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Professional Reflection: THE ALIGNMENT OF IGNATIAN PEDAGOGY PRINCIPLES WITH JESUIT BUSINESS SCHOOL EDUCATION AND BUSINESS PRACTICES

Richard F. Callahan

Introduction

Despite the widespread use of case studies in business schools, an important aspect of learning from experiences remains underdeveloped: learning from the case study that is one's own individual experience in business and in life. This absence of structured learning from personal experience is not an individual failing, but rather results from an under-appreciation of the centrality of reflection in effective business practice. "Reflection is perhaps one of the aspects least attempted in contemporary education," Tellis noted at the Colleagues of Jesuit Business Education 2011 conference (2011, p. 32). This paper develops the case for personal and corporate learning through the practice of reflection, offering a structure for effective practices in the classroom and boardroom.

The alignment of the Ignatian Pedagogy Principles of experience, action, and reflection (ICAJE, 1993, p. 9) will be explored along with the research in business on reflection as a leadership skill to improve current business practices. Three sources provide insight on Ignatian perspectives: the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE), and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2011 Conference (PCJP). The practice of reflection in a business setting is explored within the context of Jesuit business school education, as both a tool for more effective business education, as well as a way to address contemporary shortcomings in business management and leadership.

Section one of this paper outlines a set of deficiencies in business practices. Section two discusses evidenced-based practices for the application of reflection to address the business shortcomings previously outlined. Section three details the

structure of the three questions to facilitate reflection. Section four describes outcomes that can be anticipated from connecting the Ignatian Pedagogy tradition with reflection as a business practice.

Business Practices Without Reflection

In the movie *Groundhog Day*, the lead character, a television reporter played by Bill Murray, covers the annual Groundhog Day celebration in Pennsylvania. Murray wakes up each morning to experience the exact same events of the previous day. The lack of change frustrates him in his efforts to impress a woman. Finally, motivated to change, he realized that the repetition of each day offers him the opportunity to see how his behavior causes those he talks with to be repulsed. Murray changes through a process of trial and error, where he adjusts his behavior, sees others' reactions, and then learns from that experience to inform future actions. The routine changes as he develops insights into his self-centered behavior. In the absence of personal reflection, Bill Murray's character would not have changed. In business, the day changes but the behavior does not—similar to the start of the movie *Groundhog Day*. The difficulty of learning from behavior appears across the varied layers of business, including the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

The movie *Groundhog Day* locates the problems caused by a lack of reflection at the level of the individual in the character Bill Murray. Similarly, at the personal level, the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace's 2011 conference on business education in Catholic higher education found living "the divided life" as the central problem of men and women in business. The conference proceedings describes this phenomenon as dividing the "demands of one's faith from one's work in business," leaving an individual as disintegrated and disoriented. The fragmentation leads to putting business ahead of all else, through the forgetting "the call of the Gospel in their daily professional lives" (PCJP, 2011, p. 6). Those engaged in business face "numerous obstacles"—including the divided life—that stand in the way of realizing the potential of business "...to be a great force for good in any society..." (PCJP, 2011, p. 5).

In contemporary terms, the Dean of the Harvard Business School, Nitin Nohria, addresses the failure to learn from past practices with a call for business schools to teach humility (Bryant, 2011). Humility opens business leaders to address the personal challenge when the skills that created initial professional success are not the skills that will lead to success in future positions. The precursor to developing new tools is letting go of old tools. In a subtly developed study of the tragic consequences of the failure to literally drop their tools, Karl Weick (1996) finds in a case study of smoke jumpers overtaken by flames at Mann Gulch, that the difficulty of letting go of their tools caused a number of men to perish. Weick suggests in his

study that one of the difficulties of dropping tools is that past training had emphasized never to let go of any tool. Additionally, Weick notes that in this case there was great difficulty in separating the important messages that signal the need for dropping tools from the background noise, as well as the question of developing trust in those who delivered the message to drop the tools.

Shifting the focus to the organizational level reveals a related range of corporate dysfunctions stemming from the failure to reflect on experience. Business decision-making repeats similar behavior separated across decades. The business script seems the same despite the progression of time. Examples of failures to learn from past experiences have occurred across a wide range of corporate activities: in finance from junk bonds in the 1980's (Stewart, 1991) to Enron's financial collapse (Gladwell, 2007) to Bears Sterns and Goldman Sachs in 2008 (Lewis, 2010); and in manufacturing by Detroit auto makers in the 1970's (Halberstam, 1986) and then in 2008.

The prevalence of the corporate consulting model suggests the wide-ranging difficulty that business leaders experience in reflecting on and learning from their own business experience. The reliance on the consulting model developed in the 1960's coupled with the promotion of the concept of strategy as the dominate model of CEO thinking (Keichel, 2010) suggests the inability of CEOs to successfully learn from their corporate experience in order to write a new script for the future. The failure to learn from the past has been described by historian Barbara Tuchman (1984) as a "wooden-headedness" that is a widely shared characteristic of failed decision-making.

An additional shift in analysis to the societal level finds that the pervasive impact of the Internet has led to the question: "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" (Carr, 2008). Discussing the ready availability of short bits of information and abbreviated descriptions, Carr observes that what "the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity of concentration and contemplation" (Carr, p. 63). Furthermore, browsing on the Internet displaces "... the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, [where] we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas" (Carr, p. 63). The absence of space that facilitates individual thinking coupled with the hyper link which propels one directly to a document consequently reduces the opportunity to explore less direct connections that travel across different academic disciplines and fields of practice in business. The reduction in individual and collective space to think across disciplines and fields to foster new ideas (Johanssen, 2004) constrains the capacity needed to act purposefully in business for the common good (PCJP, 2011, p. 12). The complexity of social change calls for a combination of core-value driven leadership coupled with innovation.

The Evidence for the Solution

Two sets of evidence align to support the practice of reflection as an effective tool to move an individual beyond the challenges outlined above as *Groundhog Day*, the “divided life,” relying on consultants, not dropping tools, and the Internet making us stupid. The first body of evidence for the utility of reflection is found in the contemporary empirical evidence from research in the business world. The second set of evidence finding the value of reflective practice is generated by the tradition of Ignatian Pedagogy Principles.

On the business side, the research finds reflection a valuable practice at both the personal and organizational levels. For individuals, research findings connect reflection on recent professional experiences to effective leadership practices. Additional research connects reflection with the development of top performers. Moreover, shifting from the study of individuals to the research on organizations finds that reflection advances the core values of accountability and candor to create high performance in a team. Taken together, the empirical research in business suggests that reflection skills can be developed through practice to improve individual and team performance supported by a set of shared values.

Research at the individual level, through a series of interviews with private sector CEOs, has uncovered reflection as a shared practice across a wide range of leadership styles, including the practice of reflection on the recent past as the “one thing you need to know” about the skills of effective leaders (Buckingham, 2005). The research team found that the reflection styles varied from walks around lakes to use of airplane flight time, but shared the features of regular, repeated, and structured personal reflection on recent events. Earlier research on professional practices (Schon, 1983) identified reflection as an integral part of professional development through the iterative nature of learning from professional experiences. Reflection on recent experiences can develop deep and nuanced understanding of complex situations, with lessons applied across different contexts.

Along similar lines, the research by Daniel Coyle in *The Talent Code* (2009) describes “deep practice” as a skill found in top talent in the performing arts and sports. Deep practice is the experience of reflection immediately as you practice, making adjustments in real time. Coyle finds top performers do not simply practice longer; indeed, they may actually have less repetition. However, the repetitions that they have and the repeated reflection on their practice accelerate learning for future practices and performances. Deep practice is not simply doing the same thing repeatedly the same way. Rather, practice becomes an iterative process of current repetitions being informed by past repetitions through reflection. In turn, reflection informs future practice. Malcolm Gladwell distills the concept of developing world-

class skills into the rule of 10,000 hours of practice (2008). Whether in the example of Bill Gates or other contemporary top performers, practice creates success, supporting the concept that practicing reflections will improve a leader’s skill in reflecting. That is, reflection improves with practice. Applied in an executive education program, this concept of deep practice can be designed into training sessions to develop the skills for effective reflection (Callahan, 2008). The classroom offers a forum for reflection discussion and coaching that connects training to professional applications, with subsequent applications outside the classroom becoming the basis for future reflection discussions in the training program.

Shifting analysis from the personal level to the study of organizations uncovers a connection between reflection and core values. The research on high risk organizations (HROs) focuses on situations such as in hospitals and aircraft carriers where a single mistake may entail fatalities (Weick, 2006). In HROs, the transition from a group to a team occurs through the sharing of the values of honesty and accountability in the reflection on recent activities. Reliable performance becomes a function of teams discussing the successes and failures of recent experiences. As the consequences of failure increases, Weick’s research suggests an increased use of reflection.

The concept of values driving reflection aligns strongly with the Ignatian tradition in higher education. Former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. notes in his 1989 address that a distinguishing quality of Jesuit higher education is “...the essential need for discernment: [a] person must know the world, examine attitudes, challenge assumptions, and analyze motives” (1989). Moreover, this habitual reflection is not limited to any one aspect of higher education, but should be applied across the range of disciplines and professional fields. Along the lines of “deep practice,” Fr. Kolvenbach finds that habits are not formed only by chance or occasional happenings. Rather, habits develop only by consistent, planned practice. He suggests that forming habits of critical reflection should be the work of teachers in all subjects.

The process of reflection on experience addresses three related spiritual concerns articulated across three different discussions by Jesuits. First, reflection allows time and a process for the important task, as suggested by Fr. Kolvenbach, to critically consider the assumptions and consequences of progress. Second, the practice of reflection begins to create personal accountability through the consideration of the intersection of practice and principles needed in business (PCJP, 2011, p. 13). Third, the practice of reflection can bring together both the “heart and mind,” which is the formula for the best decision-making processes (Byron, 2011, p. 20).

Rather than being a solitary act benefiting only the individual, the practice of reflection offers the opportunity to move from a concern for self to a consideration of others. Initially, taking time for reflection acknowledges the human dignity of the individual: that one's own activity matters. The recognition of the dignity of oneself becomes the foundation for seeing the dignity in others. The centrality of the human dignity of each person is found in the Ignatian social tradition. The challenge is that the recognition of human dignity needs to be included in business practices (PCJP, 2011, p. 11).

Reflection builds on the premise and reinforces the concept that personal experience matters, which is a practical acknowledgment of human dignity. This insight then suggests that as others are part of an individual's experiences, their experiences have worth to the entire group. This concept of being in relationship with others and considering the importance of these relationships aligns with the definition of justice cited by Jesuit theologian, Fr. Walter Burghardt, S.J. (1996, p. 12) as fidelity to the demands of relationship. The process of reflection forming the basis for considering the "demands of relationship" connects an individual to a "social tradition" (PCJP, 2011, p. 11). The practice of reflection in a group setting, whether a classroom or boardroom, embodies the Ignatian tradition of "contemplation *in action*," of both engagement in the world and reflection on that engagement (Kloppenborg et al., 2012, p. 4).

The Structure of Reflection

Drawing on my experience of teaching nonprofit and public sector executives and graduate students, the practice of reflection works well in class by asking three basic questions:

- What surprised you about your recent experience?
- What lessons have you applied from your recent experience?
- What did you unlearn?

The first question of surprise invites a transition from judging an experience as good or bad to considering the experiences as a chance to learn. A shared quality of leading thinkers across varied fields has been the joy of figuring out something new, whether Noble prize-winning physicists such as Einstein (Isaacson, 2007) or Feynman (Mlodinow, 2004), leaders in business (Bennis, 1989), or top performers (Coyle, 2009). The power of the question of surprises at the start of reflection derives from the unstated assumption that experiences can offer something new; that, unlike the movie *Groundhog Day*, a different day can bring a surprising script. The surprise question aligns strongly with the findings of highly successful CEOs having humility to learn from confronting the "brutal facts" (Collins, 2001).

The second reflection question of application of new learning typically fits well in a training session reflection on the past class. The objective of the question is twofold: first, to build personal accountability for acting on new information. At the core of any success—personal, business, or spiritual—is the practice of personal accountability. Along similar lines, Ignatian discernment builds on the premise of personal accountability for spiritual growth. Second, in a group setting, the power of the question on applying new knowledge is the discussion "models the way" for others to apply new knowledge, an important practice for leaders (Kouzes and Posner, 2007). The practice of reflection in classes or business meetings builds individual accountability for applying new practices. Reflection in a group setting offers the opportunity to "model the way" with practical advice on how to move forward. In addition, hearing from a colleague in a group setting can inspire through connecting with shared values, and create the "art of possibility" (Zander and Zander, 2000) that can inspire new ways of thinking and acting.

The third question of what has one unlearned is the most difficult to access. At the core, this question asks adults what skills, knowledge, and tools have they relied on in the past that are now no longer valuable. The question of unlearning surfaces the practices or skills that may also be limiting career advancement. In a group setting the third question cannot be asked until there is a level of trust earned between the participants. This question of "unlearning" develops the capacity needed to drop your tools (Weick, 1996).

Structuring reflection around these three questions in a group setting offers the opportunity for those who are more at ease to start the discussion with the introverts joining as the class progresses. Practicing this structure of reflection on each day or week of a program or in a business setting allows individuals who prefer more time to process experiences to join in during subsequent discussions.

Anticipated Outcomes

Incorporating structured reflection in the business school curriculum would generate a range of outcomes. Initially, the conversation in the classroom would help students connect their experience to a larger conversation. In Jesuit business schools this practice would connect the student in a practical and actionable way to the social action embedded in the Ignatian tradition. This connectedness to a tradition allows the students and faculty to accomplish one of the most important goals of higher education: removing students "...from the most degrading of all forms of servitude—that of being merely a child of one's time" (Himes, 1995, p. 237). Reflection in a group, working through the questions of surprises, applied lessons, and unlearning offers faculty or business leaders the opportunity to

introduce appropriate research or information that applies as the discussion unfolds.

Structuring reflection in each class session or business meeting allows students or professionals to discuss core values as part of the surprises. This connection of values in discussion and action overcomes the challenges identified as the “divided life” (PCJP, 2011). The discussions on values facilitate recognition of not only one’s own core values but also how values can be part of a business and leadership discussion. The reflection can make explicit the implicit examples of values-based leadership, moving the discussion from those “Mount Rushmorian” (O’Toole, 1995) types of heroic leaders from history, to a discussion of those examples of core value driven leaders in everyday life.

A powerful aspect of reflection in a group setting is the discovery of the different ways individuals experience a shared event, e.g. lecture, experiential learning exercise, or business deal. The reflection discussion allows participants to create shared meaning—a practice that leadership writer Warren Bennis (1989) finds as one of the four key roles of a leader. Along the lines of deep practice, the leadership skill of creating shared meaning can be developed through practice in the classroom, as well as in business settings. Moreover, the relational aspect of sharing reflections in the classroom or the boardroom creates the context for experiencing the centrality of relationships personally and professionally.

Reflection in a group setting encourages the consideration of justice in everyday life, thus providing a forum for the experience of being responsible for others in that relationship—along the lines of justice “as fidelity to the demands of relationship” (Burghardt, 1996). The reflection exercise shifts the discussion of justice as an abstraction or as a legal concept, to the experience of what it means in practice to be faithful, to be true, to the responsibilities in relationship. As a consequence, the practice of reflection can develop the practical wisdom needed for “sound judgment and right relations” (PCJP, 2011, p. 18). Use of the three suggested questions structures an opportunity for the practice of inquiry and aligns with the Pontifical Council call to get to the common good through “...asking the right questions and discerning the best course of actions ...” (PCJP, 2011, p. 22).

Shifting from the group level to the organizational level, reflection becomes a practical tool to address the pressing need for more effective, value-driven organizational cultures (Lowney, 2003). The reflection exercises become a way of designing iterative dialogue to create organizational learning (Moynihan, 2008). The shared reflective conversations move organizations beyond the status quo, particularly in higher education teaching and administration (Palmer, 2010, p. 128). These types of conversations drive organizational culture (Logan and King, 2001), which in turn drives organizational performance. This dynamic might be modeled as follows:

Reflection develops positive conversations →

Conversations shape organizational culture →

Organizational culture drives organizational performance

A final outcome of incorporating the practice of reflection in business school curriculum is developing the skill of creating new possibilities (Zander and Zander, 2000). Although seemingly retrospective in focus, reflection invites a consideration of the future. The practice of reflection provides both an individual and corporate opportunity to move from a default future, the way the future would unfold in the absence of any changes. Reflection offers an opportunity to learn from past events, to learn in relationship with others, and to apply that learning to write a new script for the future (Zaffron and Logan, 2009). Literally, the practice of structured reflection becomes not only a way for avoiding a life as found in the movie *Groundhog Day*, but for writing a new script that creates new, core-value driven possibilities for the future.

Conclusion

The practice of reflecting in a group setting by asking questions of surprises, applications, and unlearning offers an opportunity in the classroom and the boardroom for conversations that can improve business practices at the personal, organizational, and societal level. Jesuit business schools are uniquely situated at the intersection of empirical research and classroom teaching in the context of the Ignatian values and teaching tradition to rigorously introduce the concept and practice of learning from reflection. Students and professionals face a range of personal and corporate obstacles in moving from a life of mundane repetition as experienced in the movie *Groundhog Day*. Reflection as part of the Ignatian Pedagogy Principles offers a way to move forward. In the Japanese *kanji*, the written characters “*renshu*” convey greater depth than the term “practice.” The character “*ren*” translates as “repetition” and the character “*shu*” translates as “to learn something new.” Together these characters convey that mastery emerges from both seeing something new and through countless repetitions.

Systematic practice of structured reflection in business education and practice offers an opportunity to address the “divided life” of individuals in business as well as the societal consequences of that disconnect identified by the Pontifical Council on Peace and Justice (2011). In addition, thoughtful reflection can become a practice that develops the “stickiness of message” that Malcolm Gladwell (2000) finds as needed as a catalyst for social epidemics. Jesuit business school education draws on a set of Ignatian insights that have endured through several centuries with a

'stickiness of message.' The alignment of Ignatian teaching practices with the research findings in business on the value of reflection offers a way for Jesuit business schools to write new scripts for the future of their students and new possibilities for the future of businesses.

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