INCITE ITEMS

For Educational Iconoclasm

Reclaiming the Deep Reading Brain in the Digital Age

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Abstract Although students today are adept at scrolling, surfing and searching the web, they struggle to read deeply and interpret meaning. They spend hours on their handheld digital devices, unaware that the time they spend on these devices is in fact altering their neuro-circuitry and weakening their ability to engage in deep reading. This article focuses on some of the current challenges digital devices pose to students, specifically their ability to be present, read deeply and interpret meaning in what they are reading, both in a literary text and in the world around them. I propose the contemplative method called *lectio divina* as a possible remedy that instructors can use in the classroom to build awareness and strengthen students' ability to read deeply and interpret meaning for their lives. *Keywords*: digital devices, neuro-circuitry, deep reading, critical inquiry, *lectio divina*, meditative thinking, calculative thinking, leisure, interpret meaning, literary texts, higher education

In the 20th century, Martin Heidegger (1977), himself aware of and concerned with the rising problems regarding human beings' relationship with technology wrote, "everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology whether we passionately affirm or deny it" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 4). Today, this unhealthy and disordered relationship with technology continues in our college community classrooms. Many students are influenced and shaped in a techno-addicted, techno-driven and techno-obsessed culture. Based on my personal experience teaching in the college classroom over the past seven years as well as multiple conversations I have had with both colleagues and students, students seem more interested in their text messages, Facebook newsfeeds, blog posts, tweets, Instagram feeds, and

snapchat stories than in entering into a dynamic conversation with a literary text, exploring it for deeper meaning and wisdom.

On many college and university campuses, students walk into class with earphones fixed in their ears and smartphones in hand. Students walk into a class oblivious to their surroundings and the people within it. In the classroom, there is little inclination to engage in a natural conversation before class begins. Once class is called to order and educators have instructed the students to put away their digital devices, some students simply ignore the instruction and continue to text, scroll and surf throughout class. In *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* (2015), Turkle expounds on the struggle for students today to engage in a face-to-face conversation with others. My students support her assertions: "I have found that too often I will be in a room with people and instead of interacting with them, I will be looking [at] my cellphone…I wasted ample time that could have been used to get to know someone better or make a lasting impression on another's life" (student, fall 2016). Students find it difficult to be in the present moment, open a book, focus on the course material, recollect their thoughts or just sit quietly waiting for class to begin. Although students are physically present, they are intellectually, emotionally and socially disconnected from themselves and the people around them. On average, students shared with me, they are able to be fully present about 20 minutes or less out of a 90-minute class.

Previous to the 21st century, most technologies were location-specific, creating boundaries around where and when they were used. For example, a phone was fixed to a wall, a computer to a desk. Today, most digital devices are no longer location-specific. Portable and no longer tethered to a particular space, these digital devices can be brought into any space, anytime, anywhere. Due to advanced technology, students carry their smartphones, computers and tablets with them into the classroom space, allowing for continuous stimuli through connections,

distractions and interruptions. During class, students are always available and "on call" via their digital devices and as a result, are trapped in endless anticipation of the next text message or snapchat. Students are in constant need of stimulus and although these digital devices appear to ease their anxiety and relieve their boredom, in truth they may be adding to their agitation and feeding their narcissistic tendencies. In *Thrilled to Death: How the Endless Pursuit of Pleasure is Leaving us Numb*, Hart (2007) notes,

> Teenagers are bored, not because there is nothing to do…But because they are overstimulated. Despite the phenomenal array of gadgets that can feed them entertainment twenty-four hours a day in every conceivable place, many teenagers feel bored most of the time…teenagers today are often bored because they are overstimulated. Their pleasure centers are saturated. (p. 28)

In his presentation "The distracted mind: Ancient brains in a high-tech world" at The Alberta Teachers' Association May 27, 2016, Larry Rosen shared that "67% of teens and young adults check their phones every 15 minutes or less…If they can't check in that often, 50% get moderately-to-highly anxious." Without realizing it, students are always "on call," awaiting the next text message, Facebook post or Instagram feed. Constantly on standby, students have become what Heidegger termed 'standing-reserve,' "ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that [they] may be on call for a further ordering" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 17).

In light of these observations, the more pressing issue is that in their overidentification with and over-reliance on these digital devices, students have become disempowered, giving power over to their digital devices and not relying on the power within themselves. Students are no longer independent and freethinking; instead, they have become overly

dependent on their smartphones, laptops and tablets, thereby disabling their capacity for self-awareness, self-reflection and empathy towards others. Digital devices are numbing students' sensibilities. This is reflected in the classroom when students, challenged to engage in a literary text, cannot read it deeply and respond meaningfully to the complexities of the human condition contained within it.

When students are fixated on their digital devices, they are no longer aware of who and what is around them. Although this is not always a problem, it becomes one when a student is in class and engaged in reading a literary text or in a dialogue around a literary text. Just yesterday, I asked my students "What makes a class interesting?" They responded, "When everyone is present, participating and asking interesting questions."

My point here is not to demonize technology; rather, it is to call attention to and address the simple truth that technology, specifically digital devices, is having a negative impact on students' ability to focus and actively engage in their learning experience.

> In World Literature, I always turned my phone off, this is one way I blocked the distractions from clogging up my brain. If I don't not have it turned off, once I hear or feel a buzz I automatically start to think of all the possibilities it could be on my phone. I did not realize how much my mind drifted off when I would have my phone on my desk in other classes. By now understanding this I no longer have my phone on during class any class times, and when I am doing work I keep my phone in a desk and turned off. (student, spring 2016)

With the rise of advanced technology, students are often more comfortable being in virtual relationships than in personal face-to-face relationships with the people around them and need help to see the pull

that technology can have on them. I am concerned digital devices are affecting students' ability to be present, engage deeply with a text and with one another. Each semester, I witness more and more students so preoccupied with their digital devices that they are no longer free, no longer at leisure to read deeply, question critically, think creatively, and respond meaningfully to a literary text, to one another and to the challenges within the world around them.

Digital devices are diminishing students' ability to be attentive to the present moment. One student commented, "with all this new technology it is getting harder to pull myself away from the distractions and attachments" (student, fall 2016). They struggle to be present to themselves, to one another and by extension in the classroom to the complexities of the human condition exposed in the world of literary texts. In *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age,* Turkle (2015) offers an insight from a conversation she had with a college student named Haley.

> Haley thinks that realistically, seven minutes is the amount of time you have to wait to see if something interesting is going to happen in a conversation. It's the amount of time you should have to wait before you should give up and take out your phone. *If you want to be in real conversation, you have to be willing to put in those seven minutes*. She says that they are not necessarily interesting minutes. In those seven minutes, "you might be bored." (p. 153)

What Turkle highlights from her conversation with Haley is the struggle for students to be present to another long enough to engage in meaningful conversation. In effect, students are unable to enter into a personal relationship and sustain a meaningful conversation. Students find it difficult to have conversation because they have to consider "the other" and be willing to listen to the other's personal story. Where

conversations take time, digital devices make obsolete the necessity to show up, be present, attentive and patient, to wait for something interesting to arise through the face-to-face conversation. As Haley remarks, "in real conversation, you have to be willing to put in those seven minutes." If students do not have the capacity to enter into relationship and wait to have a meaningful conversation, if they do not know how to create time and space to listen deeply to "the other" then they will not be able to see and understand the literary text as a doorway into the myriad of human relationships.

Students today find it difficult to unplug and detach themselves from their digital devices because these devices pacify them, entertain them and empower them. Yet, surprisingly, they actually learn to appreciate a "no cell phone policy."

> Having the strict no phone policy during class helped me focus on what was going on in class, where in some classes I find myself so worried about social media and who is or is not texting me at the moment that I find myself being so lost in class from not having my focus on the class itself. (spring, 2016)

Notice the above student remarked that in other classes she is "distracted" because she is worrying about "social media." For educators, this raises another important question: How does all this time online affect students' ability to think critically and read deeply? Carr (2011) highlights that as early as the 1950s Marshall McLuhan suggested that mediums of information in fact shape thought, later noting, "what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation" (p. 6). McLuhan's observation in the 1950s offers an insight into students attending institutions of higher learning today. They too, struggle with concentration and the need for contemplation in their lives.

Maryann Wolf, a professor and researcher at Tufts University, is interested in the way the internet is altering our capacity for deep reading. In her article "Our 'deep reading' brain: Its digital evolution poses questions" (2010), she poses the question: "will we lose the 'deep reading' brain in a digital culture?" In it she states, "soundbites, text bites, and mind bites are a reflection of a culture that has forgotten or become too distracted by and too drawn to the next piece of new information to allow itself time to think." Wolf, a professor of child development and neuroscience is interested in how the brain develops the ability to read. In *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain* (2007) she questions whether all this time online searching, scrolling, and streaming is rewiring students' neuro-circuitry, resulting in a weakened capacity for deep reading and concentration (pp. 14-16). Even Wolf herself noticed one day while sitting down to read Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* that she too, was struggling to read deeply. Turkle (2015) notes that it was this personal struggle with deep reading that led Wolf to explore further the impact on-line reading was having on our brains (p. 221).

However, McLuhan and Wolf are not alone in their critique of the relationship between the human person and technology, Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brain* (2011), has also become aware of the fact that his brain is also being re-shaped by technology.

> Over the last few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going –so far as I can tell-but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get

caught up in the twist of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. (pp. 5-6)

Another researcher Gary Small, a professor of Psychology at UCLA and the director of its Memory and Aging Center, has also been studying the effects of digital technology on the brain. He too, concurs with McLuhan, Wolf and Carr on the fact that the internet is changing our brains. In *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (2008), Small and Vorgan explain that the daily use of digital devices, i.e. computers, smartphones, search engines, "stimulates brain cell alteration and neurotransmitter release, gradually strengthening new neural pathways in our brain while weakening old ones" (p. 1). The weakening old neural pathways, the ones' associated with deep reading, are what led McLuhan, Wolf and Carr to struggle with concentration, deep reading and contemplation.

Although McLuhan, Wolf, Carr and other brain researchers like Small and Vorgan recognize that technology itself is neutral, time spent online via technologies is not neutral. Quite the contrary, time spent searching, scrolling and surfing is having a significant impact on our brains. The neuro-circuitry needed to surf the web is not the same neuro-circuitry needed to concentrate and read deeply. For example, the mental activity needed to surf the web is agile and quicker, while the mental activity needed to dive into a text is intentional, slower and leisurely. According to Small and Vorgan (2011), by surfing the web, we "sacrifice the facility that makes deep reading possible. We revert to being 'mere decoders of information'" (p. 122).

Whether or not we want to admit it, educators, especially educators in the Humanities, are faced with a serious challenge. Students arrive in our classrooms with a deficit. Many students cannot concentrate, contemplate, and read deeply. Students (spring 2016) have shared with me that they do not know how to read deeply. "My generation is definitely know for 'skimming' instead of reading and re-reading to fully understand the concepts and important points in the stories." However, all is not lost. The good news according to the research of Wolf, Carr, Small and others is that through continuous practice we can re-wire our brain and strengthen its ability to focus, read deeply and ponder. Scientists have discovered that the brain is highly adaptable, meaning its plasticity allows it to build new circuitry through practice (Carr, 2011, p. 5). Turkle (2015) agrees, noting that although "our brains are wired for talk, we can also train them to do deep reading, the kind that demands concentration on a sustained narrative thread with complex characters" (p. 69).

What research highlights is the necessity of practice. Students need to exercise their mental capabilities by stimulating and engaging their neuro-circuitry in deep reading, critical thinking and contemplation or else these neuro-pathways will begin to weaken and give way to the other neuro-pathways, those activated by constant searching, scrolling and surfing. According to Norman Doige, author of *The brain that changes itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (2007), "if we stop exercising our mental skills, we do not just forget them: the brain map space for those skills is turned over to skills we practice instead" (p. 317). Therefore, educators, particularly those in the Humanities, may benefit from incorporating a method and practice that helps students to develop and strengthen their ability to focus on a literary text, read it deeply, reflect on it, and interpret it in a meaningful way.

The Reawakening of Contemplative Education

In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger (1977) offered the following insight: "[M]an becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens and hears, and not one who is simply constrained to obey" (p. 25). What Heidegger highlights is the need for human beings to develop their ability to listen to and discern the essence of what it means to be fully human. When human beings learn to listen to their inner self in conversation with others, they can begin to discover hidden possibilities for the transformation of humanity and the world we inhabit together. They are no longer controlled by the decisions/algorithms offered by a non-living, non-questioning, non-ethical digital device. By engaging in active listening, conversations, and discernment, human beings remain the subject of their own experiences and destiny, not mere objects mastered and manipulated by technology. Students can begin to think, consider, question, ponder and discern meaning for themselves. What Heidegger points out is that in a technologically obsessed culture, what is actually at stake is human freedom. In his Memorial Address (1966), Heidegger offers the following solution:

> We can use technical devices, and yet with proper use also keep ourselves so free of them, that we may let go of them at any time. We can use the technical devices as they ought to be used, and also let them alone as something which does not affect our inner and real core. We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature. (p. 54)

In keeping with Heidegger's insight, students who have given over their power to their digital devices are at risk of losing their freedom.

Tethered to their digital devices, students risk their freedom to learn, to read deeply, and think critically so that they can respond intelligently and creatively to the challenges and problems of the human condition and the issues facing the world around them. The remedy, therefore, is to help students to detach consciously from their digital devices, and engage in deep listening to insure that their sensibilities will not become "dominated, warped and confused" by their over-attachment to digital devices. Perhaps surprising to some, there are students who welcome this challenge: "continue to challenge dependency on cell phones; this course made me see the effects technology is having on my own generation and I am grateful for that" (fall 2016).

In "The Memorial Address" (1966), Heidegger points out two distinct types of thinking: calculative thinking, which "computes and races from one concept to the next. It never stops and never collects itself" (p. 46) and meditative thinking, which "dwell[s] on what lies close and meditate[s] on what is closest; upon that which concerns us…" (p. 47) According to Heidegger, "man is a thinking, that is a meditative being" (p. 47). He has the ability "to ponder," remain open and reflective. Meditative thinking is the skill required for sustained focus and critical reflective reading. As Heidegger notes, "but-it is one thing to have heard and read something, that is, merely to take notice, it is another thing to understand what we have heard and read, that is, to ponder." (p. 52). In the Humanities, students need to acquire the skills for meditative thinking in order to notice, understand and ponder the human condition exposed in the literary text they are reading.

The Humanities, as an academic discipline, study human experience, human culture and its accompanying zeitgeist, its purpose being not the indoctrination of the students, but the cultivation of the soul. Using stories, essays and other literary texts, the Humanities offer students the opportunity to be challenged and inspired by the stories of others who have lived, reflected and struggled with the human condition. Through

their deep reading of and critical reflection on these texts, students can begin to awaken from their slumber, grow into and actualize their fullest human potential. By engaging in deep reading and critical thinking, students are better equipped to read the world they are living in and be prepared to address its current challenges.

Over the past twenty years, the emergence of the contemplative movement within higher education has emphasized the value of first-person experiences as critical in the learning process. As Barbezat and Bush (2014) note,

> By legitimizing students' experiences, we change their relationship to the material being covered. In much of formal education, students are actively dissuaded from finding themselves in what they are studying; all too often, students nervously ask whether or not they may use 'I' in their papers. A direct inquiry brought about through contemplative introspection validates and deepens their understanding of both themselves and the material covered. (p. 6)

Self-charged with the task of helping students to grow into their fullest potential and become compassionate contributing members of society, the contemplative movement within higher education strives to develop and support students as first person learners, subjects of their learning process. It is not a new movement; rather it is a re-discovery of an ancient movement reaching all the way back to ancient Greece, where the purpose of education was to know the self, develop the self and contribute ethically and virtuously to society. In the ancient Greek philosophical schools, students' minds were not perceived as empty containers waiting to be filled with the teacher's wealth of information; rather, students were actively engaged in their own learning. It was the

active engagement in the learning process that led students to develop self-awareness, while deepening critical inquiry.

However, today, as noted by Palmer and Zajonc (2010), "our institutions of higher education seldom embrace a genuinely transformative view of the pedagogies they consciously or more often unconsciously adopt. Our view of the student is too often as a vessel to be filled or a person to be trained" (p. 101). Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard College offered the following critique of higher education: Universities have forgotten their larger educational role for college students. They succeed, better than ever, as creators and repositories of knowledge. But they have forgotten that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to…help [students] grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college better human beings. (Taylor, 2010, p. xii)

Using various contemplative practices from around the world, contemplative educators guide students into contemplative practices to build and strengthen their abilities to concentrate and contemplate. Today, the reading of literary texts as a valuable and meaningful way to develop and strengthen students' abilities to concentrate and contemplate is undervalued. As noted by Barbezat and Bush (2014), contemplative practices as part of the Humanities "provide the opportunity for students to develop insight and creativity, hone their concentration skills and deeply inquire about what means most to them" (p. 8). Contemplative practices by nature incorporate specific techniques to slow down the reading process and create space for silence, leisure, deep reading, critical thinking, reflection and multidimensional responses. By integrating contemplative practices back into the Humanities - as originally taught within the Greek and monastic schools - students become engage in their own learning process. As subjective learners and with the help of contemplative practices, students can learn to detach from their digital devices and re-connect to themselves and can

begin to train/re-train their minds to focus, read deeply, think critically and ponder what they are reading.

Contemplative practices shift students' attention away from learning about something to the experiencing of what they are learning. In *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, Barbezat and Bush (2014) lay out four main objectives of contemplative practices:
1. Focus and attention building, mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability
2. Contemplation and introspection into the content of the course, in which students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material
3. Compassion, connection to others and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspects of education 4. Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity and insight. (p. 11)

Educators from various disciplines select from a wide variety of contemplative practices to help students bring the material they are learning into the subjective and intersubjective realms where they can encounter the material thoughtfully and meaningfully.

In a technologically saturated culture, contemplative practices can bring balance to students and offer them ways to slow down the learning process and deepen mental activity by activating the neuro-circuitry needed for deep reading, critical thinking and reflection. In his article, "Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom" (2004), Toby Hart states: "contemplative techniques offer both a portal to our inner world and an internal technology—a kind of mindscience— enabling us to use more of the mind rather than be driven by habitual responses or emotional impulsivity" (p. 46). Instead of relying on external technology to hold their information, contemplative practices help students to strengthen their minds and build an internal information network.

Students learn to develop their memory, make meaningful connections with information already within their memories and bring these thoughts, ideas and feeling into a productive dialogue.

As an educator, I am deeply concerned with the amount of time students spend online. I am not a Luddite; however, like McLuhan, Wolf, Carr and Turkle, I too see that all this time online is having negative consequences on students' abilities to concentrate, read deeply, think critically, contemplate, and respond meaningfully to the human condition and the literary texts that explore the human condition. I find that students read a literary text the same way they read information online. They scroll, search, and surf through the literary text to grab bits and bytes of information, unaware of the consequences their time online is having on their brains. As Carr (2011) explains:

> As the time we spend scanning Web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to quiet reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. We gain new skills and perspectives, but lose old ones. (p. 120)

As students spend increasing amounts of time online they are in danger of losing their ability to read deeply. Not only do they miss the deeper meaning of the literary text, but they are also in danger of reducing their self-awareness and freedom, since in order to be free, students need a modicum of self-awareness.

Freedom requires that students think for themselves. It also requires that students are in control of the technology and not the other way around. Technology is a powerful tool that has the ability to manipulate and persuade thinking. "The Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively" (Carr, 2011, p. 119). When students rely solely on their digital devices they short-circuit their capacity to read deeply, think critically, and respond meaningfully. Technology drives, shapes, enhances, but it can also diminishes both human thought and human relationships. Students need to question whether their digital devices are enhancing or diminishing their humanity and their capacity for self-awareness and compassion.

The more unaware students are of their techno-addiction, the more they will be disconnected and alienated from themselves, others and the world around them. Due to their fixation with their digital devices, they will not be able to be attentive to the people around them; they will not be able to develop and maintain healthy relationships with others, and run the risk of being overpowered and dominated by technology. Students who are overpowered by technology cannot focus, listen, question and interpret meaning. They cannot develop and sustain meaningful conversations or learn to understand themselves, others and the world in which they live. If students cannot engage in meaningful conversations and understand others, they will not be equipped to read accurately the signs of the times. If students cannot read deeply, they cannot discern meaning and respond intelligently, ethically and compassionately to themselves, others and the world around them.

Lectio Divina

If the brain's plasticity allows it to be adaptable as suggested by Wolf, Turkle, Carr, Small and other scientists, then perhaps contemplative

practices, which teach sustained attention, concentration and contemplation, can offer a way to build and strengthen the neuro-circuitry that is diminished from time spent searching, scrolling and surfing the Web. In the realm of contemplative practices, I suggest the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina*, a practice originally developed to teach students how to read and interpret both sacred and other literary texts. *Lectio divina* teaches and builds sustained attention, deep reading and critical thinking; the same processes that Wolf and Carr realized were diminishing in them due to their increased time spent on the Web. I propose that *lectio divina* can offer a remedy for students who struggle to read deeply, think critically and ponder meaningfully the human condition and the literary texts that explore the human condition.

By engaging in contemplative practices, students become more self-aware and more integrated human beings. Since contemplative practices are designed to reposition the students as the subjects of the learning process, students can learn to detach from their digital devices and become grounded in themselves. These practices can empower students to limit their time on their digital devices, pay attention to their inner world and be more deliberate in the search for meaning and purpose in their lives. I have used contemplative practices in my classroom and have witnessed firsthand the many positive benefits that slow reading, meditation, introspection, and contemplation have on students' ability to focus, concentrate, read deeply, think critically and consider the human condition.

However, I also discovered that contemplative practices can sometimes confuse and disorient students when these practices are not contextualized and applied to the course material and the overall learning process. Aware of this issue, I wanted to find a more comprehensive contemplative approach that I could weave into the course material and learning outcomes, so I turned to an ancient monastic practice called *lectio divina* that I learned about in 2004. Over

the years, I have worked to re-appropriate this method for my World Literature I course. I have found it to be a fruitful contemplative method to help students develop sustained attention, critical thinking and reflection. Through *lectio divina*, students learn to become the subject of their learning experience and engage in and grow through the learning process.

Lectio divina is a contemplative practice, composed of a four-fold movement (*lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio*) that positions students as the subjects of the learning process. Through the practice of *lectio divina* students learn how to read deeply, think critically and respond meaningfully to the enduring questions of humanity. As students moved through the *lectio divina* method, they leave their digital devices behind and enter into the world of the text. Once in the text, they continue to dive deeper as they move from the objective world of the text to the subjective world of the self were they began to sense, feel, intuit and experience the wisdom embedded within the text.

Lectio, the first movement in the *lectio divina* method, teaches students to slow down, focus and concentrate on the text before them. Once students begin to slow down the reading process, they begin to enter more deeply into the world of the text and the complexity of the human condition explored within the text. They begin to encounter characters and the joys and struggles that they face. The more deeply they encounter the characters, the more they get to know them. As they begin to listen to their stories and struggles, they begin to identify with and understand them and as a result, their minds, hearts and souls begin to open and become transformed in the process.

Lectio teaches students not only to read a text, but to read their lives, the lives of others and the world around them. *Lectio* is a way of reading, not only a text but also life itself. When students learn to slow down their reading of a text, they also learn to slow down their reading of life

unfolding all around them. This ability to slow down and read deeply is even more critical today than in the monastic schools. In the monastic schools, the monks had distractions, mostly interior distractions. One method I use in class to slow down the reading process is to have students engage in a type of performative reading. Performative reading engages students physically, intellectually and emotionally. It brings the text to life, making reading enjoyable and memorable, for students and assisting them on their journey to uncover wisdom and truth with the text.

One approach I use to introduce students to performative reading and bring a text to life is through hand gestures. For example, when reading the *Prologue to Gilgamesh* listed below, I demonstrate to the students how to tell the story using hand gestures. I explain to them that reading a story with hand gestures will help them pay attention to, remember and experience what they are reading.

He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions,
From exaltation to despair, had been granted a vision
into the great mystery, the secret places,
the primeval days before the Flood. He had journeyed
to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted
but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets,
had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive
wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. (Mitchell, 2004, p. 69)

After I read and demonstrate the hand gestures to a passage from *Gilgamesh,* I invite students to stand up and as we move around the circle (created at the beginning of class), they mimic my gestures as each one leads the passage. At first, they have to look at the text, but by the time, we get to about the seventh person; many of the students have already memorized the passage. Although at first this process is a bit odd to them, slowly they begin to enjoy the experience. At the end of the

semester, a student offered the following comment on reading *Gilgamesh* with hand gestures.

> Putting motions to words helps you remember what you are reading…The very first time we read, we read *Gilgamesh* and I remember feeling shy about putting motions to words. "He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exaltation to despair," (69) and "He had journey to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted but whole" (69). We put motions to the words by moving our arms and hands like we were searching for something when Gilgamesh had seen everything. To show exaltation we threw our arms up in the air and then brought them back down and looked sulky for despair….I am surprised at myself for still remembering what we did because most of the time I would read something for a class and immediately forget it when I did not have to know it anymore…If we had not put the motion to the words I would not remember the beginning of the text. It helps me study because putting certain motions to things helps my memory. (student, spring 2015)

Students are surprised at how well they remember a text after going through this exercise. They feel a sense of pride for what they were able to accomplish in a short period of time. One student even commented that she went back to her dorm and shared what she learned with her friends.

> We did weird things to understand the text better. First, we stood up and put actions to each line of the prologue and repeated it until we could do it without the professor's instruction. Since I have a horrible memory, I was really nervous and a little discouraged. But, after class, I found myself showing my friends what I learned and did the whole

performance with my roommate by memory. (student, spring, 2016)

Performative reading not only engaged this student, but it strengthened her memory, developed her self-confidence, and inspired her to transfer her learning to another.

Today students still have interior distractions but in addition, they have the external distractions brought about in the age of modern technology. Technology accelerates the pace of life, not allowing time to consider, reflect and ponder. To slow down is to value life; it is to create time and space to consider deeply that, which is before us - whether it be a text, ourselves, another or the world in which we dwell; it is to live the examined life. Slow reading is a critical practice in the Humanities. As students practice the art of slow reading they learn to focus, concentrate and encounter the voice of the other whether in the text or in life.

Meditatio, the second movement in the *lectio divina* method, teaches students how to interpret a text for deeper meaning and purpose. Through *meditatio*, students learn how to contextualize a text and ruminate on it as they plunge below the surface of the literal meaning to discover hidden deeper meanings. The practice of rumination builds memory as students learn to organize and store thoughts and information within their own minds. *Meditatio* also teaches students how to analyze and interpret the various meaning of texts. They learn to question and discern meaning for a particular time period as well as to question and discern meaning that they can apply to their own lives.

After we engaged in performative reading on the prologue to *Gilgamesh*, we begin the *meditatio* process to dig within the story for deeper meaning, by posing questions.

What do you know about Gilgamesh?

What would you like to know more about?
How do you imagine Gilgamesh?
How do you imagine life in the City of Uruk?

Students share what they noticed, such as: Gilgamesh endured a lot; he went on a journey that was difficult; he knew hidden mysteries and secrets; he returned exhausted but whole. Their interest and curiosity, naturally sparked through performative reading, prepared them to engage in reading *Gilgamesh*. The students want to find out who Gilgamesh is, what journey he went on, why he is exhausted, what secrets he knew, and what made him whole. In addition, I have students engage their imaginations by drawing pictures of the city of Uruk and inviting them to walk around the class as they imagined Gilgamesh strutting through his city.

The art of interpretation is another critical practice in the Humanities. *Meditatio* not only trains students to slow down and interpret a text for deeper meaning, but as students slow down and learn how to interpret a text for deeper meaning, they begin to learn how to slow down and interpret the deeper meaning of life. They learn to ruminate on the fundamental questions of humanity. They learn to store within their memory the insights shared by others who have dialogued, reflected and written on the human condition. They build self confidence as they learn to rely on their own power to remember and ability to make meaningful connections, and not rely solely on their digital devices to do this work for them. *Meditatio* also teaches students how to analyze the insights of others for deeper meaning that can be applied to life today.

Oratio, the third movement in the *lectio divina* method, teaches students how to respond meaningfully to the texts that they are reading. Students can only respond meaningfully once they have understood, analyzed, considered and reflected on what they have read, all of which takes time. Again, the slow deliberate pace of the contemplative life is essential for

students to deepen their understanding of what they have read and offer an intelligent and meaningful response to what they are learning. Authentic responses take time and cannot be preempted, but arise naturally from the processes of deep reading, dialogue, interpretation and reflection.

I encourage students to respond in a number of ways. Students respond orally in class, write both informal and formal reflections, create and perform a modern rendition of the text, and create booklets and or informative literature newsletters. For example, I have students who have written and performed songs about Gilgamesh, created and performed for the class modern interpretations of a section of the story, and have even had students create their own prologue to a new story about a female character named Gilgamesha and her trusted friend and tutor Enkidia. Students have shared with me that they enjoy watching each other's interpretations of the story and are always amazed with the various ways in which students respond to the text, commenting: "I loved watching everyone's and seeing the text in a new light" (student, spring, 2016). Once students learn to respond intelligently and meaningfully to the complexities inherent within a text, they are better equipped to respond intelligently and meaningfully to the struggles inherent in their own lives, the lives of others and the world in which they dwell, and give voice to them. As students practice responding to a text, they begin to recognize their own inherent struggles. They begin to see how they may also struggle with similar issues uncovered through their time in a literary text. As they become more aware of their own struggles, they develop the capacity to respond to them with new awareness. They are less likely to react to situations that arise in their lives and more likely to reflect and respond with deep thought and care.

Contemplatio, the fourth movement, is the culmination and fruit of the *lectio divina* practice. Rooted in the Greek understanding of theōria (wonder and awe), *contemplatio* is an experience with Beauty,

Goodness, Truth and Wisdom. *Contemplatio* is not a practice; it is an awakening to a new or deeper realization. The practice of *lectio divina* not only guides students to discover the deeper hidden Wisdom embedded within the text, but to experience this deeper hidden Wisdom embedded within themselves. Once students have an experience with Wisdom, they are transformed. They know something now that they had not known before. Their minds and hearts have grown larger and the soul has awakened and been transformed by the experience.

> In *Gilgamesh,* I learned that you have one life on Earth, so take advantage of what life has to offer. Do what makes you happy and do something meaningful while you are here. Appreciate everything that comes in and out of your life, not everyone or everything is meant to stay, but there is something always to be learned… (student, spring, 2016)

The experience of *contemplatio* is the whole purpose of education, since its goal is the growth and transformation of the students. As John J. Conley notes in "The Humanities and the Soul" (2015), it is "to awaken [the students'] souls to deeper ways of being human" (p. 29).

No matter how advanced technology becomes, students still need to know how to read deeply, interpret critically and respond meaningfully to the texts they read, their lives, the lives of others and the world around them. Students still need a pathway to experience Beauty, Truth, the Good, and Wisdom, since these experiences will continue to inform, transform, and nourish their lives. We live in a different time from the ancient Greek and monastic schools, but the same fundamental questions of humanity endure. When I pick up a literary text to read with my students, we enter into an aspect of the human condition and begin to explore the way in which this particular literary text is speaking to our soul and the soul of all humanity. We wonder what we might unlock as

we read and explore the text for deeper meaning, not only within the text, but within ourselves.

As we enter into the world of the text, we intentionally leave our digital devices and their mode of calculative thinking behind. We are intentional, we work to open time and space and build trust as we slowly begin to enter into the text and walk through it together as we encounter characters and explore their thoughts and feelings. None of this is easy. Every day we have to meet the challenge to welcome the contemplative life in the classroom. We have to remind each other to strengthen our concentration, challenge our thinking and deepen our reflection. We have to allow space for each other to explore our thoughts and feelings without judging and criticizing one another. We have to hold space for what Heidegger (1966) refers to as "meditative thinking" and open ourselves to the myriad possibilities of what we can learn as we stroll through "the vineyard of the text," (Illich, 1993) together, experiencing the fruits it has to offer.

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