

What have we lost?

Day-to-day we all struggle and strive toward the “best” ways to educate, teach and share knowledge. Our passion for the topic brings us together in classes and programs; sharing, creating, and researching. We look to, and expect, new technologies to help us help our students to learn more quickly and more deeply. Yet, not too surprisingly, we can’t just throw new technology at a problem and expect a solution. We may not get the solution we’re seeking and we may also find that the new technology has additional implications. “New Technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop” (Postman, 1993, p. 20).

Not so long ago, text (and paper!) were our new technologies. Text, books, libraries, and literacy are so common place today that we can easily overlook the tradeoffs that we’ve made. Literacy is a key educational metric and is a goal that parents and educators pursue for their children from their earliest days. A rousing rendition of the “ABC’s” is common in households across Canada and elsewhere. There’s a quote from an earlier blog post that I especially like and is relevant as we dig deeper into this topic of literacy and orality: “Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that” (Postman, 1993, p. 5). If there is truth to this quote then we need to consider the idea that we’ve lost something in the migration from Orality to Literacy. That is, as we transition from “...thought and its verbal expression in oral culture...” (Ong, 1991, p. 1) to a literate society, what have we gained and what have we lost? If “...educational institutions are obsessed with the primacy of the written word” (Chandler, “Biases...”, 1995) then we must question the cost of that obsession. In typing this statement, it feels like I’ve uttered a blasphemous idea, how could there be a downside to literacy? Perhaps the phrasing would be better by asking “What do we lose as we throw away Orality?” And in answering this question, perhaps we can find ways to enhance our education efforts to have literacy *and* some of the benefits derived from oral cultures.

Writing this post allows me to easily share and persist my thoughts. My literacy and associated thought process allows me to take a complex topic and generate and record well-organized and (hopefully!) intelligent commentary. “But oral cultures can produce amazingly complex and intelligent and beautiful organizations of thought and experience” (Ong, 1991, p. 56). Would anyone accuse my writing of being “beautiful”?

Ong (1991) investigates the ability of an oral communicator to memorize and accurately repeat information. While this ability is interesting, it left me wondering about measurement of the impact of the transmission of the information. Does an oral communicator vary their information depending on the audience and the setting? We’d all expect that an oral communicator must tailor their delivery. They connect with the audience and can tell when the attention of the group is dissipating or their audience is leaving, “...verbatim or not, oral

memorization is subject to variation from direct social pressures. Narrators narrate what audiences call for or will tolerate” (Ong, 1991, p. 65).

There are also things that the oral communicator does to enhance the reception and acceptance of the information by those listening. For instance, “...it should be noted that oral memory differs significantly from textual memory in that oral memory has a high somatic component” (Ong, 1991, p. 65). As educators, we talk about personal learning preferences and multi-modal approaches to communicating. Are there certain hand gestures, forms of musical accompaniment or other similar forms of engagement from oral communicators that we can use to enhance our efforts? And beyond the accompaniment, we can also look at the story-telling, embellishment and richness of oral communication. “With the control of information and memory brought about by writing and, more intensely, by print, you do not need a hero in the old sense to mobilize knowledge in story form” (Ong, 1991, p. 69). However, I sure appreciate story telling that uses strong heroes, colourful personalities, bizarre figures and additional embellishments. As a member of the audience, I want to be pulled in, captivated and enthralled. For the oral communicator, they had no choice but to use these mechanisms. Without using such mechanisms, they’d have no audience and their story and information would vanish from the world. In today’s literate world, I can easily persist and distribute my thoughts without employing such measures. But, those creations are likely less interesting and less effective.

And last, but not least, how we process and experience sound differs from how we process vision. As we consider constructivism, peer-based learning and co-construction of knowledge; how do we reconcile that “Writing and print isolate” (Ong, 1991, p. 72)? “The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together” (Ong, 1991, p. 70).

So, while I’m not campaigning that we return to a time without literacy (I love books!), we should reflect and revisit the strengths of oral based cultures to improve our current, literacy based culture and its implications on education. Perhaps the “...dismissal of the importance of the spoken word involves throwing out the baby with the bathwater” (Chandler, “Technological...”, 1995)? Story-telling, presenting and public speaking in general, should leverage lessons learned from oral traditions to draw in the listener, captivate and educate. These are critical skills and I wonder if we underinvest and overlook the importance of such skills?

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## References

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