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What Did the Argonauts Sing?

What Contribution Can the Catholic Imagination Make to the Conversation Regarding
Standardized Testing and the Problem of Scapegoating

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Michael Himes argues that the true saint of the intellectual life is an anonymous boy who made a living by rowing a boat on the Thames in the mid-eighteenth century. Boswell writes that one beautiful day in London in the summer of 1763 he and Dr. Johnson decided to have lunch at Chelsea (entry for Saturday, 30 July 1763). So they went to the Thames embankment and found a boy rowing a boat for hire. As they sat in the boat and the boy strained at the oars, Boswell, who was always plying Johnson with questions, asked the great man whether he thought that a liberal education was of value to everyone. Johnson replied that he did not, for there were people whose station in life was such that liberal

education would be unnecessary and perhaps meaningless to them. For example, he said, what need has the boy rowing the boat to know what songs the Argonauts sang as they rowed the Argo in quest of the Golden Fleece. Then, one presumes jocularly, Johnson asked the boy rowing the boat, what he would give to know what the Argonauts sang. To which, Boswell reports, the boy replied, ``Sir, I would give what I have." Boswell says that the answer so pleased Johnson that he tipped the boy double the fare. (Himes, *The Grace of Teaching*, 2001)

A recent experience caused me to ask, what would become of that boy in an educational system dominated by standardized testing? Ten days before the eighth grade New York State ELA exam, a student of mine returned to school after missing close to a month of instruction. Concerned about the upcoming exam, he asked his friends to borrow their notes, but his friends refused. Overhearing their reasoning for not helping him was surprising. "If we help you, then you may do better than us on the state exam," one said, and the rest agreed regretfully.

Academic competition is not uncommon today. Colleges, law schools, medical schools and even divinity schools across the country

currently experience and often encourage cut throat competition among their students. Admissions to Universities around the country are guarded by standardized exams such as the SAT's, GRE's, LSAT's, GMAT's and MCAT's. Once students are admitted, the importance of excelling is crucial to future success. Attempting to gain the academic edge in college has led students to steal exams, break into the library, raid study carrels, and the now infamous and viral theft of UC Berkley's professor of Biology Jasper Rine's laptop.

The question that this paper will struggle with today, however, is how did this cut throat culture bleed down from the ivy tower to children? Why are thirteen year olds behaving as if they were fighting for the last doctoral position? While there are many factors that contributed to this shift, it will be argued that the introduction of high stakes competition to elementary, middle, and high schools, specifically in the form of norm referenced standardized exams, is largely responsible for the change in the culture of schools across the country.

This paper will refrain from debating the validity, reliability, and cultural bias of these exams. These concerns have been written about at length and are widely available; instead, this paper will focus on the impact that these exams have on classroom culture. Advocates of high stakes exams will argue that, though not perfect, standardized tests are the most efficient way of measuring student success and teacher competence. The question must be asked, however, if the most efficient measure of a student's learning and a teacher's pedagogy is also something that ruins a school environment, how efficiently does that measure anything? When a classroom culture turns away from cooperation, collaboration, and mutual support, the only thing left is what Richard Lavoie refers to as "game of school." (Lavoie, 1997)

This paper will be separated into three distinct sections. The first will briefly discuss the increased focus on competition in the classroom, specifically toward high stakes exams. It will also examine the use of pedagogy based on zero sum strategies and the impact that these have had on students, teachers, and the classroom culture as a whole. This will rely heavily on the work of Richard Lavoie and Alfie Kohn.

The next section will examine the models of cooperation posed by John Nash and Robert Axelrod and their useful applications in the field of education.

Finally, it will be argued that the richness of the Catholic tradition articulated by Adolfo Nicolas, Father General of the Society of Jesus, and Michael Himes of Boston College provides a useful foundation for an adjustment toward a more collaborative, cooperative, and communal model for student evaluation. As an aggregate, these three sections will provide a more humane, more enriching, and more productive alternative to competition in the classroom. While most of this paper will be good for all seasons, it is worth noting that the majority of this paper is focused on the education system in New York State.

I. Competition in the Classroom: A Zero Sum Game

Alfie Kohn, in his work *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, writes that, “Life for us has become an endless succession

of contests. From the moment the alarm clock rings until sleep overtakes us again, from the time we are toddlers until the day we die, we are busy struggling to outdo others. This is our posture at work and at school, on the play field and back at home. It is the common denominator of American life.” (Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, 1986, p. 1).

The American obsession with competition that psychoanalyst Karen Horney describes as *neurotic* finds its roots in our economic system. (Horney, 1937, p. 160). Adam Smith, widely referred to as the father of modern economics, in his work *The Wealth of Nations*, argues that, “By pursuing self-interest we promote that of society more effectually than when we intend to promote it.” In other words, cooperation and collaboration should take a back seat to competition, because according to Smith, the most successful outcome is not reached through negotiation, but when everyone tries their best to win. He adds that, “I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade the public good.” Charity or collaboration, for Smith, was not a virtue, but a direct hindrance to the overall success of a society. For

Smith, the best system of economy is where each person does what is best for themselves without concern for the success of others.

This model speaks to the competitive vision that has been adopted in West. One man's success is another man's failure. One business grows because another fails. This structure, in economics, is referred to as a zero sum game. A zero sum game, seeks MEGA, or Mutually Exclusive Goal Attainment. (Kohn, 1986, p._5). In other words, a zero sum game has a winner and a loser, but one player must cause the loss of the other player to win. Milton Friedman, a preeminent economist, wrote that, "U.S. corporations should have only one purpose—to make the most profit for their shareholders—and their pursuit of that goal will be best for America." (Friedman, 1962, p. 124). Both Smith and Friedman are very clear in their approach, success is measured by profit and profit is king.

In 2012, the federal government spent just over 107 billion dollars of tax payer money on education. (Delisle, 2013) This money was not all spread equitably over the 50 states. Much of it was dangled like a carrot, leaving the entire country to compete for the funding. In July of 2009,

Barack Obama announced his plan to increase state accountability for education. In a true zero sum game, the race to the top initiative offered grant money to states that made systematic changes to their public schools. The biggest call for reform was in the area of testing. (Race to the top, 2013) To qualify for grant money, states were required to implement high stakes testing and to meet the new Common Core Standards. (Reese, 2013) The Common Core Standards, according to the mission statement were designed to, "...be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers." (Standards)

New York State's response to this national call for accountability was similar to the other 46 states that competed. New York implemented higher stakes, norm referenced, standardized tests for grades 3-12, all of which aligned to the Common Core Standards. (Race to the top, 2013) The New York State exams for ELA and Math are mandatory for students from the third to the eighth grade. It is administered over six days, each section ranging over several hours in length. These tests are categorized as high stakes exams for the following reasons:

First, stakes are high for students because those who do not pass the exam risk repetition of the grade or possible summer school. Their scores on these exams also impact how they are tracked, as well as their acceptances to middle and high schools.

Secondly, like students, this reform has increased the stakes for teachers. When the United Federation of Teachers and the New York City Department of Education were not able to agree upon an equitable evaluation system in January of 2013, the city of New York lost 450 million dollars of state and federal funding. The parties involved agreed to go to binding arbitration and State Commissioner John King's recent arbitration decision took steps toward linking teacher evaluations to standardized test scores. The new system requires that anywhere from 20 to 40 percent of teacher evaluations be based on the test scores of their students. (In the matter of Arbitration processed pursuant to education law 3012- c2-m, 2013) Untenured teachers with poor test scores are also typically denied tenure or provided with extensions until scores rise.

Finally, like teachers and students, schools and their districts are also struggling with the new call for accountability. Schools, in New York, that have unacceptable passing rates are designated by the state as SINI schools or “schools in need of improvement”; while districts with too many Sini schools are designated as DINI’s or “districts in need of improvement.” The failure of districts could also prevent the state from receiving federal funding. Race to the Top reform is now nearly four years old and it is worth noting that only 19 of the 46 states that have competed and made reforms have received government funding.

One of the major successes of this process, according to former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg has been this process’ call for “accountability.” The districts hold the schools accountable. The schools hold the teachers accountable and the teachers hold the students accountable. That being said, with all of these accountability measures, in New York, state scores are at an all-time low. (Willens, 2013) The achievement gap between minority students and white students continues to grow (Ferimino, 2013) and with the recent scandals involving the creator of the State exam, Pearson publishing, (Crotty,

2011), the question must be asked, is the return on accountability worth the cost?

To begin to answer this question, it is crucial to examine the means by which accountability is being measured. Alfie Kohn and Richard Lavoie have thoroughly examined the use of norm referenced exams in schools across the country. Their research will be used to examine the impact of norm referenced exams on school culture, specifically in the areas of motivation and self-esteem.

Norm Referenced Exams

Norm referenced exams, unlike criterion referenced exams, do not evaluate how much a student has learned against an objective standard, rather, norm referenced exams evaluate student scores in relationship to other student scores. Like the two hunters who stumble across a bear in the woods, the goal is not to be faster than the bear, but to be faster than the other hunter. When a single test becomes the measure of success for both the teacher and the student, it is common to find that the test becomes the focus of the classroom culture. Across the country schools have seen, “increased periods of test prep, the restriction of

extracurricular activities, canceling of school assemblies, abolishment of school trips and anything else that could interfere with preparing for the exam.” (Kohn, 2000, p. 27), The things that typically build school culture and community are sacrificed for a test that ultimately compares students to each other.

The second issue worth noting is the strain that high stakes norm referenced exams place on the teacher-student relationship. Rating teachers based on the performance of their students on norm referenced exams changes the dynamic between teachers and their students. Students who typically perform lower on norm referenced examinations come to be seen as a hindrance to a teacher’s success and a drain on the school’s resources. A superintendent in Florida noticed a change in attitude once evaluations became based on student performance. He said that, “when a low performing child walks into a classroom, instead of being seen as a challenge, or an opportunity for improvement, for the first time since I’ve been in education teachers are seeing him as a liability.” (Kohn, 2000, p. 28) This shift results in an increased amount of chicanery; Teachers and administrators recommending that students

be evaluated for special needs, poor performing students being lumped together in untenured teacher classrooms, and worst of all, the scapegoating of students who need the most encouragement and support.

Third, and finally, evaluating teachers and schools on student performance has led to widespread cheating across the country. (Kohn, 2000.) The Texas miracle is probably the best known example of this phenomenon. On December 30, 2000, Jacques Steinberg wrote an article in the New York Times describing how Rod Paige, the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, "Helped nudge test scores steadily upward in the Houston district, which is largely black and Hispanic. It now ranks among the highest-performing in the state." (Steinberg, 2000) Paige reported that this was done by increasing teacher accountability and implementing high stakes test scores across his district. He was shortly after appointment secretary of education by President George W. Bush where he helped the President craft an initiative that was largely based on his success in Texas, No Child Left Behind. Three years later it became evident that the improvement in

scores seen in Texas was nothing more than smoke and mirrors. The pressure to perform better than others presents not only an opportunity but motivation for dishonesty and deception.

Motivational Techniques

If the goal of adding high stakes to standardized exams is in part to give an incentive to students who wouldn't otherwise care about the exam, this is inherently flawed. The type of motivation that is typically used in American classrooms today is commonly referred to as extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation finds its roots in America's largest contribution to the field of psychology, B.F. Skinner's behavioral psychology. (Kohn, 1999, p. 5) Skinnerian theory, when boiled down, can be understood in these terms, "Do *this* and you'll get *that*." Perform well and you will be rewarded. Perform poorly and there will be consequences.

Arthur Koestler in his work *The Act of Creation*, wrote of Skinner's behaviorism that, "For the anthropomorphic view of the rat, American psychology substituted a rattomorphic view of man." (Koestler, 1967, p. 3). Though flip, the truth of this statement cannot be

ignored. Skinner's research was done mainly on rats and is used daily in schools across the country. Teachers attempt to control student behavior through the use of reinforcement, both positive and negative. Corporal punishment, public shaming, and verbal abuse are all examples of negative reinforcements that have been used to discourage poor behavior. For example, in just under half of the states in the union, corporal punishment is still an accepted form of negative reinforcement in schools. The goal of this type of conditioning is to provide the student with motivation, the desire not to be paddled will encourage them to obey. Research has shown the damaging effects of this type of conditioning and thus many states have made it illegal to use in schools. As a replacement, positive reinforcement has become the norm in schools.

Positive reinforcement, like negative reinforcement, follows an "if-then" model. If a student does something good, then they receive a reward. If they do something bad, then they do not receive a reward or have something taken away. Teachers use this every day in classrooms in the forms of gold stars, toys, snacks, grades and privileges.

While positive reinforcement is the better of the two evils, Richard Lavoie, in his work *The Motivational Breakthrough (2008)*, still warns that positive reinforcement is not the answer because it remains an extrinsic motivation. Alfie Kohn notes numerous studies suggesting that students who are given positive reinforcement for tasks they would not otherwise do, like study for an exam, become less likely to repeat the same action when there is no opportunity for positive reinforcement. (Kohn, 1999, pp. 5-17) In other words, a child might do something that they do not wish to do for an incentive, but this behavior will not continue without the incentive. A child that does not like vegetables might eat their vegetables for the promise of dessert, but without the same or a greater incentive the child would be less likely to eat them the following time. This poses a unique problem for states like New York that have introduced high stakes exams into the culture of the classroom. The threat of grade repetition might encourage a student to increase their productivity for a short period of time, but over the course of nine years of testing these studies suggest that the threat will lose efficacy.

The larger issue with the use of positive reinforcement is that it encourages a culture of individualism. Actions are performed for the good of the person performing them. *I will study so I will pass.* Alfie Kohn suggests moving toward a system that encourages students to do things for the intrinsic goodness of the action performed. *I will study because I recognize it as a good thing in and of itself.*

The goal for teachers and schools, Kohn argues, should be to build a classroom culture that encourages this type of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is spawned from genuine interest. If a student is interested in something there is very little that can be done to discourage that; so, it should be used to cross boundaries into areas where they might not be interested. The student who has a genuine interest in sports should be allowed to explore math, science, and literature through the lens of their passion. Teachers should not be moving toward standardizing material, in fact, the very opposite should be happening. Teachers need to be given the space to individualize instruction, to bring students together with the same interests, and to reward the process that they go through on their learning journey, not just the end result.

Viewing student progress through a standardized high stakes exam provides a blurry snapshot of a student. Educational success should be based on much fuller picture.

Student Self-Esteem

The third and final way that the classroom culture suffers due to standardized high exams is through the decrease in the self-esteem of students. Richard Lavoie, in his award winning documentary, *When the Chips are Down*, argues that the most important job a teacher has is to make sure that their students leave school with more self-esteem than when they entered. (Lavoie, 1997) This is impossible when a test rewards results and not effort, production not process. Students who perform low on exams are typically and habitually scapegoated by their classmates and their teachers for their inability to produce. Students with high scores only respect their performance in relationship to others.

This has led many parents across New York City to opt their children out of the state exam in place of a portfolio assessment. In the Spring of 2011, 113 students opted out of the New York State ELA and Math exams. (Kolker, 2013) This number has increased every year and

is expected to continue to rise. Andrea Mata, the parent of seven year old Oscar Mata, a third grade student at P.S. 210 in Manhattan, chose to opt her son out of the state exam after seeing the negative results that the increased focus on test prep was having on her student and the school as a whole. “There was a transformation of the whole culture— and curriculum...everything looked like test prep,” Ms. Mata said and as a result, “his (Oscar’s) interest in school took this immediate plummet. (Kolker, 2013)

Oscar’s feeling of disenfranchisement by these exams emphasizes the need for a more cooperative strategy that encourages the use of esteem building evaluative methods. Economics can provide an alternative approach to high stakes norm referenced examinations.

II. Models of Cooperation

The field of economics offers some potentially useful approaches for identifying an alternative to competitive testing in the classroom, specifically through the study of game theory. Game theory is the study of strategic decision making within a set structure, as one finds in a

game such as poker, checkers, and blackjack. A common tool used by game theorists to test a hypothetical scenario is called “the prisoner’s dilemma.”

One version of the prisoner’s dilemma is the following: A jewel thief steals a very expensive diamond. He needs to sell the diamond and he knows that the only person who will buy a stolen diamond is the dishonest jeweler in town. They agree on a price, but both are afraid to meet in person. The thief could rob the jeweler’s store and the dishonest jeweler could kill the thief. So they come up with a compromise. Both of them will bury their item in a secret location. Then they will exchange locations. As the thief is about to bury the diamond, however, he realizes that he has a dilemma. He could bury the diamond or act dishonestly and pretend to bury the diamond and give the jeweler a fake location. While the jeweler searches fruitlessly, the thief could make off with the money and the diamond. That being said, he also realizes that the jeweler could be doing the same thing to him. The prisoner’s dilemma begs the question, what is the best strategy for success?

John Nash, a preeminent economist in the field of game theory approached this dilemma in a unique fashion. Nash argued that one should never bury the diamond. Using game theory, he examined the results of every scenario. Since neither one could trust the other to make an exchange personally, Nash concluded that both characters would be foolish to bury the diamond. Their distrust of each other ironically establishes a perfect trusting distrust. If neither can be trusted, then both can trust that the other will act dubiously and the result is stability. An exchange is impossible, but neither character will be cheated. The stability that this caused came to be known as the Nash equilibrium.

The prisoner's dilemma is unique because it allows for more outcomes than a traditional zero sum game. A zero sum game grants one victory at the expense of many losers. Multiple sum games, like the prisoner's dilemma, on the other hand, provide an opportunity for multiple victories. Through mutual cooperation it is possible for the jewel thief and the dishonest jeweler to succeed. It similarly possible for both to fail if they follow the path of non cooperation.

Albert Tucker, in an attempt to give different approaches to the game numerical values of success, structured the dilemma into a simple game. Two people are set apart from each other, with a pen and paper, both unable to see the move that the other will make. They are given two choices, cooperation or non-cooperation. If both of them choose cooperation, both get three points. If both choose noncooperation they both get one point. The big individual pay off comes when one person cooperates and the other chooses to defect from cooperation. The person who defects receives five points and their opponent who cooperates receives zero.

In 1980, a political scientist named Robert Axelrod, wanted to document the efficacy of cooperation as opposed to noncooperation through the use of this game. He organized a computer tournament and asked game theorists across disciplines to send him their personal strategy for success in this game. He received fourteen responses and used a computer to play the strategies against each other. (Axelrod, 1984, pp. 30-31). The results were surprising. Out of the fourteen responses, eight of the most successful were essentially cooperative

strategies. The most effective was the simplest of all strategies, called Tit for Tat. Tit for Tat's first move was always cooperation. Then it simply mirrored the last move of their opponent, matching cooperation with cooperation and defection with defection. The success of this strategy was surprising to many, including Axelrod, because the greatest opportunity for individual success in the game, by far, is accomplished through defection, a 5 point payoff. However, the maximum opportunity for success overall was accomplished through cooperation, which yielded only a three point payoff for the individual, but a six six point payoff overall.

Axelrod performed the study again, this time with a larger sample size, just over sixty entries, and still cooperative strategies riddled the top twenty, Tit For Tat remaining in first place. Richard Dawkins, in his foreword to *The Evolution of Cooperation*, gave three succinct reasons for Tit for Tat's victory. First, it always begins cooperatively, never defecting first. This allowed it to receive the maximum number of payoffs from other cooperative strategies. Second, it was not concerned with the play of the other contestants. It did not compare itself to other

strategies or attempt to beat them. In fact, the design prevented it from winning. By beginning cooperatively, the best it could do was tie the opponent. Tit for Tat did well when others did well and did poorly when others did poorly. Third, it forgave their opponents poor decisions after the opponent made recompense. It did not hold a grudge or attempt to retaliate. The ability to see the best in the other opponent and to allow them to return to a more cooperative strategy and a high joint pay off showed in the final score. (Dawkins, 1986)

The cooperation that was used in the Tit for Tat strategy is more conducive to a quality classroom environment than the competitive zero sum strategy that produced norm referenced high stakes exam for similar reasons. While zero sum games require a winner and a loser, one person at forty eight percentile and another at forty ninth, the cooperative strategy rejects mutually exclusive goal attainment, in favor of a strategy that only succeed when everyone succeeds. The zero sum strategy tries to sneak in a big payment in the short term, while the cooperative strategy ignores the short term payoff, in place of a large payoff at the end. Finally, the competitive approach enjoys when others perform at

their worst, the cooperative strategy instead acts as its brother's keeper, only succeeding when they do. (Dawkins, 1986)

III. The Catholic Tradition

Keeping the productivity of cooperation in mind, it is useful to turn toward the challenges that face the new generation of Catholic educational leaders. Adolfo Nicolas, Father General of the Society of Jesus, notes in *Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry*, that the major challenge for the next generation of Catholic teachers is going to be dealing with, “the globalization of superficiality.” (2011, p. 6). He attributes the globalization of superficiality to the development of modern technology, the decreased need for community and social skills, and to the lack of incentive for students to formulate creative solutions to complicated problems. He writes that the new generation is, “Overwhelmed with such a dizzying pluralism of choices and values and beliefs and visions of life,” and this results in slipping, “easily into the lazy superficiality of relativism or mere tolerance of others and their

views, rather than engaging in the hard work of forming communities of dialogue in the search of truth and understanding.” (p. 7)

The importance of emphasizing community over competition, for Nicolas, is more than an issue of accountability. For Nicolas, globalization, technological advances, and a decreased necessity for critical thinking and problem solving skills has left students with a superficial approach to education. He writes that never has there been a generation with such easy access to information, a generation that can “cut and paste” without really considering the material. Never a generation more capable of seeing the pains and hardships of the world and more willing to block it out by closing their computer screens and turning up the volume on their mp3 players. Finally, never has a generation been more willing to become friends with a person that they just met using social media and then with a click unfriend that person, “without the hard work of encounter or, if need be, confrontation and then reconciliation.” (p.7)

Nicolas echoes Kohn and Lavoie’s warning that school today, more so than ever, needs to provide students with an escape from

superficial thinking. Standardized tests are designed to reward shallow thinking and penalize contemplation. A student chooses from four multiple choice questions, never being asked to explain their rationale, thought process, or the implications of their answers. Essay questions are taught to be answered using a formula void of creativity or uniqueness, not to answer the question fully, but to gain the maximum amount of points. Worst of all, “students typically pass and graduate, leaving teachers unsure about what, if anything, they actually learned.” (Kohn, 2000, p. 25).

Michael Himes, in an article published in *Conversations on Jesuit High Education*, like Nicolas, acknowledges this shift from contemplation. He is fully aware that many of his students at Boston College did not attend the university to study religion and that many of them are either confused or mildly irritated by the University’s required core classes in theology. (Himes, 2005)

The argument for the usefulness of these courses rests in Himes’ belief in the message of the incarnation. He argues that the message of the incarnation is, “that human beings are of such dignity that God chose

to be one.” G.K. Chesterton argues further that, “If one makes the claim of the incarnation—and it is one whopping claim to make- then the principle inevitably follows: whatever humanizes, divinizes. That is to say, whatever makes you more genuinely human, more authentically, richly powerfully human, whatever calls into play all the reaches of your intellect, your freedom, energy, your talents and creativity, makes you more like God.” (Himes, 2005, p.25) High stakes competition through testing does not humanize. It does not call on talents and creativity, it does not empower or enrich the human experience; instead, it tests in the narrowest sense. It reduces them to a number of correct answers and places them within a percentile. For Himes, the only type of education worth receiving is education that encourages a wide exploration of our humanity in search for the divine. The question remains, where should we begin this search?

Chesterton, once again, when asked why he became a Catholic responded that, “he became a Catholic because Catholicism is a community with a deep and rich sense of tradition...And belonging to a community with such a sense of tradition is extremely important because

only then can one be freed from the most degrading of all forms of servitude, that of being merely a child of one's time." (Himes, 2005, p.27) Himes follows up on this statement to argue that the goal of teaching is to prevent students from being alone with their peers. In other words, the goal is to introduce students to an intellectual community, both alive and gone, with whom they can engage. He uses a cocktail party as a metaphor. When one first enters a crowded cocktail party, if the guest is unfamiliar with the other guests, it can be daunting; However, the teacher's responsibility is to play the part of the gracious host, meeting the guest at the door and introducing them to other people with whom they have things in common. "Let me introduce you! Here's Socrates—fascinating fellow, you are going to love Socrates. And this Shakespeare what a character! And Einstein with the numbers, and Emily Bronte and Bach and Kant and Augustine." (Himes, 2005, p. 26)

In doing so we introduce students to, "one of the richest elements in the Catholic intellectual tradition...the notion of the communion of saints and within the Jesuit educational tradition one of the richest elements is the insistence on engaging in a trans-temporal as well as a

trans-spatial conversation.” This cooperative and communal approach requires a more comprehensive evaluation of skill than the current exam.

Being Part of the Solution

With this in mind, the question remains, so what? While clear solutions are few and far between, there are suggestions to move toward a more communal, collaborative, humanizing classroom environment. Alfie Kohn wrote that the biggest problem with challenging the use of competition in the classroom is that competition has become such a hallmark in schools that we rarely notice it and when we do notice it, much of the time we convince ourselves that it is harmless competition, such as spelling bees, contests to go to the front of the line, and happy and sad faces on homework. (Kohn, 2000, p. 66). To begin shifting toward a more communal classroom environment, the task should be to begin removing the causes of jealousy and anxiety in students. In other words, begin experimenting with more group work, lower stakes, and a shift from competition. As Michael Himes argues, education should be rooted in the Incarnation and the Trinity. The incarnation points to the dignity of humanity and the structure of the Trinity supports equality,

collaboration, and the most important of Catholic traditions, community. To make schools into real communities it is crucial to value the gifts that every person in the community brings, not simply those who test well and rank highly in the percentile. By making these simple changes, it is possible to rekindle a learning environment that would nurture a culture of students who wish to learn what the Argonauts sang.

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