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# Using Lectio Divina for non-scriptural texts: A successful classroom teaching tactic that other instructors can replicate

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## Teaching Tactic

“Using *Lectio Divina* for Non-Scriptural Texts”

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**The context:** An upper-level course that included a service-learning requirement. We did a modified form of *Lectio Divina* a few different times during the semester. This would work in any course where students are being asked to confront painful or unsettling topics.

**The pedagogical purpose:** To give students a chance to sit with their painful and sad feelings about, for example, violence against women (in the Bible and in their service sites) without becoming totally overwhelmed or shutting down. I hoped students would hear the course reading in a deep way and be able to enter the discussion after engaging the reading carefully. This activity also allowed us to engage our emotional reactions in a way that was still productive for learning.

**Description of the strategy:** I have used the traditional form of *Lectio Divina* with our ministry-oriented Master of Theological Studies students, but had not used contemplative practices with undergraduates before. I decided to change this when I taught a 300-level Women in the Bible course that required service-learning; the topics in the class, with the addition of service, called for some deliberate reflection.

When we had encountered difficult biblical texts or heard about students’ disturbing service experiences, I would choose a passage of our reading to read in the style of *Lectio Divina*. The first time we did this activity, I briefly described *Lectio Divina* as a meditative kind of reading, in which we hear the same passage read aloud three or four times. There would be a period of silence between each reading and then time to write or draw after the final reading. I acknowledged that this is usually done for spiritual/religious reasons and usually done with a biblical text, but that we were using this activity for different purposes. Passages from Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror* (1984, Fortress) or Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre’s *Mary Magdalene Understood* (2006, Continuum) (both required textbooks for my course) worked well for *Lectio Divina* and subsequently generated insightful discussion about our course topics.

In the traditional use of *Lectio Divina*, participants are encouraged to ingest the passage, like a cow chewing on the cud. The passage is something to imbibe, meditate on, and apply to one’s life. In our classroom use, participants might disagree, agree, react negatively, engage critically, etc. The goal is not to submit to the passage, in the way a participant in *Lectio Divina* might ordinarily do. The silence and repetition are useful for letting the ideas simmer and for giving quieter students a chance to think and respond, before the more talkative students jump in. Students have also shared that it enables them to think slower and more deeply, which contrasts with the ways they might typically approach an assigned reading: with a “checklist” mentality. They are given the time to think slowly and ponder, rather than moving so quickly through tasks and ideas. Strong emotions sometimes surfaced, but this method gave students a chance to move through

the feelings: I noticed that students became much more attentive when we did this (contrasted with a general class discussion or lecture), because they seemed to be fully present to themselves and the class.

**Why it is effective:**

Students welcomed a chance to sit still and listen to what they had already read (or, of course, for students who hadn't done the reading, they had a chance to engage with at least part of it!). Hearing the passage a few times meant that students heard it deeply and generated profound connections to the ideas in the book that previous class discussions had not. It also gave students a chance to talk about how the "telling of sad stories" (a theme in Tribe's book) is both painful and cathartic. This ended up being invaluable in our class, since many students were encountering for the first time the violent stories in the biblical text and in their service experiences.