

An Approach to Ignatian Pedagogy

Father Klaus Mertens SJ

Preliminary remark:

Ignatian Pedagogy is based on the Spiritual Exercises. Saint Ignatius of Loyola did not write them for the exercitants (those who receive the exercises) but for those who give them (the spiritual director). So they are a sort of handbook/manual for the teacher. But if you approach Ignatian Pedagogy by applying the text of the Spiritual Exercises to lessons at school, then some fundamental differences between the initial situation of the Spiritual Exercises and the situation at school become obvious immediately.

The Spiritual Exercises address an individual retreatant, who receives guidance from a single person; at school the teacher is usually faced with a group of students.

The Spiritual Exercises don't include reports, certificates, grades or marks. But school can't do without, even though school is definitely more.

Finally, the Spiritual Exercises are done voluntarily, while school attendance is compulsory for all students, also for those who like school.

So it may not come natural to draw conclusions from the methods and contents of the Spiritual Exercises for a possible Ignatian Pedagogy at school.

Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus for the "progress of souls". He did not think of education at the beginning. Only 10 years after the foundation of the order did he decide to found schools: in 1549 the Viceroy of Sicily asked Ignatius if the Jesuits could teach theology at the University of Messina and if they could open a college in the city. So, after all, the purpose of schools is "the progress of souls".

This purpose clearly shows two different things:

First:

It is the student and his spiritual welfare that is at the centre of school, not the recruiting interests of some church institutions, not the global competitiveness of the nation, not career-conscious parents or whatever.

Second:

Spiritual welfare starts here and now, we needn't wait until the afterlife. Good education and spiritual welfare are closely connected.

1 THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

1.1 Reserve

Ignatius introduces his Exercises with 20 annotations which are mainly intended for the spiritual director ("who is to give the exercises").

For the teacher-student relationship the 15th annotation is of fundamental importance: *"He who is giving the Exercises ought not to influence him who is receiving them more to poverty or to a promise, than to their opposites... In the Spiritual Exercises, when seeking the Divine Will, it is more fitting and much better, that the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to His devout soul, inflaming it with His love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve Him in future. So, he who is giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but be standing in the centre like a balance, leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord. (15th Annotation)*

In order to understand this image we have to imagine scales or a balance with a vertical bar that is fixed on the floor and a horizontal bar with one dish hanging from each end.

The “centre” is the middle of the horizontal bar. This is the point from which the result of the weighing process cannot be influenced.

The spiritual director should respect the exercitant’s (who is receiving the exercises) choice and mentally position himself at the point from which he can’t influence the exercitant’s decision.

This is Ignatian IMPARTIALITY, which is mentioned very often in the Spiritual Exercises. It is the precondition for the two dishes of the scales being able to move according to the weight which they actually contain.

For the teacher-student relationship this means: The student should really gain insights independently and not draw the conclusions the teachers want him to draw.

Put paradoxically, we can say: The basic competence school wants the student to gain should be the one expressed by the image of the scales. Ignatius speaks of INDIFFERENCE/IMPARTIALITY. Only that student can really gain insight independently and develop sound judgement (*sanum iudicium*) whose actions are guided by Impartiality and not subject to his moods and routine habits.

So Impartiality is the basic attitude the exercitant/student is supposed to arrive at, in order to be able to make his own decisions and gain insight independently.

That is why Ignatius also applies the image of the scales to the exercitant:

“It is necessary to keep as aim the end for which I am created, which is to praise God our Lord and save my soul, and, this supposed, to find myself indifferent, without any inordinate propensity; so that I be not more inclined or disposed to take the thing proposed than to leave it, nor more to leave it than to take it, but find myself as in the middle of a balance, to follow what I feel to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul. (The First Way, second point)

We can’t expect the student or exercitant to already have this attitude. The students must learn it – ideally directly from the educator himself.

But that is only possible if the teacher’s position is “in the centre of the scales”. The teacher’s Impartiality is the pedagogic precondition for learning and educating in the sense of the Spiritual Exercises.

Learning takes place through example. If a teacher does not constantly show an attitude of impartiality he won’t be able to teach his students a mature way of understanding and making decisions.

If he or she is IMPARTIAL in the sense of the 15th annotation, we can hope that his or her own Impartiality will infect the students.

Impartial attitudes can, of course, be practiced, but if the coach or trainer is not impartial, he can’t convey the idea.

Teachers must also allow the students to understand and learn independently. The students do not only need time and leisure, but particularly relationships, freedom. Students are not boxes that can be filled with facts.

Studying does not mean finding out the right answer, which the teacher already knows.

There is, of course, the difference between “right” and “wrong” – the difference between the right and wrong summary of a text, the right and wrong solution of a mathematical problem, the right and wrong meaning of a word. But these are not the aspects of understanding that really matter in the learning process.

Right and wrong competences are only preliminary exercises. In Ignatian Pedagogy they are the etude, not the sonata. The etude serves the sonata, it is not the aim.

The basic attitude of impartiality becomes evident in a certain reserve that the educator shows towards the student. It promotes the freedom and autonomy of the student or his team. It must not be confused with stubbornness, harshness or a lack of emotion. It rather accompanies a high degree of attention for the learning process and the effect on the student. It means unquestioning, unconditional care, respect, even love – which are not given up, no matter whether the teacher himself or others suggest that he should give up his reserve and declare what is right and wrong and what should be understood or learned.

1.2 Scarcity/Being moderate

There are didactic and methodical options that follow from reserve: The person who gives the exercises must give the person who receives the exercises some material: texts, information, pictures.

For the presentation of this material the following has to be considered:

The person who gives to another the way and order in which to meditate or contemplate, ought to relate faithfully the events of such Contemplation or Meditation, going over the Points with only a short or summary development. For, if the person who is making the Contemplation, takes the true groundwork of the narrative, and, discussing and considering for himself, finds something which makes the events a little clearer or brings them a little more home to him he will get more spiritual relish and fruit, than if he who is giving the Exercises had much explained and amplified the meaning of the events. (2nd annotation)

It is recommended that teachers give their students a moderate amount of material. This recommendation is the methodical consequence of the teacher's reserve and respect for the student's independent work. By giving the student only a moderate amount of material the teacher shows his trust in the student's independent process of understanding. School refrains from demanding narrowminded learning targets or too huge amounts of facts. The reason for this principle is not only the experience that truths we have found ourselves stay much longer in our long-term memory than conditioned knowledge.

Being moderate is necessary to enable students to really realise and relish the material.

In the text quoted above there are the words "fruit" and "relish", key words of the Spiritual Exercises. Here is the last sentence of this annotation:

"For it is not knowing much, but realising and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul." (2nd annotation)

"Realising and relishing" (Latin: sapere) of little makes you wise.

So a moderate amount of material, the teacher's reserve and "wisdom" as a learning target are connected.

By realizing and relishing you can develop a relationship to the material you have been given. You need enough time and room for this.

Real knowledge can only develop when we understand the importance of the material by reflecting on it.

In my opinion the importance of the material is not limited to the advantages you have from the subject matter you learned in certain circumstances for certain purposes. We all know a typical student question: "What's the point of this/What do I gain from this?"

Learning is closely connected with the experience that what we learn is useful.

The student can make this experience when he/she understands that there are purposes for which they possibly need what they are learning.

You can teach maths as a subject that deals with numbers or as a subject that enables you to describe reality, to make reality accessible.

You can teach reading as a method or as an activity you enjoy.

You can teach history as a huge amount of historical facts and data or as events we can draw

conclusions from and we can learn from.

Questions that support this way of reflecting are: “What is – in your opinion – interesting about this topic? What did we talk about in the last lesson that moved you later? Have you found a new question? What experiences of your everyday life do you associate with the lesson?”

So the teacher’s reserve and a moderate amount of material support the student’s ability to reflect. The phrases “realizing” and “relishing” are at the core of Ignatian pedagogy: The students/exercitants should chew and taste the material like a piece of bread. They should reflect on the material, not consume it, or rather: not only consume it but most of all reflect on it.

Because only by reflecting, by internally feeling and tasting the material, can we connect learning and the insight that what we learn makes sense.

1.3 Reflection

The origin of learning based on reflection can be found in the life of St Ignatius. In 1521, during the defence of Pamplona, Ignatius’ leg was seriously injured so that he had to stay in bed in his family’s castle in Loyola.

During that time he experienced something that many people experience who are thrown off track by a sudden illness or any other surprising event.

They feel emptiness. Ignatius was ill for six months. He fought against lasting damages. As his bones didn’t heal well, he had them broken several times. It didn’t help.

Ignatius walked with a limp for the rest of his life. His old career plans had become irrelevant. In order to pass the time Ignatius wanted to read books. And he made another unspectacular “moderate” experience. He was looking for entertaining books: Novels about knights or something similar. But in his family’s castle there were only books which he hadn’t wanted to read. It took him by surprise to find that he relished these books.

We read in his autobiography: *“His injury left him convalescent for many months. Ignatius requested a book of worldly pleasures, chivalric romances that had delighted him so much in his youth in order to pass the time. None being found in the castle, he was brought a book about the Life of Christ and one about the lives of the saints in Spanish.*

By reading in these books very often, he gradually grew fond of what he read.

When he stopped reading, he sometimes reflected on what he had read, sometimes he reflected on the worldly things he had been interested in before his illness.

And of the many vain things, one was so dominant that he got absorbed for hours, thinking about it...

But our Lord helped him. He brought about other thoughts, which were based on what Ignatius was reading...

And Ignatius spent much time on these thoughts, too.

And this sequence of different thoughts took a long time.

He reflected on visions of knightly glory and on the ones God sent him again and again until he had to stop because he was too exhausted.

In order to understand this text, we do not necessarily have to adopt the value judgements (“worldly”, “wrong”, “vain”) it contains. They were written in retrospect. When he made the experiences Ignatius’ judgment was unbiased. So he made an internal experience caused by something external: reading.

Dwelling on internal experiences is what in Ignatian Pedagogy and today is called Reflection. The more Ignatius is dwelling on his thought, realising and relishing, the more he feels that internal reactions follow certain structures:

At the beginning an internal reaction is for example different from what it is at the end.

“When he thought of worldly things, he enjoyed that very much. But when he refrained from it

out of exhaustion, he felt dry und dissatisfied. And when he thought of walking to Jerusalem barefooted and enduring all the hardships the saints had experienced he was not only comforted but stayed happy and satisfied afterwards.”

From these simple beginnings Ignatius later develops his mature idea of “different spirits” (6th annotation). It is based on the knowledge of the structure of internal experiences, which enables us to judge if these experiences are from God or rather from the “enemy of human nature” (7th annotation).

So reflection enables us to judge internal reactions and allows them to become relevant for our way of acting.

For the educating process this definition of reflection means:

a)

All experiences are potentially opportunities to learn. Reality is in itself sth. we can learn/from.

Each event in life triggers off internal reactions you can reflect upon.

Seeking God and finding him in all things: this does not only apply to beautiful and uplifting events in life but also to bitter and painful experiences.

It is part of the Ignatian culture of reflection not to avoid difficulties. The subject matter needn't taste good if it is supposed to provide meaning.

There is even something to discover in the painful events in life, in hard times, in the experience of failing and in boring subject matter.

b)

The process of reflection is an internal process. So the teacher's questions have to ask about the student's internal experience again and again, not about the reproduction of what he has learned.

Reflecting on the meaning of something means that I examine my internal reactions to an event, a text or reality.

Ignatius calls these internal reactions “*movements*” (motus) or “*spirits*” (spiritus). So the activity of reflecting primarily refers to emotions, inspirations, associations, further thoughts. Consequently you are not educated because you know much but because you are able to reflect, because you are able to open your mind for your own reactions to reality and all kinds of subject matter and you are able to deal with your reactions.

c)

Reflection always refers to the internal reactions which I have NOW.

Education is not primarily knowledge of past experience but dealing with momentary experience. It is not enough to teach a traditional canon of education.

We must teach the ability to judge if we want to follow the tradition of those people who based traditions on their own judgment and way of acting.

The same applies to the aim of teaching values. It should not primarily be based on the knowledge of value traditions but on the reflection on one's own experiences. This does not mean that we can do without traditions.

But the question is how we can deal with traditions at school. To put it simply: Teachers should deal with Sokrates as if he talked to us today. Then we would perhaps find that he has to tell us more than many of those who are talking to us today.

1.4 Exercise

Relishing refers to the spirit, to internal reactions. *Relishing* can and should be practised. It is characteristic of Ignatius that he appreciates *Exercise* (exercitium), that he is convinced that many of those things still can be practiced though they are usually considered as things that cannot be practiced: “*For as strolling, walking and running are bodily exercises, so every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the*

disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul, is called a Spiritual Exercise." (1st annotation)

The *Spiritual Exercises* are a sort of training.

The same is true of school.

In class this means that we hold training/practicing in high esteem. It was the *exercitium*, the systematic repetition and application exercises that fascinated Ignatius about the *modus parisiensis*, which he made obligatory for Jesuit schools.

But this does not only refer to the methodical training of subject matter in class.

From the words of the "Spiritual Exercises" we can draw the conclusion that other things can also be trained methodically:

dealing with others, dealing with conflicts, dealing with responsibility, dealing with trust - with the aim to *prepare* oneself for values, convictions and attitudes.

This part of the "Spiritual Exercises" is sometimes considered as nihilistic, as if Ignatius offered his exercitants something like a training of the soul in order to enable them to indiscriminately adopt various attitudes of the soul, the emotions or even convictions, in order to become puppets in the hands of the representatives of the church hierarchy.

But in the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius talks of *preparing and disposing* for the Divine Will. So it would be the teacher's task to *prepare* and *dispose* the student for possible insights and convictions – not more.

This can be trained/practiced by dealing with each other, by dealing with conflicts in class but also in activities outside school.

It cannot be dictated what conviction or what value must be found in a certain subject matter and it cannot be checked in a test.

But Pedagogy which tries hard to *prepare and dispose* students for insights definitely needs a certain frame. Just like the *Spiritual Exercises*.

"It is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it." (Principle and Foundation)

This frame must not be discussed.

However, in Ignatian Pedagogy the crucial exercise is the one of relishing and dwelling.

Reflecting on one's own reactions is the crucial aspect of learning.

Internal *movements* are the results of reactions to what you hear, read, experience.

They should not be accepted as accompanying music of the learning process but be integrated into that process.

It is the integration of the *movements* that makes learning an active process of acquiring something.

2 DISCIPLINE AND LIMITATION

Before the *Spiritual Exercises* start Ignatius places the *Presupposition* in case there should be conflicts between the spiritual director and the exercitant, which can also be considered a general rule for communication:

"In order that both he who is giving the Spiritual Exercises, and he who is receiving them, may more help and benefit themselves, let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity. If that is not enough, let him seek all the suitable means to bring him to mean it well, and save himself. (Presupposition)

2.1 Goodwill/Benevolence

The relationship between educator and student should be characterized by benevolence. The above mentioned reserve must not be mixed up with coldness. Benevolence shows in the teacher's willingness to *save* especially those *propositions* of his student that can be misunderstood instead of taking it as a chance for discrediting it.

This also applies to the escalation of a conflict – as the *Presupposition* says.

A conversational situation is about *propositions*. Communication proves the worth of benevolence in a relationship.

Benevolence is the necessary precondition.

You needn't prove that you deserve it.

This is especially important for the teacher-student relationship when we assume that the teacher-student relationship is asymmetrical.

The teacher's benevolence must be unconditional - like the parent-child relationship – though there are, of course, differences.

Parents and teachers offer acceptance, benevolence, love.

It does not depend on the childrens' or students' response. So ideas like “if you don't like me I needn't like you” are out of place.

2. 2 Inquiring how he means it

In the case of conflict Ignatius suggests a concrete method that can help stabilize benevolence:

let him inquire how he means it (the proposition) Before the teacher reacts he makes sure whether he really understood the student's proposition correctly. The recommendation sounds like a safety rule. “I may have understood or interpreted the signal wrongly. So I step back and give the student the chance to explain his behavior. He needn't justify it or apologize for it. It should only help me understand the proposition better. And then I react .”

For this kind of communication practicing first-person messages/subjective messages is important. There is an important difference between objective messages about others (“You are ...You did...”) or messages about how I understand the other person (“I have the impression ...I feel...”)

So basically subjective messages always tell the other person how I understand him. And this gives him the chance to tell me whether I have been mistaken or not.

That is the intention of the *Presupposition*.

Subjective Talking which the educators practice should also be practiced by the students.

Conflicts between students are a good opportunity to inquire how the other person means what he said. Listening to others and giving feedback should also be practiced outside school.

2.3 Improvement

If we know how the other means something and if correction is necessary it should be done *with charity*.

Correcting unlovingly is risky, even if the correction is factually justified and one does not get carried away. But if we get carried away BECAUSE we love, the student will feel it.

When the teacher did not strike the right note, students usually accept the teacher's apologies.

Talking about your own limitations or feelings is an important way of improvement through love.

But this can only have an improving effect on the other person if what you say is really true and is said because it is true – and not for strategic reasons.

True first-person messages from the teacher can open the student's eyes and show him the teacher's limitations. Practicing first-person messages/subjective talking – as mentioned above

– can help preserving the merely factual nature of the statements even if the teacher’s emotions are very strong.

You can even IMPOSE limitations lovingly.

Announcing the consequences of going beyond what is acceptable is an important service to the student.

It is not a contradiction to love, if the consequences are clearly announced and if the student can be sure that the teacher will really enforce the measures.

2.4 Limitation

In the last sentence of the Presupposition we read: . *If that is not enough, let him seek all the suitable means to bring him to mean it well, and save himself. (Presupposition)*

So it is not the other person’s proposition that has to be saved – because that is impossible, not even when we inquire how it was meant –

it is the other person *himself* that must be saved.

We find a parallel in the part of the Letter to the Corinthians that deals with excommunication: “*When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be SAVED in the day of the Lord Jesus. (5,4ff.)*

“To deliver to the Satan” – this is a technical term for the exclusion from the community, the excommunication – the world is the realm of Satan. But the aim of excommunication is not the purity of the community or the condemnation of the sinner, but the opposite: It saves the excluded person.

So excommunication is limitation that is positive for the excluded person.

And that is exactly the purpose of limitation in education.

So the end of the *Presupposition of the Spiritual Exercises* means using a measure that is positive for the person the limitation is imposed on, because it enables the person to understand, which, again, *saves* him.

I suppose that the measure that “saves the other person” is limitation. Limitation is an innate part of education. It starts in lessons by saying ‘no’ to the students’ desires, by little measures that guarantee discipline - and ends at severe reprimands or even the act of expelling somebody from school. What is interesting is the fact that in the *Presupposition of the Spiritual Exercises* the limitations are not explained by referring to the common good for which the individual would have to be sacrificed.

What is important is the pedagogic meaning of limitation for the person it is imposed on.

He should understand */mean it well*, in order to be able to save himself. So by understanding it well he should save himself. If he doesn’t understand it well, he is not saved.

Perhaps we can sharpen this thought even more. Limitation should make understanding possible. Offenders often don’t know what they are doing, they don’t feel that they are going beyond what is permissible.

They are so blind that they hurt without realizing, that they hurt even though they hear the injured person crying. In such cases limitation is a necessary means in order to make understanding possible.

Showing where the borderline is, showing your own vulnerability and that of others, making it clear to the ghost driver that he is the one who is driving the wrong way on the motorway not the others.

Basically limitation is not about being guilty and punishment. You are guilty under the condition that you know – at least at the beginning – what you are doing and what this means to others. That is why it is important to use different phrases. Limitation is primarily a pedagogic measure, whereas punishment is much more complex.

Punishment can also have the desired pedagogic effect. But the pedagogic effect is not the reason for the punishment – that would be a misinterpretation of punishment.

When a teacher imposes limitations on a student he must not demand that the student can immediately see reason and sense in it.

The student must be allowed to be angry and to fight against the measure.

He can only understand the measure if he *relishes* the measure. The teacher must impose the limitation without considering the student's accepting it; he must hope that the student can understand/*mean it well*.

If the student can understand the limitation, then it contributes to his salvation. It is a contribution to a better understanding of reality, of how far he can go and of the dignity and rights of others, to becoming more mature when dealing with one's own wishes and spontaneous impulses, to understanding one's own finite nature.

Expelling someone from school is the most severe form of limitation.

The educator who imposes this limitation can no longer deal pedagogically with what happens in the wake of the measure. He must leave this to others.

It is clear that the student can ask for explanations of the measure.

He might also tell the teacher later what insight he gained from the limitation. But the point of time when the student gets in touch with us again must be chosen by the student.

The pedagogic responsibility ends with the limitation; a further step is not possible – if it is not made by the person the limitation was imposed on.

(Translated for simultaneous oral presentation at the Education Conference in Rome on Monday, 20th October, 2008, where Father Klaus Mertes SJ gave his speech in German)