My Philosophy of Teaching

My philosophy of teaching is a personal adaptation of St. Ignatius of Loyola’s ideas about education as they are systematized in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599. Throughout his writings in the mid-sixteenth century Loyola developed specific themes from the works of Alexander Hegius, Rudolf Agricola and Conrad Celtis, the Northern European theorists of education at the end of the fifteenth and the start of the sixteenth centuries. They espoused a systematic educational process centered on training in the Latin and Greek languages, the rich literature these cultures developed and the rhetorical style they embodied. Knowledge of history, competency in the fine arts, skill in logic and an appreciation of philosophy and theology capped what came to be known as a “Classical Education”. Loyola adopted these Northern Humanists’ educational curriculum but made significant changes in it. Learning from the experience of the first Jesuit teachers at Messina, Vienna and elsewhere, Loyola retained the Northern European Humanists’ emphasis on classical languages and literature but selected Cicero rather than Tacitus as the author whose style should be imitated. In philosophy Ignatius Loyola chose Aristotle and Aquinas rather than Plato and Zeno. Ignatius’ models for theology were Augustine and Aquinas rather than Tertullian and Biel. Besides his frequently studied emphasis on *eloquen* *tia perfecta* in oral and written expression Loyola insisted on the study of mathematics and the physical sciences. He created an educational philosophy that lay the groundwork for “a culture of evidence”.

The *Ratio* eschewed any form of obscurantism since Loyola firmly believed in the compatibility of faith and reason. Yet Ignatius’ understanding of reason differed greatly from that of Diderot, Voltaire and the rationalists of the Enlightenment. For the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment reason, as they conceived it, was destructive of faith. For Ignatius reason was much more than logic and it refuted not faith but superstition. The *philosophes*’s reason led to the denial of the reality of the transcendent: Ignatius’ reason established the preambles of faith that grounded an empirically based philosophy and an intelligible, humanistic theology centered on religious experience.

My philosophy of teaching, following the *Ratio*, is ideally to encourage in each student the humanistic pursuit of the transcendent. I hope to have each student appreciate and cultivate reflection on experience while striving towards excellence in academics and all human endeavors. How do I help my students achieve the habit of reflection that leads to deepening human awareness and consequent growth in sensitivity and appreciation? I try to be present to them while they are on campus and to accompany them after they graduate and continue on their journey through life.

How concretely do I initiate my students into the process of appreciating and cultivating reflection on experience? What strategies, methods or exercises do I use in the classroom to achieve this goal?

There are three major elements, each modeled on Ignatius’ theory of education, that I employ in all of my classes to help the students develop the habit of reflection on experience that undergirds participation in “a culture of evidence”. The first element is to make the tone of the classroom one of friendliness, respect, and appreciation for critical
thinking and new ideas. This is done by distributing on the first day of class “Our Mode of Procedure” that we follow faithfully throughout the semester. The second element is at the very beginning to distribute a detailed syllabus and follow it exactly. Each class must be carefully prepared so that I not only master the material to be presented but also how and in what order to present it. The third element is the use of reflective written and in-class oral exercises that encourage well-founded critical thinking. Written exercises are essays, book reviews and term papers. The main oral exercise is discussion in reflection groups. Five students are in each group. Each group must analyze “cases” only to see the issues involved in them but not to “solve” them. After twenty-five minutes of class discussion the group leader orally reports to the class the issues found.

The packet distributed at the start of this lecture contains the following: (1) A copy of these brief remarks on “My Philosophy of Teaching”, (2) “Our Way of Proceeding”, (3) Syllabus from one of my courses and (4) Case Study Discussion Questions.

These particular Case Study Discussion Questions are meant to aid reflection on the initial forms of moral reasoning used by Christians during the first decades of the third century (CE). The class has seen that Jesus followed the Jewish teaching that holds that virtue may be taught. The early Christian community struggled to apply this teaching in forming a distinctive Christian way of life. Third century moral reasoning, drawn from the writings of St. Paul and popular philosophy, encouraged autarcheia (self-sufficiency, interior freedom) and encrateia (justice and self-control). In the light of autarcheia and encrateia the Christian community wrestled especially with the legitimacy of marriage and the accumulation of material possessions in trying to come to a common mind about a distinctive life-style in the culture of the third century in the Mediterranean world. Analysis of these cases will help in understanding what the Christian community faced at that germinal time.

Herbert J. Ryan, SJ
Professor of Historical Theology
Department of Theological Studies
Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, California