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The Challenges of Lasallian Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Students as Apprentices in Lifelong Learning.

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This article is rooted in discussions that occurred shortly before I was invited to the Lasallian Summer Seminar for Professors. These conversations were focused primarily on our own students at Christian Brothers University (CBU) – often students from rural areas, first-generation college students, and students who identify themselves as belonging to one or more ethnic minorities. Upon reading Section 3 of The Documents of the 45th General Chapter, the topic jumped out at me as I read several specific sections. Although my perspective is heavily influenced by my observations at CBU (and those of my CBU colleagues), it also takes into consideration observations during my time at numerous other institutions (most of them secular) and the observations of many academic colleagues.

Two subsections of Section Three struck me most strongly: First, that the "vitality and the guarantee of the shared Lasallian mission" depends, in part, on "active and committed participation on the part of students to their own formation."[2] Second, the observation that "Lasallian education believes that students are primarily responsible for their own education" is a practical trait of Lasallian education in the twenty-first century.[3]

Apprentices in Lifelong Learning

I propose that students at Lasallian institutions should be viewed – and should view themselves – as apprentices in lifelong learning. An apprentice may be defined as "one who is learning by practical experience under skilled workers a trade, art, or calling."[4] An apprenticeship often is characterized in terms of commitment or service for a specific period of time.[5]

I do not mean that all students should be groomed strictly for an academic career. To the contrary, all students should learn cognitive and behavioral skills and habits that will enhance their performance in any job and their lives outside of work! There may be skills that are specific to particular majors, minors, or other programs, particularly in terms of application to relevant fields. However, the Lasallian apprentice should gain a set of general abilities and strategies for engaging information that is common across disciplines. Thus, the Lasallian apprenticeship is much more about how one thinks than what one thinks about.

The apprenticeship model emphasizes the active role of each student, as articulated above, in the student's own learning and formation. The apprenticeship model emphasizes that students must actively take part in their education, rather than experience it passively. This includes all aspects of their education.

In the classroom, students must engage the teacher, other students, and even the material itself. The role of the teacher should not be simply to entertain (although this certainly may be a characteristic of the teacher's demeanor) and to pour out her or his own knowledge like fine wine so that students may drink to the extent they are willing and able. Instead, the role of the instructor should be like a wine connoisseur and master taster, sharing her or his own tasting skills and experience as the class samples various delicacies – wines as well as other foods and beverages – to refine their palates and enrich their lives through the very experience of what they consume. The students thus learn through practice to become wine connoisseurs themselves. They become more sensitive about how to process the various characteristics of the wine and to understand how these relate to other factors (e.g., the grape, the year, aspects of the production process). In the former role, the teacher primarily presents the wine to the students; in the latter, the teacher experiences the wine with them, inviting each student to bring her or his own insights to the table and to discuss them with the group. In her or his own way, each student must be actively engaged.

Of course (and perhaps unfortunately), most academic courses do not focus on wine. However, I hope the analogy with any academic topic is clear. Like wine, the instructor should experience the material with the students, inviting them to actively engage with the material and to bring their own insights to the table. The ultimate goal, then, is not simply for students to accumulate knowledge, but to develop cognitive and behavioral skills and habits in the classroom that they will naturally execute outside the classroom. The classroom thus becomes a life-changing environment in which students become lifelong learners.

Note that this approach to learning, although it may be used in any field, is rooted in the liberal arts and humanities. To continue with the wine analogy, a true understanding of wine (and even wine tasting) requires content from such fields as chemistry, biology (both the biology of the grape and the biology of the mammalian nervous and digestive systems), psychology, and many others. However, it is not this content that draws us to the wine itself. It is the experience. Thus, the study and discussion of any topic may derive passion from a foundation in human experience. In building a core curriculum, we can take advantage of this passion to promote a personal core in each student around which more specialized aspects of the curriculum may build (note that this then becomes a formational opportunity).[6]

The active engagement of students in the learning process forces a second effect: Teachers themselves must continuously model and engage in the lifelong learning they teach. Active students who constantly engage in learning push their teachers to do the same! Faculty must continuously strive to continue their own education – to learn more. This provides additional opportunities for faculty to enrich themselves, their students, their institutions, and their communities. Some examples: exploring new topics with students and members of the institution and/or community; research, particularly research that aligns with the research agenda of the International Association of Lasallian Universities[7]; activity in professional societies and attendance at conferences, seminars, and workshops; editorial involvement in one's field (e.g., reviewing articles and/or books).

Catholic institutions of higher education, and particularly Lasallian institutions, have a unique opportunity to provide a rich environment in which to foster lifelong learning among all members of their communities. In Ex Corde Ecclesiae, then Pope John Paul II emphasized the impartial nature of Catholic institutions of higher education.[8] Catholic institutions, by their nature as "catholic" (i.e., universal), offer greater academic freedom than secular institutions. Himes emphasizes this in describing the humanistic nature of the Catholic intellectual tradition.[9] The secular institution, in general, constrains academic freedom by minimizing, excusing, or otherwise prohibiting certain beliefs and perspectives due to their religious nature.[10] In contrast, Catholic institutions and educators must invite these beliefs into the process of learning and the search for truth, recognizing their contribution to true diversity and true learning and formation.[11] Such openness and engagement is severely lacking in society. An outright ban on any idea – even one which is tragically misinformed – only constrains our capacity to consider all perspectives and to openly, yet critically, evaluate them in the quest for truth. It simultaneously diminishes our self-confidence in engaging and, if necessary, confronting these ideas, encouraging us instead to withdraw into a stagnant intellectual life of fear and doubt.

Drawing on an article by Gioia, Heft discusses several valuable aspects of the Catholic tradition in academia.[12] One of these is that Catholics "generally take the long view of things, looking back to the time of Christ and the Caesars while also gazing forward toward eternity."[13] This tradition of skeptical, deliberate, historically-aware evaluation (and one that considers potential implications far into the future) is increasingly in contrast with modern, secular approaches to problem solving, which might be described with the phrase, "The first hit in a Google search will work fine." This aspect of the Catholic tradition, in and of itself, is a useful perspective and a valuable learning tool.

Lasallian institutions of higher education are ideally situated to promote this rich environment for lifelong learning. Saint John Baptist de La Salle's goal – offering education to those who might not otherwise have access – opens Lasallian educational communities to a richness of perspectives that is lacking in many institutions. Respect for the dignity of the individual, concern for social justice, commitment to sacramental witness to Jesus Christ (i.e., through visible actions), and striving to recognize and strengthen the unique gifts of each individual are aspects of the Lasallian mission that encourage the apprenticeship approach and also support it.[14] As we have clearly seen in the witness of Pope Francis, people of all faiths (and even atheists) are drawn to those who live out the Catholic faith in this way.

In addition, the international nature of the Lasallian schools, especially those of higher education, provides an outstanding foundation for rich, open sharing and discussion of diverse ideas, and the opportunity to reach people. This allows us, as Lasallian educators, (1) to discuss and address problems in and out of the classroom (e.g., in research, through community service) on a worldwide scale, and (2) to affect change in uniquely effective ways.

A Scientific Basis for Apprenticeship

The apprenticeship model of learning is much more than pedagogical rhetoric. Instead, it has a rationale in psychology and neuroscience. In psychology, learning is widely defined as a relatively permanent change in behavior (and, some would add, knowledge) brought about by

experience. This learning often can be traced to structural, chemical, and/or other biological changes in an organism (even plants can learn). In humans and animals, these changes often (but certainly not always) are located in the nervous system, especially the brain. If we consider memory to be the stored "information" that mediates the learning-induced change in behavior, then it is useful to consider two different types of memory: Explicit (also known as declarative) and implicit (also known as non-declarative).[15]

As the name suggests, explicit memory is manifested in our ability to consciously and explicitly remember information. It often includes information that can be expressed verbally – at least to some degree – although the memory itself may be visual, auditory, etc. Semantic memories (general world knowledge) and episodic memories (personal events) are subtypes of explicit memory. These memories generally are intentional and conscious in nature.

Explicit memories generally are stored in the parts of the brain that are active when we experience them. Another way to think about this is that, when we remember an explicit memory, we are actually experiencing it again in terms of our brain activity. In the brain, what makes these memories particularly unique is that each aspect of a memory is tied together into a web of our experience. To be a bit overly simplistic, the part of the brain that ties and stores the memories is in the middle part of the brain (the medial temporal lobe), and includes the hippocampus.

Implicit memories, on the other hand, do not depend on the hippocampus. They may depend on any number of different structures in the brain (e.g., basal ganglia, cerebellum, cortex), but they lack the conscious nature of explicit memories. Implicit memories include skills, habits, procedural knowledge or "motor memory," simple conditioning, and priming (where what you just experienced influences your behavior). A classic example of an implicit memory is the ability to ride a bicycle. Note that a person may also have explicit memories of bicycle riding: an ability to verbally describe certain aspects of the process, memory of a bicycle accident, etc. However, the memory of how to execute the intricate combination of movements to actually ride a bicycle is motor in nature. Once the process of riding a bicycle is learned, it may take little conscious effort and attention to engage in the behavior. It is a learned skill, executed largely by habit.

It is worth noting that conscious attention and effort may facilitate some (but not all) types of implicit learning. For example, trying to ride a bicycle for the first time may require a great deal of effort. With repeated trials (i.e., practice), however, the needed effort decreases as the task becomes increasingly automatic. This often corresponds with a shift in task-related brain activity from the outer cortex to somewhat "lower," more internal parts of the brain.[16]

Instead of teaching students to ride a bicycle, we may want them to learn to think in a certain way. The process is essentially the same. It may be challenging at first, but repeated exercise in certain thought processes will cause that thought process to become increasingly automatic. In this fashion, the apprenticeship-oriented learning environment may lead to relatively permanent skills and habits that characterize someone who is dedicated to lifelong learning.

Implementing an Apprenticeship Culture

It is unlikely that these practices are entirely foreign to any Lasallian institution. However, building a culture of apprenticeship requires a multifaceted approach and a genuine commitment from the president of the institution to the individual student. Student engagement is what ultimately drives the model, but students cannot, in general, make the trip on their own. The appropriate context is critical, and this depends on investment by faculty, staff, and administration.

Ultimately, students must learn to demonstrate various habits,[17] including the following: come on time and prepared for classes and other activities; accept personal responsibility for attending to and following syllabi, instructions, etc.; initiate engagement with faculty/staff/administration by asking questions and working proactively to resolve problems (e.g., missing a class); and treat faculty members, peers, and staff with respect, which includes being truthful and constructive.
For many students, practicing one or more of these habits may initially be like riding a bicycle for the first time. They may need considerable (even massive amounts of) encouragement and practice before the behaviors begin to become habitual. Students may resist, not even seeing the point of some of the behaviors (Why learn to ride a bike when I can just drive my car?). This provides us with an opportunity to witness to Jesus Christ through our actions as individuals and as institutions, "to meet young people where they are, treating them with respect and approaching them through dialogue."[18] I would argue that, once we meet them, we should not carry them, but rather work with them to find their own way.

This practice and encouragement may be provided in numerous ways. For example, setting and enforcing explicit expectations helps to provide clear, consistent goals. This applies to expectations for assignments in each class, but also for appropriate behavior in and out of the classroom. Even institution-wide policies that indicate things like how many hours of study are expected for each credit hour of class provide a clear and consistent message about the expectations for success across the institution.

It is critical to follow through with feedback about how well students are meeting those expectations. Otherwise, they have no basis for adjusting their performance. In some cases, students may benefit from opportunities to question or practice example behaviors (e.g., in the classroom) and from receiving immediate feedback from us and/or student peers. In some cases, examples, analogies, or even personal stories from a faculty member may facilitate learning.

As the experts in the apprenticeship, faculty should model the behavior we expect students to show. Engaging our faculty colleagues in critical discussion, in our own fields and across disciplines, can show students what critical exchanges look like. Such exchanges must be visible to students we may even invite them to participate. This type of "real world" intellectual interaction outside the classroom shows students a side of us that they may not see in more structured environments. Spontaneous, informal exchanges show how we "think on our feet" and give students the opportunity to practice this skill. Physical spaces and the resources in them (e.g., small, accessible areas with dry erase boards, markers, and erasers) can promote such interactions. Of course, the availability of faculty near these spaces may facilitate these interactions.

Ultimately, it takes practice to develop habits (good and bad). Such practice can be provided through activities like orientation sessions, first-year experiences, course activities, advising, and mandatory workshops. Once a certain culture is established, overt institutional efforts become less critical because students learn the habits from one another. The more broadly and consistently a certain habit is expected, the more the behavior must be practiced, and the more rapidly the behavior will become habitual. Also, requiring the behavior in more diverse contexts will make the learned behavior more likely to transfer (i.e., generalize) to new situations.[19]

Conclusions

As described here, educating students as apprentices in lifelong learning has numerous advantages – to students, to faculty, to institutions, to communities, and to society in general. It provides an institutional culture rich in the manifestation of the Lasallian educational mission. It promotes diversity and academic excellence that rivals, even exceeds, that of secular institutions. It develops habits in students that will support their success in life (not just in their careers), that will help them to realize their potential, and that ultimately will benefit society.

Once it is part of the institutional culture, the idea of apprenticeship and its beneficial outcomes should be part of recruiting and marketing strategies of the institution. The unique ability of Lasallian institutions to implement the model places those institutions in a unique niche in the higher education market.

Finally, treating students as apprentices in lifelong learning provides a venue for Lasallian formation of students, faculty, and administrators who enter the culture, thereby propagating the Lasallian tradition and securing the future for Lasallian higher education in the twenty-first century.[20]

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. How might I incorporate the apprenticeship model into my own teaching, research, advising, etc.?

2. What are some ways I can informally (perhaps spontaneously) model lifelong learning to students?

3. What are concrete steps my institution might take to foster a culture of lifelong learning?

4. How might Lasallian formation be incorporated into an apprenticeship model of lifelong learning at my institution?

5. Identify ways that students and others might resist the apprenticeship model. What can be done to encourage them to overcome these concerns?

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey J. Sable is an associate professor and psychology in the department of behavioral sciences at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee. He earned a PhD degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

2. "This work of God is also our work," Brothers of the Christian Schools, Circular 469, November 30th, 2014; General Council, Via Aurelia – Rome, Italy [http://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Circ469_Actas45CG_eng.pdf, 22].

3. Ibid., 26.

4. "Apprentice." Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Full definition 1b [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apprentice].

5. Ibid. Although an internship may have similar elements, it differs from an apprenticeship in that the former is a more general period of obtaining experience within a particular organization. An apprenticeship emphasizes working directly with one or more experts with the goal of modeling the skills that define that expertise. "Intern," Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Full definition [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intern].

6. J. A. Appleyard, "Student formation in Catholic Colleges and Universities," in American Catholic Higher Education in the 21st Century: Critical Challenges, ed. Robert R. Newton (Chestnut Hill: Linden Lane Press at Boston College, 2015): 53-54.

7. International Association of Lasallian Universities. "Lasallians in the World Solving Real Problems of the World: Research Agenda of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) Revised." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (June 2016): 286-289.

8. Ex Corde Ecclesiae [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html].

9. Michael J. Himes, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Integral Humanism," in American Catholic Higher Education in the 21st Century: Critical Challenges, ed. Robert R. Newton (Chestnut Hill: Linden Lane Press at Boston College, 2015): 26.

10. Appleyard addresses this characteristic of secular culture in discussing theological inclusivity in academia. Appleyard, "Formation," 48.

11. Note here a distinction between an idea and its messenger. In considering whether or not to host a controversial speaker, for example, any institution should weigh the practical, political, and economic risks associated with perceived institutional endorsement of an individual or her or his message. However, if a decision is made not to host a particular individual, it remains

important (perhaps even more so) for the institutional community to discuss the individual's ideas and the reason for the decision.

12. James L. Heft, "Leadership in Catholic Higher Education," in American Catholic Higher Education in the 21st Century: Critical Challenges, ed. Robert R. Newton (Chestnut Hill: Linden Lane Press at Boston College, 2015): 105.

13. Dana Gioia, "The Catholic Writer Today." First Things. (December 2013), 34.

14. The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, revised. (2015) [http://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Rule_2015_eng_ame.pdf].

15. For example, see the review by neuroscientist Larry Squire. Larry R. Squire, Declarative and Nondeclarative Memory: Multiple Brain Systems Supporting Learning and Memory." Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience. 4 (1992): 232-243.

16. For example, see Antonella Gasbarri, Assunta Pompili, Mark G. Packard, and Carlos Tomaz, "Habit learning and memory in mammals: Behavioral and neural characteristics." Neurobiology of Learning and Memory 114 (2014): 198-208.

17. Appleyard emphasizes the formation of such habits. Appleyard, "Formation," 51.

18. The Documents of the 45th General Chapter: "This work of God is also our work," Brothers of the Christian Schools, Circular 469, November 30th, 2014; General Council, Via Aurelia – Rome, Italy: [http://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Circ469_ Actas45CG_eng.pdf, 24].

19. For accessible examples and discussion of transfer of learning—going well beyond what is described here—see Gavriel Salomon and David N. Perkins, "Rocky Roads to Transfer: Rethinking Mechanisms of a Neglected Phenomenon," Educational Psychologist 24 (1989): 113-142.

20. The author notes: "I gratefully acknowledge Drs. Paul Haught and William Peer for nourishing the roots of this work through discussions with me during the preceding year. I also express my sincere gratitude to Lauren Dahlke, Andrea Perez-Muñoz, James Rogers, and Patrick Woody, who truly lived the apprenticeship model of lifelong learning with me in a spring 2016 course at Christian Brothers University. Finally, I thank Dr. Tim Gossen, Nikki Richmond, Brother Robert Smith, and my faculty co-participants in the first Lasallian Summer Seminar for Professors for their hospitality, inspiration, and thought-provoking discussion."