



CONTEMPLATIVE READING

“What a man takes in by contemplation, that he pours out in love.”

–Meister Eckhart

OVERVIEW

This practice, inspired by the lectio divina method, asks students to read a text slowly and carefully and then reflect on it, helping to cultivate deeper awareness and understanding.

LEVELS

- Middle School
- High School
- College

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To deepen students’ understanding of poems, speeches, letters, short essays, or other texts
- At the beginning and/or end of a unit conducive to deep reflection
- To cultivate students’ awareness of their own personal meaning that they bring to a text

TIME REQUIRED

- 10-30 minutes

MATERIALS

- A text conducive to contemplative engagement

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Improve their understanding of a text
- Bring deeper insight, enjoyment, and relaxed awareness to the act of reading
- Engage with other readers and their responses to the text
- Counteract the urge to rush through a reading assignment

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Reflection

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Select an appropriate text or poem and experience it yourself through slow reading. How does reading a text this way make you feel? Does your relationship to the text change as a result of this method?

INSTRUCTIONS

SETTING UP THE PRACTICE

- If possible, have students arrange themselves in a circle, each with a copy of the reading.
- Introduce the practice to students:
 - *Today, we're going to read a text through a process of close, contemplative reading that makes the simple words on the page become clearer and more meaningful. It can bring greater understanding and connection, something easily missed by a superficial, quick reading.*
- Let students know that it will be necessary to project their voices and assure them that it is all right to stumble or pass to a neighbor. [It is important that students feel comfortable and know that they can have the freedom to hesitate or even opt out. This provides a sense of freedom that allows them to embrace fear rather than ball up and fight it.]

READING THE TEXT

- Tell students:
 - *Sit quietly and relax your mind and body for one minute. [Pause.]*

- *Now we're going to read the entire text aloud slowly. Each student will slowly read one or two sentences or lines of the text/poem, "passing along" the reading to the next reader. It is all right to stumble through the words or to pass one's turn.*
- After the whole text has been read aloud, practice one minute of silence and reflection.
- Read the text aloud again, slowly, passing from student to student.
- Pause for another minute of silent reflection.
- Tell students:
 - *Now we're going to each take a turn to share one word of the text/poem that resonates for you, without explaining why.*
- Hold another minute of silent reflection.
- As appropriate for the size of the group, have some or all of the students share a short response to the reading that was particularly striking to them. Encourage students to listen attentively to one another without correcting or disputing what is said.
- Close the practice with another minute of silence.

CLOSURE

Leave some time at the end of the session to allow students to reflect on their experience. How did this process feel? What did they discover about themselves? Did it change how they felt about the text or reading in general?

SOURCE

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CMind) transforms higher education through contemplative practice. Founded in 1997, CMind organizes conferences, retreats, and the annual Summer Session on Contemplative Learning in Higher Education; creates and identifies useful resources; and connects a global, multidisciplinary community of educators through our primary initiative, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. See <http://contemplativemind.org> for more information.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

What ideas, questions, and new topics to explore arose from students' responses? How does this practice affect students' appreciation or understanding of the topic being studied? Did this practice impact the classroom as a community?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A recent study focused on university students who took a course that used [contemplative pedagogy](#), including a form of lectio divina, as they read young adult literature. Results suggest that students who used this contemplative reading practice gained a deeper insight into themselves and the content, and also regained their passion for reading and writing.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The “outside-in” approach to education doesn’t always connect [academic content](#) to students’ lives and often leaves students questioning the meaning of what they’re learning. This approach can eventually lead to decreased student motivation and well-being. Indeed, studies have found that students who set personal goals and take time to think about the person they want to become enjoy [greater academic success and engage in less risky behavior](#).

Motivated by both their personal experience and their observation of students over the years, the professors who designed the course above challenged the “outside-in” approach. Instead of asking students to deconstruct texts, they invited students to “enjoy them and engage with them in a way that helps them construct meaning for themselves as they ask: who am I, why am I here, and why should I care?”

The outcome? As one student wrote at the end of class: “What I loved about this class was that it was more than the typical ‘academic’ class: I learned more about myself, my beliefs, and how to think than in any other class. The irony lies in the fact that I had no idea I even needed to learn any of these things.”

TERMS OF USE

Thank you for downloading this resource! Please feel free to share it with friends, teachers, colleagues, and anyone else who might benefit from it.

Greater Good in Education is a free online resource produced by UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center. Visit our website at ggie.berkeley.edu to choose from more than 300 practices that can be incorporated into all aspects of a school community, from academic instruction to staff meetings to engagement with parents.

Please email us at ggsceducation@berkeley.edu with any questions about our programs and resources for educators.

With gratitude,
Greater Good in Education