

Jesuit Student Note-Taking Techniques

How did early Jesuits take notes?

Like other aspects of Jesuit pedagogy, the use of notebooks would become normalized in the 1550s-60s through written guidelines for the colleges and circular memoranda. These sources reveal a culture of note-taking indebted to scholastic learning methods which aimed at the rapid comprehension of texts through summary and drill, and which valued the cognitive appropriation of course material over verbatim mastery.

Teaching Methods and Student Learning Techniques

Dictation and student copying were still used as a means of providing students with texts throughout the sixteenth century. Prior to the widespread availability of cheap paper in the late middle ages, most students used reusable media such as wax tablets.

Commonplacing

Commonplacing, the practice of copying excerpts into a thematically or logically organized notebook under designated heading or *loci*, became widespread over the course of the sixteenth century.

Of more direct relevance is the relatively well-documented practice of recording lecture notes in the margins of printed books. This is likely a modified form of late medieval pedagogical practice carried over from the manuscript age.

Modus parisiensis

The essential elements of Jesuit techniques were no doubt acquired by Ignatius, Lainez, Polanco and others as part of the *modus parisiensis*, the teaching methods of the Parisian colleges which so strongly influenced the first generation of Jesuits. Students were expected to invest a considerable amount of time outside class in maintaining their notebooks and adding supplementary material.

Note Taking and Mission

It is no surprise that Polanco, mastermind of the Jesuit paper labyrinth in Rome, was also one of the principle forces behind the implementation of standardized note-taking techniques in the colleges. These techniques would also later serve

Jesuits in the field in fulfilling the spiritual mission of the Society in preaching, delivering informal lectures on spiritual themes, letter writing and a host of other activities in which techniques of observation and description, redaction and recall might be called upon.

"Furnishing" the Student Notebooks

At the Collegio Romano, humanities and rhetoric students spent time outside class hunting for furnishings to use in their rhetorical compositions. They were encouraged to copy into their notebooks examples, comparisons, testimonies, sentences, proverbs and other things "of manifold erudition which might enrich and embellish orations."

The student notebook consequently assumed the form of a collection of notes or glosses on a course text. Lectures furnished one source of information, but consultation of additional materials was clearly normal practice in stocking the notebook.

Notebooks for a Lifetime

The other significant feature of the summary is its anticipated use outside the immediate didactic context. While the colleges eventually taught both Jesuit and non-Jesuit students, it is worthwhile recalling that the colleges originated in the Society's need to train Jesuits for ministry. Basic techniques of reading, note-taking, and summarizing thus aimed to provide individual Jesuits with the tools which would enable them to fulfill the spiritual mission of the Society. Above all, preaching and public lectures are singled out in the Constitutions.

In this regard the summary had little to do with mastery of an academic subject. At stake, instead, was the long-term service such collections of notes could provide in a lifetime of preaching and lecturing.

A System Without Parallel

The discussion of note-taking techniques which occurred within the early Society is without parallel in the history of education. There is no similar body of evidence for medieval universities and colleges or other early modern institutions.

—Paul Noller, "Note-taking Techniques and the Role of Student Notebooks in the Early Jesuit Colleges," *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 74 (2007)

Mission and mobility were the twin defining characteristics of the early Society. The desire to create a corporate culture within a rapidly expanding organization whose members were frequently separated by great geographical distance meant that even the most routine aspects of Jesuit daily life required articulation and elucidation. The wealth of documentation bearing on the Jesuit educational experiment is rooted in this feature of the early Society.



▲ Figure 1. *De vacuo*, dictation notebook written down by Johannes an Cantelbeek in 1670. (K.U.Leuven, BTAB, Leuven University college dictata, list C, vol. VII.)

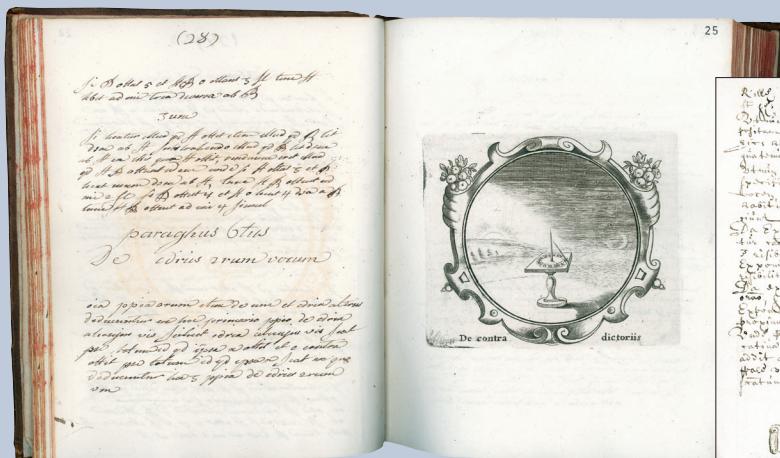
17th-Century Jesuit Student Notebooks

Students themselves inventively created similar emblematic structures. An interesting example in this respect is the set of seven dictation notebooks by Van Cantelbeek (1669-70). Van Cantelbeek bought five emblematic dictation prints from Hayé and others by the famous French engraver Jacques Callot (1592-1635). The Callot prints are often inserted in the *dictata* in a humorous way. The chapter "De vacuo" [On vacuum] in the *Physica* dictation notes by Van Cantelbeek is illustrated by a *gobbo* (hunchback) lifting a drinking cup (Figure 1). In one of Van Cantelbeek's *dictata*, an engraving from the Hayé Engelgrave series (Figure 3) served as a model for Van Cantelbeek's own drawing, namely, for the representation of a solar table, now provided with the text "effluit hora diesque" (hours and days pass by) (Figure 4).

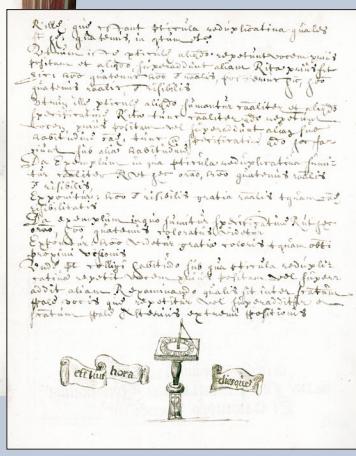
The success of Hayé's series of emblematic engravings and the way in which university students made use of them in an inventive way may be illustrated by the college dictation noted in 1676 by Michiel van den Biessema, a student in the college "Het varken" (The Pig), during the lectures of Professor Johannes Stevenot (c. 1640-1718). Van den Biessema made a drawing demonstrating the superiority of his college (The Pig) over the three others (The Lily, The Castle, and The Falcon). The *pictura* of this *impresa*-like representation shows a pig opening its bowels on a collapsing castle. At the same time, it treads on the falcon and devours the lilies on the hill (Figure 2).



▲ Figure 2. *Physica et Metaphysica*, dictation notebook written by Michiel van den Biessema, 1676. (K.U.Leuven, BTAB, Leuven University college dictata, list C, vol. 23.)



▲ Figure 3. *Quaestio vigesima quarta quid sit enunciatio*, reduplicatio et quomodo exponatur, dictation notebook written by Johannes van Cantelbeek in 1670. (K.U.Leuven, BTAB, Leuven University college dictata, list C, vol. VI.)



► Figure 4. *Dialectica*, dictation notebook written by L.J. Bevanus in 1763. (K.U.Leuven, BTAB, Leuven University college dictata, list C, vol. XXXVI.)

—Joseph F. Cherington, O.S.A., *Enchiridion Sacerdotum: Emblemata Sacerdotum* (Leuven: Leuven University College, 1982)