Connecting Orality, Language and Culture
The Seven Disciplines of Orality

- ARTS
- FEEL
- MEDIA
- DELIVER
- CULTURE
- INTERPRET
- LANGUAGE
- RECEIVE
- MEMORY
- LEARN
- NETWORKS
- RELATE
- LITERACY
- UNDERSTAND

Orality-Framed CONTENT

Courtesy of Dr. Chuck Madinger who leads Global Impact Mission and serves on the International Orality Network’s Leadership Team facilitating the Research Task Force.

INTERNATIONAL ORALITY NETWORK
During an evening worship service in Jakarta, hundreds of participants at the Lausanne Young Leaders Gathering (YLG2016) brought forward rocks, each with a significant word that God had given the person. Piled together, the rocks created an altar, depicting the integrated power of both the literate and non-literate symbols within Christian worship.
"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

Isaiah 6:1-3 (ESV)

"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"

Revelation 5:9-10 (ESV)
Orality Journal is the journal of the International Orality Network. It is published online semi-annually and aims to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on the issues of orality, discoveries of innovations in orality, and praxis of effectiveness across multiple domains in society. This online journal is international and interdisciplinary, serving the interests of the orality movement through research articles, documentation, book reviews, and academic news. Occasionally, print editions will be provisioned. Submission of items that could contribute to the furtherance of the orality movement is welcomed.

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**Connecting Orality, Language, and Culture**

In August 2016, Samuel and I had the privilege of attending the Lausanne Young Leaders Gathering (*YLG2016*) in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Lausanne Movement is an international network committed to seeing the whole gospel taken to the whole world.

For this particular event, the Lausanne leadership brought together one thousand younger leaders from all over the world for one purpose: connection. The tagline for Lausanne, “*connecting ideas and influencers for global mission,*” captures the spirit of our time together as representatives from over 140 nations worshipped, dialogued, learned, and prayed together for each other, our families, our communities, our nations, and our world.

While such a missional event is worthy of consideration in its own right, upon reflection, the *YLG2016* event was predominately and intentionally an oral communication experience. With the theme for this edition of the Orality Journal as language and culture, it seemed pertinent to offer an oral evaluation of such a multicultural and multilingual communication phenomenon.

**Oral Communication Analysis of YLG**

Upon arriving at the conference site, a sense of the oral came through enormous, brightly-colored banners that were dotted around the campus. The banners included a label (Create, Repent, Love, etc.), but what caught my eye was not the literate symbols, but the images of a green tree, a blue tower, a red cross, or a yellow flame.

There was a color and an image to go with each of the seven days of the conference; the depiction of these color-image combinations on conference brochures and name tags reinforced an oral-oriented message. It became evident that the *YLG2016* leadership team was not relying on print to begin impressing upon us the themes they believed God had for all of us.
A second way that orality featured predominately in YLG2016 was in the conference theme: *United in the Great Story*. By welcoming story onto center stage, an intentional space was created for the liminal possibilities that so often accompany narrative. This reminded all of us that what unites the Body of Christ, among other things, is a *story* of epic proportions. It is inviting each of us into our appointed roles in a divinely-authored drama.

Some within the orality movement today criticize storytelling, saying that it is not the primary means or purpose of orality. Yet clarification is needed here. An argument can be made that story is inherent in all oral communication. For example, many proverbs are but the synopsis of a larger story; similarly, song often invites us into a narrative, whether of love, loss, or worship. Drama is narrative-based, and dance is often the physical embodiment of a cultural narrative. These examples are more than story; however, story often plays an essential role in their development. Story, therefore, is the life-blood of orality.

The confusion seems to come when story is equated with oral storytelling. While story is a macro category, oral storytelling is itself a specific genre of oral communication, along with other genres like proverbs, ballads, and dance. Thus, equating orality to oral storytelling is drastically incomplete.

However, to dismiss *story* from orality is to dismiss the very power of orality. To reiterate again, story (or perhaps we should use *narrative*) is a macro category, while oral storytelling is a micro category, a particular application of oral communication principles. Such clarification allows us to appreciate the "oral-ness" of the YLG2016 theme as well as several other story components throughout the conference without feeling like we are inappropriately elevating only one particular genre.

For example, story manifested itself in multiple ways. This was no more clearly seen than in the drama and dance team. Each day, their brilliant display of reader’s theater provided an entry point into the biblical themes for the day. At first analysis, it would seem like reading scripted lines in a theatrical performance might be the antithesis of orality; yet, a wise friend observed that the text provides a point of reference—both for the dramatists and the audience.
This was not spontaneous ad-lib entertainment; instead, it was a performance that sought to uphold the value of the written biblical text even as the actors and actresses embodied the message. It was an integration of the strengths of oral and printed methodologies.

The conference program highlighted story in another creative way by prioritizing each participant’s own life map, or personal journey. Each participant presented his or her life map to a small "connect group" of five or six people. After quietly listening for a few moments, the group’s members would then share what they had heard God say in response to each personal story. This creation of a platform for story, the listening to God speak on behalf of another, and the sharing in a small community became not only the most meaningful experience for many, but also epitomized a holy oral communication event between both human persons and a personal God.

One other way that orality appeared, albeit it in a secondary oral fashion, was through the YLG2016 Connector app. The YLG2016 leadership team encouraged participants to utilize the app as a platform for engaging in vigorous discussion regarding things that were happening. Remarkably, the Connector app transformed the typical monologue plenary sessions into dialogue experiences, with participants sharing their responses and feelings with each other in real time. Print was present as many texted back and forth during these sessions, and yet the atmosphere maintained a high value-association on oral communication.

Language and Culture
To fully appreciate this oral communication analysis, we must realize the role of language and culture in attempting such a gathering from so many different nations. The YLG2016 team made translation available in six major languages, including: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, and Russian. In addition, the worship team sought to incorporate other languages like Indonesian and Kiswahili so people had as many avenues as possible to praise Jesus in a familiar tongue. Furthermore, whether in different clothing styles, the proud national flags that were often displayed, the skin tone varieties, or the volume level of different groups’ conversations, diverse cultural elements permeated the interactions.
But why raise the money and time (over three years to prepare for YLG2016) to bring together so many leaders from different language groups, representing so many cultural contexts? Particularly in today’s age, why not hold a webinar or a virtual conference, whereby people can still hear and even see each other in real time? Surprisingly, part of the answer is found in orality.

The reason Lausanne wanted to bring everyone into a shared physical space was so that oral communication—personal conversation—could happen face to face. Those personal connections can happen virtually, but the trademark of orality is its face-to-face humanness.

Virtual relationships, at times, lend themselves to minimize cultural and even language differences. Technology allows for sites like Google Translator to overcome language obstacles. Likewise, social media, by definition, requires selection: what will be shared with others and what will not. Yet oral face-to-face conversation does not allow for easy avoidance of cultural and linguistic differences. We celebrate how technology has helped us overcome many of those challenges, and yet we suggest that it is precisely the unique language and culture differences that make orality beautiful.

For me, this was no more clearly experienced than when the worship team led all of us in the song *Holy, Holy, Holy*, for we sang it not in one language, but in multiple languages, all at the same time. I was reminded of Revelation 5.9-10:

> And they (the saints) sang a new song, saying, “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood, out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.”

Gathered with over one thousand saints from over 140 countries, we spent the days face to face, learning to listen to each other’s stories and heart cries. Gathered around the throne of God, we turned our faces not to each other, but to the face that alone is worthy of our worship. In that anthem of praise, we brought our differences before the throne of God as offerings,
gifts of thanksgiving; for somehow in the divine mystery, we sensed that in the bringing together of all of our unique cultures and languages, therein could the truest reflection of the image of God be understood.

It is our hope that as you read this edition’s articles, representing cultures as diverse as Singapore and Botswana, they might inspire and encourage you as you seek to recognize afresh the beauty of oral communication, even amidst the uniqueness and challenges of all our different languages and cultures.

Holy, Holy, Holy...

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For a helpful video capturing the role of languages at YLG2016, see Supporting Languages at YLG2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQrlF5ubGuM
One rite of passage to become an effective missionary is language and culture learning. Language and culture learning may take place in a structured classroom setting or with informal local tutors. The language learning reality often seems to be a combination of the above.

Regardless of the learning environment, the attitude of the learner and awareness of the opportunities afforded him or her are critical. There is a definite journey from confidence in one’s home culture to humility in one’s new target culture that sets the stage for effective ministry and growing confidence. My own journey was enhanced by an introduction to orality before I went to the field and orality-sensitive mentoring along the way.

I served in various church staff roles and as a senior pastor before we were appointed to serve in East Africa in 2000. I remember the uncomfortable thought of my own uselessness dawning on me about six weeks into our African adventure. Virtually everything about my identity failed to transfer to my new African context. I realized within the short time of two international flights that I had been reduced to a mere childlike proficiency in the most basic task areas.

I needed instructions about bathing and buying tomatoes, washing clothes, and transportation. I experienced the vulnerability that comes with realizing I needed toilet training as well.

What I had known in my former life seemed irrelevant in my new African setting. One morning, as I woke up in central Tanzania and looked out of my tent, I realized that I was living in a place where my proficiencies were extremely limited. Recognizing my own uselessness was actually helpful for the process I call role surrender.
For me, role surrender meant setting aside my previous proficiencies, confidence, credentials, and even my pride to decide to become a humble learner. This was a painful but significant valley that led to opportunities to discover a new identity and new proficiencies based on language and culture learning.

I cannot speak of painful adjustments made for the sake of culture and language without mentioning the model of Jesus, the ultimate missionary. Philippians describes the purposeful but painful descent of Jesus to leave behind his rightful role as Lord of the universe, enter our world, and participate in our culture and language in order to communicate:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)

One of the ways Jesus accommodated his audience was to engage the oral culture in which he lived. Of course, Jesus could have chosen any communication style, but more often than not he employed narratives, asked questions, and recited parables (Mark 4:34). Rather than delivering lofty lectures on theology, Jesus connected with his audience by teaching truth using stories from daily life.

The model of Jesus motivated me to consider setting aside my comfort, communication preferences, and literate expositional style. The choice to start thinking about the oral preference learners around me was presented to me by passionate mentors who demonstrated the use of oral methods at home and in ministry settings.

With these models in view, I began discipling my children with oral Bible stories in the evenings. I also decided I would take each invitation offered me to share, speak, or preach as an opportunity to model telling a story from God’s word.

Once I realized that I could not maintain my familiar home culture role and that I needed to discover the new role I needed to fill in my target culture, two significant
questions arose: (1) What do I need to learn? and (2) How do I learn it?

When you are entering a new culture, you need to learn to communicate, but equally important is the task of learning who you are communicating with and how to build relational bridges for your message. You might say that you could make this massive transition from the person you used to be to the person you are trying to become by employing only literate communication patterns and disregarding the notion of orality. However, there were certain benefits to be gained from choosing to acknowledge and engage the oral preference culture around me. Orality became like a new cultural language pattern for me that opened up new worlds of discovery. Awareness of the oral culture around me allowed me to see opportunities to become a learner and listener and set aside my previous role as an expert outsider. Orality provided opportunities for learning, participation, contextualization, interpretation, creativity, and the discovery of the uniqueness and beauty of the local language.

Let’s consider the challenge of missionary communication in light of some observations from communication theory. Charles Kraft wrote about where meaning is found in communication (referenced in Hesselgrave 1991, 63). And David Berlo writes:

Meanings are in people, [They are] covert responses contained in the human organism. Meanings are personal, our own property. We learn meanings, we add to them, we distort them, forget them, change them. We cannot find them. They are in us, not in messages. Communication does not consist of the transmission of meaning. Meanings are not transmittable, and meanings are not in the message, they are in the message users. (1960, 7-10)

With this communication challenge in mind, we must not forget that we do not bring meaning with us, but rather we are transmitters of a message. We begin from our own culture with a source and formulate a message with a target audience in mind. We interact with scripture that is also a reflection of a source, a message and a multitude of target audiences. Our listeners in our target audience will hear the message and formulate meaning based on their worldview.
Awareness of orality and oral methodologies helped me stay aware and engaged in these three cultures for learning culture and language. I never felt like I had fully uncovered the meanings in the people to whom I was delivering the message. Indeed, people are like onions and their layers come off slowly.

There was never an end to language and culture learning; however, the process was valuable because of the discoveries about the meanings in people along the way. My observation has been that as outsiders coming into communities new to us, we tend to often highly value the message we bring, but we fail to give the same value to the meaning inside our target audience.

Instead, we tend to focus on improving our content rather than uncovering the layers of meaning in our target culture. Oral methodologies offer advantages and opportunities to make progress on these two fronts simultaneously.

_Orality allows outsiders legitimate opportunities to be learners alongside nationals._ We desire to see those in our target culture transformed by the gospel but we will never know the knowledge they already possess, what they have actually understood, or the worldview that shapes their understanding until we stop talking and start listening. Oral methods allow significant time for listening and observing.
I have seen missionaries miss the opportunity to be learners. One missionary asked me why I was wasting so much time with learning the local language. He believed that I was slowing down the volume of content that could be delivered if I would simply lecture in English. With that kind of ‘data dump’ understanding of communication, we might as well record ourselves and then increase the playback speed of the data dump. Oral methods acknowledge the significance of learning from nationals and with nationals, rather than merely coming to unload knowledge upon them.

Orality is participatory. I learned that Ugandans (like most people) enjoyed participation in activities where they excel. I spent lots of time sitting under trees in a circle listening to them process stories in their local language. The people with whom I worked most closely were not illiterates but had various levels of education and reading ability in the local language and in English. As I listened and learned the local language along the way, they allowed me to participate by asking questions and growing in my own contribution as a group member.
A lead story crafter would read and listen to a recorded story and draft an oral version. This was necessary because the available translation of the Bible had a good number of foreign words, obscurities, and ambiguities. As the oral drafting continued week after week, the group discovered numerous previously misunderstood figures of speech.

At that point, I became a helpful resource person in the group. After understanding the meaning of the biblical metaphor, the group would then translate that metaphor accurately, clearly, and naturally. The group would then own the new oral story and they were eager to share it with their own families and neighbors.

_Orality assists with contextualization._ Orality helped Ugandans see that the Bible is the primary authority for truth-based transformation. Rather than the missionary being the expert or authority at the center of the group, the Bible story became the center for the group. Orality allows a transfer of authority away from an expert or outsider and puts the focus of authority on God’s word. This is a key factor in helping nationals deal with worldview transformation issues where traditional culture clashes with the Bible.

Traditionally, even among Christians there has been resistance to the truth that both men and women were made in God’s image. When a story crafting group tried to unpack the term for being made in God’s image, they struggled to see how the image of God was a relevant truth with respect to male-female relationships, inter-tribal relations, and marriage.

The nationals were wary to accept the Western view that they had been told. Of course, they were aware of the agenda of the Western world to challenge the traditional roles of men and women. The image of God (Gen. 1:27) was translated literally as "image or likeness" in the Bible and was readily available in the local language. However, after more discussion about the uniqueness of human beings in God’s creation, the story crafting group expressed a more functional meaning as "personality or character."

God has given to human beings alone the unique ability to speak, think, choose, and have a relationship with God. The process of unpacking biblical terms and re-expressing them allowed the group to discover a more biblical understanding to a culturally-charged topic.
Orality elevates local knowledge and expertise. I enjoyed (on most days) learning a new skill and the language that went along with that skill. Unfortunately, Ugandans are more than familiar with being taken for granted in their relationships with westerners. Due to the lingering influence of colonialism, an unwritten script seems to cast the westerner as the expert in most every situation.

Although this is the overt cultural protocol, this script was not relevant or helpful for building relationships with mutual appreciation. In order to overcome this well-established barrier, we needed to operate off of a new script. One way we learned to do this was to ask a Ugandan to teach us a skill in the way he or she would teach a child. For example, we would say, “Teach me the process of growing and processing coffee.”

We discovered that in oral societies, important skills are passed on through oral learning processes. The oral learning processes involved listening, watching, modeling, receiving instruction, and correction. We learned as we picked coffee beans, dried them in the sun, removed the cover from them, and eventually roasted them together.

On another day, a colleague and I asked, “Can you teach us how to make flour?” We learned like children to pick up the cassava and place it in a large wooden mortar made from a hollow log. Actually, there were children who sat down to enjoy watching the mundus (westerners) learn tasks that they had already mastered.

We handled the large heavy wooden pestle, which was about five feet long and three inches in diameter. Quickly, we learned that we did not have the skill, the muscles, or the rhythm of the lady who taught us. She would let us hold the pestle as she pounded so we could feel the rhythm and the force needed to pound cassava into powder.

We would then try on our own and become the laughingstock of our teacher and her children. Accepting the position of humility and learning a skill from an oral learner set us apart from other westerners. Of course, we learned a new vocabulary during the process, but more importantly, we made friends because we asked nationals to excel at an oral learning process.

Orality opens windows of understanding to deep cultural
I never ceased to be amazed at the creativity and expression of a small group of people working together on a drama. The Ugandans we knew seemed to be set free to enter the story fully when they were developing a drama.

After a drama, the group would learn new truths because they had lived the story. We gained some wonderful insights about culture from seeing Ugandans act dramas of Bible stories and then debrief together. We saw the proper way to treat visitors displayed in the drama about Abraham entertaining three visitors.

In that brief drama we saw honor and hospitality vividly displayed. This indirect kind of learning gave us rich cultural insight about many topics. The use of drama helped us understand how to interpret the ways we were treated as guests in the village and ways we could show honor to visitors in our home.

Orality helps highlight the uniqueness and beauty of the local language. The process of crafting oral Bible stories with a group of nationals enhanced my appreciation of the beauty and uniqueness of the Lugbara language.

During the process, I learned about the tonal richness of the language and the uniqueness of the vocabulary within the eight dialects. These were treasured experiences which would not have been part of my journey into Lugbara culture apart my involvement with nationals in the oral story crafting process.

For example, I learned that in Genesis 4:7 the written text of the Lugbara Bible said that “sin is crouching at your door,” but this is a meaningless metaphor in the Lugbara language. After unpacking this metaphor, story crafters re-expressed this metaphor as “sin is near you and about to catch you.” This is a very serious warning that you might use if someone is about to step on a snake.

When hearing the vocabulary about God’s covenant with Abraham, I gained new insight into relational terminology. In Genesis 15:18, God made a covenant with Abraham which is translated in Lugbara as “God joined mouth with Abraham.” This beautiful picture of face-to-face communication lays the foundation for the new covenant relationship provided through Jesus.

I never would have known the words *kici kici* even by reading 1 Kings 18:38 in Lugbara, which describes the fire that fell on the altar built by
Elijah. When I heard the oral story in Lugbara and observed silence of the listeners, I knew the expression kici kici brought a unique expression of the dramatic and complete destruction of the stone altar, the wood, the bull, and the water in the trench. The dramatic pause of the storyteller and the sound of kici kici captured the wonder of what God had done very differently than the words that were written on the page of the Bible.

These examples illustrate that the oral expression is dynamic and colorful and will often be missed in a process that seeks to use only a literate process or read words on a printed page.

*Orality encourages clarification.* Another benefit of using oral methods is the methodology of questions and discussion. At first, we did not realize how rare it was for individuals to be afforded the opportunity to ask questions about spiritual issues. There was a strong tradition of top-down authority-based teaching in the established churches.

In some churches, people were told that it was sinful to ask questions. The expectation of the church leadership was that people should come and listen quietly without asking questions. We often encountered people who carried lots of confusion about the Bible, but were told that asking questions was not an appropriate response to the Bible.

We never had much influence with the church leaders on this point. We chose not to publicly oppose church leaders or challenge their authority.
However, we did train as many people as we could to use oral Bible studies, questions, dramas, and debriefing. This new interactive paradigm for discovering truth from the Bible created opportunities for new disciples to grow in their knowledge of the word of God and train others.

Orality is more than a tool for packaging the message of the gospel. Orality offers opportunities and tools for the beginning missionary even during the early days of language and culture learning for building relationships that allow you to learn the worldview of your target audience.

As I look back on our years in Uganda, what we learned about the people was just as important as learning how to communicate the message to them. I can see that we had many weaknesses and we made mistakes along the way.

When it was time to depart Uganda, the people said many wonderful things to us. Nobody actually thanked me for a specific Bible study, sermon, or training I had taught. However, several people said they were thankful for us because they knew that we loved them. I will never forget those words: “We know you love us because you learned our language, you ate our food, you slept on the ground with us, and you walked on the road with us.”

I am very thankful for the trainers and mentors who introduced me to orality and mentored me in language and culture learning along the way. I have no regrets for the efforts I made to leave my comfortable, literate, expositional world and begin the journey of understanding another way of learning and communicating. I am richer because of this journey.

References

Mission from the New Testament to the 21st Century

Sources cited at www.missionalographics.com/mission-eras
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