Practicing Benedictine Values to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment

Jonathan Nash
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, jnash@csbsju.edu

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Abstract

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University (CSB/SJU) are historically white, Catholic, and Benedictine residential liberal arts colleges in central Minnesota. The institutions define eleven dispositions as “Our Benedictine Values”: Awareness of God, Community Living, Dignity of Work, Hospitality, Justice, Listening, Moderation, Peace, Respect for Persons, Stability, and Stewardship. If practiced intentionally, the Benedictine values may help instructors and students create inclusive learning environments in which all persons have the opportunity to learn and thrive. In addition, incorporating aspects of the Benedictine values into their pedagogy may help instructors at CSB/SJU strengthen their “academic commitments to the mission.” This essay shares my attempts to incorporate the Benedictine values into my pedagogy, how I invited and encouraged students in my 2016 fall semester first-year seminar section to practice these values, our reflections on our attempts to practice the values, and observations on the effectiveness of practicing these values to create an inclusive learning environment.

Keywords

Inclusive pedagogy, first-year seminar, institutional mission
at the College of Saint Benedict and 77.0% of the undergraduate students at Saint John’s University were identified as white Americans. At CSB/SJU, the first-year seminar (FYS) is a foundational, year-long course in the current undergraduate curriculum. According to the institutional website, “This two-semester course addresses the Undergraduate Learning Goals that call for the development of clear thinking and communication skills, while helping students establish patterns of life-long learning and integrating knowledge of self and the world.” Although all FYS sections strive to develop students’ “critical thinking, speaking, and writing,” instructors choose their own topics and design their own sections. The section of FYS that I teach, “Lockuptown: Incarceration in the United States,” focuses primarily on the experiences of the approximately 2.3 million people who are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, county and local jails, juvenile correctional facilities, and immigrant detention facilities. I chose this topic for the first-year seminar because I study the histories of confinement, violence, and crime in the Atlantic World of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and I wished to learn more about these issues in the twenty-first-century United States. I also chose this topic because although many students have opinions about crime and incarceration, few students have had the chance to study the topic in an academic setting.

The topic allows us to study themes that first-year students frequently describe as “controversial,” such as race, gender, sexuality, violence, crime, and economic class. Because discussion of these themes might cause discomfort, I think it is important to deliberately establish an inclusive climate and model inclusive behavior and humility in the classroom on the first day and each subsequent day of the semester. “Inclusive” has become a buzzword in recent years, particularly when coupled with another buzzword in national higher-education conversations, “excellence.” As Janell Hobson writes, “Although college curricula have been challenged in the culture wars, for the most part the university adjusts such demands for representation so that they fit within neoliberal corporate models. Diversity and inclusion become mere buzzwords, now altered and framed as ‘inclusive excellence.’” Likewise, Jeffrey Carlson argues, “The term ‘inclusive excellence,’ made popular by the
Association of American Colleges and Universities and adopted by many schools across the country, including my own, is in some ways unfortunate, in that the concept of ‘including,’ arguably, assumes the priority and ongoing dominance of a given reality into which one may (or may not) be granted admission.”

Despite my misgivings regarding the neoliberal rhetoric of “inclusive excellence,” inclusive pedagogical practices are similar to universal design: effective pedagogy that facilitates all students’ learning. An “inclusive learning environment,” Maurianne Adams contends, “is characterized by mutual respect, careful listening and learning from each other, and acknowledgement that everyone’s participation is important.” To establish an inclusive learning environment, I must be intentional when planning a course. While planning this course, I selected common readings that included multiple perspectives on the topic and its themes, included sources produced by individuals from various backgrounds, privileged the perspectives of members of incarcerated, exploited, and oppressed populations, and attempted to avoid presenting issues in forms of binaries, such as black and white when it came to race. Likewise, in the planning stage I formulated what I thought were clear, fair, and flexible course assignments, expectations, policies, and procedures, given the common-curriculum constraints of the course. It also was important for me to learn about the students enrolled in the course during the planning phase. In the week before the semester began, I emailed students a short survey that asked open-ended questions regarding their preferred name, their expectations for the course and me, their concerns about the course, what helps them learn, and what gets in the way of their learning. I used what students shared to reflect upon the pedagogical strategies that I might use during the semester.

Once the semester began, I worked toward creating an inclusive learning environment by sharing clear goals and expectations with students, establishing a cooperative classroom learning community, modeling inclusive language and behavior, being attuned to the emotional aspects of learning, being aware of my own identity and students’ identities, addressing
discomfort and tension, and practicing critical self-reflection and humility daily.\textsuperscript{11} Many of the aspects of inclusive course planning and learning facilitation correspond with CSB/SJU’s Benedictine values.

Drawing upon \textit{The Rule of Saint Benedict}, CSB/SJU identifies eleven dispositions that are “Our Benedictine Values”: Awareness of God, Community Living, Dignity of Work, Hospitality, Justice, Listening, Moderation, Peace, Respect for Persons, Stability, and Stewardship.\textsuperscript{12} The values appear on multiple webpages and in different iterations throughout the institutional website. In my opinion the values have so saturated the institutions’ website that they have become like water for fish: an almost invisible and sometimes taken-for-granted, yet necessary and live-giving component of the institutional context.\textsuperscript{13} By foregrounding the Benedictine values in the first-year seminar, I introduced first-year students to the heart of CSB/SJU’s identity, incorporated aspects of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Catholic Social Teaching, and made my academic commitment to the institutions’ missions explicit.\textsuperscript{14}

As someone who does not identify as Catholic or Christian, I approached incorporating Benedictine values into my pedagogy with trepidation. In particular, I found the value, “Awareness of God,” to be a mystery. I translated “Awareness of God” into “Awareness of Mystery.” Apparently, I was on the right track. In “‘Finding God in All Things’: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects,” Michael J. Himes writes, “‘God’ is the theological shorthand that we use to designate the Mystery which grounds and undergirds all that exists.”\textsuperscript{15} To heighten students’ awareness of mystery and to cultivate their curiosity, the first common reading of the semester was David Foster Wallace’s \textit{This Is Water}, a commencement speech that he delivered at Kenyon College in 2005. Wallace praises the promise of a liberal arts education: learning, choosing, and practicing how to think about the world and ourselves, and how to recognize the unnoticed, taken-for-granted “ordinariness” of the everyday. One of the goals of this reading and our discussion of it was to plant the seeds of what Matthew T. Eggemeier calls the “sacramental-prophetic vision” that combines the sacramental and
prophetic imaginations. “The sacramental imagination,” writes Eggemeier, “views creation as a manifestation of God.” Building primarily upon the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Walter Brueggemann, Eggemeier observes, “The prophetic imagination seizes on the insight that social change begins with the recognition that there is an alternative to the present.”

Fusing the sacramental and prophetic imaginations requires practice. As Eggemeier argues, they “are held together because both are grounded in a commitment to seeing the real.”

To cultivate “a commitment to seeing the real,” I think we must practice “seeing” in a daily, disciplined, continual confrontation between the self and the world. “Seeing” draws upon aspects of the Benedictine exercise of *lectio divina*—“slow meditative reading”—that calls upon the seer to practice humility, listening, stability, and peace. To help develop the habit of contemplative seeing, I provided students with multiple opportunities to practice reflecting, asking questions, cultivating curiosity, and recognizing contradictions. For instance, the first essay of the semester invited students to acknowledge and reflect upon what they think they currently “see”—their own perspectives on incarceration and its purpose—and why they think they “see” what they think they see—aspects of their own lives that influence their perspective. While writing and revising the essay, some students began to “see” how their own preconceptions and frames of reference shaped their vision of “the real.” The essay helped some students begin to recognize that despite thinking they knew something about incarceration, they did not really know much about the topic outside of the depictions that they consumed from sensational documentaries, news coverage, music, and popular shows such as *Orange is the New Black*.

The second reading of the semester was “Our Benedictine Values.” I introduced the values after planting the seeds of the sacramental and prophetic imaginations because they are potentially revolutionary when interrogated deeply and practiced regularly. On the day we discussed “Our Benedictine Values,” I invited students to reflect upon how they thought they had seen the values manifesting themselves during their first few days
on campus. Many students claimed to see the values of hospitality and community living. Yet, when pressed on what they mean by hospitality or community living, students stumbled. When pushed to reflect on how one enters into community, as well as how one defines community, they began to realize that community living as practiced on our campuses is not necessarily inclusive. It is predicated upon an exclusionary concept: admission; not all who apply are admitted. Those who are admitted are potential members of the community, yet the community often splinters along multiple fault lines. Furthermore, I invited students to consider if hospitality is more than offering “warmth, acceptance, and joy in welcoming others.” I suggested it might be about shedding selfishness and cultivating “habits of mind and behavior that are life-giving and contribute to the good of all.”

After students discussed “Our Benedictine Values” and reflected upon what they thought they meant while writing and revising their second essay, we used the values to frame and formulate our classroom discussion guidelines in hope of creating an inclusive learning environment. Students recognized instinctively that all members of the class are of value and important to our learning community (Community Living and Respect for Persons). Students also recognized the importance of hospitality in the classroom. They wished to be welcomed for who they are and understood that they too must welcome others for who they are. Likewise, they acknowledged the importance of listening during class discussions. Through listening, students practice understanding the perspectives of others, recognize their own perspectives, and might even deepen their learning about our course content, themselves, and their world. Using the explanation of stability as “To stand firm in one’s promises,” students recognized the importance of everyone’s promise to be prepared for each class meeting.

While we practiced “Our Benedictine Values” in the classroom, I invited students to practice a value of their choice outside the classroom. Students identified a potential value to practice in their second essay. For each week after the second week of the semester, students chose a value to practice, and then reflected on practicing their value at the end of each week.
To help students practice and reflect on their chosen value, I provided them with a worksheet that asked them to identify the value that they practiced; how they specifically practiced the value; how they felt while practicing the value and why they think they might have felt this way; what they might or might not do differently when practicing the value in the future; and to reflect on the value of practicing their value for themselves and for others. It was difficult for me to tell if this exercise had a strong, lasting impact on students. My hope was that it would help students cultivate the earlier mentioned “seeing” and establish a reflective praxis that might deepen their sense of self and their relations with others and the world.

In addition to the institutions’ Benedictine values, I introduced indirectly three modified concepts of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition—convergence, dialogue, and transformation—into our daily discussions of common readings. As Bernard V. Brady writes, one of the many hallmarks of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is its integration of outside knowledge. This integration, or convergence, occurs through dialogue. Likewise, dialogue may lead to transformation. This happens when students approach common readings as their whole selves by working to interpret texts for themselves outside or inside the classroom. During discussions or other in-class exercises that created spaces where students could share their own interpretations of the common readings with their peers, they engaged in dialogues in which they refined and revised their own interpretations in the context of their peers’ interpretations. When this occurred, students were led toward transformation in which they strengthened their own interpretations and thought freshly about texts while working to incorporate the knowledge of their peers. To do this with success, students practiced humility and began to recognize a fuller knowledge of self in relation to others. Daily repetition of this convergence, dialogue, and transformation model contributed to developing students’ habits of “seeing” and knowledge of self and their relations with others and the world.

In addition to “Our Benedictine Values” and aspects of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, my understanding of Catholic Social Teaching
influenced my selection of common readings and how I facilitated our in-class discussions. As I understand it, Catholic Social Teaching highlights a concern for the most vulnerable, the most oppressed, and the most exploited in hope of creating a world community in which all human beings are seen as invaluable and worthy of respect and dignity. To help cultivate this way of “seeing” in the world, I invited students to encounter many first-person perspectives of incarcerated individuals. I hoped this would help students see that the gap between themselves and incarcerated individuals might not be as wide as they think. In addition, individuals who are incarcerated are excluded from their original communities. This provided us with an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of community and other Benedictine values such as peace, stability, and respect for persons. I also hoped that repeatedly encountering, witnessing, and beholding the perspectives of incarcerated individuals would contribute to the development of students’ “sacramental-prophetic vision” and heighten their “commitment to seeing the real.” Lastly, by privileging the perspectives of incarcerated individuals, I hoped to encourage students’ “Cultivation of the habit of promoting the common good which is formed by knowledge, faith and an open-hearted response to the needs of others.”

From my perspective, the integration of Benedictine values into the course and my pedagogy helped create an inclusive learning environment. Although we occasionally experienced “awkward silences” and “disagreements” during our discussions of “sensitive” topics, many students’ comments in the end-of-semester course survey suggested that they had positive learning experiences. One student wrote, “we were able to discuss our personal ideas as well as listen to others. [The course] made me think deeper into things and see it from different perspectives.” Another student claimed, “The topics broadened my thinking and taught me a little bit about myself and my beliefs.” Another student observed, “I found myself thinking about new thing[s] and things I thought I knew before in different ways.” And another student asserted, “This class challenged my thinking significantly and I have a new understanding for how the world works.” Almost all students thought that the common readings and our discussions
of them contributed to their learning. One student claimed, “listening to everyone else’s points of view really helped me learn more.” Despite many positive comments, some students felt that I spoke too much during class discussions and shared my own interpretations of the common readings too frequently. Those comments remind me that I too must continue to practice and reflect on how I enact “Our Benedictine Values” in the classroom.27

In the end-of-semester essay that invited students to reflect upon what they learned during the semester, many students claimed to have learned about themselves. Some students attributed this to class content and pedagogy, while other students attributed it to their weekly reflections on the Benedictine value that they practiced. One student wrote, “I also learned more about my relationship with God. I learned this through our topic as well as through our benedictine [sic] values reflections.” Another student learned that “I should not be making big assumptions about something that I really don’t know anything about.” One student claimed to have become a “more avid listener.” While another student felt he or she “became more aware of the Benedictine values and realized that prisoners are more than just the animals that they are treated like.” “I am genuinely nicer to people,” one student reflected. “I believe everyone deserves to be treated with respect.” Many students noted that the course and Benedictine values encouraged them to try to see the world through the eyes of others. A handful of students felt that their sympathy and compassion for others increased during the semester. “The most important thing that I learned about myself during this class is that I am more compassionate than I ever thought I would be,” a student reflected.28

As students’ comments and my reflections suggest, intentionally incorporating aspects of the CSB/SJU Benedictine values, Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Catholic Social Teaching, and my academic commitments to the missions, helped to create an inclusive learning environment, as defined by Adams, in which students were able to learn about incarceration and themselves. My efforts and students’ comments suggest that the course not only helped students develop academic skills,
but also helped them begin to establish “patterns of life-long learning and integrating knowledge of self and the world.” The discussion-based pedagogy in the classroom drew upon the convergence, dialogue, and transformation aspects of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. This pedagogical strategy, in conjunction with the common readings that privileged the perspectives of incarcerated individuals, drew inspiration from Catholic Social Teaching to help students begin to cultivate a “sacramental-prophetic vision” rooted in a “commitment to seeing the real” in hope of imagining and implementing alternatives to the present (which are addressed in the spring semester of the course).

These strategies and efforts were grounded in CSB/SJU’s “Academic Commitments to the Mission” that emphasize, in part, “the personal growth of women and men”; “An experience of Benedictine values which fosters awareness of the meaning of one’s existence and the formation of community built on respect for individual persons”; and the “Cultivation of the habit of promoting the common good which is formed by knowledge, faith and an open-hearted response to the needs of others.”

Pedagogy driven by institutional values and missions can be and should be an inclusive pedagogy that demonstrates and ensures, in the words of College of Saint Benedict President Mary Dana Hinton, that each student belongs, that each student has a voice, and that each student “has a right to be here and a right to the full education we offer.”

By committing ourselves to our institutional missions as we practice inclusive pedagogy, we transform ourselves, our institutions, and prepare our students to become future leaders who will work “to improve the well-being of the underserved, enhance community life, and protect the environment.”

Notes

In the fall of 2016, 14.9% of the students at the College of Saint Benedict and 15.7% of the undergraduate students at Saint John’s University were categorized as “American Minority” students.


13. A superficial search for the phrase, “Benedictine Values,” on the CSB/SJU website yields at least 150 hits ranging from news articles, admissions information, departmental websites, residential life, orientation, alumni and alumnae information, student conduct books, and faculty handbooks. College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, accessed January 17, 2017, http://www.csbsju.edu/search?q=%22Benedictine%20Values%22. As Jon McGee writes in *Breakpoint*, “if, say, 98 percent of our organizational DNA is shared with other peer and competitor institutions, then the 2 percentage points of difference need to make a difference. The distinction must be known; it cannot be assumed or simple hoped for.” The 2 percent of the CSB/SJU organizational DNA that I highlight as distinctive includes the institutions’ and its students’ and faculty’s commitment to “Our Benedictine Values.” Our commitment to “Our Benedictine Values” are our “comparative advantage” in the crowded regional higher-education marketplace. McGee, *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 114-115.


19. This idea draws upon Joanna E. Ziegler’s strategies for “teaching the practice of looking at art,” and Anita Houck’s “Circle of Theological Reflection or Praxis, or the Hermeneutic Circle.” Ziegler, “Practice Makes Reception: The Role of Contemplative Ritual in Approaching Art,” in *Becoming Beholders*, 41. Houck, “You are Here: Engagement, Spirituality, and Slow Teaching,” in *Becoming Beholders*, 73.


26. “Academic Commitments to the Missions.”

27. End-of-semester student surveys in author’s possession.

28. Students’ final essays in author’s possession.

29. “Academic Commitments to the Missions.”


31. “Academic Commitments to the Missions.”
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