

Fall 2016

## Spiritan Pedagogy and Cura Personalis in a Large Lecture Hall

Matthew Kostek

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kostek, M. (2016). Spiritan Pedagogy and Cura Personalis in a Large Lecture Hall. *Spiritan Horizons*, 11 (11). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol11/iss11/17>

This Soundings is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

## SPIRITAN PEDAGOGY AND CURA PERSONALIS IN A LARGE LECTURE HALL



### Dr. Matthew Kostek

Dr. Matthew Kostek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Physical Therapy and director of the Laboratory of Muscle and Translational Therapeutics at Duquesne University. He is also a faculty member of the McGowan Institute of Regenerative Medicine at the University Of Pittsburgh School Of Medicine and a Fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine. His research focuses on the molecular genetics of muscle diseases and disorders. He has published more than 30 scientific articles, and textbook chapters in the biochemistry of muscle metabolism. He teaches the Human Physiology I & II courses to doctoral students of physical therapy and physician assistant students at Duquesne.

The Spiritan Congregation has been involved in education essentially since its founding more than 300 years ago. The founder, Claude François Poullart des Places, founded the Congregation with one of the primary intentions being to help poor seminarians obtain an education. Since then, the Congregation has founded and run several seminaries, grade schools, and one University (Duquesne University, founded 1878) and two University Colleges (Spiritans University College, Ejisu, Ghana, founded 1990 and Marian University College, Bagamoyo, Tanzania, which opened in 2015). And while much has been written on the role of education as part of the Spiritan mission,<sup>1</sup> there is no formal document detailing a *Spiritans Pedagogy* in a university setting. On the campus of Duquesne University, the idea of Spiritans Pedagogy is currently being discussed amongst faculty across various disciplines. The University has no document describing the pedagogy; yet, several essays by Duquesne faculty have recently been published on the topic.<sup>2</sup> These essays are starting the conversation of what might define a Spiritans Pedagogy at Duquesne. As there is no formal dictate as to what a Spiritans Pedagogy is, it is being asked of faculty who currently use techniques inspired by the Spiritans charism to define some of the characteristics. This essay culminates my first interaction with the idea of Spiritans Pedagogy after attending several discussion groups sponsored by the Center for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Center for Teaching Excellence at Duquesne. The groups were meant to stimulate, not dictate, ideas about the pedagogy. It was said we are taking a “bottom-up” approach, letting the ideas rise from within the teaching experience of the university faculty. This approach itself could be considered Spiritans.

A question that often arises in these discussions is whether a Spiritans Pedagogy is even a distinct pedagogy or is just “good teaching.” What, if anything, makes this pedagogy unique? Many examples of what might make it unique have now been written about and examples can be found in current Duquesne classrooms, in service-learning trips with reflective paper writing or engagement with the community as part of a class and/or research project. A

perspective that has not been addressed to a great extent is how Spiritan pedagogy might look in a large lecture hall, a lecture hall with more than 100 students. For example, a basic science class taught within a professionally accredited curriculum. The size, subject content, and accreditation standards of this classroom setting do not leave much flexibility or lend itself to group discussion or reflective paper writing. Is there a place for Spiritan pedagogy in this setting? In considering this large, didactic lecture-class over the past two years, I describe examples of how I think the Spiritan charism infused my classroom and I suggest this is related to the pedagogical concept, *cura personalis*. Drawing from the work of others, I describe Spiritan pedagogy with four elements: *cura personalis*, openness to the Spirit, community, and high academic standards.<sup>3</sup>

*The phrase, cura personalis, is Latin and has been interpreted to mean “care of the whole person,” “education of the whole person,” or holistic education.*

The phrase, *cura personalis*, is Latin and has been interpreted to mean “care of the whole person,” “education of the whole person,” or holistic education. The phrase is commonly associated with Ignatian Spirituality and Pedagogy. And while the phrase is likely very old, there are no records that St. Ignatius ever used it. The first Jesuit record appears to be in a letter written by the then Superior General of the Jesuit Congregation in 1935. Fr. Wladimir Ledochowski sent a set of instructions outlining reforms needed of Jesuit Higher Education in America. These included some administrative changes, advocacy for Jesuit Universities joining accrediting associations in America, and changes in policy and perspective<sup>4</sup>. In this letter, Fr. Ledochowski advocates for the personal care of students (*personalis alumnorum cura*) and that this care should extend beyond good teaching in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> His use of the phrase was likely new to Ignatian pedagogy, even if the concept was not. The phrase is now associated with Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian Colleges and Universities. Yet, the concept of *cura personalis* is not unique to Ignatian spirituality, as suggested by McGinn: “claiming that *cura personalis* is distinctively Jesuit is tantamount to trying to copyright the alphabet.”<sup>6</sup> Although the phrase, *cura personalis*, is not currently used in relation to Spiritan pedagogy, it helped me to define Spiritan pedagogy in relation to my large lecture classroom.

My introduction to the idea of *cura personalis* was in listening to a colleague from a Jesuit university describe how it impacted the teaching in her department (Physical

Therapy). She drew a connection from the way a physical therapist treats not just an orthopedic condition but the entire patient as a person, not as an injury. This requires considerations that are anatomical, physiological, psychological, and philosophical or spiritual. I immediately saw the connection to the teaching in my own department and to Duquesne University as a whole. The connection in fact is spelled out in bold letters and can be found at the bottom of the page of official University letterhead, “Education for the Mind, Heart, and Spirit”; this aphorism often used to describe and summarize the ethos of Duquesne University seems to be *cura personalis* rephrased. Other instances of *cura personalis* abound on our campus and become immediately apparent when one is looking for them.

### **Openness to the Spirit and *Cura Personalis***

Because it is the most universally discussed principle of Spiritan pedagogy and at the heart of the Spiritan charism, I begin with openness to the Spirit. The principle has been explained in many ways as taking shape in a classroom.<sup>7</sup> Being open to topics and discussions that are spontaneously inspired is perhaps an obvious example. Ethical and moral discussions are, and should be, common in some classroom settings. Certainly some college courses are specifically designed to encounter these discussions, while others can address them if they arise. These encounters often lead to new insights and profound growth experiences by students that would otherwise not happen, a hallmark, perhaps, of a good liberal education. These encounters and insights contribute to the development of the whole person, intellectually, emotionally, and perhaps spiritually. Yet, a small class size seems ideal for this as it lends flexibility to instruction, assignments, and evaluation. This then seems to limit these encounters to small classes, perhaps in sociology, philosophy or ethics. Could there be a role of openness to the Spirit in a large lecture hall, was my question. Before proceeding with this question it seems to me relevant to consider the purpose. The purpose of most pedagogy is to increase understanding of a topic, which thereby should improve learning outcomes (as measured by grades). Alternatively, a purpose could simply be holistic education. This holistic purpose could be stated more specifically, e.g., to help the student understand and assimilate the information in a societal and global, or personal and human context. When the pedagogy has

*Could there be a role of openness to the Spirit in a large lecture hall, was my question.*

a purpose outside of gaining factual knowledge or even critical thinking skills, but purposefully approaches the learning objective within *specific contexts*, it becomes a unique pedagogical method. The selection of which contexts to use makes it distinctive.

During my first semester teaching at Duquesne (and each subsequent) I taught a basic life science course (human physiology) to about 100 students. This course is part of a two semester series in physiology which allows us to delve deep into human cellular organ function. It is a traditional lecture style course that relies heavily on power-point presentations and didactic instruction. While the purpose of the course is understanding normal human organ function, examples of abnormal or pathological function are used as a means to apply the knowledge. During a lecture on the cellular and molecular function of an organ, I presented a disease example to connect the molecular mechanisms with whole body function. In this case we discussed diabetes and blood glucose disposal within skeletal muscle. Skeletal muscle is the primary storage site of glucose in the human body. After describing diabetes, I then explained how a non-pharmacologic treatment (i.e., exercise) can correct the molecular/cellular abnormality (insulin signaling pathways), and thus blood measurements may no longer reach the diagnostic criteria for disease. My intent was purely academic, using an analogy to describe a difficult concept. The goal being to increase learning outcomes (increase factual understanding to increase exam grades). Questions from the students were however not about organ function, they were about the effect on patient's lives and the ability to have health insurance. "How does that affect the patient diagnosis and what the patient has to pay their insurance company"? Considering the amount of content I needed to cover, there was no time for this discussion so I cut it off. I relayed the story to my then department chair expecting him to tell me to avoid these discussions because they are not part of my course objectives. Instead, he suggested that I embrace them, even if they use some lecture time. This is exactly the type of question, he suggested, that should be acknowledged and engaged, be open to it. In short, I should connect cellular function to the effect on a patient's life, an effect that seemingly has nothing to do with cells or molecules (i.e., my learning objectives), an effect like insurance premiums after a diagnosis. This is not just using another clinical scenario or example to

*My intent was purely academic, using an analogy to describe a difficult concept. The goal being to increase learning outcomes...*

increase content understanding but instead to connect the basic science information directly to the patient's life. I should be teaching the *whole student* to recognize the *whole patient*. The terms Spiritan pedagogy and *cura personalis* were not used, but in retrospect were certainly implied.

Embracing this philosophy I now not only engage these issues but on occasion purposefully plant seeds during lecture so more discussions might arise. Students recognize this and are now more likely to engage discussion inside or outside the classroom to explore not only course material but also the larger implications of the material to society and life.

An example from the following semester illustrates the idea. To describe thyroid hormone function it is necessary to discuss dietary intake of iodine. Iodine is a chemical building block of thyroid hormone, without which our bodies cannot synthesize it. Dietary intake of iodine is therefore necessary for the human body to produce thyroid hormone. Severe iodine deficiencies, in very young children, can cause permanent mental retardation; in older children and adults it causes physical deformities (goiters). In the US, iodine deficiencies are rare as nearly all the salt consumed in the US has been treated with iodine. Iodized salt is an inexpensive product that prevents thousands of cases of hypothyroidism (low thyroid levels) every year in developed countries like the US. Yet this is not the case throughout the world. There are thousands of preventable cases of mental retardation that occur every year in developing countries that could be completely prevented by the intake of iodized salt.

*There are thousands of preventable cases of mental retardation that occur every year in developing countries that could be completely prevented by the intake of iodized salt.*

With the intention of educating the whole person, after a forty minute lecture on the molecular process of thyroid hormone production and function, I presented two slides describing how thousands of children are born each year in Africa with mental retardation simply due to a lack of salt. The treatment which can completely prevent or alleviate the condition is to consume iodized salt, costing only five cents per child per year.<sup>8</sup> I mentioned that several non-profit organizations were trying to address the issue. After the class, a student approached me. She told me that she was a member of the Kiwanis organization (known as Circle K on college campuses) and then explained how Kiwanis along with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is currently delivering salt to

*...by being open to the spirit of the situation (the student in this case), I was able to demonstrate a model of interrelatedness of our seemingly un-relatable, dry, textbook information to disease prevention in Africa and how one student can contribute to making that difference.*

more than a million African people each year and this has saved many lives. She provided several other details of which I was unaware; so I investigated further on my own. For the next lecture I added five more slides describing how Kiwanis (along with other organizations) accomplished this task and the effect it has on worldwide human health. Serendipitously, the lecture occurred on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kiwanis organization. The student was a member (at the time, president) of the Duquesne Circle K club, which allowed me to weave the discussion from textbook pictures of a cell, to people in Africa, then back to Duquesne, and to a student in our class who was working to make a difference. It all seemed amazingly coincidental. My original intention was holistic education, *cura personalis*, to plant the seed of a relationship to the larger world. But by being open to the spirit of the situation (the student in this case), I was able to demonstrate a model of interrelatedness of our seemingly un-relatable, dry, textbook information to disease prevention in Africa and how one student can contribute to making that difference. Recognition of the student for providing this information, during lecture, further modeled the care of the individual.

In addition to *cura personalis* and openness to the Spirit, this story highlights three additional components of Spiritan pedagogy that have previously been mentioned, a global vision (in this case, health), a commitment to service (volunteer organizations like Kiwanis), and concern for the poor (in a global health care context).<sup>9</sup> As professors in large lecture halls we are always looking for ways to connect students to the information. Sometimes a personal story or just a unique analogy that students can relate to will improve understanding. Most would agree that this is a good teaching technique. But if the intention is not just to increase understanding but to increase understanding in a certain way, then it becomes something unique. If the intention is to connect the students' understanding of the material to a global vision of health, community, and service, then it seems we are discussing something distinctive. Any professor is looking to connect the information to the student so the student can assimilate the information into their own personal context, understand it and use it. The context in which it is presented is what makes it unique. When the context is based on certain principles, and when it is meant to inform the whole person, as opposed to just another

*The motto of the Spiritan Congregation, “One Heart and One Soul,” itself seems to evoke a certain sense of community.*

way to increase learning outcomes, it perhaps becomes a distinct pedagogical method.

### **Developing Community by Acknowledgement**

The motto of the Spiritan Congregation, “One Heart and One Soul,” itself seems to evoke a certain sense of community.<sup>10</sup> For Spiritans this is often expressed in communal living, prayer, and work. Developing a sense of community in a large lecture hall, regardless of how we are going to define community, is however going to be a challenge. Recognizing the individual by learning names would be a good start. However, learning about 100 names in one semester is rarely feasible, although an attempt to learn as many names as possible is often appreciated by students. At Duquesne, professors can obtain photo rosters before the semester and to supplement these I often have students complete an online journal entry in Blackboard and have them include a recent photo to further assist me in learning a few names. But, teaching more than 100 students, especially if teaching multiple sections of a course, only so much can be done. The effort to do this importantly models an act of recognition of the individual and is at least a brick in the road of building community. Recognition, as argued by Hyde, is a preliminary step toward acknowledgment. Acknowledgment is a process of attuning one’s consciousness toward another and his or her expression of a topic, to create a personal connection where we can “know together” (*con-scientia*).<sup>11</sup> It may not be possible to recognize all individuals, but to move toward acknowledgment creates a deeper connection to the individual and group.

While passing through the campus Union Building last semester a student from my class, who was an attendant of a student organization booth, offered me a ribbon “in support of Women’s Heart Health.” I paused. In a society where we are all constantly accosted by billboards, video screens, and people soliciting merchandise, or for a cause or organization, it’s easy enough to say “thank you” and just keep moving. Personally, I experience this everyday traversing through downtown Pittsburgh to catch public transportation (bus or train), so I am familiar with this scenario and by instinct I just keep moving. For some reason, on that day, I accepted the token and paused to listen. I learned the Alpha Phi organization is a sorority dedicated to advancing women’s lives through the power of philanthropy; the primary philanthropic cause being

*After some due  
diligence of  
researching it myself,  
I saw this as a perfect  
societal connection.*

women's heart health.<sup>12</sup> She cited some statistics and told me a bit about the work that they do in support of women's heart health. Again serendipitously there was a connection to our class. We were about to spend the next six lectures covering cardiovascular physiology. At the time, for this portion of the class, I did not have a Spiritan pedagogy tie-in. After some due diligence of researching it myself, I saw this as a perfect societal connection. But this time I chose to acknowledge and give credit to where it was due; so I later asked the student if she would be willing to talk to the class for about 10 minutes regarding women's heart health and what her organization does. There were actually several members of Alpha Phi in my class so they gave a group presentation. We all learned something from that presentation as this was news to me as well. This story, I believe, takes a step beyond recognition of the student (knowing a name), to being an act of acknowledgment (by recognizing, accepting, and supporting a belief). It eventually became an act of what has been referred to as, "walking with learners,"<sup>13</sup> as I sat listening to their lecture with the rest of the class. This again brought our content of discussing seemingly dry molecular details of protein ion channels and electrochemical gradients in myocardial cells out into the societal community of heart health and health disparities, and it acknowledges individual students for the work they do. This story might seem to be incidental, trivial, or random. But it is an example of what can be set in motion by practicing the principles of openness to the Spirit, holistic teaching, and trying to connect to students to create community. This has the further consequence of increasing student engagement and overall buy-in of the course content. I have heard Father Bill Christy, C.S.Sp. (personal interview, September 9, 2016) remark that many of the major events that Spiritans have undertaken throughout their over 300 year history were seemingly "accidental." I expect many more of these "accidental" events to occur in my classroom in the coming years.

### **High Academic Standards**

Education of the whole person requires high academic standards. With the discussion of classroom community, openness to the spirit, global concern, and care of the whole person, it could give the impression of a less rigorous environment. Yet, Spiritan pedagogy and *cura personalis* require just the opposite. To lower academic standards would suggest and model that care, compassion,

*To serve the whole student, their deficiencies cannot be ignored. Otherwise they are set up for future failure.*

and societal concern equate to lower standards. This would not serve the pedagogical purpose or the student. To serve the whole student, their deficiencies cannot be ignored. Otherwise they are set up for future failure. As a mentoring relationship develops with students, we must be even more vigilant to not let that interfere with what the student must know to pass to the next phase of their education. It does not serve them as an individual or individuals and society that they will eventually serve.

### **Conclusion**

Spiritan pedagogical principles are applicable in large lecture classrooms and may enhance learning outcomes of stated and unstated objectives. It certainly will educate the whole person. *Cura personalis* can be viewed as a principle of Spiritan pedagogy at Duquesne University as it is already present in many forms across our campus. It is reflected in our mission statement, administrators, and our core curriculum grounded in the liberal arts. It is also present in large lecture halls of the basic sciences. There it can be seen not just as a tool to teach the science of human physiology but as a part of the understanding of what it means to be human. There it can become a distinctive pedagogy.

*Dr. Matthew Kostek  
Duquesne University*

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Spiritan General Chapter, Bagamoyo 2012, 1.28 – 1.32: “Mission as Education”; Koren, Henry. “A Spiritan Educational History,” *Essays on the Spiritan Charism and on Spiritan History* Bethel Park: Spiritus Press, 1990, 111-149; Jeff Duaine et al., “The Heartbeat of Spiritan Education in the US,” *Spiritan Horizons*, 8 (2013), 101-114; Okoye, James. “Spiritans and Education: An Overview,” *Spiritan Horizons* 9 (2014), 55-65.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Hansen et al., “Spiritan Pedagogy in Practice,” *Spiritan Horizons*, 10 (2014), 99-113; O’Brien, Maureen. “Spiritan Pedagogy and Critical Thinking in United States Higher Education,” *Spiritan Horizons* 9 (Fall 2014), 98-110; Darlene Weaver, “Spiritan Pedagogy and Ethics,” *Spiritan Horizons*, 10 (2014), 114-127; Darlene Weaver

et al., "Spiritana Pedagogy: Responses and Questions," *Spiritana Horizons*, 10 (2014), 128-131. Worgul, George. "Spiritana Charism and Ethos in Education," *Spiritana Horizons* 9 (Fall 2014), 73-86.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Jeff Duaine et al., "The Heartbeat of Spiritana Education in the US," *Spiritana Horizons*, 8 (2013), 101-114; O'Brien, Maureen. "Spiritana Pedagogy and Critical Thinking in United States Higher Education," *Spiritana Horizons* 9 (Fall 2014) 98-110.

<sup>4</sup>Leahy, William. *Adapting to America: Catholics, Jesuits, and Higher Education* Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>5</sup>Geger, Barton S.J. "Cura Personalis: Some Ignatian Inspirations," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*, 3/2 (2014), art. 2.

<sup>6</sup>McGinn, A. "Mission Matters: What Do Jesuits Mean By 'Cura Personalis?'" SLU.edu. Saint Louis University, October 2013. Retrieved July 2016, from <http://www.slu.edu/mission-matters-1028>.

<sup>7</sup>See the references in note 2 above.

<sup>8</sup>Kiwanis International and UNICEF. *Partners with Purpose: Eliminating Iodine Deficiency Disorders Worldwide* (New York: U.S. Fund for UNICEF, 2009), 11.

<sup>9</sup>Jeff Duaine et al., "The Heartbeat of Spiritana Education in the US," *Spiritana Horizons* 8 (2013), 101-114, here p. 104.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Hyde, Michael. *The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgement* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006, 38.

<sup>12</sup>"Women's Heart Health." AlphaPhiFoundation.org. Alpha Phi Foundation, n.d. Retrieved July 2016.

<https://www.alphaphifoundation.org/womenshearthealth>

<sup>13</sup>Stephen Hansen et al., "Spiritana Pedagogy in Practice," 99.