

More, more, more?

John Moffatt SJ

One term that is often associated with Jesuit education is the Latin word *magis*, which is interpreted to mean 'more'. But what does it mean in practice to talk about 'more' when it comes to education? Students doing more work, or passing more exams? Teachers covering more in their lessons? John Moffatt SJ asks what the Ignatian *magis* really entails and why it inspires the work of every Jesuit school.

The word *magis*, the Latin for 'more', is one of our slogan phrases in Jesuit education, alongside *cura personalis* ('care for the whole person') and 'men for others'. They are useful mental clothes hooks on which to hang some important ideas. Quite often, though, we can find ourselves using such phrases in a way which may be quite convenient for us and for our immediate purposes, but which can reduce the richness of their meaning.

For example, someone in our care is not working hard enough, so we ask them to reflect on what more they should be doing. Here our 'more' expects the answer, 'more work', because that is the outcome that we want. But this way of using the word flattens out important dimensions of the Ignatian 'more'.

We tend naturally to think of 'more' in the context of a to-do list. If we tried harder, we could squeeze in one more useful and important thing before we caught the train. So we will run a little bit faster, jump a little bit higher, push harder, get more done. But physically doing more things or doing them faster and more frequently is not always the way to do better the things that matter. Fr Adolfo Nicolas, the Superior General of the Jesuits, has suggested that a better word with which to associate the Ignatian *magis* is 'deeper'. What might that mean?



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Well, if I am visiting the National Gallery, the quality of my visit is unlikely to be improved by trying to see every picture in the space of a two hour visit. If I am preparing for an exam, working fifteen hours a day for the month beforehand will not always leave me in the best state to deal with the paper on the day. If a major part of my job is listening attentively to people and their concerns and responding appropriately, I have to find a balance between the number of people I

listen to and the quality of my attention.

Two things arise out of these examples. One is the importance of the *quality* of what we do; we can think here of the way a craftsman or craftswoman attends carefully to their handiwork. A second is the idea of the *balance* between the quantity and the quality of things done. Sometimes we will have to reduce our pursuit of one thing in favour of another in order to achieve what is better overall.

So we should think of *magis* in terms of quality as well as quantity, and in terms of balance as well as boundary-pushing. But we need also to think of the *context* in which Ignatius asks us to go deeper. His *magis* only makes sense in the context of a relationship between a human being and the God of the universe. It is rooted in a profound sense of gratitude for the gift of life and grace. Its strength comes from the desire to respond to the gift.

This is the 'more' of the Ignatian AMDG: *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* ('for the greater glory of God'). For those uneasy with religious language, we might say it is the 'more' which delights in and pursues ultimate value, the things that matter deeply.

At once we find ourselves in the realm of human freedom, and the personal quest to live a life that is worthwhile. Here every human being is not compelled but rather invited to discern where this *magis* is leading them. Each of us chooses our own pathway in freedom. Once we recognise this element of the *magis*, we will be cautious about using it simply as a tool to get other people to do what we want. I might have your best interests at heart, but I cannot determine in advance where the *magis* will lead you in your freedom.

For those of us working in an educational setting, I think there are a number of ways in which our constant striving towards the *magis* can have a direct bearing on our approach to education.

From judgement to reconciliation

Unlike the ancient Romans, we do not actually watch people mutilate one another for pleasure, but we are fascinated when people gang up on one another to inflict public humiliation. It indicates a deep-seated tendency within us to justify ourselves by condemning others. It also highlights an ingrained feature of our public life.

We rightly celebrate the collective pursuit of excellence. But this does have a dark side, creating a culture of judgement and condemnation. This is ever-present in the language of the press and in government rhetoric about public services, failing teachers, failing schools. That culture colonises every area of modern professional life and either sharpens up our act or makes our lives a misery. Or both.

This is a world in which human beings with a rich inner life are reduced publicly to their functionality. They become a sophisticated app on the UK public service desktop, to be replaced as soon as the next upgrade is released.

To feel the walls of judgement closing in on you, where your every error is highlighted and analysed, and

nothing good you can do is ever good enough, is horrendous and eventually annihilating. In a culture of judgement, acts of kindness are either taken for granted or treated with suspicion. Mistakes are rarely forgiven and upsets are taken as an attack on human rights. In this world of judgement, everyone ends up in hell.

What might our tradition have to say to this? After all, we want a system that works best for those we are serving. I do not have any clear cut answers, but a suggestion that might help shape our environment differently.

When Ignatius first started giving the Spiritual Exercises, he was put on trial on suspicion of heresy. In spite of this he and his Exercises became accepted by the Church and were more widely used. But in the fever of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the people giving them would often be dealing with retreatants who might come up with things that sounded heretical. Ignatius's advice is to put the best possible construction on whatever is said to you. Only when careful enquiry had established a genuine issue does that issue need to be tackled gently, without dragging in the inquisition.

The point of this is not to avoid confronting genuine problems, but to avoid burning people at the stake as a result of miscommunication. It seems to me that this could be a very helpful attitude in an environment, local and national, where overstretched systems make proper communication and consultation difficult. Ignatius gives an invitation to be generous in how we interpret the mind behind the words and actions of others.

Every human institution has its walking wounded, the history of conflicts, slights – real and perceived – disappointments and failures. Things could stop there in bitterness and tragedy, or there could be a 'more' of hope and reconciliation – a process that involves painful honesty, detachment, the surrender of righteous indignation, the capacity to see our adversaries as human beings, openness, generosity, compassion, the risk of betrayal.

However, this 'more' cannot be put on a job description or demanded. Its value – and its cost – is beyond money. It can only be a choice of free humanity.

From data to narrative

We all have days when we are swamped by emails requiring a complex variety of responses, or when we have the agony of turning our knowledge of the people we work with into supposedly objective numbers, for the purposes of data.

Now, I quite like the idea of the sort of numerical information that allows me to plot graphs and lines and curves. I like the idea of 'objective' data. So I am not in principle against using measures from one point on an individual's learning curve to predict where the learning curve ought to be in two or three years' time.

But here is a problem: a predictor is only as good as the data that goes into it and the number of relevant variables that it includes. Digital objectivity in human affairs comes at quite a high price.

Thus we have a choice. We can enter data with just a few variables. On a good day it flags up a genuine problem. But on a bad day it proves worse than useless for evaluating the learning history of human beings or the performance of their teachers. Alternatively, we can invest a huge amount of time and energy into gathering data with a range of variables that might go some way towards doing justice to the complexity of the human condition. But then we notice (if we have time) that we are disrupting other important activities, like preparing lessons and teaching them.

However, even when a balance has been achieved and manageable data usefully flags up something unexpected (positive or negative), it cannot tell us why this has happened. Numerical data is blind to one of the most fundamental elements of teaching: the human relationship. It is we, people, who see, we who know the story, or who can at least work it out. In the end, educational data arises out of a human story and returns to a human story.

Data is useful and of primary importance when we have to give an account to outsiders of the performance of the organisation. It is useful but *not* of primary importance when we are engaged directly in teaching children. Data can often help us see things more clearly, or justify our intuitions. But if we are good at what we do, data is inferior to what we as human beings can learn of a student's capacities, history and character.

State education is a data-hungry machine, with productivity targets to be satisfied largely for the benefit of politicians and their agents. The 'more' that lies at the heart of our educational tradition reminds us that education is a human activity. Data should be at the service of humanity, and where humanity is enslaved by data, something has gone seriously wrong. More important than figures and graphs are the stories of our lives.

Freedom and value

There are two more features of our education system that generate mixed feelings in me: OFSTED inspections and the current emphasis on exams.

When I look at the OFSTED lesson observation checklist, it seems to me that all the items are reasonable things to look for, sensible areas to work on, and I must admit that I think better about what I do in the classroom because of OFSTED pressure over the last 10 years.

However, when I look at the same list and realise that the inspector wants to see me making all those things happen in this lesson, and this lesson, and this lesson, my heart sinks. I cannot do that. Or I might be able to get close with some of it, some of the time, with some classes. The learning walk and the lesson observation, which might otherwise have been a source of help and support, become a source of fear and suspicion. I will be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Then there are exams. The modern system suits the learning capacities of most people and enables more people in this country to progress further in academic areas than ever before. We have made a national choice (though we might be about to unmake it) and swapped an exam system that suited the top thirty percent best, for a system that now suits the middle sixty percent best.

And yet this system in its current form absorbs a huge amount of our collective energy in cramming people through exams. The exams have become an end in themselves and they are the criteria by which we (and our students) will be judged, even though the exams themselves are not intrinsically valuable.

How can our tradition help us think our way out of these boxes?

The key word when it comes to OFSTED is 'freedom'. Education is a human activity, not a machine activity. Where a lesson framework becomes a cage, an instrument of oppression, something has gone wrong; where it provides material for exploration and experiment, there it is a liberating resource. Our tradition reminds us that we are not machines, programmed for a limited set of functions. Rather we are human beings called to exercise creative freedom.

When we talk about exams, the word is 'value'. My C in O-Level music says nothing about the value of the subject in itself, or how it has been a major part of my life before and since. My dodgy degree essays in Homer and Horace say nothing about the hours of

exciting and life-changing reading and tutorials that preceded them. Our ancient educational tradition reminds us that what we study and how it affects us have a value far deeper than any measurable outcomes.

We are invited to look beyond the exam production line and the inspection reports to a deeper 'more' in the classroom. That 'more' reminds us that we are doing something that matters deeply. We are passing on to a new generation something that we have found important in our lives. This *magis* takes us beyond the relentless, functional efficiency that feeds the national statistics into the human and luminous realm of value.

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