

2011

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### Recommended Citation

Christian, Beverly J. (2011) "The Other Hat: Teaching Discernment in the Twenty-first Century," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol5/iss1/10>

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# The other hat

## Teaching discernment in the twenty-first century

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### Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is placing new demands on teachers and schools. Children are growing up in a society that is characterised by exponential change, escalating social issues and ever-changing technology. Because of this rapidly changing culture, our students will face challenges that do not currently exist, when they reach the workplace (Davies, McNulty & Maddox, 2011). These factors have shifted the perceived necessary skill base from knowledge based to thinking based skills such as creativity and flexibility. One area of education that is continuing to receive attention is the area of critical thinking, or mental flexibility (Davies et al., 2011). This article explores one model of teaching mental flexibility and evaluates its effectiveness for teaching discernment in a Christian environment.

### Discernment

Discernment is a word that is not widely used in society at large. An internet search of discernment brings up over two million entries (Google 2,790,000); however, it is interesting to note that most of these occur within the context of either Christianity or other religions. Dictionary definitions largely support this link to Christianity, citing discernment as a term used by Christians that describes the process of discerning God's will for one's life (Wikipedia). Yet, like most words, there is more than one nuance to the meaning. It is also defined as "the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure" (Merriam-Webster OnLine). Some Christians may equate the two, as the amount of literature on discerning God's will suggests that this is not a clearly defined area of Christian living. For the purpose of this article, a broader and simpler definition, based on Brown (1990) has been adopted. This definition has been chosen, in part, because it is readily understood by children as well as adults. Discernment is the ability to recognise and choose the best in life (Brown, 1990). This definition appears to suit the common usage of the word more precisely although

it poses problems of its own. What comprises recognition? Does choice demand action or is it merely the mental assent to a principle or idea? How can one determine what is 'best', and is what is best for one person also best for another?

### Influence of post-modernism on thinking skills in the curriculum

As educational practice is impacted by society, it is important to discuss what comprises post-modern attitudes and thought. There is no simple definition for post-modernism; however, it can be described as "a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices" employing concepts such as difference and similarity, repetition and hyperreality "to destabilise other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

It is the concepts of epistemic certainty: knowing about knowledge, and univocity of meaning: constant and ultimate truth, that are of particular interest to Christian educators who teach thinking skills in the context of Christian belief. This belief subscribes to the idea of ultimate truth and the recognition that what is good when "human knowledge tends to be socially conditioned" (Rosado, 1996, p. 33) is an important issue for Christians who view God as the source of knowledge and absolute truth.

Marsh (2007) maintains that even when it comes to theology, most young people will be influenced by the society in which they live through enculturation by the media. Furthermore, emotions often take a leading role when making choices. One doesn't need to look further afield than the celebrity pages of the media to determine that emotions underlie many of the choices that are both modelled to teenagers and practised by them. Choice, for many young people living in the twenty-first century, is the freedom to take or leave an ideology, practice or belief. The choice may take the form of mental assent and may or may not lead to action. More problematic; however, is the meaning of 'best' when applied to the idea of making choices. Post-modern thought by its own definition rules out the possibility of the superlative, leaving only comparatives so therefore

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'best' is an individual perception with no univocity of meaning, and in the extreme, it doesn't exist at all as everything is relative and there can be no best, only degrees of better, based on individual perception.

Although post-modern attitudes may cast a pall of doubt over the univocity of meaning, it is important to recognise that the skill of being able to shift gears when thinking, to deliberately change perspective, to view the world from another vantage is an important and necessary skill. Research by Beyer (2008, p. 229) supports the benefits of learning critical thinking with a study identifying that direct instruction in thinking skills can significantly encourage students to become more effective thinkers. One Christian writer (White, 1952) speaks of the importance of teaching children "to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts" (p. 17).

Most thinking skills programs offered in schools promote mental flexibility as a way to develop critical and creative thinking, problem solving and decision making. Programs available to schools include CoRT (Cognitive Research Trust) (de Bono n.d.); H.O.T.S. (Higher Order Thinking Skills) (Pogrow, 1995); Odyssey of the Mind (Micklus & Micklus, 2003) and Habits of Mind (Costa & Kallick, 2009). These and other programs are widely used in schools.

Critical thinking has become an established academic discipline that focuses on decision making based on examining information and ideas from multiple perspectives. (Matthews & Lally, 2010, p. 169)

Not only is critical thinking gaining ground, but moral thinking is back on the classroom agenda with open discussion about the introduction of ethics classes (Compass, 2010). It is interesting to note that educationalists such as Gardner (2008) are including ethical thinking in their lists of essential skills for the twenty-first century, and placing the responsibility for developing it with teachers. Lucas and Claxton (2010) have introduced the term 'ethical intelligence' and claim that "true intelligence is not morally neutral" (p. 55). In addition, they point out that "believing something does not necessarily mean that you will put it into practice" (p. 154) and offer the observation that beliefs and good intentions do not necessarily translate into action. This presents a real challenge to Christian educators who believe that discernment is about belief which is confirmed by action.

While there is some common ground between ethical thinking and the Christian view of discernment, there are also gaps. Ethical thinking revolves around what is socially and morally acceptable; while a Christian perspective of discernment steps beyond social mores, and

exercises a belief that God is the absolute source of morality. Ethical behaviour deals largely with the impact of individual and/or group behaviour on other individuals or groups; discernment includes ethical behaviour but also challenges individual behaviour that impacts on self only. Ethical behaviour focuses on practises that minimise harm to and destruction of human life; while discernment is applied more broadly to every aspect of life. For Christians, discernment is important because it helps determine life direction. All young people are faced with choices that impact their wellbeing and happiness. Choices range from personal clothing styles to lifestyle habits and career options. How they make those choices is the theme of this discussion.

## Discernment and Christianity

Christians regard discernment as an integral part of their spirituality. Most view the action of discerning God's will for their lives and living accordingly as a personal responsibility. Yet this has not always been the case. Historically, the Christian church had an authoritarian approach to discernment. Consequently, it became the conscience of the people, interpreting scripture and moving beyond doctrine to establishing standards for its members relating to how they should live their lives. These standards of behaviour were then adhered to, sometimes rigidly, sometimes reluctantly, and often blindly, with no understanding of the rationale behind the ruling. This approach to discernment was evident in varying degrees in all protestant denominations. While many Christians today support a personal application of principles, there are still some who cling to the clerical collar to reveal God's will for their lives.

There are dangers in adopting this approach. First, people are human and their ideas fallible, so standards for Christian living may change as those in authority change, or they may be biased by the perspective of church leaders. Secondly, changes in culture may bring about a shift in standards, which in turn may legitimise certain behaviours previously eschewed on the basis of Biblical principles. In addition to causing tension when this happens, Christians may start to question the validity of other more important aspects of the Christian faith. Thirdly, behaviour without belief is hypocritical, and impacts not only on Christians but on those they interact with in their everyday lives. The greatest danger; however, as Bailey Gillespie (1996) points out, is that preoccupation with church standards has the potential to take our focus off what really matters—the saving Grace of Jesus Christ.

In response to the controlling attitude to church standards of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a

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period of silence on the issue. This could, in part, be due to the fear of offending fellow-Christians, and of being labelled legalistic, but after some years of silence on this matter, Christian writers are again authoring books with intriguing titles such as *Bulls, bears & golden calves* (Stapleford, 2002), *Rich Christians in an age of hunger* (Sider, 2005), *What's a Christian to do with Harry Potter* (Neal, 2001), *Theology goes to the movies* (Marsh, 2007) and *Shall we dance: Rediscovering Christ-centered standards* (Case, 1996). Each of these books attempts to clarify and establish a Christian position on matters such as finance, poverty, literature, the arts and a variety of lifestyle issues.

Enforced sets of behaviour, history indicates, are not the answer to teaching discernment, yet students are faced with so many options that it would be negligent to not offer some guiding strategies for making wise choices in a society which places everything into question. Consequences of poor choices may have far-reaching effects; therefore, educators need to explore ways of helping future generations think christianly; to operate out of a Christian worldview. One role of teachers is to equip students with the tools to make their own decisions, and then to trust them to make those decision wisely. As already established, thinking skills are widely recognised among educators as tools that may assist in this process.

## Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats

This article examines one critical thinking model and explores its application to teaching discernment. Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (2000) were first introduced to schools in the 1980s and have been widely used for over 25 years both in education and the corporate world by companies such as Seattle-based Boeing's Rocketdyne Division and Hewlett-Packard (Suzik, 1999). These hats or thinking tools represent an intentional approach to teaching thinking skills which is both simple and effective (Sunderland, 2000). De Bono claims that there are three difficulties individuals face when confronted with an issue, idea or problem.

1. They rely on gut feeling, emotion and prejudice. This clouds their perspective.
2. They feel a sense of helplessness. They don't know where to start so they never begin.
3. They experience confusion because they try to think of everything at once. Their minds become chaotic because their thoughts have no clear path (de Bono, 2000).

In an attempt to address these road-blocks to thinking, de Bono's straightforward yet highly effective Six Hats method focuses on parallel

thinking which enables individuals to separate logic from emotion and creativity from information, resulting in increased thinking efficiency. The Six Thinking Hats also promote mental flexibility by using a multiple perspective approach. While this method has proven successful in the corporate and educational world, the focus of this article is to examine the model against a Christian view of discernment. In de Bono's model, each coloured hat is indicative of a type of thinking: positive, cautionary, factual, creative, evaluative and emotional. The following section will briefly describe each hat and its thinking style.

## Overview of the Six Thinking Hats

As previously stated, each of the six coloured hats is a metaphor for a thinking style. With this method, only one hat can be worn at a time, although this may happen in quick succession. This method is most commonly used in a discussion of an issue, dilemma or problem where all participants wear the same hat at the same time, but is also used by individuals for their own clarification. There is no set order for using the hats, although the white or red hats are a good starting point, yellow and black usually follow each other and green and blue are often used after the other hats.

White hat thinking focuses on the facts. It requires an individual to take an objective look at a situation. This is in contrast to the argument habits of Western society, which "prefers to give a conclusion first and then to bring up the facts to support that conclusion" (de Bono, 2000, p.27). White hat thinking encourages an objective look at all available information. As gaining a multi-perspective view is important in this model, focusing on the facts is a neutral and emotion-free place to start a conversation that has potential for disagreement.

Red hat thinking allows individuals to acknowledge their feelings on an issue without being required to justify their opinion. Emotions are important, says de Bono (2000), but by themselves they are not a sound basis for making decisions. As educators, it is important to recognise that young people will have strong feelings about issues and to give them the dignity of respecting their feelings, which, after all, are a created part of who they are.

The yellow hat is the optimistic hat. This thinking hat concentrates on positive judgement, and asks what is good or right about an idea or concept. It focuses on the benefits and forces individuals to examine the inherent 'good' and value in an idea (de Bono, 2000). Yellow hat thinking is easiest to do when putting forward one's own ideas, but takes practice to apply it to the ideas of others. As such,

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it is valuable in helping students to develop a multi-perspective approach to an idea, issue or problem. As value or benefit are not always obvious in a given situation, yellow hat thinking also draws out the best in an idea (de Bono, 2000).

In contrast to the yellow hat is the black hat. This hat is concerned with caution. It considers “risks, dangers, obstacles and potential problems” (de Bono, 2000, p. 88). It may be used to ask what is wrong with a particular idea, and, de Bono (2000) claims it is the dominant thinking style of western society. He warns against the overuse of this hat as it has the potential to create negative emotions through association. The yellow and black hats combined encourage multi-perspective thinking.

The green hat stands for creative thinking. It searches for alternative ideas and generates new concepts and perceptions by cutting across existing thought patterns. This ‘outside-the-box’ thinking is important as it can grow new ideas out of the black and yellow hat perceptions and is the basis for innovation and development (de Bono, 2000).

The blue hat is the control hat. It may be used to plan, to focus on particular areas, to determine the questions and to summarise or review. It is the blue hat that draws all ideas together and asks, “What more thinking is required?” or “What action should be taken?” (de Bono, 2000).

When used together, these six thinking styles promote mental agility and are a valuable resource for teaching young people to think about issues, ideas and behaviour using a multi-perspective approach. However, from a Christian perspective, it could be suggested there is a missing element, which may be represented by the ‘other’ hat, designated in this article by the colour purple.

### The other hat

There are two arguments for the inclusion of a purple hat, both relating to the yellow and, more specifically, the black hat. The first argument for another hat is found in the lack of a reference point in de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats process. On what do individuals base their caution or their certainty? The yellow hat asks what is right or positive about a particular idea and the black hat asks what is wrong, or what cautions should be observed, but we are left asking, “Who decides what is wrong and what is right?” An important aspect of a Christian worldview is the belief that knowledge and the ability to know anything at all has its origins in an all-knowing God. God is the reference point for the knowledge of what is right wrong (Sire, 1990). This is where the purple hat fits; purple because it is the colour of royalty and therefore fitting for the King of the Universe from whom Christians derive their

very identity. The purple hat is the valuing hat, the ethical hat, the discerning hat which asks, “How does this idea fit with my understanding of the world?” For Christians, the purple hat provides a reference point, a certainty of knowing. It provides an opportunity to keep beliefs, and ultimately actions, consistent with a Christian worldview.

The second argument for the inclusion of a purple hat relates to the choice of colour. In western civilisation ‘black’ is commonly associated with the dark side of life, with wrong, with that which is bad or evil. Children are exposed to a plethora of movies, songs and literature that consolidate the idea that blackness somehow equates with something evil. Every family has a ‘black sheep’. If you do something wrong, you get a black mark against your name. Days remembered for something catastrophic are given the nomenclature ‘black’ as in ‘Black Tuesday’, October 29, 1929 when Wall Street crashed and ‘Black Saturday’, February 7, 2009 during Victoria’s deadly bushfires. In western literature and movies, villains traditionally wear dark colours while heroes and heroines shine in white; witches are shrouded in black while good fairies sparkle with light. It is not the point of this article to argue over the political correctness of this cultural stereotyping, but to point out that students are somewhat conditioned by society to this point of view. De Bono (2000) himself introduces a cautionary note over the use of the black hat. He points out that this is the hat which alerts us to dangers, difficulties and potential problems (de Bono, 2000). He acknowledges that this hat can be misinterpreted as the ‘bad’ hat, rather than being the careful and cautious hat which was its original intention. It is this misperception that validates the second reason for the inclusion of another hat. Instead of asking, “What is wrong, or with what caution should I approach this idea, belief or practice?” the purple hat allows us to ask “How does this idea, belief or practice measure up against God’s plan for our world, humanity, the environment, or my life?” This converts the perception of discernment from a negative process to a positive one.

An additional observation on the colour purple is that it is a combination of red and blue. By taking the metaphor one step further, it can be argued that the purple hat sums up thinking on an issue and sets future directions (the role of the blue hat) while operating out of an emotional love response to the Lord Jesus Christ (the role of the red hat).

Christians who adopt or teach de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats approach need to remember that this process makes no allowance for a reference point. A reference point is crucial to the Christian worldview which is found in God and His goodness.

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God's goodness means then, first, that there is an absolute standard of righteousness (it is found in God's character) and, second, that there is hope for humanity (because God is love and will not abandon His creation). (Sire, 2004, p.29)

Christian educators may find that purple hat thinking is a useful tool to purposefully guide children and teenagers to begin operating out of their worldview.

### Using the purple hat to teach discernment

The following three step approach may be helpful to Christian educators who wish to assist children and teenagers in developing discernment in their lives. These steps are: ask the right questions, find the right timing, and use appropriate sources of information.

#### Ask the right questions

Often Christian parents, educators or pastors attempt to help a child or teenager be discerning in relation to a particular high risk behaviour or idea by asking, "What is wrong with this idea, practice or concept?" In other words, they use black hat thinking. While this questioning has its place, the use of all the hats and especially purple hat thinking creates affirming links to a Christian worldview and builds on the positive rather than the negative. Purple hat questions may include: "How does this idea fit a Christian worldview?", "Will this practice contribute to the joy that God wants me to experience in my life?", "Is this idea consistent with biblical teaching?" or for younger children, "Is this how God wants me to live?" and even "What would Jesus do?" Although it may not be possible to use purple hat thinking all the time, it is a proactive method of helping young people to live a life consistent with their belief system, one of the issues facing the Christian church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Poe (2004) surmises, "We tend to ignore the philosophy or the worldview, out of which we operate, largely because we have grown so accustomed to it" (p. 22). Barna (2003) adds weight to the argument for purple hat thinking.

Without application, a worldview is simply the intellectualisation of reality—a head game we play that has no bearing on who we are, what difference our life makes, or how we relate to God. (p. 182)

Purple hat thinking encourages people to view life and its choices in terms of their relationship with God, and to act accordingly. It gives individuals a reason to believe or reject an idea, and to behave correspondingly.

A cautionary note must be added here. Purple hat thinking without a love relationship with Jesus will

be ineffective. True discernment is a response to that relationship: it is not a formula to be applied that will turn out Christian clones. Therefore, how Christian educators go about it is of utmost importance.

#### Find the right timing

In matters of discernment, teaching needs to be proactive, rather than reactive. Because teaching discernment often touches a raw nerve in children and especially teenagers, sometimes certain big questions are left to spiritual osmosis, with uncertain outcomes. One way to counteract this is to find the right timing. Often questions, discussions and education programs are left until a time of crisis, when emotions are running high, hormones are pumping and the heart and mind are not receptive. Asking pertinent questions well before (preferably), and long after emotionally charged moments is more likely to elicit rational responses, assist in clarification, and promote ownership of values and beliefs. Christian educators may help prepare their students to make life choices before they are caught up in the power of peer pressure, before they find themselves in compromising situations and before they no longer want to listen. Teachers can offer students opportunities to practise their responses in role play, voting, ranking and moral dilemmas (Larson & Larson, 1996) before acting them out in reality. They can also provide time for consolidation and clarification of what really matters in life. Purple hat thinking will assist in this process.

Children can begin learning discernment at a young age. Asking questions relating to all areas of their lives can help prepare them for future scenarios. A child who has learnt to ask herself the right questions in little matters has a greater chance of being discerning in significant areas. Children who are given opportunities to think through their values and beliefs and make decisions based on them are more likely to follow through with those decisions as they grow and face similar situations in the real world. The danger is that too little may happen too late, leaving the church to wonder why Christianity is having so little impact on how its followers live their lives.

#### Use appropriate sources of information

There are many quality educational programs available to assist in teaching appropriate life skills. However, teachers should apply some purple hat thinking to educational programs to ascertain their consistency with Christian beliefs and values, and recognise the limitations of educational programs in teaching discernment. Educational programs often focus on teaching content in the hope that information will change behaviour. As Hopkins, et

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“In reality, information may have minimal impact and needs to be accompanied by opportunities for students to explore ideas, think through alternatives and reach their own conclusions within the framework of a nurturing Christian environment”

al. (2007, S70) point out, “There is little evidence to suggest that information dissemination alone is a successful strategy for preventing high-risk behaviour among adolescents.” In reality, information may have minimal impact and needs to be accompanied by opportunities for students to explore ideas, think through alternatives and reach their own conclusions within the framework of a nurturing Christian environment.

Christian mentors are a second source of information, offering support and a safe place for the exchange of ideas. Hopkins et al. (2007) promote the building of healthy, safe relationships with non-family adults or “caring others” as a strategy to promote resilience, which in turn has links with lower incidences of at-risk behaviour. Brooks (1994) has observed that children with at least one caring adult who accepts them unconditionally are better equipped to deal with problems and are generally resilient. Rice (1994) cites an older study where it was found that caring Christian adults who were willing to share both their life and Christian experiences were very influential in the lives of adolescents.

When significant adults model purple hat thinking in their own lives and are prepared to discuss their ideas and listen to the ideas of others, it may help young people clarify their own stance on issues. This points to the importance of involving children and teenagers in multi-generational worship and social activities where they can form strong friendships with significant adults as well as their peers.

The third source of information for Christians is the Bible. While it is important to encourage the practice of consulting the Word of God in all areas of life, it is also important to exercise some restraint in how the Bible is used. Proving a particular point using obscure and random texts is unlikely to convince a reluctant teenager, and may ultimately do more harm than good. It must be remembered that the Bible is a guide to affirm and strengthen faith; not a weapon to beat Christians into submission. Far better is a holistic purple hat approach founded firmly in the grace of God’s goodness and His desires for His children. The Bible serves another purpose in this discussion. It affirms individuals that they are loved unconditionally and that God calls them his children. This belief may also help young people develop a sense of worth and identity; a genuine high self-esteem. Several studies (Hopkins et al., 2007; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger et al., 2003; Lilja, Larson, Wilhelmsen et al., 2003) support the notion that genuine self-esteem is one factor in preventing at-risk behaviour and promoting resilience, both which are linked to the ability to make wise life choices.

## Conclusion

De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats approach to problem solving is an effective tool for Christian teachers. This approach encourages careful examination of different perspectives, which may promote a clearer understanding of issues. Christian teachers could also consider the inclusion of the ‘other’ hat, the purple hat, to provide a spiritual reference point for thinking and to encourage students to view discernment in a positive light, rather than relying on more negative black hat thinking. Purple hat thinking, combined with judicious timing, supportive mentors, and reliable sources of information, including the Bible, may promote positive attitudes and lead to prudent life choices. Christian educators have the responsibility to engage their students in a variety of thinking styles, and whatever the model used, they can adapt it to include thinking christianly. It should be recognised, however, that thinking skills cannot replace a relationship with Jesus Christ. Ultimately, it is from a love relationship that wise choices will be made. Christian pastors, teachers and parents can purposefully build on this relationship to help young people learn discernment so they can live inside and outside their churches, homes and classrooms with integrity. **TEACH**

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## Developing a faith-based education

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