

Jesuit and Feminist Education

INTERSECTIONS IN TEACHING AND
LEARNING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*Edited by Jocelyn M. Boryczka
and Elizabeth A. Petrino*

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4 “The Personal Is Political”

At the Intersections of Feminist and Jesuit Education

JOCELYN M. BORYCZKA
AND ELIZABETH A. PETRINO

When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education.

bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

Jesuit education, from its inception, has retained its vitality and relevance through its interaction with other faiths and philosophical traditions. It is a tribute to the early teachers of the Society of Jesus, led by Ignatius Loyola, that they maintained a core set of principles and beliefs informed by their sense of spirit and rigorous search for truth while contributing to many of the leading intellectual achievements that developed in different cultural and historical contexts. As in the past, social and cultural diversity still give rise to a range of opportunities and challenges for Jesuit universities. At the twenty-first century's outset, “diversity” generally refers to race, class, and gender as well as religion, ethnicity, age, sexual identity, and ability or disability. These variables remain critical to understanding how the complex puzzle of identity is pieced together within the context of social, political, and economic institutions on local, state, national, and global levels. With these intersecting individual, structural, and contextual elements in mind, here we explore the essential role of diversity in the Jesuit mission for social justice through the lens of gender in order to see where principles and practices of Jesuit and feminist education may intersect.

Three initial questions drive this discussion: What role do women and their issues play in the identity of a Jesuit university? How can attentiveness to female experience in society and culture enliven the

authentic dialogue and practical witness that have been hallmarks of Ignatian styles of teaching for over four hundred years? How can we put feminism in dialogue with Jesuit ways of understanding the world, both informing and transforming our understanding of our mission?

To engage with such questions, we could take many different approaches, such as examining the treatment of faculty, staff, and administrators in terms of the glass ceiling and equal pay, the development of a curriculum inclusive of women's contributions to all intellectual traditions, and attentiveness to problems such as sexual harassment and eating disorders. Though these are all important issues, we focus on methods of teaching to explore how feminist and Jesuit approaches promote education of the whole person as critical to achieving social justice. Admittedly, at first glance, Jesuit and feminist ways of looking at the world appear to be divergent and even antagonistic. A deeper analysis, however, suggests their profound similarities. Both approaches, for instance, are committed to integrating reason and emotion in educating the whole person, and both attempt to join theory and praxis in meaningful ways by viewing knowledge in the context of real-world decisions and choices. Furthermore, both Jesuit and feminist ways of understanding the world openly articulate their commitment to social justice and ending oppression in its various forms. Although mindful of divergences, we take the position here that Jesuit education's principles and practices are not antithetical to—in fact, may intersect with and support—aspects of contemporary feminist theory and practice. To develop this position, we explore how feminist pedagogy, captured in the slogan “The personal is political,” converges with and diverges from five key aspects of Jesuit education—context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation—in order to understand how they can inform and even transform one another.¹

Examination of pedagogy from feminist and Jesuit perspectives arises from the real need to attend to issues of gender discrimination on all college campuses.² Despite the fact that women make up 57 percent of undergraduates, gender inequality particularly manifests in ways of knowing and teaching that contradict the impression of females dominating college campuses conveyed by such a statistic. Studies, for instance, have found that males receive more attention from their teachers in the classroom.³ While males tend to demand more attention, particularly by asking questions and raising their hands during

discussion, teachers (male and female alike) not only call on male students more frequently but also ask them follow-up questions and show greater involvement during teacher-student interactions. This learning context contributes to lower self-esteem and confidence among female students, who often remain silent in class and are more likely to abandon academic tasks than males. Additionally, female students respond more positively to student-centered cooperative learning than to lecture-style teaching, which still dominates college education.⁴ Such gendered inequalities in our classrooms emanate from and reflect those found in the broader society. Speaking to this situation, Decree 14 of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation states, “The dominance of men in their relationship with women has found expression in many ways. . . . We still have with us the legacy of systematic discrimination against women. It is embedded within the economic, social, political, religious and even linguistic structures of our societies. It is often part of an even deeper cultural prejudice and stereotype.”⁵

To link this political context to our colleges, universities, and, most important, the personal lives of the students who attend them, Decree 14 recommends two approaches particularly pertinent in this context: the “explicit teaching of the essential equality of women and men in Jesuit ministries, especially in schools, colleges and universities,” and the “promotion of the education of women and, in particular, the elimination of all forms of illegitimate discrimination between boys and girls in the educational process.”⁶ Feminist views on the goals of equal education would concur with such Jesuit practices designed to promote gender equality on our campuses and beyond. Yet determining the means to achieve such ends often remains difficult. At this juncture, exploring the relationship between feminist and Jesuit pedagogy may offer insight as to a process capable of achieving this goal.

Unlike the Jesuits, feminists lack a centuries-old tradition and a systematic articulation of pedagogical principles, in part because feminism remains a relatively new intellectual perspective still in the early stages of theory building. Here feminist pedagogy is loosely conceived of in terms of “The personal is political,” a slogan that served as a clarion call to second-wave feminists. As the radical black feminist Charlotte Bunch explained, “there is no private domain of a person's life that is

not political and there is no political issue that is not ultimately personal. The old barriers have fallen.⁷⁷ Such a perspective captures the permeability of boundaries between the individual and the collective; the public and the private; and, in this case, the classroom, the campus, and the world. Second-wave feminists articulated the necessary interrelationship between consciousness-raising and direct action, which represents a point of departure for identifying where feminist and Jesuit education converge.

To draw this connection, we explore the five central elements of Ignatian education—context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation—first articulated in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599. This founding Jesuit document defines teaching and learning as a collaborative process between teachers and students and encourages discovery and creative self-exploration as a lifelong commitment to learning and action, which relates to a feminist pedagogy premised on the idea that the personal is political. Before we move forward, we stress that our feminist approach and Ignatian pedagogy emphasize permeable boundaries that, in this context, translate into the constant interplay of the five central elements of Ignatian education, which should not be understood as separable entities.

To describe how this connection can inform and transform educational practices, we use the example of a direct action project employed in Dr. Boryczka's Introduction to Feminist Thought course. First, the Ignatian principle of *context* involves navigation of the terrain between the personal lives of teachers and students and the political world, which includes their socioeconomic status, religion, race, culture, and sexual orientation, all of which affect how teachers teach, students learn, and vice versa. Viewed in this light, the context for learning might include not only the micro-level of students, teachers, and the classroom, but the macro-level of socioeconomic, political, and cultural institutions. An Introduction to Feminist Thought course, though ostensibly focused on the more abstract issues of second-wave feminism's political history and theory building, immediately engages individual students with larger contextual issues, since the terms "feminism" and "feminist" evoke many biases cultivated by the many negative stereotypes perpetuated in the broader culture against this

intellectual approach. To address this initial barrier to the course material, the Introduction to Feminist Thought class begins with activities and discussions designed to engage students with stereotypes about feminism, to deconstruct them, and then to construct a working definition of feminism for the class that reflects their collective experience and knowledge. Such a process identifies their personal responses to the public arena, where images and language shape our beliefs. In short, context becomes reality as students individually and collectively reflect on their lives within a complex community and they are introduced to the theory of social constructivism through their experience, drawing theory and practice together.

Beyond this initial point, students engage in a semester-long direct action project that involves working in groups to carry out an action designed to raise consciousness in their campus community about an issue pertinent to women. By creating a situation in which students reach beyond the classroom to connect with their university context, this project operationalizes the immediate reality of students' lives as it relates to their institutional environment within their broader socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts. Students start the project by drawing on their experiences to identify issues important to women, such as breast cancer, heart disease, women in the military, domestic violence, sexual harassment, body image, or eating disorders. Since their understanding of such issues usually emanates from their construction in the broader society, students immediately confront the challenge of connecting these issues directly to the lives of women and men at their university. One group, for instance, focused on heart disease as the number one killer of American women, though it is not generally perceived as a danger for college-age women, by holding a nutrition and exercise class to educate their peers about prevention. Such an approach requires students to navigate the micro- and macro-levels of context, which enables them to see the permeable boundaries between one's personal life, one's immediate context, and the larger political world.

Second, the Ignatian model specifies *experience* as signaling the need to fuse an intellectual and emotional approach to learning—to maintain openness to human reality in its complexity, which will provide the

basis for analysis and contemplation. The Ignatian concept of experience intersects with the feminist practice of consciousness-raising, which translates personal experience into meaningful collective action. American women throughout the late 1960s started small group “rap sessions,” where they told stories of their daily hardships in the home and sometimes the workplace, finding that other women shared their experiences. This process awakened them to their systematic oppression as women in a male-dominated society.⁸ From these rap sessions evolved a theory of consciousness-raising, which usually involves the steps of opening up, sharing, analyzing and abstracting from shared experiences, and engaging in direct action.⁹ Summarizing the thinking behind this process, Pamela Allen states that “we believe that theory and analysis which are not rooted in concrete experience (practice) are useless, but we also maintain that for the concrete, everyday experiences to be understood, they must be subjected to the processes of analysis and abstraction.”¹⁰ Starting with personal experience uses practice as a point of departure for analysis and theorizing that abstracts from an individual’s material reality, a hallmark of feminism consistent with Ignatian pedagogy.

Students translate experience in the Introduction to Feminist Thought course by meeting in small groups organized around a specific feminist issue and then participating in a modified consciousness-raising exercise following these four steps. This exercise, unlike the relatively unstructured opening up and sharing of feminist consciousness-raising groups, asks students to open up by expressing how they feel about group work and then sharing why they chose the particular issue on which the group is focusing. This first step usually opens communication, since students often have either strong positive or negative feelings about group work, and later in the semester, many report that despite their initial reluctance to express themselves, this exercise resulted in a solid bond among the group members. In the second step, students are asked to respond to questions such as, What personal interests or experiences drew you to this particular issue? Why is it important to you personally? What do you hope to learn from engaging with this issue? To help ensure a space for groups to discuss these questions confidentially, the professor needs to specify that anything shared in the group stays in the group. Students should not take notes

on this part of the discussion and the professor should observe groups carefully by walking around the class without intervening in the conversations.

This consciousness-raising exercise’s third step of analyzing and abstracting shifts from experience to Ignatian pedagogy’s third element—*reflection*, which values critical analysis and generates a deeper understanding of how one’s experience relates to the lives of others. The personal translates into the political as students recognize the patterns that arise as they share their experiences in relation to their group’s issue. On the basis of collective discussion, students speculate about societal responses to their issue and its role in a broader context. This analysis serves as the touchstone for more extensive student research on the issue, which is now grounded in personal experience, from which they may analyze and abstract. Such an approach often generates a high level of student investment in and responsibility for the project.

The three Ignatian concepts of context, experience, and reflection indicate how this paradigm, similar to feminist teaching methods, emphasizes a student-centered approach to learning. Feminist pedagogy turns more explicit attention than the Ignatian paradigm to teachers, who must also reflect on their contexts and experiences as part of a dynamic interplay with students and their communities. As Lee Anne Bell et al. explain, teachers “struggle alongside our students with our own social identities, biases, fears, and prejudices. We too need to be willing to examine and deal honestly with our values, assumptions, and emotional reactions to oppression issues. The self-knowledge and self-awareness that we believe are desirable qualities in any teacher become crucial in social justice education.”¹¹ While comprehending our students’ lives remains imperative, teachers also need to participate in the difficult work of identifying their own contexts and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, through reflection. Here, feminist and critical pedagogy inform and highlight the teacher’s essential part in the Ignatian paradigm.

Students, having engaged with context, experience, and reflection through consciousness-raising, turn to direct *action*—the fourth aspect of Ignatian pedagogy—which structures the entire student project and,

ultimately, the course. Direct action serves as a powerful tool for showing students through experience that they can address a specific political issue within the broader community, cultivating their agency and sense of empowerment. Jesuits and feminists in this regard desire nothing less than to liberate and transform the individual through self-reflection and, eventually, to move each person to act in pursuit of social justice. Under the professor's guidance, students design a project that speaks directly to their fellow students. Students have developed and carried out projects ranging from fund-raising for breast cancer research and holding self-defense classes to bringing an attorney to campus to speak on the issue of domestic violence and the law.

A student project that focused on the treatment of women in the arts illustrates how direct action can affect the students, their campus community, and the broader society. One group of three women started their consciousness-raising activity by discussing the challenges confronted by women in the comic book industry, a profession still dominated by men despite an ever-increasing readership among young women. Initially, the professor failed to see how such a concern would translate into a viable direct action project, yet the students' persistence convinced her to allow the project to move forward. The group consisted of an avid reader of comic books, a female graphic artist, and a history major interested in how female images such as that of Rosie the Riveter have promoted different political agendas throughout American history. Graphic art, in their experience, conveyed images of women that reflected their oppression in the broader society. Their direct action then involved recruiting faculty, staff, and students from the campus community to contribute to creating a graphic novel based on their responses to various feminist terms such as "patriarchy" and images such as Wonder Woman. As contributors developed their drawings, collages, and accompanying story lines, the students held two consciousness-raising sessions with them to allow them to share their experiences and reflect upon them. After pulling their contributors' work together, the students arranged for a gallery showing of the graphic novel in a student space on campus, an event they advertised in the student paper and through fliers. With over sixty people attended the showing, where students displayed the work and encouraged people to reflect on the exhibit by writing or drawing on a huge piece of

butcher-block paper hung on the wall. The student organizers and contributors were also on hand to talk with attendees, creating a vibrant atmosphere of discussion in which consciousness was raised through multiple levels of interaction. Much to the professor's surprise, one student organizer contacted a host of news agencies about covering the event. A local station, Connecticut News 12, invited the students to be interviewed on their "Educational Notebook" segment, which aired numerous times around the Christmas holiday. This group's direct action project ultimately reached well beyond their immediate campus community to the broader society, raising consciousness among the public.

Evaluation, the fifth element of the Ignatian paradigm, involves the learner, under the gentle guidance of a teacher, in defining lifelong goals and considering his or her beliefs in light of further experience or social and cultural change. Through self-evaluation, the Jesuit model is committed to *cura personalis*, an ethic centered on developing the person rather than teaching a curriculum. Feminist pedagogy tends to underemphasize evaluation as a step following direct action that enhances personal growth and may further political action. Realizing this weakness in the feminist approach, the professor cultivated the critical element of evaluation in the direct action projects. Groups were required to include an evaluation mechanism such as a questionnaire for participants in their projects. Research papers on their projects also constituted an evaluation mechanism, allowing space for considered reflection about the implications of their project for them, their group, the class, and the campus community. In this space, students assessed the overall experience and the obstacles that they encountered as well as how they overcame them. Additionally, students reflected on these issues as a class throughout the semester and during the final class, when they collectively evaluated the experience by considering how and where the personal meets the political and the obstacles to and opportunities for creating change in the world. In the Introduction to Feminist Thought course, Ignatian pedagogy offered a structured approach to developing consciousness-raising as a tool for the class to carry out direct actions premised on context, experience, and reflection while contributing the critical element of thoughtful evaluation.

Looking at this direct action project in light of these two teaching methods returns us to the question: How can we put feminism in dialogue with Jesuit ways of understanding the world, both informing and transforming our understanding of mission? A few responses emanate from this discussion. Identifying gender as critical to diversity and as valuable in the search for social justice represents a critical contribution of the feminist perspective and one recognized as essential in Decree 14. More specifically, the Ignatian model of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation provides structure and meaning to the feminist approach, framed here in terms of the phrase "The personal is political." These approaches share a commitment to valuing personal experience and reflecting upon it to determine direct courses of action designed to have an impact on the broader structures of society that shape our context and act as barriers to social justice. In particular, feminism highlights the teacher's significance in a student-centered model, which is implied in Ignatian pedagogy, while Jesuit education makes explicit the need to engage in careful evaluation, an element that is more marginal in feminist approaches.

The integrated approach developed here reflects a broader potential for transforming the Jesuit university and our role as educators in two more ways. First, it broadens our understanding of culture to include those populations that have been traditionally marginalized. Second, this approach redefines social action to include a range of social ills of particular concern to women. The Jesuit statement on "Our Mission and Culture" clearly states that respecting "a range of ethnic and new subcultures which are often ignored" within a larger culture comes close to meeting the need to validate the rights of those persons who are marginal within society.¹² Not only have Jesuits committed themselves to resisting living as a foreign presence in the cultures they encounter globally, but we educators at Jesuit universities must seek to change the lives of people in our midst, including women, the poor, the underprivileged, and the marginalized. If the order commits itself to "accompany[ing] people, in different contexts, as they and their culture make difficult transitions,"¹³ shouldn't this apply to our roles in nurturing the female student who may be weighing whether or not to pursue a career or befriending the gay student who may be coming out during his time at the university? Similarly, by seeing women as "equal

partners in dialogue,"¹⁴ we can build a context of mutual respect and understanding that may result in deeper awareness and a sustained critique. As "Our Mission and Culture" declares, "the structural injustice in the world [is] rooted in value systems promoted by a powerful modern culture,"¹⁵ and this is reflected in gendered issues such as self-esteem, body image, eating disorders, child care, unequal pay, ableism, and sexual harassment, as well as racial and sexual discrimination. Given the commitment of Jesuit universities and colleges to pursuing social justice, we should seek to understand how women's oppression reflects larger structural inequalities operating in our culture, every day and at every level. Making the political personal may enable us to envision a joint future and to rectify those injustices that exist within our community as well as those in the culture at large.