Introduction

As I spend time in our Innovation Center and with our exciting work of continuing to define innovative education, my phone lights up with a picture delivered via text message from my son’s school.

It’s of him and his buddy, showing off part of their work on a class unit on community. What a wonderful example of project-based learning that challenges first-graders to be self-directed in producing a product based upon their experiences and research. Better than a lecture from his first grade teacher? Perhaps. Where in the continuum of education do such experiences stop?

I am slowing but happily embracing what Teilhard de Chardin’s prayer hopes, to “accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.” Perhaps it’s because the prayerful phrase best captures the essence of our high school students today. Maybe it’s because our educational reality is the result of not fully understanding the ramifications of our teaching and learning model – the IPP – that is in desperate need of appropriation to today’s students. And maybe it’s because I’m nervous that now is the time to reframe the traditional paradigm (IPP) used in our network of Jesuit schools by blending it with a 21st-century-and-beyond model for innovative education – creating a new prototype?

Setting the Context

When we teach, we presume the best in our students - rooted in the tradition of the Spiritual Exercises, whereby “Ignatius exhorts the director to first presume the best in the retreatant, to put the best interpretation on his or her motives, intent, desires, and commitment” (Gallagher, Musso). When we approach teaching and learning, how do we do this? What do we know about students in our classrooms (their environment, background, community, and potential)?
How do we arrive at a more holistic care for students in our classes—cura personalis?

Innovative educators start with “why.” What’s my role as a teacher in a Jesuit high school and how does my why impact how I proceed, plan, implement, and evaluate? How do I authentically get to know and understand students? How does the content and skills of my class get used by students out in the world? How do I create an environment for students that helps them to better understand that we are part of a larger world? How do I teach students what it means to be human? Innovative educators learn along with our students, while lecturing less. We use available resources, data, best practices, and research to address—individually—the contexts of our students (Dressler, Musso, Talken).

Using Experience

When we teach, we use experiences to frame course content. During the Spiritual Exercises, the “retreatant comes to realize that God moves about within the circumstances of one’s life” (Lonsdale Qtd. in Gallagher, Musso). Similarly, “starting with experience, the teacher creates the conditions whereby students gather and recollect the material of their own experience in order to distill what they understand already in terms of facts, feelings, values, insights and intuitions they bring to the subject matter at hand” (International Commission of the Apostolate of Jesuit Education).

“Teachers . . . should take account of . . . the real context of a student’s life which includes family, peers, social situations, the educational institution itself, politics, economics, cultural climate, the ecclesial situation, media, music and other realities” (International Commission of the Apostolate of Jesuit Education).

What is the best way to engage learners in the teaching and learning process?

We create the conditions whereby learners gather and recollect the material of their own experience to distil what they understand already in terms of facts, feelings, values, insights and intuitions they bring to the subject matter at hand. “Attention paid to experience will enable a student to achieve an understanding of the material that reaches beyond the cognitive,” perhaps into empathy (Gallahger, Musso). Teachers later guide learners in assimilating new information and further experience so that their knowledge will grow in completeness and truth.
Innovative educators appropriate the lesson so that it centers on students and students collaboratively creating content. We provide students autonomy, choice, and collaborative opportunities. We embrace that technology is part of life, leveraging technology in safe, legal, and ethical ways. We foster a spirit of collaboration, locally and globally – accessing and using the experiences of others to inform ourselves (Dressler, Musso, Talken).

Reflection

In our teaching, we provide opportunities for reflection. In the Spiritual Exercises, “it is the retreatant who is responsible for his or her own personal growth . . .” (Gallagher, Musso). “Reflection should be a formative and liberating process so that it shapes consciousness of students – their habitual attitudes, values, and beliefs, as well as ways of thinking . . .” (International Commission of the Apostolate of Jesuit Education).

How do learners become more reflective so they more deeply understand what they have learned? We lay the foundations for learning how to learn by engaging students in skills and techniques of reflection. Here memory, understanding, imagination, and feelings help students grasp the essential meaning and value of studies, to discover its relationship to other facets of human knowledge and activity, and to appreciate its implications in the continuing search for truth. We should continuously “seek to increase the freedom of the student by exposing the student to different viewpoints and asking questions that lead the student to understand his or her own personal reaction to the material and the implication of the material for them and for others” (Gallagher, Musso).
Innovative educators are attentive to minds, bodies, and souls. Students become aware of a bigger picture in the context of the lesson. Together, we practice various forms of reflection, toward understanding why we are doing what we are doing. How do lessons influence how we think and act? How do we use our education to impact the world, using the lens of social justice? How do we cultivate an understanding of the deeper issues of the lesson, to develop a sense of empathy with and for the work in the world?

Teachers and students are curious, questioning, discovering and learning together – curating resources to construct knowledge toward meaningful thought or action. This is about expansive thinking and doing, without constraints, where failure is part of education (Dressler, Musso, Talken).

Action

Learning and teaching do not exist in a vacuum, but for the purpose of meaningful action – to help us think or act in new and different ways. “Jesuit education is never meant to end in mere personal satisfaction for academic achievement” (Gallagher, Musso). Instead, students “are compelled to move beyond knowing to action” (International Commission of the Apostolate of Jesuit Education).

How are we compelled to move beyond knowledge into meaningful action?

The lesson is an opportunity that challenges the imagination. It is an exercise provoking learners to choose the best possible course of action from what they have learned. What do we do because of new understandings? While it may not immediately transform the world into a global community of justice, peace and love, action should at least be an educational step towards that goal even if it merely leads to new experiences, further reflections, and consequent actions within the subject area under consideration.
Innovative education leads students to learning that is collaborative, blended, and not formulaic. Teachers are creative, working toward intentionally developing design processes for students, to solve real world problems.

Those design processes include offering students a variety of diverse resources, and challenging students to be collaborative in creating prototypes. . . a mock-up, a storyboard, a role-play, or even an object made out of readily available materials such as pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, and rubber bands. The purpose of prototyping is to expand upon the ideas generated during the brainstorming phase, and to quickly convey how a solution to the problem might look and feel. Prototypes can often expose learners’ assumptions, as well as uncover unforeseen challenges that an end user of the solution might encounter. The focus on creating simple prototypes also means that students can iterate on their designs quickly and easily, incorporate feedback into their designs, and continually hone their problem solutions.

This requires a high level of clear communication and facilitation and perhaps only small periods of lecture and explanation. This includes problem- and project-based pieces. Actions also include networking and are driven by students’ personalities, lives, and talents, as well as choice.

Evaluation

How did we do during this lesson? “Success is in proportion to both the student and the educator’s growth in attitude and action toward becoming a man or woman for and with others” (International Commission on Apostolate of Jesuit Education Qtd. in Gallagher, Musso). How do we assess learners’ growth in mind, heart, and spirit?

Daily quizzes, weekly or monthly tests and semester examinations are familiar instruments to assess the degree of mastery of knowledge and skills achieved.

Ignatian pedagogy, however, aims at evaluation, which includes but goes beyond academic mastery to the learners’ well-rounded growth as persons for others. We then perceive indications of growth or lack of growth in class discussions and students’ generosity in response to common needs much more frequently (Korth).
Innovative educators discover evidence that **students are engaged in the class and inspired beyond the class, toward just action.** Innovative educators **encourage failure** during the unit, combined with a process for re-do and revision. Innovative educators use statistics and data to inform classroom decisions and improve student achievement.

**IE Spheres at De Smet**

While we practice this new prototype which combines the IPP and IE, we use four IE spheres as tools in our classrooms:

1. Project-Based/Problem-Based Learning,
2. Inquiry-Based/Blended Learning,
3. Virtual Reality,

Successfully used with students, the tools reinforce our way of proceeding.

**Works Cited**


