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NOT WHAT, BUT HOW

By Kelly Younger

What distinguishes a Jesuit core curriculum from a core at public, secular-private, or non-Catholic religious universities? We purport to “educate the whole person” but isn’t that true of all curricula whose aim is fostering well-rounded individuals? The difference in a Jesuit core may lie not in *what* we teach, but *how* we teach it.

Let me offer an example. At a recent international conference, I orchestrated a syllabus exchange for professors of introduction to drama courses. The diverse participants from a variety of institutions discovered we all mostly teach “the same stuff” regardless of our affiliations, traditions, or missions. Almost everyone was comforted that we taught mostly the same plays in the same order. I, however, was disconcerted, since I believe the core curriculum at a Jesuit institution should be differentiated from others. But how?

I decided to reform my core class by rediscovering the links to our Jesuit mission. I reorganized, restructured, and rearranged the content; but, as many of us who teach introductory courses do, I agonized over what I *should* teach (i.e., breadth) and what I *would* teach (i.e., depth) if given time. Yet nothing I did to the content resonated with our Jesuit tradition. That is when my own Jesuit education and understanding of the Spiritual Exercises reminded me that it is not always about the answer, but the question. I stopped making a list of plays undergraduates should read, and started making a list of questions undergraduates would ask about themselves, each other, and the larger world if given the chance: *Who am I? Whose am I? Why am I here? Who is God? What really matters? What does the world need? How ought we to live?*

I looked at my existing syllabus and highlighted the plays I thought would engage with each question. For example, I placed Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* under the question *Who am I?* Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* and Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud 9* fell under *Whose am I?* Margaret Edson’s *Wit* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* engage with *What really matters?* while Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Setzuan* challenges *What does the world need?*

Never before had I considered teaching some of these titles in tandem, nor in this order, yet all the titles from my original syllabus remained. I managed to preserve the breadth while enriching the depth. In other words, this course now distinguished itself from the others not because it was formulated around content, but because it was founded upon the context of Jesuit inquiry.

That is when I realized this model could potentially apply to an entire core curriculum, regardless of discipline. As an exercise, I asked forty colleagues from around the university to incorporate these questions into an existing syllabus. For *Who am I?* a biologist would teach genetics, a philosopher Augustine’s *Confessions*, a computer scientist artificial intelligence. For *Whose am I?* a mathematician would turn to voting theory, a dance professor would study Kurt Jooss. For *Why am I here?* a theologian would assign “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” while an art historian would examine Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*. The list goes on and grows as more participate, each from faculty who changed nothing of their content, but reformed their core syllabus under this common context.

This model could potentially redesign a core curriculum around these or other questions while upholding academic freedom. Moreover, faculty could collaborate a great deal, or not at all, because everyone would be engaging with these common themes regardless of section, department, or college. Students would continue to pick their own course, but now there would be a clear link between offerings that once appeared as hodgepodge and “something to get out of the way.”

A Jesuit core curriculum should be distinct from any other in its promotion of identity, community, meaning, spirituality, purpose, passion, and social responsibility. Rather than just providing our students with these answers, we can lead them there with common questions.

All we have to do is ask.

Kelly Younger is a playwright and associate professor of English at Loyola Marymount University. He has plays opening this year in Boston and New York.