

We publish here reflections of **Fr. Vitangelo Denora SJ**, General Director of the Gonzaga Institute in Palermo, founder and instructor at CeFAEGI, a training center for teachers working within the Jesuit network of schools in Italy.

PREMISE

In this essay Fr. Denora gives guidance on how to interpret distance learning within the framework of Ignatian pedagogy, with particular attention to teachers who have been thrust without warning into new and unknown dimensions of “doing school”, and with profound attention dedicated to the students, to their interior lives and their growth.

In this text there resound many values of Ignatian pedagogy: *cura personalis* (the care that every teacher must have for each of their students, helping their personal uniqueness to emerge), *non multa sed multum* (it is not knowing many things that sates and satisfies the soul, but rather the sensing and interior savoring of knowledge), the *praelectio* (the motivational moment of learning), the *lectio* (the moment in which the teacher explains what is to be learned), the *repetitio* (the moment of reflecting upon and internalizing what has been learned), *action* (the moment of action and of choices that are generated from what has been learned), *evaluation*, the experience of the learning journey as more than just a final exam. Even to those who do not know all the steps of Ignatian pedagogy, this text can still speak to how the world of education is experimenting in the particular historical moment that we are living through.

COMPANIONS ON A NEW VOYAGE

School is following, in this period, its own path and it is carrying out its own educational mission, even as it is experiencing a routine that is artificially constructed to cope with the emergency that has befallen students, teachers and their families.

That which is happening in the world right now is not merely the background against which the schools carry out their work; it is rather an integral part, and it directly involves the younger generations who must still in the long term face the challenge of thinking about the future, when Italy and the world will be free to go out, to move around, to travel, and to build.

In this situation, particular attention must be placed on the work of the teachers, who find themselves being companions on an unexpected voyage, during which windows are often opened on something quite different than what they normally experience in their professional lives, on who they are as people as they pass through this difficult time, people who are somehow laid bare, one close to the other, in spite of the distance of electronic communication, called to live this complex situation.

Certainly it is not simple, but their finding themselves in this situation, even with few defences, can also be experienced as a new opportunity. **Collegial action** is fundamental. It is the expression of a sense of community that permits teachers

to offer mutual support to each other and to get through this difficult time, strengthened by mutual respect.

The workload needs to be divided up well among the teachers in a shared program: it is necessary to balance the workload within the week and also within the day and for this reason coordination is fundamental, for example through the figure of the teacher representative for the class or the class coordinator.

It is worth taking into consideration that, in critical situations in life, or in periods that are very stressful, everyone reacts differently, in a way that is shaped by their personal history, and sometimes in a way that is incomprehensible to those around them. For example, some withdraw into themselves, others seek out expressions of affection that can comfort them. Generally whatever characterizes a person is amplified (the rigid become even more rigid, the organised can become obsessive, the flexible risk losing their way, the tolerant risk becoming paternalistic...). So in the end each person reacts as they can, and it is good if everyone develops their own self-awareness. Being close together, as a college of faculty members, even metaphorically, there is the risk of judging, or misunderstanding or not understanding, but this is also an occasion to come together, to regard each other with patience and tenderness, to build an authentic community. **This is a time for community and not for individualism or protagonism or, simply put, for solo journeys.** *This is a challenge that we must overcome together!*

WHAT KIND OF JOURNEY DO WE WANT TO UNDERTAKE WITH OUR STUDENTS?

Certainly, one objective is the validation of the school year, but at this moment it must be our priority to give space to the broadly formational and educational aspects of school, which happen to be typical of Ignatian education. Our students probably will be shut up in their houses still for some time, in an unnatural condition of isolation and immobility, and they must reckon with an illness that will probably touch them personally in some way, and with fear that can become anguish, with questions about the meaning of life that will preoccupy their minds and hearts for a long time, even after the end of this emergency; today they have to come to grips with the difficulty of organizing their day, which is no longer defined by places nor, above all, by meetings with others; with the passage of the days there may emerge a heaviness, a lack of motivation to study and even a lack of commitment. What they are living through is not easy and it is up to us to accompany them now in this time, with the difficulties they have and will have.

And so how to relate to them, **how to be close to the students on this unprecedented voyage?**

The word **“accompany”** is essential in Ignatian pedagogy, and expresses an attitude that is the foundational approach of the teacher-educator, namely a **human and spiritual posture that is rich with respect and attention.** What precisely does that mean in these times?

- That we should not be afraid to express to students, perhaps even more explicitly than before, our **understanding**, our **affection** and our **tenderness** and our **closeness** to them.

- That we should be not afraid to allow our humanity to emerge, and indeed that beautiful humanity that translates into our **worrying** about our students, in our **experiencing their difficulties as our own**, putting ourselves in their shoes;
- Nor should we be afraid to **show our own fragilities**, because our responsibility as adults at this moment is not to go ahead as if nothing were happening, as if we didn't experience fear or sadness or as if we didn't feel a profound sense of uncertainty, or a feeling of being lost, but rather to go forward with humility and courage notwithstanding the weight that we are carrying in our hearts, aware of this weight and ready to cope with it.

Certainly it is difficult to express all of this in front of a screen or while assigning homework and various tasks, but we must succeed in doing this. Is this not the extraordinary beauty of our work and *indeed a mission?*

While we share that about which we are passionate and which for us has been a channel to authenticity and happiness we meet lives that are taking shape and that suddenly light up, **understanding something that renders them more themselves, happier, more capable also of changing the world around them.** The mystery of their lives and of our lives meet in a moment that is completely unplanned and spontaneous: of insights, of moments in time that repay the many labours that belong to the life of a teacher.

When we are teaching in a classroom we look at our students, we give them our attention with non-verbal gestures and even when we give them bad grades we can make them understand that the grade is an episode, not a judgement of their person, but rather a way to make progress and to change, and that they can make it if they want to because we are present and we believe in them.

How to do all this today? **From a distance we must learn to express, more than usual, a kind of attention made up of positive recognition and tenderness.** The students need this the way we need it: to say simple words that perhaps we never say to each other, like those that express gratitude and affection.

For many teachers these expressions are enriched with nuances of many shades, which harmonize well with the values upon which education is founded: the community of educators, the sense of belonging to the school, the care of the whole person.

Teachers are dedicating their energies to a **continuity that is not strictly formal and not only related to teaching**, and one important suggestion is to **freely create human and spiritual moments to meet**, to share and simply say "this is how I am doing".

Cura personalis in this moment is fundamental for everyone, and no one is excluded. Also the teachers have a right to it, not only in this moment but particularly in this moment.

A new sense of community and of solidarity can thus take shape, new reflections on the sense of educational work, on life, on society, on relationships. In these days, one is struck by the generosity beyond the professionalism with which the teachers throw themselves into this challenge for the good of the students.

COMPETENCIES TO DEVELOP

The objective of the journey—which corresponds to a sort of profile of the finished student in the time of Coronavirus—can be defined, if you like, as the teacher discerning which specific competencies they want to develop in this period.

Among these are also the **competencies of each discipline, which are to be studied in the essentialist manner of *non multa sed multum***, having the courage to re-conceive and re-adapt in this historic time.

Then there are the transversal competencies or **competencies for life**. If you take into consideration this specific time, they could be:

- learning to stay with oneself, with the mystery of life and with one's own fears;
- not to give up cultivating faith in the future;
- rediscovering the value of affection and small things;
- having a perception of a human community more fragile than ever and yet rediscovered and interconnected;
- participating in the didactic and educational journey that is proposed;
- demonstrating active and personal involvement;
- the capacity to live this moment with resilience;
- the capacity to stay the course and remain open;

For these competencies, today more than ever, our style of accompanying students is decisive.

THE EDUCATIONAL OFFERING

If the direction is clear to us, then perhaps the way will be as well. The curriculum, defined as the entire educational offering, is like a road paved with our disciplines and experiences that the school proposes (spiritual, social, cultural...), a road where the teachers accompany, **attentive and grateful to be near the mystery of persons who are growing, who blossom** and who discover new horizons and new reasons to live their lives, thanks also to the cultural and didactic work of the teachers.

This journey today certainly has a different tone and perhaps must have a different pace: there will be need of **more stops and more time**. Perhaps the crisis is also telling us this: **let's make time and not worry about hurrying**. Let it be abundantly clear that even a slower journey can be serious and rigorous. **There is an even tighter focus on learning** (the journey of the student) **at the service of which is the teacher** (the journey of the teacher): the pace is dictated by the student and the care of the teacher is that which allows the student to walk ever more autonomously.

Finally it must be a **serene journey** and joyful, even if these days one is hard-pressed to speak of unbridled joy. **It certainly cannot be a heavy journey, because the ballast we are carrying, unwillingly, is already great.**

THE METHOD: THE IGNATIAN PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGM AND INTERACTIVE LEARNING

One of the principles of Ignatian education is joyful learning, that is to say that **learning begins when a spark is ignited**, if a person is entirely involved, starting from their emotional side, or as Pope Francis says, starting from the **heart**. Now it is necessary to start from this heart full of uncertainties and fears and we must involve the heart with patience, including it and helping it to express itself.

An approach to interactive learning that alternates video lessons and different kinds of didactic activities fits naturally within the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm:

- Every module must begin by posing the question of **how to motivate the students to learn about that particular topic**: what experience should be proposed in order to involve the students, to make them feel that that which is being taught concerns them personally and will open their minds and hearts? This in the PPI is the *praelectio* or the phase of **experience**;
- **The lectio comes after, and not before**, the lecture of the teacher, that must take into account the attention span of the students, a span that clearly is further reduced during video lessons compared with classroom learning also because interaction is more difficult. In this part the essential contents are taught;
- The third step is one that Ignatian pedagogy regards as crucial, because it is particularly educational, and that is the phase of **reflection** or internalising or *repetitio* ("**mind**", as Pope Francis would say). This involves asking oneself how to make certain that the students internalize and make their own that which has been taught;
- **When knowledge is made one's own, it is solid, and it becomes part of the most intimate fibre of a person and it is able to be translated into new situations, to become action** ("hands", as Pope Francis would say), **competence and change**;
- And thus we arrive at **evaluation**, which in Ignatian pedagogy has essentially the **diagnostic character of a process (that which worked and that which didn't work during the learning process) and prognostication (how to improve in the future)**. From this point begins a new learning process.

It is precisely the step of evaluation that remains one of the most complex aspects of this historical moment. The first meaning of evaluation is *to give value*. It is necessary to ask oneself today: **to what sort of thing do we want to give value and how to we want to give value?** There is a close connection between the object of the evaluation (which is not necessarily a performance, an oral exam or written work) and the way of evaluating it (which is not necessarily the assignment of a grade). Ignatian pedagogy has always taught us to arrive at an **evaluation of the course of study more than results or tests**. Today it is particularly important to make transversal competencies emerge and in particular the tests that make them

emerge must be conceived in a creative manner. In this case, there are diverse instruments of evaluation that can be brought into play:

- systematic observation (for example observations regarding participation, involvement, and work);
- real-life homework (which identifies problematic situations to resolve that will bring into play the contents the students have learned and their abilities);
- some instruments of self evaluation (among which, very dear to Ignatian pedagogy, is the “cognitive autobiography”: to recount what I understood from that which has been taught to me, and **what I learned about myself in that which has been taught**).

But one can use and creatively invent new modalities for evaluation and new instruments: for example, to conserve materials produced by the students in a sort of portfolio.

One important aspect to take particular care of in this time is to **give constant and frequent feedback to the students**, evaluating (=giving value to) the many tasks to be done. **Positive feedback is extremely important** and one must be very **careful with negative feedback** also because negative feedback requires you to indicate a path to remediation (and if this path isn't visible, then we risk blocking the student as a person, with no real way of exiting) transforming the evaluation, as we also read in ministerial documents, into a ritual punishment.

Online teaching is fruitful if it is informed by interactivity without falling into the trap of becoming even more “frontal”, or unilateral, than classroom learning. The Ignatian tradition indeed envisions frontal and transmissive teaching as something to be used with extreme parsimony, favoring instead a teaching style that is active and personalized.

DIGITAL DISTANCE LEARNING: THE DISTRIBUTION OF TIME AND WORKLOAD

Already in 2007 Jesuit schools inserted a figure comparable to what the state schools called the technology “animator”: the ITAS (Information and Technology at School) leader, a teacher conversant with technology, able to jump start research into his own discipline and that of his colleagues into how to integrate Ignatian pedagogy with technology, able to stimulate and gather significant digital materials to share and socialize.

The Jesuit schools have reflected upon the concern of educators regarding over-exposure to technological media—which without any doubt has repercussions upon psycho-physical health and poses risks of hyperconnectivity and virtuality—within the framework of research into a healthy equilibrium in the structuring of the students' time.

From a didactic point of view there exists the **necessity of an attentive distribution of time, above all, between videoconferencing and other activities.** It is clear that videoconferencing gives a greater sense of our presence and our work to both the students and their families, but a high concentration of

videoconferences in one morning can become taxing for the students and the attention that is required of them, and also for the teachers if in the same morning they have many videoconferences scheduled. Such videoconferences must be inserted into a learning process that needs to be planned with care, and envisions a motivational moment, a transmissive one, a personal moment and one that generates the internalizing of knowledge with a view to action and then evaluation.

One important instrument can be brief video lessons (or also audio lessons) even if video lessons can be a burden to prepare, provided this can become part of a process and produce long-lasting contents. It is also necessary to guarantee a moment in which the students can ask the teacher questions, ask for clarification, possibly review of parts of the lesson that were not clear or understood well by the students (a form of the *flipped class*).

In general it is necessary to pay attention and not overload the students with stimulation and contents. The actual risk one could run, paradoxically, is that of excessive cognitive load that can turn out to be oppressive rather than stimulating for the continuity of the course. **The students, above a certain threshold, get lost and feel unmotivated.**

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