful learning experience, and develop an awareness for positive interaction and social action. Many informal assessments we have done indicate that students see value in them and actually love them. The practices honor their wholeness. I have also seen students use the practices to manage difficult emotions and anxiety during test taking time, family or work relationships, or to simply learn how to respond rather than react.

For example, some students reported that they appreciated the practices and assignments because they helped them:

* Cultivate more attention and reverence to what is around them. Before that they missed many of these moments. They were able to see more of the sacred and beautiful in the every day.

- * Use their imaginations and creative thought more often so that they were able to do their assignments and problems better.
- * Get to know themselves better and learned aspects about themselves they didn't know existed.
- * Develop a life-skill for stress and anxiety management.

Each class starts with Mindful Moments, a self care component which takes about 10 minutes at the beginning of each class. This usually involves a minute or two connecting with the bell and sitting together in stillness, and then doing a practice such as breath awareness, body scan, mindful seeing, listening, movement such as walking or yoga, visualization or other creative/contemplative practice.

The initial class time allows students to take a rest from their busy day, and connect to themselves and each other more deeply over time. This also lays a fertile ground for Reflection and Self Awareness. Our class involves a great deal of higher level thinking skills (on Bloom's Taxonomy). By adopting an increased mindful and compassionate approach with our students we add a layer of compassion and care. When our students' need for care is filled they often have more to give to others (Magis). Magis to me means that we must strive to be more for others, but to do that we need to nurture and grow ourselves. Cultivating practices for self care is essential. This is especially true in the face of so many mental health issues today.

Mindfulness is also integrated into the entire class through our increased presence, short awareness practices, and within the various visual and performing arts that students delve into through the semester. The class is experiential and participatory

in nature, and truly stretches our students' capacity to notice each moment and be aware of the sacred in all things (God In All Things). In learning by doing and reflecting on their first-person experiences of personal meaning, our students are more likely to embody the principles for *their* students, who learn by adult example.

I also was able to share these practices as I co-facilitated a faculty learning community this year on mindfulness and contemplative practices. This was very rewarding in that the members were then able to take these practices into their projects and teaching, spreading the benefits and Ignatian principles with their students, and for themselves.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for Donna Huchinson-Smythe for mentoring me to explore Ignatian-Jesuit principles on our many lovely walks through the woods. We enjoyed discussions of our lives as we lived them into connection with the Mission and personal interests.

References which were helpful:

[Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises- A Desktop Primer](#)
[Do You Walk Ignatian? A Compilation of Jesuit and Ignatian Values Expressed in the Work Day](#)
[Montessori and Peace](#) by Maria Montessori
[Education and Peace](#) by Maria Montessori
[Teaching Mindfulness - A Practical Guide For Clinicians and Educators](#) Donald McCown, Dian Reibel and Marc s. Micozzi
[Multiple Intelligences – The Theory In Practice](#) by Howard Gardner