

PRESENTING ORALITY IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

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Biola University asked me to teach students in their PhD program a course on the topic of orality. I had been involved in numerous workshops on this topic, but those workshops were of a more informal nature taught to mainly church members. If there was one thing I had learned from putting on story workshops, it was the need to actually learn and tell stories in a practical way as a core aspect of the training. I came to this PhD class with the same mentality and since my exposure to orality had come mainly through *Simply the Story*, decided to entitle the class with that name. Biola, however, was concerned that such a title would not suit the academic context of these PhD students and changed it to "Biblical Theology and Narrative Texts." More than once I was asked what I intended to teach, but had trouble remembering the long title I had been given. Since then I have taught this basic subject in other institutions and as a result see more clearly the challenge that orality poses for those who seek to introduce or teach this topic to highly literate and academically minded Bible schools or seminaries.

One incident at the Trinity Theological College in Singapore stands out in this regard. I happened to meet an Old Testament professor at TTC and was asked to describe what orality was all about. After an hour and a half of explanation, the professor surprised me by asking me to teach part of her class on the Minor Prophets the next day. I prepared an oral treatment of Jonah 1, but as I entered the room, I saw a PowerPoint slide with "Textural, Form and Redaction Criticism" on the screen. In an introductory course it is important to touch on such topics, but how do you incorporate a truly oral approach within such a highly literate, propositional and western academic environment?

Gatekeepers—The origin of this word comes from a guard who monitored the flow of goods and people through a physical gate. The definition that we are concerned with speaks of "a person who controls access." Academically, gatekeepers are the directors, academic deans and professors who control and monitor access to biblical and theological information. The institutions in which they teach invariably shape the mindset of all who pass through their portals. Anyone seeking to spark a grass-roots movement or proposing a new or innovative approach to Biblical training will eventually come under the scrutiny of these gatekeepers. Their influence is often extensive and flows from their alumni into the life and ministry of the churches and their members. This is why it is important to present orality in such a way that these gatekeepers can see the validity and value of oral strategies within their curriculum.

On more than one occasion I have been warned concerning a possible "push back" by those with reservations about orality and a more narrative approach to Bible education. This push back is understandable, especially for those with a vested interest in a highly literate communication paradigm. In such an environment, telling a story in a more dramatic way (rather than reading it from the text) and then asking students to repeat it so that the teacher could ask questions of the class, probably made many think they were in a summer VBS or backyard CEF class, rather than a seminary classroom. When you have become used to a basic lecture pedagogy for decades, a strongly oral approach will seem unsettling if not shocking. Instructions to put up your Bibles so you can listen more clearly and refrain from taking notes no doubt add to the shock factor.

So, it is not surprising when some people become skittish when they hear that a teacher is "storying" the Bible. Are they going to hear a dramatic rendition of Ruth in costume, a Christianized Aesop fable, or possibly an embellished children's sermon? So acute were these concerns that a church actually called a special meeting of the elder board to discuss at length whether they would allow one of our story workshops to take place on their property. They came up with seven questions that needed to be answered in detail before they would allow the

workshop to take place. Such concerns are valid and need biblical answers. Churches and gatekeepers in educational institutions need to be confident that what is being proposed with an oral approach is both solid pedagogically and biblically.

Thus, the following are considerations, questions, and proposed actions that should be considered by any institution seeking to incorporate orality into their curriculum:

1. Most institutions have western accreditation requirements, which shape the courses that are taught. Classes that stress an oral approach do not neatly fit into these descriptions. For instance, academic deans are often at a loss as to where to place a class on "Story Telling" within their present framework. Does it fit under Christian Education, Homiletics, Missions or Evangelism? Academic deans should work with their faculty to develop titles and descriptions for classes that reflect an oral component, yet satisfy accreditation requirements.
2. Good biblical story telling includes not just the presentation aspect, but also the unpacking of the meaning of the story, yet in an oral way. How can one demonstrate the validity of an oral inductive bible study method that allows both literate and nonliterate students to discover deep truths in God's Word? For instance, could oral discussion and dialogue in a small group be seen as a valid interpretive tool for a hermeneutics class?
3. Orality is much broader than just story telling and needs to be taught in a holistic manner. Institutions should investigate how to use drama, music, proverbs, dance, and poetry within their curriculum. Experts in ethno-arts could be invited to present how these aspects factor into a culturally appropriate communication of truth.
4. With truly oral people groups, one does not need to stress the undergirding philosophy or present apologetics for its use. Academic institutions, however, will invariably encounter a resistance to oral methods. There are some who have found that the mere mention of this new word "orality" sets off red flags, particularly in conservative and more traditional schools. As a result, some have chosen to emphasize the power of Bible stories and narrative in and of itself without the need to buttress their arguments by referring to how this subject relates to the nonliterate and preferred oral learners of this world. Stressing the Biblical basis of a more narrative approach by referring to the nature of the Bible (70% narrative), the model of Jesus (using story/parables) and use of questions/dialogue (Jesus was asked 183 questions but answered only 3 directly, choosing rather to answer back with questions or story/parables or refusing to answer at all). Stressing these three aspects have proved to be helpful starting points for those who question the validity of orality in an academic context.
5. In church history classes, you will hear virtually nothing about the place that oral strategies played in the expansion of the church. As has been noted, "The gospel has walked on literate feet since Guttenberg". What historic basis can we marshal that will show orality as a valid approach, not just within the last 20 years, but at different points in the history of the church? Those who teach church history should be encouraged to develop lessons that trace this oral development over the course of the Bible up until our day.
6. Seminary libraries are often virtually bereft of the key texts on the oral movement. How can we insure that faculties and students have access to qualitative research and reputable books on orality (whether in print or digitally)? What bibliographies and literature reviews are available for those that are interested in studying this subject? Librarians should be encouraged to do a literature review of orality and make sure that key texts are available to staff and students.
7. Many people can accept the validity of orality for primary oral people groups, but have a hard time understanding the more sophisticated secondary orality issues. Since gatekeepers are more likely to identify with secondary orality, how can we present these concepts in a compelling way? What type of curriculum can be developed to address the unique needs of secondarily oral people? Usually there are certain staff that have a natural bent towards technology, media and digital communication. Those individuals should be encouraged to study how those aspects can be incorporated into the curriculum.

8. Most people would see an immediate use for orality in Christian Education, but there are classes like Christian Family, discipleship, and counseling that would benefit from an oral emphasis. Once again, teachers working in these disciplines should discover what oral teaching materials are available or under development and incorporate them in a kind of "hybrid" fashion into their more traditional lesson plans.

9. Faculties often have experts for various fields of study. How can a school promote an "orality expert" among its ranks? Every school should have at least one faculty member who has been given the green light to pursue this topic of orality. Such an "insider" will have a much better chance of influencing the curriculum and teachers within the school than an outsider (no matter how solid the outsider's credentials might be). What accredited courses are available for someone pursuing this emphasis?

10. Chapels are often the showcase of approved communication approaches. How can oral presentations be promoted and accepted in a more academic context? What if one week of the month was given to chapels presented in an oral manner?

11. What basic texts can be suggested for those who are just being introduced to orality issues? Making Disciples of Oral Learners should be read first as an initial introduction to the subject and can be obtained online. God's Stories with Power is based on a Fuller Seminary doctoral thesis and begins by laying a solid theoretical basis for orality and supports it with field based examples. Truth That Sticks is a more popular treatment with a stress on secondary orality and discipleship.

12. In most classes it is fairly straightforward as far as assigning homework to a class of students. Usually a student is required to read certain texts, interact with the material and answer set questions along with a written report. However, with orality as a subject, you want your students to interact with the material in a more holistic and truly oral manner. With that in mind, what type of homework assignments are best suited to insure that students get a feel for the unique aspects of orality?

If you have been in cross-cultural education on the field for any length of time you no doubt have gotten invitations to attend various seminars and workshops. Each of them claim that their approach is the "key" that will unlock a people movement, multiple conversions and rapid expansion of the church. Thailand, as a free country in the midst of closed or creative access nations, becomes a breeding ground and launching point for many of these innovative approaches. The nationals here have seen many of these teachings come and go and some have become quite skeptical. I will never forget how a national leader reacted after hearing my impassioned plea for orality among the Thai. He basically said, "We will see. I've heard this claim for numerous programs that have been introduced in my country and so far have yet to be convinced."

For such "gatekeepers", orality often sounds like yet another new teaching that was developed in a western context, gained unusual success and then was exported overseas. The tried and true literate courses which they were trained in and now teach seem a much safer and universally accepted route to pursue. They fear that opening the door to oral pedagogy in their curriculum would somehow undermine the solid academic foundation that they have worked so hard to establish. In such contexts, the challenge is to present orality in such a way that it does not appear as a threat, but as an ally in the goal of developing effective ministers of the gospel. We do not want academics to see this as an "either/or" question, but a "both/and" melding of the best practices of literate pedagogies with proven methods from those working in the oral world.

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