

IN PRAISE OF 16TH CENTURY LEARNING

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We hear a lot these days in educational circles about 21st Century learning and learners. For example, the Province of New Brunswick has established “21st Century Standards of Practice for Beginning Teachers.” The document begins with the assertion that the province “is shifting its public education system to a 21st Century model of learning.” Central to this “model of learning” is the integration of current and emerging information technologies (ICT) to meet the learning needs of 21st Century students” (Province of New Brunswick, n.d.).

New Brunswick is hardly alone in this emphasis. A search of YouTube using 21st Century learning as the search term turns up some 4000 hits. Many of these include videos that almost breathlessly extol the possibilities of ICT to enhance learning in ways not heretofore imagined. We are told that students come naturally to computer-mediated environments having had tens of thousands of hours of experience before beginning school; they are “digital natives” as opposed to their older teachers (myself among them) who are “digital immigrants.”

My purpose here is not to critique this policy direction or the specific claims underpinning it. Rather, my purpose is to make the argument that while ICT offers exciting opportunities for learning, there are some important aspects of intellectual and ethical growth that are much better enhanced by far older (in some cases ancient) approaches to learning. In particular I will highlight an approach to disciplined reflection developed by Ignatius Loyola in the 16th Century and the potential of that approach to facilitate the personally transformative aspects of education.

In the Western tradition, education has always been about much more than acquiring knowledge and skills; it has been about developing particular kinds of people. People, who in the words of the Mission Statement for New Brunswick Schools, will help to build “a just and democratic society;” in other words education seeks to create good citizens.

Good citizenship requires, among other things deep knowledge of history and politics, and the skills to be able to put that knowledge to work in deliberations over questions of public policy. The development of the knowledge and skills necessary for good citizenship can be greatly enhanced by contemporary digital technologies that can deliver information faster and in more interesting ways than ever before, and can also facilitate dialogue and collaboration with other citizens locally and around the world. In the parlance of 21st Century learning, this kind of “connectivity” has great potential for citizenship education.

While knowledge and skills are absolutely necessary components of effective citizenship, they are not sufficient in and of themselves. Good citizenship also requires the disposition to act in ways consistent with democratic values. Schöpflin (2001) describes these components as first and second order rules. First order rules consist of the structures of democracy such as constitutions, legislatures, legal systems and the like. Second order rules are the civic values like humility, commitment, and respect for others and the rule of law that make the first order rules work. Civic education seeks to develop citizens who both understand democratic systems and are disposed to operate democratically.

It is my contention that this kind of transformative learning is often best fostered by disconnectivity, by turning off computers and cell phones, moving away from others, and thinking deeply about what democratic ideas mean and how they might be lived out in everyday life. Over the centuries many religious leaders have been concerned about the same educational question – how to move people from knowing ideas to living them out. They have developed models of disciplined reflection that all focus on the same two things: deep thinking about relevant ideas or principles with particular focus on how they might be embodied or lived out; and recursive practise (trying-reflecting-retrying) in living them out in real situations – what Gandhi called experimenting with truth (Gandhi and Desai, 1949).

One such model is the practise of the Daily Examen or the Examen of Consciousness developed in the 16th Century by Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. The Examen is a structured exercise practitioners work through at the end of each day. It takes them through a series of questions or assignments designed to bring to mind times and incidents during the day when they had an opportunity to encounter God or act Christianly. They then consider how they responded to the opportunities and seek to learn from those responses. The objective is to become more aware of self, God, and opportunities for faithful action so that will become more a part of one's every day life. It is a process centred on personal transformation.

I think there is great potential for this kind of approach to transformative learning beyond religious contexts. In terms of civic education, students could be asked to regularly consider a series of questions such as: Where have I had opportunities for civic action over the past day/week/month? How have I responded to those opportunities? How do my responses conform to what I say I believe about the issues involved and the way citizens should engage? What might I do in the future to bring more correspondence between my beliefs and actions in these areas? Students could then be encouraged to do some of their own experimenting with truth by trying the things they think of in response to the last question and then reflecting again on how those work.

Full commitment to creating just and democratic citizens must go beyond connecting students to the fullest information about the practice of democracy over time and in different contexts. It must do more than foster the development of the skills necessary for effective civic action. It must also provide opportunity for personal transformation. This will enable students to become the kind of people disposed to work with others to shape the common good. This involves not only connecting them to the world but sometimes making room for periods of disconnection from it in order to learn to live what they know.

References:

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