Chapter Eight

Seeing, Hearing, Creating: Exercises That Are "Low Tech" but That Engage Media Cultures

One of the persistent concerns often raised when attempting to integrate digital technologies into graduate theological education is that it is so expensive. This concern assumes that doing such integration requires institutions to purchase large amounts of equipment. While I believe that there are many advantages that come from having equipment "in house," there are also many ways to engage digital cultures with very "low-tech" tools. In this final chapter I will explore three separate learning exercises that all have at their core learning goals related to integrating theological reflection and digital cultures. They are also exercises that seek to engage students on all three levels—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor—and that are flexible and open to participation in many different settings. Finally, they are exercises that encourage exploration of digital cultures and meaning-making without using digital technology.

THE RULE OF 3S

This is an exercise that takes at least an hour and a half but can go much longer depending on how many people you have.[1] The first half of the exercise takes approximately thirty-five minutes. To determine the remainder of the time required, allow at least five minutes of processing for each small-group poster; and then, finally, you will need at least twenty minutes for "meta"-stage processing.

You will need a variety of basic materials:

- A stack of recent pop culture magazines that you don't mind cutting up. I usually use several issues of magazines like *Time or Newsweek*, *Entertainment Weekly or People, Good Housekeeping or More, Glamour or Self,* *Rolling Stone or Spin,* and so on. You can often get discarded copies of such magazines from people in and around your institution (friends, staff people, students, etc.). For this exercise to work well, however, try to find only mass-market, supermarket-stand-type magazines.

- Enough scissors and glue for every participant.
- At least one sheet of heavier-weight paper or tagboard that is about 8.5 × 11 inches in size or larger for each small group.
- A music player of some sort and some quiet instrumental background music.
- An evocative question that has explicit theological elements and admits of diverse responses. Choosing the question to which you seek answers is probably the most difficult part of this exercise. You will need a question that is open enough to elicit several responses but also focused enough to allow the groups to share ideas from their experience. Questions that have worked well in my courses in the past include: What does it mean to be Catholic? What is redemption? Who is God? and so on.

Divide your participants into smaller groups of about three to five people. Explain that each group is going to construct a poster that will offer an answer to the same question. Each group will have thirty minutes to construct its poster and may use no more than three images and three words cut out from the magazines provided—hence the "rule of 3s." Post the question somewhere where it will be highly visible, turn on some quiet music, and have the groups gather their materials and begin working.

Give the groups a five-minute warning as you draw close to the thirty-minute mark, and then call time at thirty minutes. Ask the students to rejoin the large group and bring their posters to a central place in the room. Open a discussion on each poster in turn. Begin by explaining to students that for the initial discussion of a poster, anyone who contributed to the construction of that particular poster is to refrain from speaking and simply listen to what their colleagues have to say about it. Ask the rest of the students to voice what they believe the poster "says"; what is the answer being offered to the shared question?

Once you've gotten the basic responses out into the open, deepen the reflection by asking students to focus on the specific construction of the poster. Was there anything problematic about the images that were chosen? (Are all the images of people white, for instance? Are they all male? Are there extraneous elements of a particular image that contest the meaning the poster offers? and so on.) Once the reflections begin to end, invite the small group that constructed the poster to reflect out loud on what they heard. Did their colleagues "get" the message they were trying to send? Were there any surprises in what they heard?

Repeat this process for all of the posters in turn.

Once you've completed discussing each poster individually, ask the group to reflect on the process itself: What did they learn from this exercise? What was most difficult? What surprised them? and so on. By this point most students have begun to figure out that there is something interesting about the creativity that is spurred by specific constraints—time constraints, material constraints, format constraints, and so on. They are also usually beginning to sense the complexity involved in making meaning with images. No poster ever conveys precisely what its creators intend, and most people improvise more meaning from a particular set of images than the creators of the images can imagine. Further, taking images from one context and placing them in another often radically shifts the meaning made with them.

As a final topic of discussion, ask the students to reflect on the process of looking for images that convey specific theological meaning amidst the multiplicity of images offered up via popular culture. How large was the pool of possible images? Were there images they were seeking and couldn't find? How much interpretative ability do they think people need to function well in media culture? The exercise is often best concluded by reminding students that this is the kind of process behind much creative production in mass mediated popular culture—working very fast, in small groups of people, from a limited database of possibilities, and within specific constraints. (And even when that is said and done, as ad executives are fond of saying about commercials, "We know that 50 percent of our commercials will be successful, we just can't predict which 50 percent!")

This exercise clearly has multiple layers and evokes a variety of intelligences. Students who can draw on spatial and visual forms of intelligence can contribute much more in this kind of exercise than is usually the case in purely text-driven encounters. Students who are deeply steeped in theological themes will be able to bring them to the table and will be challenged to embed those themes in the nonlinear format of image. The discussion is shaped in such a way as to invite initial reflection on the experience a student is having (whether in looking at a specific poster or in reflecting on the process more generally), and then to move from there to reasoning that is more analytical (what images contribute to particular meanings? what images are problematic? etc.) and synthetic (how can we reflect theologically across multiple media?). Individual student responses are invited, but the group process also suggests that individual experience alone is not as rich a source of learning as is a carefully framed group process.

All of these elements are critical for the learning goals I have within my religious education courses. At the same time—almost as a bonus—the exercise helps students to reflect upon theological imagination in media culture, and to do so without once using a piece of digital technology (although using multiple images created by digital technologies). The point is to reflect upon digital cultures and the process of creative production in digital culture, to reflect upon theological imagination and its expression in mass mediated contexts, and so invite students into more active engagement with their own meaning-making.

MUSIC AS AN ELEMENT OF SONIC ENVIRONMENT

Another exercise that invites students to reflect upon the meaning they make with an element of mass mediated popular culture is the "sonic environment" exercise.[2] This exercise takes about an hour to accomplish and can be used in a group as small as five or as large as your room can accommodate.

For this exercise you will need a variety of music CDs or MP3s and a music system with good speakers that can replay the music well. Choose three groups of music, with four pieces of music in each group. Each piece of music should be instrumental, although since you will only be sharing thirty seconds of it with listeners, you can easily choose pieces that begin instrumentally even if they later include words. I will have more to suggest about how to choose music, but first let me outline the exercise.

Begin by dividing your large group into smaller groups of no more than twenty-five people (if you have fewer than that to begin with, simply remain in one group). Explain to students that they will need a piece of paper and a writing instrument and that you will be asking them to listen to some short excerpts of music and to respond to those excerpts briefly in writing. Make certain that you stress that this is an exercise that has no "right" or "wrong" answers and that students may keep their responses private if they so choose. Explain that the music will be grouped into three sections and that after each section there will be some group discussion time.

For the first section, ask the students to listen to each piece of music as it is played and then write down the *color* it evokes for them. They should note it quickly, not try to analyze their response, and prepare for the next piece of music. Their list at the end of the four pieces might look like this: 1. green, 2. blue, 3. purple, 4. black, and so on. After you've played all four pieces, go around the group and ask each student to say what color they wrote down for each piece of music. Remind them that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers and that they are free to pass and not share their response. Don't belabor the process too much, but at the end allow general feelings to be expressed. Often there is general amazement and surprise, for instance, at how many of the responses fall into the same color families.

For the second section of the exercise (the next group of four pieces), ask the students to write down an *adjective* describing what they are feeling as they listen to each piece of music. Again, stress that this should be a quick, "off the top of the head" response that they should not analyze. As before, once all four pieces have been heard and noted, go around the room for each piece and elicit the responses students wrote down. Here again, don't belabor the process, but at the end allow for general feelings to be expressed.

Finally, for the third section of the exercise, ask the students to write down a *sentence* that captures the story the music might be trying to tell. Here you will likely want to leave a slightly longer pause between pieces of music. When you've finished playing the music, again return to the group and go around the room asking for responses. This is the section of the exercise where I've most often had students pass on their turn, so it is often useful to remind them, again, that it's fine to choose not to share if they would prefer not to.

After completing the process for all three sections, return to the large group (if you have divided previously), and ask students to reflect upon what, if anything, they've learned in this process. Responses often cluster around surprise at how much different responses have in common, how evocative music can be, and so on. Then ask students to consider what implications this exercise might hold for their specific contexts. Students who are musicians involved with planning liturgies, for instance, often talk about wanting an entire liturgy to have a "color" to it. Students who are planning to preach often suggest that they ought to be more attentive to planning with the church musicians for the environment in which their sermon will be embedded. Students who plan learning events will often speak of the ways in which their imagination has been expanded to think about how they incorporate music into what they are doing—not simply in terms of songs they will teach but also in terms of the music playing in the background while they work.

Finally, I have often found it fruitful to ask students to reflect upon what they think I might have intended to accomplish by using this kind of exercise. It is almost impossible to predict the answers I receive to that question, but it gives me an appropriate opening to talk about the ways in which embodied knowing shapes our learning, even if we do not consciously attend to it.

Clearly one of the crucial elements in the success of this exercise is choosing appropriate music. I strive to find music that is quite diverse, usually drawing on a variety of genres. Movie soundtracks have been particularly fruitful resources for me, because they frequently paint quite deliberate "colors" using only instruments or voices with no discernible lyrics (although I try to stay away from movie soundtracks that are particularly famous). I also usually include at least one piece of Native American flute music. Given the contexts in which I teach, heavy metal Christian music is fun to use because it tends to subvert expectations. When the exercise is over, students often ask what the pieces were, and when they discover that the harsh, driven music they put deep colors and emotions to (red and black often come up there, or angry and frustrated) is from a Christian group, they tend to pause and reflect on whether knowing something about the producer of the music alters their reception of it.

At the heart of this learning exercise is an invitation to students to consider the multiple ways in which they engage various kinds of music and the layers of meaning that attend to sonic environments, whether they are paying attention to them or not. In designing learning environments—as in planning liturgy—it is important to attend to the implicit and null curricula as much as to the explicit curriculum. Sonic environment is one element that far more often falls into the implicit or null elements of curriculum design.

Given the ease of use of digital sound tools, particularly the compression format MP3, which has made the sharing of music so easy, more and more people have the technical capabilities necessary to attend to their sonic environments. So-called "mix tapes" (cassettes of different songs that people record and share) have been a part of the pop culture scene since audiocassettes were invented, but the availability of tools to make and share music mixes in digital format has expanded the practice exponentially. In addition, more and more of the most popular television shows are embedding music marketing into their format. You can watch *Joan of Arcadia,* for instance, and learn from the credits who the "featured artists" were. You can then go to the Web and buy such music from a site like iTunes. Such practices encourage a high degree of attention to sound, and to the shaping of one's context through sound, as well as to the promotion of meaning-making stretched over many more contexts than the original television show. More traditional church contexts need to attend to this process, not to duplicate the commercialization of music, but rather to respect the depth of experience and interpretive ability people bring to their music experiences.

Hymns that once conveyed important theological meaning in their lyrics may not be conveying such meaning to listeners who are embedded in music that has freer rhythms and more flowing melodies. The "sound" of such hymns in some contexts conveys regimentation and imposed order rather than freedom granted by God. The solution to such a dilemma is not to throw out traditional hymns and bring in only contemporary pop music—as some church folk have proposed—but rather to be more hospitable to the multiple meanings people are making with various kinds of music and more respectful of the role sonic environment plays in shaping such meaning. We can ask each other, across multiple contexts, how does our music *mean?* What are the stories embedded in the songs we love? For some those stories are carried by particular lyrics, but for most of us the stories attach rather more to what we were doing when we first heard a song, who was holding us in their arms when first we sang that song, and so on. A learning exercise like this one invites us into appreciation for the complexity of such meaning-making.

VIDEO REALITY GAME

The final learning exercise I'll describe requires rather more technology to work, although here again it is technology that is usually readily available even in church basements: a TV and a VCR.[3] This video exercise usually requires from an hour to an hour and a half to complete and can be used in a group as small as ten people, although it works very well in very large groups, too, as long as everyone can see the TV monitor and hear what is going on.

For this exercise you will need seven roughly three-minute-long video clips from broadcast television (more about that in a moment), a blackboard or whiteboard or newsprint to write on in front of the group, and a piece of paper and a writing instrument for each participant.

Begin by drawing a horizontal line on the chalkboard (or whiteboard, etc.), with the word "real" on the right-hand end of the line. Make the line as long as you can, and ask students to replicate the drawing on their own piece of paper. Explain that this is a reality spectrum, that you are going to show them various short video clips, and that you are going to ask them to place each clip somewhere on that spectrum. Already at this point in the explanation I am usually interrupted by students who want to know what word to place on the opposite end and what "real" means. I tell them that part of what we'll be exploring in this exercise are responses to those questions. In the meantime, they should simply try to engage the exercise as it comes. Here, as in the last two exercises I've described, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, and students should always feel free to keep their responses private. Next, explain that you will be inviting a person to volunteer prior to each clip and that once the particular clip has been shown, that volunteer will come up front and place the clip on the large spectrum in front. Volunteers may also share why they've placed the clip there, if they choose to do so.

Go ahead and show the clips in the order you've chosen in advance. Remember to invite volunteers *prior to* showing the clip (so they don't know what they're about to see), and then remember to give them time to come up front and mark the clip on the spectrum. Most people will immediately recognize at least the genre of the clip you're using, if not the precise show from which it's drawn. It is useful to remind the group from time to time that they should be thinking about their own spectrum, not assuming that theirs should echo the one up front.

Once you've shown the clips, the first question to ask is usually "Does anyone's spectrum match the one up front?" In all of the years I've been doing this exercise, I've never once had anyone whose drawing did. A point to draw out here is that everyone approaches media from their own location and will make meaning with it in highly personal ways. One way to explore such meaning-making is to invite students to talk about the criteria they used in placing clips. This is usually a very fruitful question, and people do not hesitate to brainstorm about it. Write the criteria up on the board in front of the room, and do your best to be encouraging. If you don't understand a particular response, you can always invite the student to elaborate on the idea by explaining how he or she used it to place clips.

If students' responses do not include reflecting on the particular production elements of the videos, I will usually add those as criteria as well, pointing out that different genres carry meaning in different ways (soap operas have low production values and are produced on a budget, whereas prime-time dramas have higher budgets, etc.; new media are framed in certain ways, and Saturday morning cartoons in others). Once all of the criteria have been written down, go through the list and see what kinds of themes emerge. In general this exercise usually elicits a lot of criteria based in some way on students' experiences—"It feels true to me," "I've been in similar situations," "It didn't feel real, I felt manipulated" —and so on. I generally have to push to get at other possible criteria that could emerge, among them elements of genre, production, and so on. This exercise has been at the heart of my own shift over the years to recognizing the profoundly affective ways in which people make meaning in mediated contexts. As Thomas Boomershine has noted, we tend to reason more by means of sympathetic identification than philosophical argument in our current media climate. At the same time, however, such identification must needs be stretched—particularly in an environment where only certain experiences are embedded in mediated representations.

After talking about the criteria the students are using, I then shift the discussion to the question of what is "real" and what term they had in their mind as the opposite end of the spectrum. Here the discussion can quickly become quite philosophical as students struggle to figure out what the relationship is between notions of "real" that mean "material reality" or "evidence" and notions that have more the connotation of "truth" or "absolute ground of existence." The opposite end of the spectrum might be "false," "unreal," "hyperreal," "surreal," and so on, but what qualifies under that term usually varies greatly from student to student. Is a particular clip more "real" or "true" because it has a Bible verse embedded in it? Is it more real because it "feels" more real to me or because it aligns more completely with a particular understanding of truth? Here again the conversation can go in multiple directions. I tend to work toward keeping the *questions* as open as possible, laying the groundwork for more discussion in later sections of my courses. This is not an exercise aimed at arriving at a common definition of reality, but rather one focused on problematizing the perceptions of reality that students have when they enter my class.

In my own teaching, the layer of "content" meaning I've tried to include in this exercise clusters around representations of religion and religious persons. All of the clips I use carry some element of religious representation in them, and that allows me to invite students to reflect on the "religious education" people receive within media culture before they ever walk in the door of a church or other faith community.

Here, as in the sonic environment exercise, the choice of clips you use is important. I generally use seven clips and draw them from a variety of genres. I use something from a soap opera, from a newsmagazine, from a PBS documentary, from a children's show, from a cartoon, from a prime-time drama, and I usually also include a clip that is a broadcast of a religious service. Each clip is no longer than three minutes and has to have some internal consistency. That is, the clip I use from a drama is an entire scene, the exchange from a newsmagazine is at least one question asked and answered, and so on.

I gather these clips simply from regular television viewing (a chore that has been made much easier by our purchase of a ReplayTV digital video recorder). Shows such as *The West Wing, Joan of Arcadia,* and *The Simpsons* are usually very fruitful for grabbing clips with religious representation embedded in them. Newsmagazine shows often run specials around the release of particular movies, so if there is a movie coming out with a religious theme (a much more frequent occurrence these days), then taping *20/20* or *Primetime* or *The Today Show* often yields useful materials. Evening newscasts frequently have religious stories on them on Sundays or in the days preceding major religious holidays. I have not had as much luck with soap operas, although *One Life to Live* has a recurring character who is a priest and has, at least in the past, produced some interesting and evocative story lines. VeggieTales, a popular animated children's series, is often the one exception to my rule of using only broadcast clips. The series is sold primarily via videotape and DVD and is not regularly broadcast, but it is almost always good for a brief and amusing clip and is a good example for problematizing the embedding of biblical text in video.

When I first encountered this video exercise, it was done around the representation of violence and was very effective. I think you could also implement it using the representation of gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, or any of a number of other cultural characteristics as the lens through which you choose clips. It is a remarkably flexible exercise for generating critical reflection along with enjoyable engagement. A final comment I would make about it is that I have found it a very useful evaluation tool when used at the beginning of a course. I often try it on the first day of my classes—that session when you cannot assume that students have read any of the course materials yet—and it provides a way for me to draw them into collaboration right away. I learn a lot about who in the class likes this kind of exercise and who does not, who can frame their experiences critically and who is not yet able to do so, and so on. I also learn a lot about students' attitudes toward popular culture and their familiarity (or lack thereof) with media education.

CONCLUSION

All three of these exercises provide an entry point into quite sophisticated and complex descriptions of the social construction of reality, but they do so in a way that invites participation whatever kind of meaning-making participants are most familiar with. I have used each of these exercises in a variety of different settings, with participants ranging in age from ten to eighty-eight. Clearly I have different kinds of emphases in specific classes, but overall my goal is to invite people into a deeper and more reflective stance toward the media cultures they inhabit. While there are many ways in which these exercises could use digital technologies (the music exercise could use MP3s, for instance, and the creative exercise could be based on students using digital cameras to capture images rather than cutting them out of magazines), they do not require such technologies to be effective. Instead, they can invite us into deeper engagement with the mediation of meaning using quite basic, nondigital materials.

Two of these exercises were developed in the context of media education aimed at the K–12 level. What fascinates me most about them is that they have proven equally engaging for my oldest students. There is a wealth of media education material available via the Web, and much of it can be adapted toward the goal of "real-time" theological reflection. Doing so provides multiple levels of learning: it engages students' theological "muscles," it stretches their assumptions about media cultures, it challenges their assumptions about basic pedagogy. I dare to hope that it also, as the group Jars of Clay sings, helps us to "see the art in me" and draw us outward in wonder at all that God has created amongst us.[4]

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

California Newsreel. http://www.newsreel.org/ (accessed May 13, 2004).

The Center for Media Literacy. http://www.medialit.org/ (accessed May 13, 2004).

The Jesuit Communication Project. http://interact.uoregon.edu/medialit/JCP/index.html (accessed May 13, 2004).

The Media Education Foundation. http://www.mediaed.org/ (accessed May 13, 2004).

The Media Literacy Review. http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/home/index.html (accessed May 13, 2004).

The Media Research and Action Project. http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/soc/mrap/default.html (accessed May 13, 2004).

The New Media Bible. http://www.newmediabible.org/ (accessed May 13, 2004).

NOTES

1. I have adapted this exercise from one I first encountered in the Felton Media Literacy Scholars seminar taught by Professor Renee Hobbs in Boston, MA. More information on Dr. Hobbs's work is available at http://www.reneehobbs.org/ (accessed on May 13, 2004).

2. This exercise was created by Professor Fabio Pasqualetti of the Facoltá di Scienze della Comunicazione Sociale of the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, Italy. I first experienced it during a workshop at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, TX, in 2003.

3. This exercise is another one adapted from the work of Renee Hobbs and the Felton Media Literacy Seminar.

4. Jars of Clay, "Art in Me," from the compact disc *Jars of Clay*, Jive, 1995.