

Using Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy in an Online Leadership Class

Abstract

Lectio Divina is an ancient Christian method of Scriptural study, and means prayerful reading from Latin. Though primarily used in the modern age to reflect and contemplate on Scripture, professors have used Lectio Divina in humanities, such as philosophy and art, along with professional studies in seminaries and education, as a contemplative pedagogy. The application in secular studies has been reported to increase student ownership of the material, enhance engagement, focus and collaboration. The practice of Lectio Divina removes distractions from the student with short, focused listening, reading, discussion and reflection. In this research, the Lectio Divina method was applied in online leadership classrooms for MBA students to see if an increase in student engagement, as measured by quantity and quality of discussion posts could be achieved. The research effort occurred over six semesters and two academic years in entirely online, asynchronous classes.

Keywords: Contemplative Pedagogy, Lectio Divina, Leadership Development, Online Education, Constructive Alignment

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Having taught online leadership classes since 2008 following a traditional, prescribed number of discussion posts, with very carefully controlled rubric grading focused on the format of the posts, the research and the number of words, the foundation for this study was that the online environment could rob students of the creativity and innovative spirit necessary for leaders, and leader development. The effort for the students appeared to become a focus on the process, rather than the learning of leadership. Reviewing results from seven online classes between 2017 and 2020 showed 57% of the students posted the minimum number, usually two longer posts of 300 or so words, followed by two responses to colleagues of 100 words, for a total of four posts per week.

Though students were rewarded with an A with five total posts, only 12% took advantage of the opportunity to post five times. The student reviews over this time tended to be complimentary towards the recorded lectures used in a flipped lecture style, the feedback, and the essay assignments as far as career applicability, but negative as to the discussions with terms such as formulaic, wasteful, redundant, boring and regurgitation. The quality of the posts tended towards the analyze level of Bloom's Taxonomy, with statement or quote from a textbook used to answer a question, generally staying away from taking ownership of the answer. Qualitatively, the discussion post comments from students on leadership tended to be academically sound but emotionless, without a sense of the human factor so necessary for leadership.

Contemplative Pedagogy

Contemplative pedagogy is a way for students to make an internal connection to course material because of deepened awareness and concentration on a process of gaining insight. Methods vary from deep reading, guided reading, journaling, mediation and contemplative

writing (Morgan, 2015). Knowing comes with silence and inward pondering, beholding, and witnessing as consciousness of the material emerges because of reduced distraction (Gunnlaugson, 2014). Mindfulness emerges through the refined attention by concentration in staying in the present moment, with the material directly interacting with the student. The engagement is expected to create an emotional response with compassion, self-inquiry, creation of personal interpretation and a “first person” connection to a text that is lived, embodied and experienced through students’ own learning (Coburn, Grace, Komjathy, Roth, Simmer-Brown, 2011).

With contemplative pedagogy students are more aware of their internal world, as they connect to their own values, sense of meaning, with richer, deeper relationships developing with colleagues as common sense-making develops in the reflective exercise (Barbezat & Bush, 2013). Contemplative pedagogy develops from spiritual traditions as ways to concentrate more effectively while moving beyond scientific and technical training (Liebert, 2018). With concentration, students’ sense of meaning and implications as to the discernment for application in a profession opens wisdom and knowledge, the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Knowledge (Frncl, 2016). The practice of contemplative pedagogy creates independent thinkers, that build a habit of critical self-reflection in the community of fellow students. The method also develops problem solving skills with the reflection on the theory in practical application with the self-developed, careful explanations of complicated matters (O'Donnell, 2015).

When viewed through the lens of contemplative pedagogy the material is not a set of intellectual hoops for students to pass through but a supportive method to engage with the material, with active opportunities to find meaning and supportive of intellectual development. The literature does caution that this focus on the students’ learning journey should not

compromise the teacher's role as the architect of the learning process (Rendón & Kanagala, 2017). The architecture creates the devotion to clarifying the nature of the material in the world view of the student as the architect. The integration of the world-view has much in common with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kayes, 2002). Concrete experience is combined with conceptualization of the abstract, placed into a personal mental experiment combining domains of experience and knowing into learning. Experience is uncovered with the student's introspection rather than the teacher's external framework. This is referred to as direct inquiry, a type of contemplative pedagogy which allows students to ruminate making an internal connection necessary to true understanding. The students are framing research questions in a sense, making and testing their hypothesis, as a way of spirituality in education.

The result is more effective problem solving because students enhance their attention and ability to consider multiple perspectives at once (Barbezat, & Bush, 2013). Rather than learning the teacher's views on how to think contemplative pedagogy learn exposes students to how they think best in order to understand the complex material. The outcome is more effective than direct, formal problem solving because students enhance both attention and ability to consider multiple perspectives at once. The leisurely time aspect of contemplative pedagogy gives students the empowerment to realize what the words and formulas mean, to discern meaning in the abstract and to locate students in the learning as personal involvement and action-oriented knowledge.

Lectio Divina in Education

Lectio Divina, meaning divine reading, was formalized with Benedict of Nursia and the Western Monastic Tradition (Dalton, Hall, & Hoyser, 2021; Wright, 2019,). Designed as silent, private prayerful reading for sacred texts, and specifically contemplation of the Scriptures, Lectio

Divina the form is also applied in the secular world to non-religious texts. For those reading Scripture, Lectio Divina deepens introspection and critical self-reflection through experiential and direct learning (Liebert, 2018). Having been used by people across a variety of denominations, cultures and faiths, Lectio Divina is reported to have deepened conscious awareness of the meaning and context of the text (Wright, 2019). The reader of the text embodies creative reflection, and collaborative worship allowing discovery of renewed capabilities with Lectio Divina as deep learning (Hall & Hoysler, 2021).

Lectio Divina has a flow, though not necessarily always done in the same formal steps given the contemplative nature, with participants lingering and pondering specific words and phrases that they are drawn to (Keator, 2017). Participants jump ahead, move back, and linger as they need to reflect on the flow of their experience with the text. The four movements of Lectio Divina begin with the reading, either out loud or silently, then reflection on the reading, followed by an internalization and then personal transformation. In Latin the movements are *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplation*. Though practiced in monasteries and worship services along a formal flow educators find students study in silence in most cases and skip from one movement to the next. Educators have used Lectio Divina in philosophy classes, art, education, literature and theology (Keator, 2017, Wright, 2019).

The literature describes similar approaches to the use of Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy (Keator, 2017; Liebert, 2018; Wright, 2019). Professors read a passage out loud, and then invite students to re-read to themselves slowly, and methodically going from word to word. This step is the *lectio* phase and is likened to nourishment, with the words of the literature nourishing the reader. A word, phrase or sentence may catch the reader's attention. The reader is encouraged to stop and ponder that short piece as long as needed, contemplating why that piece

has been given significance in the reading. The second step brings the reader into a meditative state, with repetition on that short word or phrase taking place. Gentle, peaceful study takes place allowing the phrase to interact with our thoughts, memories, experiences, challenges and plans.

The next step is oratio, Latin for prayer. Some literature describes this step as an opportunity to have an imaginary conversation with the author, asking the intent, meaning and application. We ask to ourselves the connections and systems by which the words of the text come to life in application or the physical space. This is a form of dialogue with the text, discerning the meaning and application of the words. In the final movement, contemplatio, we stop doing and rest without words as the passages move over our minds. Meanings emerge from our previous movements. Literature describes this step as the meaning of the reading coming to the reader, and the meaning coming in the context of relationships to other people as well as the context of the text. The intent is passive capture arising from listening (Keator, 2017; Libert, 2018; Wright, 2019).

In education, Lectio Divina is described as a community of doers creating a precondition for understanding (Keator, 2017). This is the educator's and academic's spirituality as scholarship that we do regularly and repeatedly. With reading and rumination, the movements of Lectio Divina follows the true meaning of the text, as discerned by the reader in that slow meditative study. The suspension of judgment and focused attention allows students to hold the text in mind while seeing what the text is, rather than what it means alone (Wright, 2019). Lectio Divina is the continuous framing and reframing of our own unique research questions that is placed in a mental experiential cycle of learning. Some educators couple reflective writing throughout Lectio Divina so as to write about how both the process and the outcome inspired

deeper learning in the material (Dalton, Hall, & Hoyser, 2021). The notes, pondering, cycling from reading, to repetition, to secular application of prayerful study, and contemplation build a case leading to deep collegial sharing in the classes that have employed Lectio Divina in other subjects.

Teaching Leadership Online

In online learning outcomes can be best judged by practical inquiry that included a triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution (Doh, 2003; Kranzow, 2013). The triggering event can be seen as the lectio step, as the first contact or questioning with a section of the reading identified for deeper learning. The second inquiry is similar to the second step in Lectio Divina, meditation, or as exploration derived from reflection on the material. The third step is integration, the oratio step of reception of meaning derived from the contemplation. The final step is resolution where a definite result is determined and the new knowledge is applied as the material transforms the students understanding (Sun & Chen, 2016; Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

In the specific of teaching of leadership, online students that are engaged tend to report higher levels of learning and feel they were better students because of reflective inquiry that established the knowledge in a minimal amount of time because of established attention. In effective leadership online classes, the technology became transparent as the professor is the architect of the content rather than the technology. Sun and Chen (2016); along with Deschain and Whale (2017), studied effective online leadership classrooms. Both recognized the importance of teacher presence and the limitation of technological distraction. The movements of Lectio Divina make the technology transparent as the relationship with the material occurs immediately with the student rather than mediated by technology. The immediacy in that

relationship between student and material is seen as a positive impact to student motivation (Kranzow, 2013).

Though not originally structured with online or leadership classes in mind, Bain (2004), along with Crouch and Mazur (2001) offer highly regarded advice for effective college teaching. Both advise to ensure focus, a process for consistency and connection to content in the teaching and learning activities. The intellectual engagement with the material by the teacher is essential and must be evident to the students on a regular basis (Palmer, 1993). The class must be designed with student outcomes in mind, rather than what the professor must get done. The learning environment must be critical and questioning seeking perspective, application and inquiry (Bain, 2004) . The students must be assessed as to the theory in practical application.

Integrating Lectio Divina into the Online Classroom with Constructive Alignment

The researched online course had originally been designed using Constructive Alignment when set up in 2016. With Constructive Alignment the class is designed in an “end in mind” type flow (Ambrose, 2010; Biggs, 1996). The teacher starts with Intended Learning Objectives (ILOs), often described as the key learning points the students will take away from class into application. Biggs (1996) calls the ILOs the things students will recall ten years after class has ended. From the ILOs Teaching/Learning Activities (TLAs) are crafted that place the ILOs into action. The students will also have Assessment Tasks (ATs) to ensure the students understand and can apply the ILOs. The system is designed with action verbs in mind so ILOs are phrased as Explain, Synthesize, Create, Develop, Present in a language representative of Bloom’s Taxonomy and supporting a rubric grounded in Bloom’s Taxonomy. The student must be able to actively engage with the material. From the ILOs, the students will employ the knowledge in TLAs, and then be assessed with the ATs. Constructive Alignment seeks efficiency in the

teaching ensuring the right knowledge is created with the students in the right sequence to ensure both academic understanding and the ability to apply as part of the subject's body of knowledge.

As an example of Constructive Alignment, the text from Manning and Curtis' (2022) section on High Performing Teams, the ILO was crafted as; Evaluate a case study using the framework of High Performing Teams and identify areas for improvement. The TLAs would have been a pod-cast using Lectio Divina with that section's readings, and discussion questions drawing from Lectio Divina and the text. The AT would have been a short case analysis evaluating and identifying problems with alternative solutions grounded in text book material as described in the ILO.

Using literature from leadership development, researchers have found that academic study alone is not sufficient and suggest a more comprehensive program that fosters personal integration of theory and practice over time in a manner that is both reiterative and reflective (Kayes, 2002; Doh, 2003; Roberts & Westville, 2008). Given the teaching practices of Contemplative Pedagogy along with the system to study with Lectio Divina, changes were made to the established leadership class in a single area to see if the quantity and quality of the discussion posts could be improved. Rather than use a traditional recorded lecture with Power Point slides, a pod-cast created with Apple's Garage Band was used.

At the beginning of each week a pod-cast was crafted of around 10-minutes in length, as a suggested length (Robinette, 2019). The semester contained 14 class sessions, or one pod-cast per week. Each pod-cast practiced Lectio Divina with the readings that connected the text book to the ILOs from Constructive Alignment. The preselected text chosen for Lectio Divina was an important facet of the reading that supported the discussions and weekly short essay or case study as described by Wright (2019). The first pod-cast of the semester described Lectio Divina

and the intentions of Contemplative Pedagogy in secular study, along with the connections between Constructive Alignment and each assignment. Each pod-cast set the stage for Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy by asking the students to set up in a quiet area by themselves, remove distractions and prepare by having the text opened to a specific page number. If they were inclined, I asked them to consider themselves in a prayer-like environment substituting the text book for a prayer book or Bible as a mental model.

I began by reading an important section aloud, asking the students to follow along in their text. The section was usually a few paragraphs in length, never more than a couple pages so as to not overwhelm. I wouldn't explain why this was an important section, leaving that decision up to the students. After a paragraph, I'd ask them to pause the pod-cast and read it over themselves as the lectio movement. For the meditation step I'd ask the students to read the section again, pausing on words, phrases and sentences that offered an opportunity for deeper meaning and their learning. I'd ask what the author intended in their mind by those words or phrases from the students' perspectives. At this point each student could well have focused on different parts of the first reading. I'd ask for another pause in the pod-cast and request that the students ruminate on those words, perhaps writing out their responses, feelings, observations on those key words.

The third movement, oratio, was originally intended as prayer. To modify this stage, I borrowed from Wright (2019) and inserted questions to ponder that also connected to the week's discussion questions. As an example, from the high-performing teams' section, the question might be phrased as "how might the student use the key concept they had studied to improve team performance?" The student was invited to pause the pod-cast and think through the concept in practical application, again writing out what they thought the authors meant by those concepts

in application. The final step of contemplatio asked the students to let the meaning come to them by asking and reflecting on how they would use the concept as a leader? Again, the pod-cast was paused and students were invited to reflect on how the material transformed their approach to leadership, what the readings may have added to their leadership portfolio.

The pod-casts would cover two sections of the readings from the text, that connected to the two discussion questions and were the foundations to the short essay or case study for that week. The total length of the pod-cast was ten minutes but students reported in an end of class survey that the process could take them from a half hour to over an hour as they lost themselves in the Lectio Divina process. In order to ensure graduate level rigor, outside research was required for the weekly short essay or case study drawing on the text book chapter's bibliography.

In order to capture the thoughts and insights immediately at the end of the pod-cast I asked the students to immediately respond to the two discussion questions with the insights that had emerged in the Lectio Divina process. The discussion posts in the Learning Management System were set so that the students could only see their colleagues' posts after their own initial post. They were free to respond to their colleagues at that point, commenting on unique insights and observations. Though the pod-cast was up by Monday morning of each week, students had until Thursday evening to review the pod-cast and post their initial reflections. On Friday I responded to several posts, moving from student to student weekly so over the course each student had been engaged by me several times. I'd ask for further reflection, perhaps clarification or highlighting the connection between their observations and a leadership application. I would insert a written, short mini-lecture and also ask each student to review their original post, edit/modify as they thought appropriate and comment on their colleagues using a compare and

contrast approach from their own posts. The department rubric required the two original posts and then at least two follow up questions to a colleague to either post per discussion.

Going to the fundamentals of Constructive Alignment as developed by Biggs (1996), the quality of the learning was assessed not in the Discussion Questions as Teaching/Learning Activities (TLAs), but rather the weekly essay as the Assessment Task (AT). The essay questions were not changed and the grading rubric remained the same since it was based on Constructive Alignment. In classes taught before integrating Lectio Divina the average response of the weekly essay was averaged for 212 graduate students as a 3.61/4.0 scale. A sample rubric is shown in Figure 1:

Criteria	Very Good 4	Good 3	Acceptable 2	Poor 1
Context of and Purpose for Writing	Demonstrate a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work.	Demonstrates adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) (e.g., the task aligns with audience, purpose, and context).	Demonstrates awareness of context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned task(s) (e.g., begins to show awareness of audience's perceptions and assumptions).	Demonstrates minimal attention to context, audience, purpose and to the assigned task(s) (e.g., expectation of instructor or self as audience).
Content Development	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work.	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to explore ideas within the context of the discipline and shape the whole work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through most of the work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop simple ideas in some parts of the work.
Genre and Disciplinary Conventions	Demonstrates detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) including organization, content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices.	Demonstrates consistent use of important conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s), including organization, content, presentation, and stylistic choices.	Follows expectations appropriate to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) for basic organization, content, and presentation.	Attempts to use a consistent system for basic organization and presentation.
Sources and Evidence	Demonstrates skillful use of high-quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing; appropriate use of APA format.	Demonstrates consistent use of credible, relevant sources to support ideas that are situated within the discipline and genre of the writing; appropriate use of APA format.	Demonstrates an attempt to use credible and/or relevant sources to support the ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of writing; uses APA format.	Demonstrates an attempt to use sources to support ideas in the writing; limited use of APA format.
Control of Syntax and Mechanics	Uses graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency, and is virtually error-free.	Uses straightforward language that generally conveys meaning to readers. The language in the portfolio has few errors.	Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include some errors.	Uses language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usage.

Average Score: _____ (Total/# of criteria)

Figure 1: Sample Rubric

Discussion, Results and Conclusions

In order to reduce confounding variables, the online classes were structured and organized on the same Learning Management System (LMS) the same way, with discussion questions that reflected the original intent and the same essay assignments. The discussions and assignments were modified to reflect changes to the text book with new revisions. Though one

cannot discount the impact the teacher can have on the outcome of classroom-based research, the only change to the class was the pod-cast focus on Lectio Divina. The students in the class had not been in another class I had taught since the leadership class was in the graduate students' first semester.

As I prepared for my first class using Lectio Divina for the Fall of 2021, I met with my University's Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, along with the Associate Provost for Academic Effectiveness to seek their inputs in the Summer of 2021. My initial inclination was to not integrate student responses into the research and rely only on the quantitative number of posts and rubric results of the essay grade. They suggested and encouraged use of a survey instrument into the class as a way to gather student observations on a regular basis. Given familiarity with the instrument, Brookfield's (2017) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) was selected and the following anonymous survey was sent out via the LMS at the ends of Weeks 3, 6, 9, and 12. A small point total was assigned for completing the anonymous survey so as to encourage feedback substituting for an extra credit assignment. From Brookfield (2017) the following questions were used.

1. At what moment in class these past weeks did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in class over the last three weeks were you most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action did you find most puzzling or confusing that you witnessed over the past few weeks?

5. What about the class surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).

Since the Fall 2021, through the Spring of 2023, 136 graduate MBA students have been in the online leadership classes using Lectio Divina. The average number of posts rose from four to seven. The quality of the learning, as assessed by the rubric application in the grading of the weekly essays improved from 3.61 to 3.72. The most compelling statistic however was qualitative and focused on the first question from the CIQ. The question asked “at what moment in class these past few weeks did you feel most engaged with what was happening?” Over the two years, 426 anonymous CIQs were received, usually with only two or three questions fully answered. In 287 of the 336 CIQs, the first question was answered with Lectio Divina followed with specific comments about the students’ experiences during Lectio Divina. The most commonly used term was “focused” used 176 times. The second most commonly used term was “refreshed” used 72 times. “Meditative” or “Centered” were the next most commonly used terms. There were 17 comments that had negative terms such as “Repetitive”, and “tiresome”. One comment suggested that lectures were more effective.

With the data from the CIQ, if the objective is to engage students more fully, the numbers indicate that Lectio Divina may increase students’ focus encouraging more efficient engagement with the material. In conclusion, Lectio Divina when combined with Constructive Alignment, may aid in improving student discussion engagement in an online leadership class; and the quality of assessments, because the practice emphasizes the necessary focus gained with Contemplative Pedagogy.

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