

## The Jesuit Understanding of a Liberal Arts Education

In the course of my initial exploration of various approaches to this program, primarily through reading the reports of past participants, I saw that most projects in the Ignatian Mentoring Program have focused on methodology, broadly speaking—for example, by applying the Ignatian spiritual principles of discernment and reflection to classroom teaching. After consulting with my mentor, Kathleen Smythe, I decided to investigate another aspect of Jesuit education, namely its content rather than its methodology.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I was interested in the conception of liberal education that guided the early Jesuits and their successors in their selection and organization of subjects, texts, and authors. In this way I hoped that I might come to a greater understanding of the principles and traditions that have helped to shape and that continue to guide Xavier as “a Jesuit Catholic university rooted in the liberal arts tradition.”<sup>2</sup> In what follows I will briefly summarize the results of my research and then reflect on their implications.

First, let me note an obvious but nonetheless important point: Jesuit education from the very beginning has been self-consciously and explicitly grounded on the study of the liberal arts. As Ganss puts it, referring to Ignatius' *Constitutions*, “Ignatius' educational scheme, if taken in its entirety of prescriptions for both higher and lower faculties, is indeed a Jesuit code of liberal education.”<sup>3</sup> But how exactly did the Jesuits conceive of liberal education? The specific disciplines composing such an education have not substantially changed from Ignatius' time to the present, though the names and categories have fluctuated: languages (including grammar), literature (rhetoric, poetry), history, mathematics, philosophy (logic, ethics, metaphysics, natural sciences), and theology. The classic liberal disciplines of the medieval trivium and quadrivium, as modified by the Renaissance humanists, provided the basis of the Jesuit curriculum. In effect, the Jesuits took the best of the educational theories and practices of the day and adapted them into the system delineated in its most authoritative form in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599. In the words of McGucken, “The Jesuits wished to save what was best in Scholasticism and unite it to humanism. The result is evident in the *Ratio*, which provides for a thorough training in the classics, followed in the higher studies by courses in scholastic philosophy and theology. The *Ratio* is essentially a compromise between the old learning and the new.”<sup>4</sup>

The progression noted here by McGucken marks an important difference between the original Jesuit approach, modeled in part on the organization of studies at the University of Paris (the *modus parisiensis*), and the current approach standard in American universities, characterized by distribution requirements and electives. As Schwickerath puts it, “The *Ratio* insisted not on a variety of branches taught simultaneously (the bane of many modern systems), but on a few well-related subjects, and these were to be taught thoroughly.”<sup>5</sup> All students pursued the same studies in the same order from secondary school (the “colleges”) through the university. Those studies were organized to provide, first, a foundational knowledge of the “humane letters,” the languages and literatures of Rome and Greece, leading to the study of rhetoric, the ability to express one's cultivated thoughts with eloquence (*eloquentia perfecta*<sup>6</sup>). This grounding in language and literature prepared the student for the next

---

1 I also met with Fr. George Traub, whose comments and suggestions were very helpful to me.

2 From Xavier's recently revised mission statement (<http://www.xavier.edu/mission-identity/heritage-tradition/Xaviers-Mission-Statement1.cfm>)

3 Ganss, *Saint Ignatius' Idea of a Jesuit University* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1954), 200.

4 William McGucken, *The Jesuits and Education* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1932), 28-9.

5 Robert Schwickerath, “Ratio Studiorum,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12654a.htm>. See Allan Farrell for a strong criticism of the elective system from a Jesuit perspective. (Farrell, *The Jesuit Code of Liberal Education: Development and Scope of the Ratio Studiorum* [Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Co., 1938], 408 ff).

6 This phrase captures the Renaissance ideal of education, reflected in the elevation of Cicero to a central place in the curriculum. Farrell describes *eloquentia perfecta* as “the union of knowledge and eloquence, or the right use of reason

stage, a rigorous study of “the arts,” including mathematics, science, and philosophy, which was designed to yield knowledge of nature (including human nature) and its principles along with the intellectual skills to analyze and apply that knowledge. The study of the arts was followed in turn by the various sub-disciplines of theology, which was not just a professional discipline for the training of priests but also designed to integrate the different aspects of one’s education in a comprehensive God-centered wisdom.<sup>7</sup> An impressive amount of time was dedicated to the mastery of each stage. For example, the *Ratio Studiorum* assigns three full years to the study of “the arts,” including logic, physics, metaphysics, psychology, and ethics, as well as mathematics, based primarily on readings in Aristotle and Euclid, with eight hours a week dedicated to the first year and two hours a day to the second and third years.<sup>8</sup> The ultimate aim of this program of studies was “to stimulate each student to the self-activity by which he will perfect, with well-balanced attention, his whole personality to the highest virtues of both the intellect and the will, that is, to both wisdom and charity. The truth is taught to stir up good deeds.”<sup>9</sup>

The progression of studies was a key part of achieving this goal, but no less important was the content of the studies themselves. The curriculum was based on the greatest works of classical civilization, in part because those were also the greatest works available at that time (before the full flowering of vernacular literature), and in part because of the broad consensus concerning the inherently elevating qualities of these texts. As Farrell notes, the Jesuits held that “the Latin and Greek classics and scholastic philosophy are constants in any educational planning, because they offer abiding and universal values for human training.”<sup>10</sup> More generally, *humanitas*, a humanistic education, “had come to mean both the process and the studies that developed moral goodness, devotion to truth, and a disposition to act for the civic good: languages, poetry, history, rhetoric, and logic, along with mathematics, the sciences, and philosophy of nature. For the humanists these were the subjects that opened the mind, sharpened wits, deepened human sympathy, developed clarity of thought and force in expressing it. They gave students an adroitness of mind in meeting new questions, and laid a foundation from which to explore the more important questions they would come to later in their studies.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Ratio* as well as the *Constitutions* go so far as to indicate the study of specific texts and authors, with a heavy emphasis on certain key figures, such as Cicero in rhetoric, Aristotle in philosophy, and Thomas Aquinas in theology.<sup>12</sup> However, even from the beginning these specifications were not regarded as sacrosanct. As Farrell points out, “The facts are, first, that the *Ratio* itself foresaw the necessity and advisability of present and future adjustments, and secondly, that in practice the Jesuit schools did not remain static, slavishly bound to the curricular prescriptions of the *Ratio*.”<sup>13</sup> In the revised *Ratio* of 1832, furthermore, several changes were made, including the removal of direct reference to Aristotle, the expansion of studies in mathematics and the sciences, and an increased

---

joined to cultivated expression” (*ibid.* 356).

7 Cf. John Donahue, *Jesuit Education: An Essay on the Foundation of its Idea* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1963), 141-2.

8 Cf. Farrell, *op. cit.*, 343.

9 Ganss, *op. cit.*, 186-7.

10 Farrell, *op. cit.*, 403.

11 From the Boston College Jesuit Community, “Jesuits and Jesuit Education: A Primer” in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, ed. Fr. George Traub (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 41. Compare a recent statement by Fr. Michael McMahon: “The emphasis on these subjects, without absolutely excluding others, of course, contributed to the balanced formation of the human being, making him a fit receptacle for the grace of God. The humanities offer abiding and universal values for human formation. Why have the great classics, the great works, the great authors, been studied? —Quite simply, they provide what it takes to form a soul, to form a personality” (“The Jesuit Model of Education,” [http://www.edocere.org/articles/jesuit\\_model\\_education.htm](http://www.edocere.org/articles/jesuit_model_education.htm)).

12 Cf. *Constitutions* Pt. 4, chapters 12-14 (in Ganss, pp. 331-7) and *Ratio* (33-37, 40-45, 72-77).

13 Farrell, *op. cit.*, 367; he cites the 39<sup>th</sup> rule of the Provincial and evidence from the actual practice of schools such as the College of Madrid.

emphasis on the vernacular languages and their literatures. These changes reflect developments in these fields without abandoning the core principles on which the original *Ratio* was founded: an orderly progression of studies grounded on the greatest works available in the core disciplines of the liberal arts, leading to the broadening and deepening of the mind and the enrichment of the soul—the education of the “whole person” to fulfill his God-given potential as a human being.<sup>14</sup> This kind of “general education” has thus been the heart of Jesuit education from the beginning to modern times; specialization and professional training were not rejected but were regarded as secondary and subsequent.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the practical and professional utility of a classical liberal arts education itself was always regarded as an important part of its value.<sup>16</sup>

On the basis of this review of the principles, curriculum, and organization of the traditional Jesuit liberal arts education, I will conclude by considering their potential applicability to the educational program at Xavier and to my own teaching in particular. On the former point, I am struck first by the extent to which Xavier has preserved its Jesuit liberal arts heritage in the designated disciplines and courses of the Core Curriculum. The emphasis on the study of language, literature, history, mathematics, science, and especially philosophy and theology, reflects Xavier's respect for this heritage. It is true that Latin and Greek are no longer required except in the HAB program, and the content of these disciplines has changed significantly, but such changes (along with addition of other disciplines, notably the social sciences) need not violate the principles and spirit of Jesuit education, as noted previously. However, to the extent that the content of required courses is no longer grounded on classic texts (whether ancient or modern), that the same content is not studied by all students at the same level, and that courses are not organized in such a way as to constitute a cohesive and well-integrated curriculum, it is fair to say that Xavier (and certainly not Xavier alone), has moved away from the principles and practices of the first Jesuits and their followers.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the more that the distribution of courses has shifted from the liberal arts disciplines to the student's major discipline, particularly in the professional programs, the more Xavier (and other Jesuit schools) has come to resemble the typical non-Jesuit university rather than the Jesuit university as it existed up until fairly recently.<sup>18</sup>

As Xavier considers changes to its Core Curriculum, then, it faces the option of continuing further down this path or of finding ways to reemphasize and strengthen its Jesuit liberal arts heritage in the contemporary context.<sup>19</sup> Certainly there is more than one way to accomplish the latter objective.

---

14 Cf. Farrell, *op. cit.*, 390 ff.

15 Cf. Schwickerath, “The training given by the *Ratio* was not to be specialized or professional, but general, and was to lay the foundation for professional studies. In this regard the *Ratio* stands in opposition to various modern systems which aim at the immediately useful and practical or, at best, allot a very short time to general education; it stands in sharp contrast with those systems which advocate the earliest possible beginning of specialization. Jesuit educationists think, with many others, that ‘the higher the level on which the professional specializing begins, the more effective it will be.’ . . . The educated man is to be not merely a wage-earner, but one who takes an intelligent interest in the great questions of the day, and who thoroughly understands the important problems of life, intellectual, social, political, literary, philosophical, and religious” (*op. cit.*).

16 Cf. Ganss, *op. cit.*, 163-66, 200-1.

17 As Monica Hellwig notes, when liberal arts programs dissipate “into unrelated elective offerings,” focused narrowly on distinct disciplines, “the benefits of a truly liberal education are lost. Those benefits ought to include the integration of learning, the realization of the community dimension, increasing experience of the continuity of faith and reason, a deepening respect for and appreciation of the cumulative wisdom of the past, progressive transcending of facile and unexamined prejudices and, of course, the integration of life and learning” (“The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” in Traub, *op. cit.*, 254).

18 Farrell observes that at the time of his writing (c. 1938), all Jesuit universities in the United States still required two years of philosophy for all degrees and two years of advanced Latin for the A.B. degree (*op. cit.*, 408).

19 In Farrell's view, because Jesuit institutions in general cannot compete financially with their secular rivals, they would be foolish to attempt to imitate their approach to education, but instead should emphasize the distinct features of their own educational philosophy, heritage, and practices. He cites in particular “three essential elements of their pedagogical code: (1) Inherent unity and continuity of curriculum; (2) characteristic teaching methods and techniques, and (3) their

The university could make an explicit commitment to the assignment of canonical texts in Core courses, taking inspiration from the original classical curriculum; common texts could be read in multiple sections of the same course, courses could be blocked and taken at particular stages of a student's studies, the curriculum could be oriented around common themes focused on perennial questions and ideas,<sup>20</sup> the progression of courses could be organized chronologically (beginning with the ancients and moving forward) or systematically (as in the traditional Jesuit curriculum, or in some other way), interdisciplinary courses, perhaps of higher credit-hours, perhaps team-taught, could integrate the content of two or more Core disciplines,<sup>21</sup> capstone courses or projects could draw together disciplines and previous courses or encourage application of classical problems and solutions to contemporary issues, and so on.<sup>22</sup> The timeliness of exploring such ideas is apparent not only from upcoming discussions about changes to the Core Curriculum but also from two different “Faculty Learning Communities” taking place this year—one that is exploring ways to improve our teaching of honors courses, in which I am exploring various models of integrated programs centered around classic texts, and the other looking at ways of integrating courses, with particular focus on the “human good” as a common theme around which courses could be designed or coordinated.

Regardless of any future institutional changes, however, I can see ways to bring my own courses more fully in line with the original Jesuit vision of the liberal arts. Assigning classic primary texts comes first, and I am now more inclined to favor some of the preferred texts of the early Jesuits, especially Aristotle, Aquinas, and Cicero. Replicating the order of courses would be more difficult, but it would be possible to follow the spirit of the traditional *modus parisiensis* in a single course by assigning certain preparatory texts from the “humane letters” in advance of a key philosophical text, such as the Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Aristophanes' *Clouds* in advance of Plato's *Republic*, in order to bring to life the world within which the *Republic* emerges and to highlight key themes such as justice and its relation to democracy and philosophy. This could be offered as a version of the standard Philosophy 100 course, which already assigns the *Republic* as a common text, and it could be cross-listed in Classics or other departments, team-taught, focused on a particular theme such as war, and so on. Another option would be to coordinate my courses with courses in other departments on an individual basis, perhaps in one of the ways mentioned above. These are just some possibilities. In short, I see opportunities for positive changes in the Core, the Honors program, and my own courses, which my study of the Jesuit tradition has helped to illuminate. For this reason, undertaking this project has certainly been of benefit to me, and hopefully its results will prove to be of benefit to others as well.

---

conscious aim to develop in the student alertness of all his mental powers by demanding public proof of mastery of a subject or an entire field of knowledge, thus inculcating habits of self-activity, self-exertion, responsibility, and hard work” (*op. cit.*, 422-3).

20 Among the “seven higher standards for Catholic higher education” delineated in “Higher Standards,” the second is a “focus on the big questions” because “[w]isdom, not mere information, is the goal of education” (Dean Brackley, “Higher Standards,” in Traub, *op. cit.*, 190).

21 Item number 10 from the 34<sup>th</sup> Jesuit General Congregation's statement on key principles in “Jesuits and University Life” (1995) reads “Jesuit universities will promote interdisciplinary work” both within and beyond each university, promoting faith, freedom, and justice (in Traub, *op. cit.*, 136).

22 Michael Buckley points to one way of integrating courses in a program at Santa Clara, which takes a contemporary issue that resonates with Jesuit-Catholic concerns such as faith and justice (examples include poverty and war) and makes it the unifying theme of courses from a variety of disciplines. As he sees it, this is one way of restoring theology to its traditional “architectonic” function. (*The Catholic University as Promise and Project* [Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998], 72-3)