

**Ageless Insights for Distracted Minds and Bodies:
Teaching the Ignatian Habits of Reflective Discernment for Future Busy Professionals
Through Online Environments**

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Project description

It is an open secret that in the present culture of ruthless efficiency a premium is put on our productivity and accelerated performance. Technological revolution has been a mixed blessing: we have ample tools to be connected and interact with one another even across the globe twenty-four hours a day, every day. Multi-tasking is increasingly perceived as a non-negotiable demand for our high-tech minds and careers. Technological developments have taught us to constantly multitask. What is particularly important in academic settings is the virtually required ability to learn in distracting environments. The skills of gathering large amounts of information from electronic media are rapidly developing. Certain tasks can be performed much faster using our ubiquitous technology. And yet, on the other hand, in this context distraction emerges as the pivotal nemesis of self-knowledge, genuinely productive learning as well as reflective analytical skills alongside thoughtful action and decision-making capabilities.

As Fran Grace summarizes, “The highly touted goal of ‘critical thinking’ is not actually possible without probing into the nature of one’s own inner workings. Critical thinking without contemplative inner quality is like a blindfolded archer shooting arrows.”¹

My inquiry focused on finding, appropriating, and designing effective and user-friendly pedagogical tools to help shape and advance such personal and professional habits as cultivation of attentive observation skills on intellectual, emotional, ethical and agential levels. These skills, in turn, can facilitate richer and more personalized processes of acquiring complex types of knowledge and applying it in various professional settings with a finer sense of self-awareness (including self-limitations), professional expertise and integrity.

¹ Fran Grace, “Meditation in the Classroom: What Do Students Say They Learn?” in *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy from Religious Studies* (Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds.; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011):239.

Application

Experimental use of select digitally enhanced and online-sourced discernment practice modules is fitting for courses such as THEO 111 Theological Foundations and THEO 404/632 Religion, Ethics, and Professional Practice/Ethics in Ministry. With proper customization of content, these discernment practices can be applied in various classroom settings, physical and online, across many disciplines in humanities as well as natural and social sciences.

Challenge

Despite the rapid advance of multitasking abilities, the emergence of corresponding dis-abilities warrants serious attention. Research and pedagogical observations suggest that, paradoxically, multitasking and constant distraction can impede learning, especially when it comes to the comprehension, analysis and advancement of complex ideas. It can also greatly increase the probability of mistakes. There are several major areas of concern:

- Dis-ability to sustain attention stability over longer periods of time
- Dis-ability to effectively deal with distractions
- Dis-ability to sustain complex arguments in written and oral forms
- Dis-ability to achieve or sustain mental clarity to effectively complete complex assignments

In light of these widespread observations about the impact of media culture on how we reason, learn and relate several new categories have recently gained attention. For example, “CPA” – Continuous Partial Attention describes electronic media-based activities while simultaneously engaging in a conversation. Terms such as “Surfer’s Voice” and “Absent Presence” describe situations when a person is engaged in human interaction while also browsing the web, text-messaging, posting on social networks and, perhaps, making their favorite pasta simultaneously.

As a result, most students doing their reading assignments, and research projects and papers can be expected to encounter continuous and, by now habitual, distractions. Often the outcome is an emphatically diminished ability to focus and concentrate in class and while working on their assignments. Academic performance suffers. Personal frustration increases. Here the question is: what practices could help to interrupt and assuage the tiresome routines of distraction? What practices can cultivate emotional and social intelligence alongside intellectual clarity and body-awareness?

Findings and Strategies

My inquiry led me into two directions. First, I explored various initiatives under the auspices of the emerging discipline of Contemplative Studies. Contemplative pedagogies incorporate various mindfulness and discernment practices from religious and non-religious sources in college teaching. Among the published results, attesting to the fruitful effects of such approaches across a spectrum of disciplines, is, for example, the recent collection of essays *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds.; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011).

Second, I explored Ignatian insights about the process of wholistic reflection and decision-making to discern the “movements” of the soul that could be combined with the developing body of research from Contemplative Studies. My specific goal was to find and appropriate already existing resources in online environments that would use digital media according to the principle of “like cures like” – to benefit from the best that technology can offer to remedy what technology has made problematic.

My conclusion is that a helpful resource with considerable potential for future expansion is available in the form of “3 Minute Retreats” from Loyola Press: www.loyolapress.com. In the present form, Loyola Press offers a free audio-visual resource directly from their website. Among the scores of currently available “retreats” I identified over a dozen modules that are appropriate in Xavier classrooms taking into consideration the interreligiously diverse student body. The selected “retreat” modules provide a guided, interactive, step-by-step, audio-visual practice that can be employed in classroom to develop and nurture attentive intellectual vitality by addressing the following components:

- body awareness by focusing attention on breath and posture
- simple techniques of mindfulness built around particular subjects such as diversity; mutual respect; burnout; gratitude etc.
- the identified retreats did not advance a particular sectarian agenda and so can serve as a sufficiently inclusive tool in classrooms at Xavier

These modules can be used in class via live streaming yet there are other options as well. After communication with Mr. Ray Ives, Marketing Communications manager at Loyola Press, he created a customized DVD with select theme-specific and goal-specific “retreat” modules that can be played on any PC even if broadband connection is unavailable. I acknowledge with gratitude his enthusiastic and creative collaboration!

The “like cures like” approach suggests a fruitful fit: it can integrate contemplative pedagogy and its plethora of mindfulness techniques, Ignatian spiritual heritage on discernment and cutting edge digital technology. Among the potential benefits are the following:

- Online-based and media-sourced discernment modules can be useful for both in-class and entirely online courses
- Students can engage in these practices individually and collectively
- The instructor can practice together with their students instead of being the sole leader; this approach can be used even by instructors who would not, for a number of reasons, feel competent and comfortable leading and designing such practices alone
- Absentees can practice the same module as the students who are present in class
- Brevity: 3-5 minutes format providing a step-by-step guided structure
- Flexibility: a common theme or a variety of themes and approaches depending on the course objectives; flexible length and placement in the course of a single class or the whole semester
- Online access and customizable format (such as DVD) for backup if high speed connection for streaming is unavailable

Desired Outcomes

The outcomes are broad and not discipline-specific to benefit diverse personal and professional aspirations. Regular practice has the potential to be positively habit-forming in the following areas:

- Ability to be mindful of one’s body
- Ability to sustain attention better and longer
- Ability to listen to others openly and actively with a robust sense of presence
- Ability to acknowledge and reflect on one’s own background, life-experience, emotions and desires
- Development of precision in one’s perceptual and observational skills
- Ability to analyze new information efficiently and clearly
- Development of precision in thinking and responding to others
- Ability to recognize healthy personal strengths and limits

Further Efforts

Using insights from contemplative pedagogies and considering the characteristics of Xavier's academic community, there is a clear need to substantially expand the diversity dimension of the online "retreats" that Loyola Press currently offers. Such an expansion is certainly possible. Ignatian practices of discernment are mobile, flexible and time-tested and thus particularly fitting to be appropriated to better resonate with the cultural, racial, gender, and ethnic diversity at a contemporary university such as Xavier. Particular attention must be directed toward respectful recognition of not just Roman Catholic spiritual tradition but also other Christian traditions across the Protestant and non-denominational spectrum as well as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hindu traditions, Spiritual-but-not-Religious, and atheist perspectives. All of these are represented among Xavier student body and faculty. Hence they deserve to be considered with sensitive respect so that our classrooms are genuinely safe and welcoming environments that foster learning for all our undergraduate, graduate, and professional program students.

Resources

Select examples:

- Emory University, Atlanta, GA: Religions and the Human Spirit: Contemplative Initiative:
<http://www.emory.edu/religions&humanspirit/Religion%20pages/Contemplative%20Studies.htm>
- Brown University, Providence, RI: Contemplative Studies Initiative:
http://www.brown.edu/Faculty/Contemplative_Studies_Initiative/
- Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN: Center for Teaching: Contemplative Pedagogy:
<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/teaching-activities/contemplative-pedagogy/>