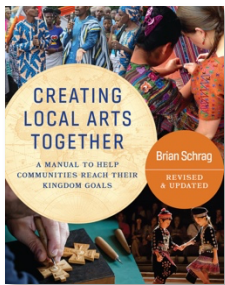


[Review] *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals (Revised and Updated)*, by Brian Schrag



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Introduction

In 2016, I had the privilege of reading the first edition of *Creating Local Arts Together* (CLAT) as a textbook in the “Arts for a Better Future” course. I later translated the abridged version, *Community Arts for God’s Purposes*, into Chinese in 2023. With years of practical application and instruction to guide me, I eagerly embraced the enriched and updated 2025 edition. This revised manual, with its expanded narratives and vivid, real-life illustrations, demonstrates the facilitation of authentic indigenous artistic expressions in Christian worship and missions across diverse cultural contexts.

Brian Schrag, a pivotal figure in merging ethnomusicology with world arts through an incarnational ministry approach, has significantly contributed to the ethnodoxology movement and the world arts program at the Centre for Excellence in World Arts at Dallas International University.¹ As a former student of Schrag, I personally feel his desire to make people laugh, sing, and imagine “Heaven”—a theme that is prominently featured in the new edition.

Summary of the Book

Rooted in ethnodoxology, Schrag crafts the CLAT model to help communities, particularly Christian ones, incorporate local artistic expressions into their daily lives and faith, thereby enriching their communal and spiritual well-being. This model champions a participatory approach where communities actively meet, specify, connect, analyze, create, improve, and celebrate their local arts to achieve “Kingdom Goals”—objectives like healthier families, healing, rest, play, justice, and spiritual growth. The manual outlines a seven-conversation process that spans from initial community engagement to the long-term sustainability of artistic traditions. A new *Manual Companion* offers expanded guidance and

¹ <https://www.diu.edu/cewa/>

tools for detailed research into various artistic domains, highlighting that all artistic forms, regardless of their perceived significance, reflect divine creativity and are valuable for ministry.

Comparison with the 2013 Edition

From its 2013 inception, the manual has undergone substantial revisions influenced by extensive user feedback and methodological evolution over twelve years. Initially published alongside the handbook *Worship and Mission for the Global Church* (Krabill et al. 2013) as a practical companion, this edition more effectively integrates solid theoretical underpinnings with practical applications in diverse settings, more effectively fulfilling its purpose.

Noteworthy updates include the shift in terminology from the seven “Steps” to “Conversations,” reflecting the importance of ongoing dialogue and acknowledging the non-linear nature of real-life CLAT applications. Further terminological adjustments include replacing “critical” with “careful” in the discussion of contextualization to better express the “more clearly and fully” approach (191). Changes in artistic form analysis include renaming “Performance Features” to “Enactment Features” and “Underlying Symbolic Systems” to “Consolidation and Meanings,” broadening the understanding of artistic nature and facilitating easier comprehension (129).

Next, the treatment of “Artistic Domain Features” (Conversation 4B) has been significantly streamlined in the 2025 edition. The detailed research and analysis activities for artistic domains have been relocated to the *Manual Companion*, making them more accessible while retaining their depth, and representing years of expert evaluation and refinement.

Brian Schrag expands the manual by about 20 percent in this edition, incorporating a wealth of new content, examples, updated references, and an enhanced bibliography. He introduces case studies from urban and multicultural contexts, reflecting the evolving global landscape. The periodic reflection questions he adds engage with CLAT practitioners in diverse settings, boosting the manual’s usefulness for both field workers and scholars. Fueled by extensive material and user feedback, the 2025 revised manual outgrew a single volume, prompting the creation of two new essential resources: the *Manual Companion*, a repository for relevant materials that no longer fit into the main text, and the *CLAT Digital Library*, an online resource offering extra stories, articles, tools, and background documents.

The closing sections of the manual include updates such as renaming the publisher to “Global Ethnodoxology Network (GEN),” previously known as the “International Council of Ethnodoxologists.” This update, alongside the inclusion of GEN’s Core Values, signifies their comprehensive integration. Additionally, the glossary has been revised and moved to the end, with key terms like “cocreation” and “Kingdom goals” clearly defined. A comprehensive scripture and subject index has also been added to enhance navigation.

Critical Analysis

Brian Schrag’s latest revisions to the CLAT manual primarily aim to bolster both the theoretical framework and practical application of the CLAT model. He transforms the initial “Prepare Yourself”

section into “Framing the Seven Conversations,” enriching the manual’s theoretical foundations. This restructuring weaves together ethnoarts, theological, and missiological concepts—such as narratives from creation to new creation, Jesus’ incarnation model, and ethnodoxology—all strategically aimed at advancing the Kingdom goals through the seven-conversation model of CLAT. In Conversation 4D on church arts, Schrag introduces a new section titled “What Church is Like,” thoughtfully placing biblical and theological foundations before artistic analysis tools to deepen the readers’ understanding of the unique church context and enhance the model’s sustainable impact.

The manual’s strengths lie in its comprehensive and flexible methodology that adapts to the unpredictable nature of real-life applications in diverse cultural settings. It promotes a relational and dialogical approach rather than a rigid, linear process. The manual is rigorous in scholarship yet practical in application, empowering local creativity and ownership while focusing on nurturing relationships and fostering a deep understanding of complex artistic expressions. The addition of specialized tools in Conversation 4D for church integration and the provision of companion resources like the *CLAT Digital Library* are significant enhancements.

However, due to significant reordering and content changes, the new version of the manual may seem unfamiliar to longtime users. Each chapter now starts with a clearer introduction aimed at preparing readers and outlining the content, but inconsistencies in formatting persist, such as the lack of bullet-point outlines in Conversations 2 and 3, and the omission of icons (magnifying glass and pencil) mentioned in the preface (xi). In contrast, the earlier edition effectively utilized visual aids, numbering, colors, and layout. I recommend increasing the spacing between titles and paragraphs and adding specific lists for “Kingdom Goals” (Conversation 2) and “Community Connection” topics (Conversation 4C) to improve usability. A more detailed table of contents would also benefit new readers by providing a logical flow and assist existing users in better navigation and engagement.

The manual’s complexity and detailed nature, while beneficial for thorough study, introduce challenges that require specialized skills and training, potentially beyond the scope of the manual itself. The non-linear application may complicate the learning process, requiring users to adapt flexibly to the conversational approach. These aspects highlight a dynamic yet imperfect tool, one that acknowledges its ongoing developmental trajectory and the need for continuous adaptation and improvement, as noted by Schrag in the preface (x).

The manual’s continued focus on traditional artistic domains—music, drama, dance, oral verbal arts, and visual arts—may seem limited in an era dominated by digital technology and new media arts. Although Schrag briefly acknowledges the intersection of CLAT with emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (10), this discussion is minimal and does not permeate the manual comprehensively. Instead, he introduces new artistic domains such as aromas, taste, video, virtual realities, and architecture (129), inviting CLAT practitioners and art specialists to enrich the manual with content that reflects contemporary art practices.

Conclusion

The 2025 revised edition of *Creating Local Arts Together* has emerged as an indispensable resource,

richly updated with new methodologies and insights that enhance its applicability across diverse cultural contexts. By transitioning intricate technical content to the *Manual Companion* and *Digital Library*, the core volume stays concise and user-friendly without losing depth.

Schrag's manual is particularly valuable for a wide range of people—ranging from field workers to teachers, trainers, and administrators—all of whom engage in weaving local arts into multiple contexts. It helps them navigate the collaborative processes of uncovering, examining, and sparking artistic creativity. The *Manual Companion*, equipped with specific tools for fieldwork in ethnodoxology, becomes a must-have for those committed to applying the manual's principles.

This manual is highly recommended, standing out as a critical asset despite minor flaws. The Chinese proverb “雞旦裡挑骨頭” (picking bones from an egg) aptly captures the challenge of critiquing such a comprehensive guide; its immense benefits far outweigh its few drawbacks.

References

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