A Great Divide or Gentle Drift?

Commentary One

Joy Penner

University of British Columbia

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In his work *Orality and Literacy*, Ong (2002) suggests a number of distinctive characteristics that define ways of thinking for both oral and literate cultures. He uses these contrasting aspects to prove his bold theory that, “More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (Ong, 2002, p. 78). As a technological determinist, Ong (2002) seems comfortable creating sharp dichotomies between the two cultures, however there are several reasons to view his “Great Divide theory” (Chandler, 1994, para. 4) with caution. He is far removed from oral cultures, his thesis is viewed through the philosophical lens of the technology of literacy, which “codifies the world” (Postman, 1998, para. 15) in a certain way; but human development rarely happens in such a dichotomous fashion. In defining the characteristics of both groups Ong (2002) provides some useful tools for thinking about the topic, however his strong assertions are problematic for what they leave unexplored.

Researchers know that all variables must be isolated before a hypothesis can be confirmed reliable. Ong (2002) acknowledges that the shift from orality to literacy does interact with “social, economic, political, religious, and other structures,” yet, he has chosen to only deal with these issues indirectly in favor of focusing on “the differences in mentality between oral and writing cultures” (p.3). In so doing, he has sidelined a number of variables that could have also contributed to the perceived shift in thinking between oral and literate cultures.

The Influence of Organic Societal Change

“Great Divide” theories” (Chandler, 1994) attempt to define the “differences between modes of thinking in non-literate and literate societies” (para. 4). Ironically, although seeking to develop theories of “social organization and development,” (para. 4) the theorists may in fact be overlooking important societal changes that could have affected the development of thinking. “New technologies are generally invented to fill a perceived need that comes about as a result of modifications in social practice” (ETEC540 course notes). As ancient oral societies transitioned from hunter-gatherer to “highly developed forms of agriculture” (Gernet, 1972/1982, p.14) populations grew, spawning organized states. With the increase of wealth, some members of society could be spared to devote their time to developing the arts. Increased wealth and trade necessitated a system that could keep up with the development and changes in thinking and lifestyle that was already naturally occurring in society. Writing then, was a natural development to a perceived need. Ong (2002) asserts that in contrast to oral thinking, writing enables “new speculation” (p.41). However it seems evident that new speculation was already present in society, precipitating the need for record keeping, followed by the development of increasingly elaborate methods of communication.

The Influence of Schooling

Ong, (2002) dealing with the dichotomy of situational versus abstract thinking, cites numerous anecdotes from Luria’s study conducted in remote areas of the former Soviet Union. Luria found that a student who had two years of schooling was capable of abstract thought, whereas illiterates always returned to situational thinking even after some instruction on the “principals of abstract classification” (p. 51). Ong (2002) implies that literacy is the reason for the difference in thinking between a two-year student and one who receives less instruction. However, what he fails to explore is the influence of the instruction and not the literacy.

In their study of the Vai of Liberia, Cole and Scribner (as cited in Chandler, 1994) “found that schooling rather than literacy appeared to be the significant cause of some changes in cognitive skills involved in the logical functions of language” (para. 8). Schools provide “practice in treating individual learning problems as instances of general classes of problems” which would explain differences in the thinking skills that Luria encountered. Practice and instruction could also account for Ong’s (2002) “additive rather than subordinative” (p. 37) dichotomy. Young children naturally write in an additive manner. As they receive instruction and gain practice, their writing slowly changes. One cannot say it is the writing that is changing their thinking, but rather the internalization of the instruction and practice.

In considering the role of schooling on thinking, we may also consider developmental theories and their influence on the evolution of thinking. Vygotsky believed that “the development of mind is the interweaving of biological development of the human body” (Cole & Wertsch, 1996, para. 9) coupled with cultural influences. Piaget too recognized maturation and experience to be significant in the development of thinking. Although his theory does delineate prescribed age spans for each stage, he did concede that they vary depending on the culture in which the studies were conducted (Piaget, 1964 in Gauvain & Cole, eds, 1997). Luria’s illiterate subject’s thinking was categorized as “operational thinking” (Ong, 2002, p.52). In Piagetian terms, they had not yet reached formal-operational thought. And while Piaget himself, acknowledged that it is possible that a person may never reach this stage of thinking, with the encouragement of the culture and environment, such as a school, it seems far more plausible that a person’s thought processes would develop as a result of maturation and environment rather than through one single technology.

Influence of Culture

Ong used Luria’s study to prove that analogous thinking is a result of literacy. However, cultural-historical psychologists, including Luria, assume a connection between “special environment that human beings inhabit and the fundamental, distinguishing, qualities of human psychological processes” (Cole & Wertsch, 1996, para. 6). Different cultures, whether literate or illiterate classify things according to their cultural perspective. By way of example, two years in a row I had students protesting the “correct sample answer” on a standardized test. Given a list of animals, students were to decide which one did not fit. The answer was that the squirrel did not fit because it was not a pet. My Asian students were categorically upset because for them a squirrel can be, and often is a pet. All my students were literate, however their own cultural practices had defined the norms for categorical thinking.

In reference to Scribner and Cole’s more moderate study, Patricia Greenfield (as cited in Chandler, 1994) declared in no uncertain terms that Great Divide theories are “ethnocentric” and “arrogant” in thinking “that a single technology suffices to create in its users a distinct, let alone superior, set of cognitive processes” (para. 8). While Ong (2002) does not appear arrogant in his work, by leaving out discussions surrounding other variables as they relate to development in thinking processes, he has delivered a one-sided argument, devoid of rigorous testing. His characteristics of oral and literate thinking remain helpful, but must be viewed with balance.

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