

New Fields Deserve New Pedagogies: Using Drama in the Basic Course on Media and Religion

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This essay discusses drama or how a play is used to teach fundamental concepts of the media-religion interface. Drama, as a participative learning technique is similar to the case study method, but has additional benefits. Using the play, *Ghosts of Galileo*, the author describes actual experiences with students as they learn from a story, and deal with dilemmas by projecting themselves into the roles of characters in the narrative. While students are often ambivalent about discussing sensitive issues related to religion in the conventional classroom format, they are more comfortable doing so in the context of a story. How to use the play as a readers' theater or fully staged play is explained.

Religion is a sensitive subject in media studies; students do not know what to expect. Given disparate cultural and religious worldviews, a course on the subject can be puzzling. Non-religious students may question its value. Comparative religion is missing from most students' course transcripts; they struggle with the distinction between sociology of religion and theology. Some resent what they perceive as implied advocacy of religious philosophy. Thus forethought and sensitivity by teachers is essential. Drama, I believe, is an effective way of addressing these challenges in the basic media and religion course. Here I discuss my experiences with the method. I use a play culminating in a classroom readers' theater or fully performed stage performance for the public.

My arguments coincide with a larger problem facing today's universities. Bok (2007) observes:

Many cannot reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, nontechnical problems, even though faculties rank critical thinking as the primary goal of a college education. (p. 8)

Responding to this situation, educators are embracing problem-based learning in the form of multimedia cases, tutorials, and simulations (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Students' pragmatic

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desire to solve everyday problems drives this trend. Teaching media and religion is a worthy goal, but restricting approaches to traditional techniques is perilous for a new subfield.

Drama is a pedagogical approach in problem-based learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Armstrong, 1991; Albanese & Mitchell, 1993). The story replaces the lecture (Duveen & Soloman, 1994; Kitzerow, 1990). Case studies are similar, but the play is a more intensive problem-based learning experience. In case studies, students develop critical thinking by applying theories to everyday situations. Case analysis, like drama, is effective in broaching sensitive subjects such as religion, but are brief. Drama, using the play method, permits in-depth discussion over several weeks of a semester. Plays are of longer duration than cases, and offer complex analysis of the media-religion interface.

The play is a teaching approach in other fields (Brockett, 1968; O'Hara, 1984), including literature (McMaster, 1998; McCalib, 1968), history (Cassler, 1990; Duveen & Soloman, 1994), education (O'Hara), social work (Whitemen & Nielsen, 1986), and sociology (Kitzerow, 1990). Despite expanding interest in drama, it is yet to catch on in classrooms of journalism and mass communication.

For this reason, I experiment with an original play, *Ghosts of Galileo*, formerly titled *Redeeming Value* (2013). *Ghosts of Galileo* is the story of Russell McBride, whose doctoral dissertation is failed for claiming that stories of the school's founder, Anthony Comstock, were fabricated a century ago. Set on the nondenominational Christian campus of Comstock University in New York, 2012, McBride concludes they're more like poetry than actual events. He's offered a low-level instructorship in exchange for his silence. Eventually he sues to get his doctorate as censorship's moral dimensions are debated, particularly in a courtroom drama in Act Two. The play confronts dilemmas in all religions such as whether it's ethical to conceal information to protect an institution's image, or whether stories have to be literal to inspire. Characters in the play take divergent positions on these questions; much is at stake for all. For Russ it's his future as an academic. For Professors George Fackler and Barbara McPhee, reputations will be destroyed if their books and films about Anthony Comstock are rendered inaccurate and thus no longer relevant. If Russ's dissertation chair Ivan Sellars defends him too vigorously, he may not get tenure. Each character represents a different moral perspective from the utilitarian, *It's for the greater good*, to the categorical imperative, *It's never moral to lie*.

Textbook concepts are teased out through the play's narrative: *media as religion*, *secularization*, *interpretive community*, *medium as message*, and so forth. Russ McBride's view about media, for example, is grounded in an autonomous independent religious perspective, while Professors Fackler and McPhee operate from a rules-based orthodox worldview. As students take the roles of various characters, they explore religion as a multidimensional phenomenon with disparate interpretations, unlike the flat depictions of denominations in popular media. The major goal of the play, then, is to grasp the diverse nature of religious audiences. In an exchange between Russ McBride and his major professor Ivan Sellars, this diversity plays out:

- Russ*: I mean, that's what they drill into us at this school. Stand up for the right. Take a stand.
The categorical imperative.
Ivan: Not now. Not in your dissertation.
Russ: Why not?
Ivan: Save it for later. After you get your doctorate.
Russ: Play it safe, right Ivan?

Religious censorship is a dominant dilemma in the story. Is it ever moral to censor the media? Religionists have different views. Are they well defended in the play? Students seem eager to criticize various characters on this point.

Professional practice is also raised. Why didn't 19th century journalists uncover the truth about the university's founder? What are the principles of effective religion reporting? How can they be applied in the context of the play? Commercial influence is another major theme. As Professors Fackler and McPhee gain financially, do they perpetuate myths and misinformation about their denomination? Does this occur in the larger society as well?

In the way that English majors critique religious elements in the *Grapes of Wrath* or *Lord of the Rings*, mass communication students should do the same with films, TV programs, and Web sites depicting religion. The play *Ghosts of Galileo* provides fodder for such analysis. Students learn *religious media criticism*, or the assessment of moral and religious dimensions of media (Young, 1994). Critical frameworks are applied to the play (e.g., didactic criticism, formalism, ethical criticism, and critical studies analysis) in order to determine how competently the text treats religion. Such skills can be applied to films such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *Saved* or the TV programs *Big Love* or *South Park*. Hopefully, students are adept media critics by the end of the semester.

The dramaturgical teacher makes no apologies for entertainment in the classroom. Millennials blur the lines between traditional genres (e.g., news, documentary, educational programs) and entertainment fare (Sayre & King, 2010). Students not only have an affinity for entertainment, but they desire participation in such activities. Students grew up with the Internet, movies, and music. It is no wonder they are willing to discuss religion through these media (Sylvan, 2002). Similarly, the play *Ghosts of Galileo* is studied in an entertaining fashion. Students are assigned parts, and are expected to know their lines. Few have acting training, but students enjoy playing the part with feeling and creativity. The class culminates in a readers' theater before an audience of friends and family. Costumes and props are used. After the performance, audience members are invited to comment on the issues raised in the play. Questions might include:

1. Can censorship be justified morally?
2. How do various religions and denominations view censorship?
3. What difficulties do journalists face when covering religion?
4. How has the marketing of religious products affected faith communities?
5. Which critical skills are necessary in analyzing a movie or television drama with religious themes?

On April 10–11, 2015, *Ghosts of Galileo* was performed as a fully staged play in the McKay Little Theater on the campus of BYU-Hawaii (Figure 1). Both communication and drama students participated in the student-directed performances. Time was taken after rehearsals to discuss aforementioned issues, and unlike the smaller activity of the readers' theater, the staged play generates discussion among the larger campus and residential communities, especially when audience members are invited to remain for a short discussion after the performance.

Dramaturgical approaches coincide with a trend toward engaged learning. Some universities emphasize the case study method across campus, placing less emphasis on traditional lectures (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). While I am a strong advocate of the lecture personally, students



FIGURE 1 Students at BYU-Hawaii learn about media and religion by acting in the play, *Ghosts of Galileo*, taking a break from the traditional classroom approach.

expect abundant and varied learning experiences. They desire analytical tools to solve personal and professional problems after college. Like the case study, plays facilitate a classroom culture of problem-solving. It is not a passive approach; the learner must define the situation and apply course concepts to solve relevant dilemmas. Drama is the pedagogy of engagement; students teach each other in the critical thinking process.

Media and religion scholarship has expanded, but its pedagogy must be developed for momentum to continue. In fact, I believe that progress of the field hinges not only on what we teach but also how we teach it. We must connect with students in ways that key ideas are passed on. Drama is one way to do this.

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