

INCARNATING OUR CONSOLATION THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE ACADEMIC LEARNING

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IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY OFFERS a framework of prayer through the Spiritual Exercises in which we are invited into a conscious relationship with God and to appropriate the fruits of this experience within our daily lives, directing our whole selves towards God. This apostolic spirituality calls us to incarnate our consolations, that is, to take our graces, inspirations and holy desires to serve God, and transform them into action in everyday life.¹ But can this be learnt in an academic setting?

David Coghlan defines spirituality as ‘a fundamental dimension of the human person that is orientated towards transcendence, is lived experience and is an academic discipline’. He continues by saying that ‘Ignatian Spirituality seeks to build an integration between prayer and action’ and therefore ‘research into one’s spirituality is potentially personally transforming’.²

At Sentir Graduate College of Spiritual Formation in Australia,³ we have witnessed the transformative potential that emerges through the study of Ignatian spirituality. Every experience of learning is an invitation to broaden our current horizon; and ‘to know the horizon in which a person lives, helps one to discover who the person is and understand what he does’.⁴ The study of spirituality broadens the horizon of the divine within our lived experience, both at an individual and communal level. When our

¹ Judith Roemer and George Schemel, *Beyond Individuation to Discipleship: A Directory for Those Who Give the Spiritual Exercises* (Scranton: Institute for Contemporary Spirituality, 2000).

² David Coghlan, ‘Ignatian Spirituality as Transformational Social Science’, *Action Research*, 3 (January 2005), 91

³ Sentir Graduate College of Spiritual Formation is a college of the University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia which specialises in the postgraduate teaching in the fields of spirituality and spiritual direction. See www.sentir.edu.au.

⁴ *The Dynamism of Desire: Bernard J. F. Lonergan on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, edited by James L. Connor (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 1.

desire for knowledge and understanding meets our desire for God, we open ourselves to the invitation of transformative academic learning. I should like to explore one methodology here that can facilitate such learning through the integration of spirituality with study, and the impact this has on the experience of students.

Transformative Academic Learning

Learning can be defined as the ‘acquisition of knowledge through study, experience, or being taught’.⁵ The potential for learning is present in all life situations and is not limited to academic settings. In an academic setting we expect learning to have an organized framework and a particular topic, and to draw on previously articulated understandings through formal study. The aim of transformative learning is to be attentive to the potential for change within the learning process, to listen to new opportunities as they emerge and to allow the new data to take effect on our understanding as it is created.

In the twenty-first century we witness change at an unprecedented pace in almost every aspect of the way we live as a human community. Christians are not immune to change, but neither are they powerless to make choices about how society will be transformed and influenced by humanity’s progress or regression. We can become agents of change, serving the development of a community of life grounded in love, or we can resist change and claim that we remain powerless. As Ilio Delio explains:

Evolution shows us that change is integral to new life. Given a sufficient amount of time, life evolves. To evolve is not only to change but to become more complex, to unite in such a way that new forms of life emerge and diverge.⁶

Transformative learning is attentive to this evolutionary process and to raising consciousness of new life as it emerges. Transformative learning ‘requires careful, thoughtful and constant attention to inner works on the parts of both the educator and learner’. It is ‘a way of *being* rather than a process of *becoming*’.⁷

Being must be understood here as inclusive of our relatedness to all creation, implicit order, plasticity (the ability to change) and endless

⁵ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/learning>.

⁶ Ilio Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 2.

⁷ John M. Dirkx, ‘Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: An Overview’, *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 7 (1998), 11.

depth.⁸ Recent developments in quantum physics reveal that all creation is interconnected and interdependent at every level from the smallest scale to the universe as a whole, and that we 'remain connected throughout our lives, bound together by a single energy that makes all creation a single whole'.⁹ Therefore *being* should not be seen as something individualistic but placed in the context of the whole community of life, which currently faces so many serious problems such as poverty, war, environmental crisis, political conflict, social divisions and many others. Interconnectedness, as identified by quantum physics, mirrors Jesus' invitation to know that we affect each other and that we are called: 'To Love. To be communion for one another. To empower one another. To become free. To live with great passion and compassion.'¹⁰ Therefore, when we are open to transformative learning for ourselves, there is a potential impact on all of creation.

Being should not be seen as something individualistic

Jack Mezirow states that transformative learning develops autonomous thinking.

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education.¹¹

Ignatian spirituality fits naturally into the framework of transformative learning. The Spiritual Exercises draw exercitants into deep exploration of their beliefs, judgments and decision-making processes by paying attention to the senses in the light of their relationship with God and the world. By drawing deeply on exercitants' experience of making the Spiritual Exercises and integrating that experience into an academic setting, new data are made available through the exchange of individuals' experience. This information is then brought to the wider community, which in turn builds a new basis from which to acquire greater understanding of the evolutionary process of God's action in the world. Ignatius invites exercitants to become conscious of their world-views and to transform them into action.

⁸ Delio, *Emergent Christ*, 2.

⁹ Judith Cannato, *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame: Sorin, 2010), 20.

¹⁰ Cannato, *Field of Compassion*, x.

¹¹ Jack Mezirow, 'Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice', in *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 5.

According to Edmund O'Sullivan:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world.

This shift includes our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations and our relationships with other humans and with the natural world. It also involves our understanding of power relations in interlocking structures of class, race and gender, our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living, and our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy.¹²

In transformative academic learning the content and processes of learning are grounded concretely within personal experience, and in the social and cultural contexts of the educators and students, by focusing initially on previously articulated theories and extending knowledge through our own experience. The transformative learning process has three aspects:

- psychological, which means a change in the understanding of the self;
- convictional, which means that learning will have an impact on a person's belief systems;
- behavioural, which indicates a change in lifestyle.¹³

Developing Ignatian Spirituality as an Academic Discipline

The process of applying transformative academic learning within the ministry of Ignatian spirituality has evolved quite organically in Australia. Ministry formation has been available to those who join formal religious life within their religious congregations, and theological education has been available through university studies. This separation has meant that those not formally in association with a religious congregation could have access to theological education but rarely ministry formation. With the increase of non-religious now taking up formal roles within the Church in ministry, the need for formation outside vocational training for religious life has become critical, and has led to formation and academic

¹² Edmund O'Sullivan, at <http://tlc.oise.utoronto.ca/About.html>.

¹³ M. Carolyn Clark, 'Restructuring of Meaning: An Analysis of the Impact of Context on Transformative Learning' (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1991).

study being integrated into postgraduate courses in Ignatian spirituality, such as those offered by Sentir Graduate College. Sentir is a work of the Australian Jesuits and an ecumenical College of the University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia. It specialises in the study of spirituality, spiritual direction, ministry supervision and leadership formation.

The word *sentir* is one St Ignatius used frequently in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In Spanish *sentir* is both a noun and a verb, communicating not merely an intellectual activity *per se*, but a felt knowing of God, a knowing with the heart, an affective activity. It is interesting to note that the Chinese character for *think* also integrates the brain and the heart.



The bottom part is a heart (xin1) and the top part of the ancient form of the character represents the brain. The ancient Chinese believed that thinking is the work of both the brain and the heart. It is this philosophy that underpins our basic principle of teaching, that is, to help the student to come to know with both the head and the heart. We believe that students will gain the greatest benefit from their study when the head and the heart come together to know deeply the content being taught from within their own experience.

As specialists in the field of Ignatian spirituality we have received criticism from both the academic world and the Ignatian spirituality community. Academics struggle to understand how the study of spirituality can be understood as a serious academic discipline, or how it can possibly have the rigour of the study of philosophy, biblical studies or theology. It has been difficult to have our work taken seriously by other departments in the university. On the other hand, those engaged in the ministry of Ignatian spirituality and spiritual direction often criticize our courses for being too academic. We have sat within the tension between these two worlds now for fourteen years, and have come to understand that neither of these criticisms is valid. The efficacy of our pedagogy—which integrates rigorous academic learning, personal experience and supervised praxis—is confirmed by the positive feedback we receive from our students.

The integration of academic rigour into our spiritual formation programmes has had a significant impact on the study of spirituality in

Australia and perhaps in the Jesuit Conference Asia Pacific as well.¹⁴ It would also be true to say that spirituality and spiritual formation have influenced the way students now integrate their spiritual experiences with their theological studies. Students who come to us from other theological institutes often describe the experience of learning at Sentir as deeply reflective, challenging, academically rigorous and personally transformative.

Sentir students state that our courses in spirituality are far more demanding than many others they have done in their theological studies. Those coming for spiritual formation claim that the integration of academic study into their formation has greatly enhanced and clarified their understanding of spirituality. Our students are encouraged to submit academic papers which integrate lived experience with the theories they have explored during the course. They find this daunting at first, but inevitably express gratitude at the way in which their writing has supported and deepened their understanding. Rigorous study of spirituality provides an opportunity for transformative learning that enables students to take up ministry in a way that is both well informed and integrated. They appreciate how their capacity to be spiritual leaders begins to be actualised.

Integrating spirituality and academic learning not only invites the students to broaden their horizons by expanding their knowledge, but also challenges them to consider how this knowledge relates specifically to each individual. The question is: *so what? What difference will this knowledge make to the Kingdom of God? How will I incarnate my consolation?* I recently asked a theology graduate what impact his study had had on him and his relationship with God. He replied ‘What do you mean by relationship with God? I don’t understand that. How do you have a relationship with God?’ I was stunned that a person could spend four years studying theology and not have considered his own personal relationship with God. We see this experience repeated many times at Sentir, when students who are studying theology are invited for the first time to approach academic study from within a spiritual perspective, so that theology and theological frameworks are able to be explored in the first person.

The underpinning principles of learning at Sentir are:

1. Students are expected to integrate their personal experience with theoretical learning.

¹⁴ Students in our programmes come from all over Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, East Timor, the Philippines and Vietnam.

2. Students and faculty share their experience and insights, leading to a collective understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of courses offered, expanding our horizon of knowledge.
3. The student will have been educated fully only when the head and the heart come to know together.
4. Well-formed leaders and spiritual directors have the capacity to articulate their understanding clearly. Therefore, assessment of written work is an essential aspect of the learning process and learning outcomes.
5. Students should be open to personal transformation.
6. Our goal is to support the student in working with God to build the Reign of God in his or her life work.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius gives clear instructions that the one giving the Exercises ought to be brief in explaining points and instructions to the exercitant:

For in this way the person who is contemplating, by taking this history as the authentic foundation, and by reflecting on it and reasoning about it for oneself, can thus discover something that will bring better understanding or a more personalized concept of the history—either through one's own reasoning or insofar as the understanding is enlightened by God's grace. This brings more spiritual relish and spiritual fruit than if the one giving the Exercises had lengthily explained and amplified the meaning of the history. For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly. (Exx 2)

Using these instructions from Ignatius, we encourage our students to take a little theory at a time and go deeply into their own experience, to explore it in both their minds and hearts. It is from this position that we structure our learning processes through the following six phases:

1. students come with their own personal experience and desires;
2. a theoretical lecture is given, focusing learning;
3. integration through personal reflection;
4. integration through group sharing;
5. integration through academic writing;
6. integration into practice.



The Sentir education process

Through these six stages of learning, the students' knowledge is broadened by the opportunity to engage with theorists and then deepen their understanding of the theories offered through the four stages of integration. I will elaborate on these stages of learning and the method used at Sentir to teach Ignatian spirituality. Bernard Lonergan states that 'method is a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding culminate and progressive results'.¹⁵ The following is a deeper exploration of our normative pattern of teaching and learning.

1. Personal Experience

The students who attend our courses come from diverse backgrounds: some are in formation for ministry, leadership or spiritual direction; some are seeking to integrate their spiritual lives within their secular or working lives; others are undertaking theology degrees or coming to explore their own spiritual journeys and relationships with God. They are generally mature students and will have had previous careers (some in ministry); most will have worked in the secular and corporate world. They will be single, married, divorced, mothers, fathers, grandparents, ministers of religion, spiritual directors, pastoral associates, religious, ordained (to give a few examples), and come from a diverse range of Christian traditions.

¹⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1990), 4.

All desire to deepen their understanding of how God is at work in the world. All desire to increase their capacity to serve in the Kingdom of God. It would be fair to say that they are all leaders, even if they do not hold formal leadership positions. We recognise this experience as a rich resource for our shared learning.

Many students who come to do a course eventually go on to make the full Spiritual Exercises. Students in our spiritual direction formation programmes will all have made the full Exercises. We have found this to be a great advantage. Students are familiar with Ignatian terminology; they have explored their own relationship with God and their deep desires; and they have faced their own disordered attachments while making the Exercises. Any formal theory presented from within this framework will immediately link back to their own lived experience. We are ecumenical in our teaching, and the Spiritual Exercises accommodate ecumenism well. We are consciously and overtly Ignatian in all that we teach.

Personal experience is not static. As the students participate in the learning and formation process, their knowledge and understanding is stretched, grown and constantly challenged. Therefore the dynamic of learning continuously moves through the cycles of personal experience and integration of new understanding, and the students draw on this knowledge to facilitate further transformation and understanding.

2. Lecture

During each course we devote equal time to formal lectures, personal reflection and group sharing. The lecture will focus the learning for the day and will be given by one of our faculty members. It will be theoretical, drawing on previous research and clarified by the lecturer's own experience. Most of our programmes are taught in an intensive mode in which students come for five consecutive days, often living in. The lecture sets the focus for the day, brings new information into the learning system, and challenges the students to broaden their horizon. The lecture generally takes between sixty and ninety minutes.

3. Integration through Personal Reflection

The lecturer provides the students with a challenge for personal reflection time. It will be framed within a spiritual exercise or prayer experience. The students are asked to consider reflectively and prayerfully the content of the morning's presentation and to explore and integrate it within their own experience. They draw on that experience and notice what new awareness is emerging within them as they reflect in this prayerful space

with God. They are asked to do this in silence and will be given sixty to ninety minutes for prayer and journal writing.

4. Integration through Group Conversation and Sharing

After focusing on the topic of the session and having reflected deeply on its content in relation to their own knowing and experience, students are then invited to integrate their learning further through collective listening. At this point the class is divided into smaller groups of between four and six students, with one facilitator, a trained spiritual director. Students stay with the same groups for the duration of the course. The group facilitator's task is to: keep the group focused on the task; ensure every student is given a chance to speak; support the students by inviting them to go more deeply as they share; set the norms for group sharing; and keep the time boundaries.

The norms for group sharing are explained at the beginning of the small group sessions as follows:

1. **Confidentiality.** It is important to create a space in which the group feels that what they share will be held in confidence. The conversation shared will not continue outside the group and what is shared will be held sacredly. Students should share as much or as little as they wish, only saying what they feel comfortable saying, and not feeling pressured to speak of things they might regret when they meet group members outside the session. However it is expected that all students will share something, as our learning is dependent on each student participating fully.
2. **Speak once** in the group. Initially everyone will be given a chance to share his or her reflections. After everybody has had a turn, a person may speak again. If there is time, responses to what has been said and heard may be offered by one or more of the students.
3. **Do not interrupt** while another person speaks. The group does not analyze, give advice, or make comments on what has been shared. Small group sharing is not discussion time. The facilitator may ask clarifying questions or invite speakers to elaborate or go more deeply into their experiences.
4. **Listen** to the words, but also try to understand what is behind the words. As students listen to each other speak, they are invited to notice what moves in them, how they are feeling, how it relates or is unrelated to their own experiences.

5. **Clarification.** If students are unclear about what a person means they may ask, but this should not develop into general discussion. The group is not to solve problems or correct another person's experiences, but to listen openly.
6. **Review of session.** At the end of each group time is taken to review what has been experienced in the small group sharing. *What moved me as I listened to others share? What helped me? What did I hear, whether it was said or not? What new understanding and learning can we bring to the topic of this session?*

The small groups are then brought back into the large group, where students are invited to reflect collectively on what is being learnt. This is a time for discussion, clarification, further learning and integration. Questions may be asked such as: *what impressed me as the others shared? What are the inevitable consequences of the truths we have shared? Where did I experience affective harmony with the others as they spoke about their experiences? What new insights did I gain?*

Phases two to four (lecture, personal reflection, group sharing) will be repeated up to ten times within one course of study. The collective learning is cumulative and somewhat sequential, often shaped by the successive Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. Though not always put forward in a strictly sequential framework, the aspects of the Weeks are always present in the dynamic of learning. Remaining conscious of the transformative aspects of the Spiritual Exercises supports the process of learning for both the students and the lecturer-formators. The Weeks of the Exercises are not treated as literal weeks of seven days; rather they are seasons or phases of the spiritual journey.

In the First Week learning focuses on coming to know ourselves as loved sinners and understanding our own part in the destruction of creation and life, under the gaze of God, who loves us unconditionally. Here subject matter will examine the breakdown of our capacity to live fully, and the way in which our own spiritual capacity and freedom are limited by our disordered attachments. This will vary in content and context depending on the topic of the course. The invitation to transformation is to come to know ourselves as flawed but loved. With the Second Week of the Exercises learning is focused on our relationship with Jesus and the impact this has on our apostolic and creative potential in clarifying our identity before God. Learning in this area of any course is about mission, systems and personal vocation. The invitation to transformation is to come to know ourselves as called and gifted. The Third Week looks more closely at the individual's



Graced aspects of the Weeks

or group's capacity to stay focused and faithful to their call even in the light of suffering. Can we stay faithful to the transformative learning offered within the course, even if the cost is high? The Fourth Week is an invitation to incarnate our consolation—to bring into fruitful being the graces, gifts and desires that flow from our relationship with God.

In the diagram above Marlene Marburg describes the aspects of each Week from four perspectives: the orientation of the exercitant towards God; the character of God's initiative towards that person; the person's experience of encountering God; and the person's response to God's initiative.¹⁶ If students are able to open themselves to God and to the encounter being offered, transformative learning can truly take place. In this way education becomes formation. Phase five of the learning experience integrates more clearly the academic focus of the process.

5. Integration through Academic Writing

This phase of the learning process is normally undertaken at the end of each course, though in some cases smaller assessment tasks are given

¹⁶ Marlene Marburg, 'Poetry and Grace: An Autoethnography which Explores Writing: Poetry as Prayer in the Context of Ignatian Spirituality' (PhD dissertation, MCD University of Divinity, 2014), 17, 19.

throughout the course to support students, particularly in the early stages of learning during postgraduate studies. Each student is required to complete a minimum of 6,000 words for each course. Students are also required to adhere to strict standards of formatting, referencing, bibliography and formal academic language.¹⁷ Students are penalised for using colloquial language, informal sentence structure and unreferenced material. Where what is expected of their writing may differ from other experiences they will have had during their postgraduate study is that they will integrate their own experience into their papers as well as articulating theory from the perspective of recognised experts in the field. This may include their own personal experience and the experience of others that they have gathered in ministry or have come to understand better through the process of learning within the course.

Commonly students come to Sentir having completed at least one undergraduate degree. They will have been expected to repeat what they have been taught in class and maybe expand on it by exploring other theorists. Generally, in past studies, they will not have been encouraged to include their own thought or experience, so they have to learn how to do this. Students generally find this aspect of the work challenging, either because of their limited experience of academic writing or because of the requirement to write both personally and academically. By the end of each course, students inevitably find that writing the paper was an important part of the learning process and, in particular, of the integration process.

It is critical that ministers develop the ability to maintain and balance professional standards and personal attentiveness to each situation. We try to form our students to have good boundaries and a clear understanding of how their own experience is their best tool when they are out in the workplace. Personal formation is essential in the ministry setting.

6. Integration into Practice

On completing a course, students are encouraged to take what they have learnt into their working practice. Within each degree offered at Sentir there is generally a supervised *practicum* element. Students are also encouraged (in the case of spiritual direction formation they are actually required) to receive regular supervision and regular spiritual direction.

The supervised *practicums* generally involve students taking their learning out into their area of work. They are supported by a one-to-one

¹⁷ To see a sample of these guidelines you can visit www.sentir.edu.au.

supervisor from Sentir offering regular meetings. Students maintain a *practicum* journal in which they record the details of the work being undertaken, hours of face-to-face practice and hours of supervision, received either singly or in a group. In the supervisions, students are asked to consider those aspects of their work in which they feel enabled and consoled, and those where they experience desolation or difficulties. They are then able to explore this with their supervisors in order to identify the aspects of themselves that might be well served by further formation, through the supervision process itself, spiritual direction or sometimes therapy. We encourage our students to understand that therapy is not necessarily a matter of curing a person of some deep problem, rather it may help that person become freed from disordered aspects of him- or herself in order to be more effective in ministry. Therapy can be a great support to those who work in ministry. We often remind our students that 'you cannot give what you have not got'. In other words, a person's ministry will only be as good as his or her own personal formation.

Integration through practice is something that can continue long after a formal study programme has ended. Students are encouraged to remain in spiritual direction and supervision for as long as they remain in ministry.

Incarnating Our Consolation

When it applies the concept of *sentir*, that is, heartfelt knowing, learning has the potential to be transformative. This is what we are trying to achieve in the courses offered at Sentir Graduate College. Such learning requires that students be able to bring their own experience into formal study, integrating it with established theory. When this is brought into their practical work, students will be actively incarnating their consolations, that is, taking their graces, inspirations and holy desires to serve God and transforming them into action in everyday life.

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