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Molly Pepper

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TEACHING THE MISSION

This column by seminar member Molly Pepper is the first in a regular series of reflections on teaching.

Bringing mission to the classroom

By Molly Pepper

What does reflection look like in the classroom? Of the five elements of Ignatian pedagogy - context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation – it has always been *reflection* that has been most difficult for me to implement. The logistics of doing so in the classroom have been a struggle. In part, this may be because I assumed using reflection in the classroom would require long papers and subjective grading.

However, I recently discovered a way to implement reflection in all my classes by borrowing an idea from an Aspen Institute conference. At Aspen, participants were asked to fill in the typical form regarding the quality of the presentation. However, they were also asked to write a “tweet” about the session. The conference organizers used these tweets to populate the conference feed on Twitter with interesting insights from participants. At the end of each session, the tweet request forced me consider what I would be taking from the session. Normally, I would have been figuring out which session I wanted to attend next.

On my return, I started to require students to turn in a “tweet” on an index card at the end of each class period about their biggest learning point from the day’s class. These are not posted to Twitter; I call them “tweets” to emphasize to students that they should keep their comments short and only try to cover one main learning point.

Students find the system a bit awkward at first. Many will try to tell me what they think I want to hear. But, over time, the tweets become more honest. By midsemester, students tell me that they look forward to “tweeting.”

While the main purpose of the cards is to require students to pause at the end of class for a brief moment of reflection on what was important to them in that class period, the cards have other pedagogical uses. First, the cards allow me to take attendance without using other class time. Second, they provide me with feedback about what was interesting and compelling about the class. They tell me what stuck with students and what might need further coverage. Third, the cards allow me to clear up any misconceptions. If a student writes a tweet that contains misinformation, I am able to email the student and clear up the misunderstanding or address it in the next class.

However, the final pedagogical use of the cards was unexpected and relates back to those five elements of Ignatian pedagogy. While students generally stick to providing information on what they learned, I often get additional comments like “just took an accounting test and am very tired” or “sorry I did not participate today – I am worried about my grandfather.” These comments provide me with the context of my students’ lives and allow me to engage in *cura personalis* – care for the whole person. When I meet one-on-one with a student, I can reference these cards and understand the context in which the student is experiencing my class and the educational experience. The cards have become a valuable format for bringing the Jesuit mission into the classroom.

Molly Pepper is the associate dean of undergraduate programs and associate professor of management in the School of Business Administration at Gonzaga University.