

*Engaging Diversity and Building Liberative Community:
Issues Related to Incorporating Practice into the Christian Spirituality Classroom*

Beth R. Anderson
Graduate Theological Union

Abstract: While spiritual practice has the potential to enhance student learning and build a liberative classroom community, some scholars in the field of Christian spirituality highlight the danger of diluting academic rigor by bringing practice into traditional academic space. This paper brings together insights from the discipline of Christian spirituality with the critical pedagogy of educational theorists. The final goal of this project is to demonstrate how incorporating practice into the Christian spirituality classroom can engage issues of diversity and foster a liberative learning community.

Introduction

In the academic discipline of Christian spirituality, there exists a tension between maintaining an appropriate academic distance from the topics at hand and allowing space within the classroom for the practice of particular spiritual traditions or rituals. While practice has the potential to enhance student learning and build a liberative classroom community, some scholars in the field of Christian spirituality highlight the dangers of bringing spiritual practice into traditional academic space. Others embrace the use of practice as a pedagogical tool but are not thoroughly comfortable with the “how” of placing academic learning alongside spiritual experience. I stand with the latter group of scholars and educators, and I seek to bring together insights from the discipline of Christian spirituality with the work of educational theorists in order to better understand and inform my own experience of teaching in a practice-oriented classroom. The final goal of this project is to demonstrate how incorporating practice into the Christian spirituality classroom can engage issues of diversity and foster a liberative learning community.

The academic discipline of Christian spirituality seeks to explore and explain “lived experience,” and the boundaries of such experience are often difficult to define. I begin with a working definition borrowed from the opening pages of *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*: “Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”¹

Experience is inherently diverse – it is embodied in different ways by each individual involved in the “project of life integration.” There is a special tension, I argue, when the act of practice raises issues related to diversity in the classroom. How does a teacher within this discipline foster and honor students’ diverse lived experiences (their own spiritualities) and their encounters with the lived experiences of others (the course content) while continuing to inhabit the “appropriate” academic space?

¹ Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

This paper will rely on observations from a seminal article in the field entitled “The Role of Practice in the Study of Christian Spirituality,” by Elizabeth Liebert, insights based on theories of critical pedagogy, as well as an exploration of findings from a collaborative project by members of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality entitled *Teaching Spirituality Well*. In addition, my resources will include experiences as a teaching assistant for a course on the history, theology, and practice of *lectio divina*.

Before going further, it is important to attend to one additional issue of terminology. In this paper I will be working with Elizabeth Liebert’s definition of the term “practice” in relation to the Christian spirituality classroom: “‘Practice’ is the intentional and repeated bringing of one’s lived spirituality into the various theaters of one’s scholarly work and attending to what happens when one does,” Liebert writes.² This definition goes beyond practice as simply referring to an individual or collective activity, as in Margaret Miles’ definition of practice as “whatever people do.”³ Liebert’s definition extends practice beyond specific rituals or prayers found within the history of Christian spirituality, and it incorporates *reflection* as an integral part of practice itself (not as a separate movement divorced from the experiential piece).

Understood in this way, practice can be an opportunity for students to authentically voice their experience without being held up as “the example” of their particular race, culture, gender, or any other exclusivism. Those voices are indispensable, as they aid students and scholars alike in contextualizing their own identities, which is an essential task in the self-implicating discipline of Christian spirituality.⁴ As Janet Ruffing stated in her 2011 Presidential Address to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, “Narratives from those with whom we are less familiar can serve as correctives for our own oppressive or myopic views.”

Engaging Conversations About Practice in the Discipline of Christian Spirituality⁵

In her article entitled “A Hermeneutical Approach to Christian Spirituality,” Schneiders begins by distinguishing between two spheres within the study of spirituality: 1) the formative

² Elizabeth Liebert, “Practice,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 503.

³ Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 2.

⁴ Claiming one’s own identity is integral to one’s full participation in the project of liberative education in any discipline, whether one participates in the role of student or teacher. As Paulo Freire writes, “Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. . . . They call themselves ignorant and say the ‘professor’ is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen.” Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 63.

⁵ A number of scholars within the discipline of Christian spirituality have tackled the issue of incorporating practice into the classroom. In this section I will outline the views of Sandra Schneiders, who problematizes the use of practice, and then I will further illuminate the views of Liebert and other proponents of practice.

sphere – in which students are preparing for ministry of some type in a denominationally-exclusive setting where there is general agreement on “appropriate” practices, and 2) the research sphere – in which students are pursuing a doctoral degree or research-focused masters degree.

In the formative sphere, Schneiders deems practice a fine pedagogical resource, provided the expectation of the students and professors is to promote growth in personal and professional – but not academic – capacities. This distinction is crucial for Schneiders – practice may have a place in personal spiritual formation for those who are training for ministerial roles where the goal of study is professional preparation and not contributing to the “production of new knowledge in the field of spirituality.”⁶

In the research sphere, where the goal of study *is* the production of knowledge, Schneiders sees practice as problematic. She writes, “In any case, I have very serious reservations about the appropriateness of including any kind of personal practice aimed directly at the spiritual formation of the students in the academic field of spirituality at the research level.”⁷ I do not entirely disagree with Schneiders here. However, I offer that there *is* value in including practice in order to increase the scholar’s understanding of the discipline’s content.⁸

In later work Schneiders continues to question the place of practice, warning, “Students of various religious backgrounds (or none) participating in a graduate research seminar might find attempts to induce and/or structure their religious experience or require its revelation manipulative or even violent.”⁹ Schneiders concludes with this pedagogical reminder: “As with any other subject in the curriculum, teachers must make prudential decisions about what, when, and how experiential material or methods should be introduced into a course in spirituality.”¹⁰ It is helpful to have a voice like Schneiders’ in this conversation – she reminds teachers of Christian spirituality to tread lightly and to respect the lived experience of their students.

Turning now to the proponents of bringing practice into the Christian spirituality classroom, I return to Elizabeth Liebert’s original presidential address on the topic.¹¹ There Liebert clarifies her definition of practice: “To many, ‘practice’ connotes a particular spiritual

⁶ Sandra Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach to Christian Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 58.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Schneiders offers the caveat of “controlled introspection” as potentially helpful in increasing understanding of spirituality, but she follows immediately with this blunt reminder: “Introspective knowledge must be rigorously criticized.”

⁹ Sandra Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 31.

¹⁰ Ibid.

discipline. But, as I am using it, ‘practice’ stands for the activity of continually bringing – practicing – lived spirituality into our scholarship.”¹²

With this rich definition, Liebert finds it quite possible that there would be a lacuna in the production of knowledge within the discipline of Christian spirituality if practice were not involved. Additionally, Liebert directly addresses the concern Schneiders raises regarding how students of other or no religious background might perceive practice in the classroom; Liebert states that practice may be constitutive of scholarly work even when the scholar is not working from within the Christian tradition.¹³ She acknowledges the need for sensitivity on the part of both student(s) and teacher, especially when the classroom contains religious (and I would add, cultural and ethnic) diversity. However, that sensitivity need not preclude the use of practice – though it makes the educator’s preparation and the reflection aspect of practice more important.

Educators in Christian spirituality continue exploring the options and establishing best practices for incorporating practice into their classrooms. In 2008, a group of scholars and educators coordinated a project with the help of a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Religion and Theology on the topic of *Teaching Spirituality Well*.¹⁴

The Wabash group noted that one of the main characteristics of teaching in the discipline of Christian spirituality is the “centrality of shared practice—in both scholar’s and student’s life-work.”¹⁵ The group’s report does not reveal the specifics of this “shared practice,” however, it is clear that there is at least a desire on the part of scholars and educators in the field to carve out space for practice somewhere within the discipline. As one of the participants in the consultation reported, “For me, spirituality is practice and we can’t teach it without practicing it.”¹⁶

Practice, Diversity, and Educational Theory

In this section I engage with pedagogies and educational theories that provide insights on facilitating practice in the classroom.

¹¹ Liebert first delivered this to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality in November 2001, and it was subsequently reprinted and expanded in the journal *Spiritus* and in at least two major edited volumes on the study of Christian spirituality. See Elizabeth Liebert, “The Role of Practice in the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit* and Elizabeth Liebert, “Practice,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*.

¹² Liebert, “Practice,” 503.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 512.

¹⁴ *Final Report: Teaching Spirituality Well: Teacher-Scholars Engaging Best Practices*, Wabash Small Project Grant, Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, Catholic Theological Union, October 31, 2008, 2-3. <http://sscs.press.jhu.edu/links/index.html>, accessed 10/12/2011.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

First, Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, in the text *Teaching from the Heart*, proposes a “process-phenomenological method” for theological reflection on experience that is adapted to the higher-education classroom.¹⁷

- 1) Identify the practice that is to be the focus of the reflection;
- 2) Identify and set aside prejudgments and assumptions about the practice;
- 3) Observe and describe the practice (this applies whether students are exploring their own practice or that of another person);
- 4) Analyze the practice (paying attention to particular symbols, words, and/or gestures, for example);
- 5) Reflect on the meaning arising from the practice and from the insights gained using this process-phenomenological method;
- 6) Make a decision about future action (in relation to the practice itself or another aspect of their experience).¹⁸

In addition to the process-phenomenological method, Moore also describes Thomas Groome’s “shared praxis approach,” which Moore compares to Paulo Freire’s intentionally liberative process of critical reflection on practice.¹⁹

In his own text, *Christian Religious Education*, Groome elucidates the following movements: first, participants locate themselves by naming their present action; second, participants share their visions and stories; third, the teacher/leader shares her/his understanding of the Christian community’s story and vision; fourth, all participants reflect on the relationship between the community story and their own stories; and fifth, participants decide on a practice/praxis/action based on their new understanding of the relationship between the community’s vision and their own visions.²⁰

Each of these models – Moore’s process-phenomenological method and Groome’s shared praxis approach – offers the critical reflection piece demanded by scholars of Christian spirituality.²¹ In addition, these models provide a way for students to be engaged in the production of knowledge. As Paulo Freire writes, “Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain

¹⁷ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1991, 1998), 120-2. I have adjusted Moore’s language to reflect this paper’s focus on practice.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 172.

²⁰ Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 207-22.

²¹ I would note that I cannot say for certain whether these processes would satisfy every spirituality scholar’s standard for rigor.

this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators.”²²

In her article tackling issues of spirituality, cultural imagination, diversity, and equity in the classroom, Elizabeth Tisdell offers several examples of individuals who engage with spiritual experience/practice and notes, “These spiritual experiences take them to the depths of their being that connect to their cultural identity. Indeed, at its best, spirituality not only propels one inward to one's more authentic identity as the cultural imagination is engaged; it also often propels one forward into the world as one connects to something grander than one's self.”²³

In light of this insight, practice is especially significant in diverse classrooms, since it may allow students to connect more deeply with their own experience, which in turn allows them to interact more authentically with their classmates.²⁴ Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan concurs: “To counteract this [system of racialized violence],” he writes, “we need to integrate multiple ways of knowing (using poetry, art, drama, and music) and multiple knowledges in our teaching practices that can empower students from diverse backgrounds. In short, centering spirituality requires us to blend emotion, our spirits, and embodied knowledge with critical analysis to make the study of equity and social justice inclusive to our diverse student body.”²⁵

²² Freire, 69.

²³ Elizabeth J. Tisdell, “In the New Millennium: The Role of Spirituality and the Cultural Imagination in Dealing with Diversity and Equity in the Higher Education Classroom.” *Teachers College Record* 109, no. 3 (2007), 548.

²⁴ Parker Palmer speaks to the need for spirituality in the education of educators, in particular – “Even though I spent most of the sixties in Berkeley, I did not learn about the powers of heart and soul sitting in a hot tub in northern California. I have learned about them over the years by drawing as close as someone like me can to the experience of oppressed people. I mean people who, by definition, have had every external form of power stripped from them: they have no money, no status, no access to influence, no heavily armed nation-state.

How have such “powerless” people managed to foment deep-reaching social change in so many parts of the globe—from Eastern Europe to Latin America, from South Africa to the black liberation movement in our own country? By drawing upon and deploying the only power that cannot be taken from us: the power of the human soul, the human spirit, the human heart. Far from being socially and politically regressive, “heart and soul” language, rightly understood, is one of the most radical rhetorics we have.

Despite our cultural bias that all power resides in the outward, visible world, history offers ample evidence that the inward and invisible powers of the human spirit can have at least equal impact on our individual and collective lives. That simple fact is one that our educational institutions ignore at their—and our—peril.” From Parker Palmer, “Teaching with Heart and Soul: Reflections on Spirituality in Teacher Education,” *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54, no. 5, (Nov/Dec 2003).

²⁵ Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan, “Centering Spirituality in the Academy Toward a Transformative Way of Teaching and Learning,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 2, no. 4 (October 2004), 303.

As I turn toward an examination of my own experience teaching in a classroom that intentionally incorporated spiritual practice, I am encouraged by the writing and vision of the scholars whose work I consulted in the creation of this paper.²⁶ However, nearly all scholars engaged in this dialogue point out how uneasy the academy is with the conversation, never mind its implementation in the university or college classroom.²⁷ This issue will certainly not be resolved here; I simply wish to remind the reader of this ongoing challenge, as it looms in the background of the teaching experiences I describe next.

Teaching in a Practice-Oriented Classroom

In this section I will bring the previous discussions about practice and pedagogy into conversation with my experience as a teaching assistant in a practice-oriented course on *lectio divina*. The practice of *lectio divina* has roots in the earliest Christian communities and in the Hebrew tradition that formed the foundation for early Christian practice.²⁸

The *lectio divina* course is one of the elements in the “Spiritual Life and Leadership” series required of students in the M.Div. program who are concurrently enrolled in the Concentration in Christian Spirituality at San Francisco Theological Seminary. This series is designed to introduce students to classical spiritual practices from within the history of Christian spirituality and to teach students how to utilize those practices as tools for personal growth and ministerial leadership.

In addition to being a requirement for students in the concentration, this series of courses intentionally provides opportunities for doctoral students studying in the discipline of Christian

²⁶ Tisdell remarks that “the connection of spirituality to culturally responsive teaching about diversity and equity issues and/or transformative learning for social change” has been the subject of an increasing number of articles in the realm of educational scholarship. Tisdell, “In the New Millennium,” 533.

²⁷ The scholars I consulted expressed this conflict between spirituality and the academy from a variety of angles: Elizabeth Tisdell, bell hooks, Parker Palmer, Sandra Schneiders, Elizabeth Liebert, and Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan all point to the issue in their work.

²⁸ Several texts offer descriptions of the historical and theological roots of *lectio divina*, as well as an overview of the practice itself: Teresa A. Blythe, *50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006); Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph Books, 1996); Ken Kaisch, *Finding God: A Handbook of Christian Meditation* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1994); Christine Valters Paintner, *Lectio Divina – The Sacred Art: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2011); Norvene Vest, *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1996).

spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union to practice and strengthen their teaching and leadership skills.²⁹ The following examples are from my own experience as a teaching assistant.

The self-reported demographic data collected at the beginning of the semester suggested a racially and ethnically diverse student population.³⁰ This diversity was reflected in the experiences shared by students during the *oratio* portion of each session's *lectio divina* practice. While the process of praying in the *lectio divina* style does not specifically address issues of diversity, when practiced in a group context it becomes obvious that the way participants experience the four movements of *lectio divina* depends a great deal on the cultural and religious assumptions each individual brings with her/him into the classroom and thus into the practice.

I began my presentation about the history of *lectio divina* – on the first day of class – with a question for the students: What do you already know about *lectio divina* and its origins? Most of the students responded with some knowledge of the practice itself but with very little or no idea about the history of the practice. One student reported concern about whether *lectio divina* was actually Christian, as there had been no mention of the practice in his previous Protestant church experience. Another student reported that from her preliminary reading, the steps referred to as *meditatio* and *contemplatio* in *lectio divina* sounded (to her) much like experiences she had with practicing yoga.

Those two reactions underscore the importance of contextualizing a practice before asking students to engage it in the classroom.³¹ Allowing space for students to express their preconceptions helps create a setting where practicing difference is productive and “safe.”³²

²⁹ To facilitate the doctoral students' learning, the lead instructor for the course collaborates with the doctoral teaching assistants on syllabus design, allows the doctoral students to take the lead on in-class lectures and small group direction, and also provides space to de-brief the teaching experience in a one-hour faculty meeting at the conclusion of most class sessions.

³⁰ A summary of the self-reported demographic data for students in the *lectio divina* course during fall semester 2011: Latino/white, 1; white, 4; African-American, 1; African, 1; Asian, 4. Faculty demographics (including teaching assistants and lead instructor) were self-reported as: Asian, 2; white, 2.

³¹ Instructors have a responsibility to anticipate and to prepare for a diversity of experiences when introducing practice to the classroom setting. This may include: having a plan for conflict mediation within the classroom, preparing a list of professional resources for students who may experience intense emotional or even physical responses to the practice, developing group norms for confidentiality, and establishing appropriate boundaries for sharing sensitive information with the group.

³² I qualify the issue of safety here by leaning toward the definition bell hooks describes: “Instead of focusing on the commonly held assumption that we are safe when everyone agrees, when everyone has an equal time to speak, if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and conflict.” hooks continues by reminding teachers that building trust and accountability within the classroom is what truly makes for a safe situation for all involved. (bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 86-7.)

By the final week of small group practice, students reported a greater understanding of the historical practice of *lectio divina*, as well as more ease with relating the practice to their own theological beliefs. Students generally noted the importance of experiencing the practice itself – the course readings helped with contextualization, but many students noted that they would have felt unprepared to lead *lectio divina* in a ministry setting if they had only received the reading material and not participated in the practice. The group format allowed students to witness and learn from the similarities and differences between their own experience and those of their fellow group members.

This example shows how practice can be incorporated into a course *about* practice within a seminary setting where the majority of the students are preparing for church-based ministry within the Christian tradition. Most likely, this example seems appropriate even to scholars who might be hesitant to incorporate practice into the classroom.

There can be no doubt that it is more complicated to incorporate practice into a course in which the course material is primarily theoretical or where the majority of the students are preparing for academic professions. However, I believe there is reason to do so, assuming the professor incorporates the practice (meaning both activity and reflection) in an intentional and thorough manner. In future work, I plan to examine experiences of incorporating practice into research-oriented classrooms.

Conclusions and Ongoing Pedagogical Questions

I whole-heartedly agree with Elizabeth Liebert’s assessment in the closing paragraph of her essay on practice:

It is, I believe, time to quit being so timid about practice as a constitutive aspect of our discipline. We "have a tiger by the tail," and are not quite sure what to do with it, how to tame it sufficiently to allow it into the study and the classroom. But we also have something uniquely useful to offer scholars in other disciplines. When lived spiritual experience comes into the room, it makes the study of Christian spirituality immediate, transformative, compelling, self-implicating, and life changing.³³

Educators must take great care in developing curriculum that incorporates practice: we must address issues related to diversity; we must be willing to spend time and energy to build trust and accountability within the classroom; we must choose forms of practice that add value to the existing curricular content; and we must integrate the practices into scholarly work using appropriate methods for critical reflection. Then, having prepared the way with care and respect, we can invite the lived experiences of our students and ourselves into the classroom.

There will always be an element of risk involved when practice “comes into the room,” but I believe the production and dissemination of knowledge is an inherently risky proposition.³⁴ In that risk lies the possibility of liberation, of conscientization, of greater understanding and of more authentic relationships. With these radical possibilities in mind, I ask educators in Christian

³³ Liebert, “Practice,” 512.

³⁴ Ibid.

spirituality to be open to taking a risk that may usher in unheard, sometimes long-ignored, voices.

In conclusion, I stand with scholars who are convinced that practice has a significant role to play in the educational process at all levels of study, and I see a particular need to incorporate practice into the Christian spirituality classroom in order to honor the diversity of experience our students bring.

Paulo Freire offers a fitting closing thought: “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. ... Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis. In order to *be*, it must *become*.”³⁵

³⁵ Freire, 84.

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