Seeing with New Eyes: 
Teaching Scripture using the Critically Engaging Creative Arts 
(CECA) Approach

Abstract
The CECA Approach to teaching religion, unlike other approaches, is not specifically related to content but rather to the way students are invited to take part in the process of learning through critical engagement with the arts. The proposed CECA Approach comprises three movements, an Inquiry movement, an Investigation movement, and an Appraisal and Demonstration movement. It begins with naming and examining artistic and filmic retellings of biblical stories using a critical literacy approach and then applies a similar process to the biblical text. This paper will provide a theoretical framework for the approach and then engage participants in the practical application of the approach using a selection of artistic retellings and biblical texts.

Introduction
Religion and the arts have been vehicles through which societies have sought to express beliefs and to pass these beliefs on to others. Long before mass literacy, storytelling along with drawings, stained glass windows and statuary told the story of the Christian tradition. The creation of the printing press, led to availability of cheaper printed texts. The gradual acquiring of mass literacy began to shift the cultures of the time towards an ascendancy of the printed word. Christianity followed the trend and came to depend more and more on the printed word as the source for instruction. If academic instruction in religion concentrates only on written texts and ignores creative arts texts, the focus is too narrow. By expanding the discourse of religious education to include the creative arts, we are able to engage with and examine many ‘texts’.

The approach suggested is not that of art, music or film history but one of ‘cultural studies’ which is inter-disciplinary, investigating texts through multiple lenses from the point of view of their cultural, political and social context as well as that of their
maker. Such an approach recognises that knowledge is ‘situated’ rather than objective or unbiased and that by locating knowledge we are able to expose the internal complexity of what is being investigated (Moore 2007). The creative arts ‘texts’ are also examined in terms of their “intertextual chains” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 30) that is, the works they draw on and are transformed by. For example, Jesus movies are not made in isolation, they draw on and are influenced by scripture, tradition, religious art, theology, old movies and popular culture in order to develop an image of Jesus for current times.

Essentially, the CECA approach is an inquiry based approach where teachers adopt the role of facilitators and ask questions rather than tell, and provide guidelines rather than instructions helping the learner to acquire his or her own understanding of content. The approach does not diminish the role of the teacher or dismiss the relevance of expert knowledge but requires that teachers assist students to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce facts or provide the ‘answer’. When used effectively, students move from being a passive recipients of information to active participants in the learning process. Students engage with contestable materials, primary and secondary source materials that offer differing views on the topic which enable them to enter a dialogical process of knowledge and investigation leading to critique and analysis. Such an approach is in stark contrast to banking models of education which Freire describes as teacher-centred rather than learner centred; and focuses on knowledge accumulation rather than critical thinking. The approach encourages engagement with differing view in an atmosphere of mutual respect and dialogue.

**Background to the Creative Arts Approach**

The approach develops a culture of critical inquiry that is able to display and reflect what Fiorenza (1999) calls the “rhetoricality of all knowledge” (p. 77). A critical rhetoric of inquiry requires religious educators not only to identify and examine positivistic practices but also to acknowledge the theoretical frameworks and socio-political and cultural interests that undergird their approach to teaching religious education. In addition, the inquiry should also critically and systematically reflect on the predominantly discursive practices used by teachers in religious education classrooms. Recent advances made in curriculum development through the
hermeneutic tradition, critical theory and arts-related investigations have made it possible to construct an approach to religious education that is creative, engaging, emancipatory and liberating. A Creative Arts approach to the teaching of religious education pays particular attention to “Critical Framing”, a term coined by Cope and Kalantzis (2000), which involves learners in creating a personal and theoretical distance from what they have learned so that they can critically interpret the social and cultural contexts of a text’s meaning in relation to its context.

As well as drawing on the work of educationists, the approach draws upon and develops ideas proposed by Kreitzer (1993, 1994), Exum (1993, 1996), Bal (1987, 1999) and Bach (1997, 1999). Initially, Kreitzer (1993, 1994) explored the relatively unmapped territory of the relationship between theology and film. Kreitzer (1993, 1994) believed that the ‘hermeneutical flow could be reversed’ by studying representations of biblical texts in films and then returning to examine the biblical text with fresh eyes. He saw representations of biblical texts as a form of midrash, an imaginative expansion of the biblical tradition. He believed that, when viewers are able to identify the midrashic character of film, they may be alerted to the presence of midrash within biblical texts themselves. He acknowledged that while many people have no trouble recognising embellishments in modern re-interpretations of biblical texts, few people realise that the biblical text is also embellished. He saw films and other representations as a way of pointing to the multi-layered character of biblical texts. One of the advantages in using and adapting Kreitzer’s idea of reversing the hermeneutical flow is that it allows students to take their place in the hermeneutical circle and to explore how much of their own ideas and influences they bring to the table when interpreting texts. It also enables students to examine the interface between the world of the Bible and the world/s of the arts. While Kreitzer’s idea was primarily concerned with how films re-presented parts of the biblical text for modern audiences, he did not, however, explore how the ‘new texts’ may influence interpretations of the ‘old texts’.

In recent times, feminist scholars such as Bal, Exum and Bach have also investigated the role that the arts have played in the re-telling of biblical stories. They do not privilege the biblical text or indeed any particular retelling but rather question how stories of biblical woman are altered, expanded or invented and how
gender ideology of the biblical text is reinscribed and challenged by cultural appropriations. For many feminist scholars, the role of the reader is central in determining textual meaning and so there is a “plurality of interpretive possibilities” (Exum, 1993). Their two-pronged approach, while centring on the role and interpretation of women in the text, is also concerned with the social and cultural assumptions that cluster around sexual difference and the influence these have on representation and interpretation. Feminist readings are not neutral readings: They challenge people with counter-readings of texts.

The CECA approach combines elements of Kreitzer’s reversing the hermeneutical flow with the hermeneutic possibilities presented by feminist scholars and so offers teachers of religious education alternative ways of approaching biblical texts in religious education.

**Literacies**

The approach aims to increase knowledge and develop literacy - visual literacy, religious literacy and multimodal\(^1\) literacy. Teaching and learning not only takes account of the social and cultural contexts of the learners and ‘texts’\(^2\) but also aims to develop critical thinking skills.

Literacy is no longer simply a matter of acquiring and decoding, comprehending and producing but now includes the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate in a variety of modes. It is, as Dwyer (2001) suggests, more an “integrated complex of language and thinking processes and skills incorporating a range of habits, attitudes, interest and knowledge, serving a range of purposes in different contexts” (p. 118). Where being literate once meant that a person could read and write, today a literate person is competent in reading and understanding all manner of texts and is able to function responsibly as a citizen. Literacy is not viewed as a single unitary skill to be applied across disciplines but as various social practices and abilities that relate to purpose and contexts and are intricately connected to practice.

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\(^1\) According to Kress (2000) all texts are multimodal. No text exists in a single mode even though one modality may dominate. “The concept of multimodality forces a rethinking of the distinctions usually made between communication and use, and in particular between reading and use” (pp. 187-188).

\(^2\) Texts includes written, visual, aural and film.
Religious literacy

The naming of curriculum literacies has also become common practice. One such curriculum literacy is ‘religious literacy’. Religious literacy must encompass the kind of competencies that Green (1988) suggests as essential dimensions of literacy: the operational, the cultural and the critical dimensions. The operational dimension involves “competency with regard to the language system” (p. 160). It is concerned with the way individuals use “language in literacy tasks in order to operate effectively in specific contexts” (Green, 1988, p. 160). The cultural dimension encompasses the meaning aspect of literacy including events that are not only “context specific but also entail a specific content” (p. 160). The cultural dimension recognises that there is a mutually informing relationship between the language system and the meaning system. The critical dimension has to do with the “social construction of knowledge” (p. 162). Implicit in this dimension of literacy is critique, which for Green means that “individuals should not simply participate in culture but should in various ways transform and actively produce it” (p. 163). Religious literacy, at base level, involves learning and understanding the language associated with a particular religious tradition but further implies that a level of interpretation and analysis is available. In today’s religiously plural world, religious literacy also requires some knowledge and understanding of at least the major world religions and appreciation for the contribution religion makes to culture. Moore (2007) also adds that religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersection of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses (p. 56).

What is required is not simply religious literacy but critical religious literacy. To be critical, according to Boys, is to employ self-critical scholarship. It does not refer “to one’s attitude toward the content . . ., but to ways of thinking that enable us to recognise the assumptions and bias that we . . . might impose” (Boys 2004, p.150). Unsworth describes the steps in the process towards critical literacy as moving through three phases: recognition, reproduction and reflection (Unsworth 2002). Recognition literacy involves learning to recognise and produce the codes that are used to construct and communicate meaning as well as cultural practices present.

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3 Literacies such as verbal, media, visual, computer, technological, aesthetic and environmental.
and central to common experience of everyday life. Reproduction literacy involves understanding and producing the conventional visual and verbal text forms that construct and communicate the established systematic knowledge of cultural institutions. Reflection literacy involves learning how to read inclusion and exclusion, analysing and interrogating verbal and visual codes to expose how choice of language and image privilege certain viewpoints and how other choices of visual and verbal resources could construct alternative views.

A critical literacy approach challenges us to examine how we read the world, to examine what we take for granted and to critique the particular culture in which texts are constructed. It enables us to look at written, visual, spoken, multimodal and performance texts to question and challenge attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface. It emerges from critical pedagogy, which Freire says we need to evaluate and critique received ideas, particularly those presented in student texts (Freire 1970). A critical literacy approach assists students to question texts, (without destroying them), and reinforces the idea that there are multiple readings and realities. Through such an approach, students are encouraged and enabled to identify, examine and critique problematic, contradictory and multiple ways of viewing the world. Such an approach also challenges teachers to consider how they have constructed their knowledge of the subject and how their selection of teaching resources reflects their perceptions and biases. A critical literacy approach recognises teachers as curriculum decision makers while at the same time inviting them to be self-critical and also encourages critiquing the interests of curriculum decisions.

**Multimodal Literacy**

Over the last two to three decades a revolution has taken place in the area of communication. It is now widely recognised that meaning is transmitted through a variety of modes such as images, page layout, screen formats; audio modes comprising music, and sound effects; gestural modes such as body languages and sensuality; spatial modes including the meanings of environmental space, architectural space. Thus all meaning-making is multimodal (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 28). According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), the key to understanding multimodal meaning is hybridity and intertextuality. Hybridity “highlights the
mechanisms of creativity and of culture-as-process as particularly salient in contemporary society” (p. 29). Today people create by “hybridising”, using established materials and conventions in new ways and within new areas of meaning. Some popular music provides examples of hybridity in that it uses and combines music from various cultures and traditions. Intertextuality refers to the multifaceted way in which meaning is formed (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 30) and relies on the reader to make links and references across texts. Multimodal literacy should provide students with a durable and transportable knowledge and skills for participation in a rapidly evolving communication environment.

A Critically Engaging Creative Arts Approach
Building on sound educational practice, the Critically Engaging Creative Arts (CECA) Approach to religious education begins with known or familiar material then moves to the unknown or unfamiliar. The approach is not specifically related to content but rather to the way students are invited to take part in the process of learning through critical engagement with the arts. CECA comprises three movements, an Inquiry movement, an Investigation movement, and an Appraisal and Demonstration movement.

The Inquiry movement invites students to recall what they know about a particular biblical character or event and if possible to identify how they acquired this information. The Investigation movement can be broken into two parts. The first part deals with various artistic interpretations of the chosen character or event while the second part deals with relevant biblical texts relating to the character or event. The final movement, the Critical Appraisal and Demonstration movement, requires that students not only critically appraise the texts in the light of their investigations but also demonstrate or represent their acquired knowledge in a new or unfamiliar context.

Using the CECA Approach
Begin by selecting a biblical story, character or event. Consider, for example, a series of lessons based on Mary Magdalene. In preparation for the class, the students would collect a wide variety of ‘texts’ (artworks, songs, movies, children’s books) retelling the story of Mary Magdalene.
**Inquiry movement**
The teacher elicits students' knowledge of Mary Magdalene ensuring that students indicate sources of their information, that is, whether they remember it from children's Bible stories, movies, pictures or songs. The information provided by the students is sorted and categorised.

**Investigation movement**
The Investigation movement assists students to gain new knowledge, skills and attitudes related to the story, character or event and is best presented in two parts.

**Part A**
Part A of the movement focuses on creative arts ‘texts’ that deal with Mary Magdalene. Students then examine, investigate and research the artistic texts using a modified form of cultural analysis. When this section of the investigation is complete students should be able to use the evidence they have uncovered to draw some conclusions regarding various perspectives presented in the artistic texts.

**Part B**
Part B examines biblical texts related to Mary Magdalene and introduces students to some of the approaches of contemporary biblical investigation to enhance their research and analysis of relevant biblical texts. For instance, the idea of a hermeneutic of suspicion or reading the story looking for gaps and omissions may be introduced to the students. When this section is complete, students should be able to use the evidence they have uncovered to draw some conclusions regarding various perspectives presented in the biblical texts.

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4 Cultural analysis is “based on a keen awareness of the critic’s situatedness in the present, the social and cultural present from which we look, and look back, at the objects that are always already of the past, objects that we take to define our present culture. Thus, it can be summarised by the phrase ‘cultural memory in the present.’ As such, it is immediately obvious that cultural analysis entertains an ambivalent relation to history as it is or has been traditionally practiced...Far from being indifferent to history, cultural analysis problematises history’s silent assumption in order to come to an understanding of the past that is different. This understanding is not based on an attempt to isolate and enshrine the past in an objectivist ‘reconstruction’, nor on an effort to project it on an evolutionist line not altogether left behind in current historical practice. Nor is it committed to deceptive synchronism. Instead, cultural analysis seeks to understand the past as part of the present, as what we have around us, and without which no culture would be able to exist” (Bal, 1999, p. 1).
Critical Appraisal and Demonstration movement

This movement is in two parts and requires students to critically engage with the biblical texts presented and demonstrate or represent their knowledge in a new or unfamiliar context.

Part A

Using the information gathered from their research and analysis in the Investigation movement, students begin to re-interpret all of the relevant texts in the light of their newly acquired information.

Part B

When all the information has been presented and collated, students are invited to demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge by re-presenting the character of Mary Magdalene in the light of what they have learned. They may for instance write a children’s book or a newspaper article or a song incorporating their newfound knowledge.

When the CECA Approach is applied to different age levels, the three movements remain basically the same, but the emphasis is different for each age level. In the early childhood years more emphasis would be given to knowing and understanding the biblical text via the creative arts while at senior secondary level a greater emphasis would be placed on cultural analysis of selected ‘texts’ both from the creative arts and the Bible.

Conclusion

The challenge for religious educators and students using the Critically Engaging Creative Arts Approach is not merely to recognise the translation from one medium to another but to interpret the medium by learning the grammar of that medium whether it be film, modern or classical art, music or prose. By employing the CECA Approach today’s students are provided with a means of entering into dialogue with biblical texts and religious education in general. The Critically Engaging Creative Arts Approach challenges contemporary students, who have seen more movies than they have read books, to investigate ways of unlocking and critically interpreting the intertextual chains which help form our contemporary understanding of biblical texts. The approach requires all participants to respond and attend to new and emerging
literacies as well as to the multiple ways in which our senses come into play when learning via the creative arts.

References


