Encouraging Ducks to Swim: Suggestions for Seminary Professors Teaching Oral Learners

JAY MOON

Introduction

The seminary student spoke clearly and deliberately, as he presented a story that made me re-think my own teaching methods. Even though this class discussion was several years in the past, the memory is still fresh. I can still hear the sincerity in his voice and picture the earnestness in his eyes as he unfolded the following story:

A man once owned a baby duck. He wanted to encourage the duck to walk on land instead of swim in water. Whenever the duck waddled close to the water, the man would spank the duck on its backside. WHAAACK!

At first the duck was stunned. Looking at the duck’s webbed feet, it is obvious that the duck was meant to swim in water. After several whacks to the backside, though, the duck reluctantly succumbed to the man’s wishes by waddling behind the man, following him on land. As the duck grew, he continued to walk on land, trailing behind the man wherever he went, since he was discouraged from swimming in the water.

Eventually, the man died. Finally, the duck was free to swim in the water. The duck was excited for the big day when he could finally swim again. He inched over to the water’s edge, scanned the surroundings to make sure the coast was clear, and finally jumped in the water. The duck floundered in the water since he forgot how to swim. Unfortunately, he had walked on land for so long that he was unable to swim in the water!

The student then looked directly at me and concluded, “That is how I often feel during my seminary studies. I grew up in an oral culture but in school we were discouraged from using oral methods to communicate; rather, we are rewarded with good grades for writing fine research papers and other print assessment methods. Unfortunately, when I go back to my home in Korea, they do not understand me any more. I forgot how to communicate using the oral methods that the local people appreciate! I feel like a duck out of water.”

*W. Jay Moon and his family worked with SIM from 1992-2001 with the Builsa people in Northern Ghana doing church planting and water development. He learned about oral learning by participant-observations with the Builsa people, who are a primary oral people. Jay has written two books and several articles that discuss oral learning. He is presently the Professor of Intercultural Studies and Director of the Wesley House of Study at the Sioux Falls Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.*
This story still haunts me. I wonder what we professors are doing to seminary students. Are we assisting in the process of fulfilling the calling that students were created by God to fulfill OR are we asking them to adjust to the professor’s print methods of assessment, like forcing a duck to walk on land? Poor grades, like a whack on the backside, send signals that students respond to. Perhaps, these good grades indicate how well students adjust to the professors’ assessment methods instead of assessing how well students are learning and being transformed.

What can seminary professors do to encourage ducks to swim in water? Where would they start? What are some of the underlying issues involved here? To address these questions, this article focuses on the following three objectives:

1. Briefly describe a learning preference shift from print to oral learning that has been described as “secondary oral” or “digit-oral” learning.
2. Summarize a few common characteristics of oral learners.
3. Describe a process for seminaries to better understand and start to address this learning preference shift.

**Learning Preference Shift**

Walter Ong (1982), a seminal author on orality and literacy studies, noted that learning to read changes the way people think more than any other single invention. Neuroscientist R. Douglas Fields conducted imaging studies on the brain and concluded, “learning to read restructures the brain – we can see it with human brain imaging” (Fields 2011). Someone who has learned to read then will think and compose their thoughts very differently than someone who has not had the opportunity to learn this skill called reading. A primary oral learner is one who cannot read or write; rather, they rely upon oral means to remember and utilize information. As a result, teachers in primary oral cultures have developed elaborate and ornate mnemonic devices and teaching methods to aid in recall, such as storytelling, ceremonies, symbols, proverbs, songs, dances, drama, etc. (Moon 2010).

Ong observed, however, that a new type of orality called “secondary orality” is occurring due to recent technological advances, such as television, radio, movies, and more recently computers, iPods, cell phones, etc. Secondary oral learners are those who have the ability to read and write, but they prefer to learn or process information by oral rather than written means, aided by electronic audio and visual communications (Lovejoy and Claydon 2005, 63–64). Brown (2004) notes, “A general trend in history has been the progress from primary orality to some literacy with residual orality, and from then in some cases [e.g., U.S. academia] to a print-oriented culture. The modern trend is to move on to secondary orality, to a post-literate or multi-media culture…”

Whereas previous generations in U.S. seminaries assumed that print-based means of teaching and assessing were effective to produce student learning and transformation, many contemporary students prefer to learn through oral means. Sachs observed that contemporary learners are accessing information through digital means and they are exhibiting the characteristics of oral learners. As a result, he described these secondary oral learners using the term “digit-oral.” Sachs (2012, 20) noted, the oral tradition that dominated human experience for all but the last few hundred years is returning with a vengeance. It’s a monumental, epoch-making, totally unforeseen turn of events . . . our new digital culture of information sharing has so rejected the broadcast style and embraced key elements of oral traditions, that we might meaningfully call whatever’s coming next the digitoral era.

While some have called this learning preference the “21st Century Literacy” (NMC 2005), the roots of this learning preference stretch far back into oral cultures. At one end of the continuum then, primary oral learners cannot read or write and at the other end of the continuum there are highly print learners. In between, there is a range
of learning preferences. The secondary oral learners fall near the middle, as they shift from a print to an oral learning preference as shown in Figure 1:

What do these secondary oral or “digit-oral” students look like? How do they learn best and have their lives transformed through the seminary experience?

Characteristics of “Digit-oral”/Secondary Oral Learners

While other sources (Ong 1982, Lovejoy 2007, Moon 2009, Moon 2010) describe this more thoroughly, Table 1 below highlights a few common differences between oral and print learners:

Table 1. Oral vs. Print Learning Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Oral Learners’ Preference</th>
<th>Print Learners’ Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>Learn mostly in dialogue with others, often communicate in groups</td>
<td>Learn mostly alone, often communicate one to one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Art</td>
<td>Appreciate clarity/style of speech through oral art forms (e.g., stories, proverbs, songs, drama)</td>
<td>Appreciate clarity/validity of reasoning through interesting literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Learn best when teaching is connected to real events, people, and struggles of life</td>
<td>Learn by examining, analyzing, comparing, and classifying principles that are removed from actual people and struggles (events are examples)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Holism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Oral Learners’ Preference</th>
<th>Print Learners’ Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holism</td>
<td>View matters in the totality of their context, including everyone involved (holistically)</td>
<td>View matters abstractly and analytically (compartmentally)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mnemonics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Oral Learners’ Preference</th>
<th>Print Learners’ Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mnemonics</td>
<td>Mnemonic devices like stories, symbols, songs, rituals, and repetition serve as valuable memory hooks.</td>
<td>Written words can be recalled later; therefore, value brevity and being concise. Stories merely help illustrate points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Oral Learners’ Preference</th>
<th>Print Learners’ Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Respond to a speaker and participate in a storytelling event</td>
<td>Read alone and listen quietly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To research the prevalence of this learning preference shift in U.S. seminaries, I conducted research during a nine-year period with over 230 seminary students from various cultural backgrounds. I discovered that 51% of the students evaluated via an Orality Assessment Tool (Abney 2001) had a preference for oral learning. Keep in mind that all of these students have completed an undergraduate degree; therefore, they CAN read and write but they prefer to learn via oral means. When I tested 23 seminary professors, however, a different picture is painted. Only 22% of the professors were oral learners compared to 51% of the students. To state it another way, the majority of professors prefer to walk on land while the majority of students prefer to swim in water!

How can seminary professors address this learning preference shift? Where should they start? In short, what process can professors use to encourage ducks to swim? To answer these questions, we will finally discuss the process that WCIU faculty undertook during a Winter Institute in February 2013.
Process for Faculty Discussion

Dr. Yalin Xin, Associate Professor of Intercultural Studies at WCIU, contacted me to introduce the above topic to the WCIU faculty. The following is a reconstruction of the process to lead the faculty in a discussion and exercises to address oral learning in their university setting. There are five stages in the process that are similar to the stages of learning to swim.

Stage 1: Send the invitation to swim

In conference calls with Bill Bjoraker, Associate Professor of Judeo-Christian Studies & Contemporary Western Culture at WCIU, Dr. Xin, and myself, we discussed the context at WCIU and agreed upon the following objectives for the consultation:

a. Increase professors’ awareness that orality is a real and important educational issue.

b. Understand oral learners better in order to adapt teaching and assessments methods to supplement print methods.

c. Apply this discussion to professors’ work at WCIU with secondary oral learners.

With these objectives in mind, Dr. Xin sent an email to the faculty a month prior to the consultation, asking them to complete the LPA. The completed LPA results provided a snapshot of the faculty learning preference. The results reveal that 29% of the WCIU faculty is oral learners.

In addition, faculty was asked to post responses on a Wallwisher.com site to the statement, “Describe briefly the changes you have noticed (in the last 5-10 years) in the learning preferences of students that you are working with?” This website includes images and allows for the posting of videos, papers, comments, etc. in order to invite the faculty to start swimming in the digit-oral waters.

Stage 2: Survey the water

On the day of the consultation, I led a presentation/discussion on “Understanding Oral Learners in Seminary.” This was then followed by Dr. Bjoraker’s presentation/discussion on “To Teach is to Learn: Matching Teaching Styles to Learning Styles in an Age of Increasing Orality.” A discussion panel was then conducted with the two presenters, who were joined by Dr. Tom Steffen, Professor of Intercultural Studies at Biola University. These hour-long events provided a brief survey of the field of orality studies in relation to seminary education. The aim was to prepare the faculty to get their feet wet with further participatory activities during the rest of the day.

Stage 3: Submerge in the water

The comments posted by the faculty on the Wallwisher.com site prior to the consultation were grouped into the following themes, and presented to the faculty. Each faculty member was asked to pick one of the following topics to meet in a small group. They then broke into small groups to discuss the five most important changes (related to their chosen topic) that faculty need to address. The five small groups were based on the following student changes:

a. Students do not prefer Western research and writing approaches to learn and demonstrate what they have learned:

   Faculty comments: “Students find it hard to do academic writing (organizing paper, progress of arguments, analytical thinking, English language usage). Research Papers and a lot of reading are not the way our Majority World people learn best and demonstrate their learning. The heavily cognitive WCF curriculum teaching style was not matching the learning style of these, largely, oral learners. I am in favor of adjusting the “deliverables” that students use to demonstrate what they are learning.”

b. Students want access to information in print materials in combination with oral methods:

   Faculty comments: “How do students access the rich learning tradition of the West from printed materials (in libraries) and print learning methods? Internet facilities are the biggest issue to fix to allow everybody to participate. Hard to afford to purchase hard copy texts.”
c. Students find it hard to apply print teaching methods in their “home” context:

Faculty comments: “Hard for students to effectively communicate with oral learners who will never be university students. Target group is most likely highly oral. What is the predominant learning style of the people that they minister to?”

d. Students learn through digital/graphic media, symbols, and narratives:

Faculty comments: “Learners are digital in orientation and graphic/media as well. We need to recognize this and admit that such learners are gravitating back towards more narrative/story type learning.”

e. Students favor oral discussion and interaction with professors, mentors, and students:

Faculty comments: “Hearers genuinely appreciate and resonate with more oral presentations. [Students are] more comfortable with face-to-face oral teaching and enjoy the online discussions. [Students] enjoy the in-person discussions, and appreciate having a face-to-face mentor to discuss reflection questions with. [I recommend a] combination of a face-to-face mentor-coach (who does not give grades) and an online facilitator.”

The faculty small groups reconvened with the rest of the faculty team in order to present their five points to everyone (written on poster paper). Clarifications of the points were provided based on questions asked. Then, each person was asked to select the top three most important issues that they need to work on together, using the Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq et al. 1975) for scoring. Basically, the most important issue should be given three points, the second most important issue was given two points, and the third most important issue was given one point. Once each faculty member posted their scores, the scores were totaled, and the top five point getters emerged as the most important issues for the faculty to work on together. This stage provided consensus and buy in for further engagement with oral learning in seminary. The faculty was then ready to stir the water.

Stage 4: Stir the water

Using the list of five items that were selected in the previous stage, the faculty now had a short list of the most important items to work on together. For further motivation, I presented a summary of the LPA results for the faculty. 29% of the WCIU faculty was oral learners compared to 51% of the seminary students tested from previous studies. This disparity highlights the need for faculty understanding and action.

Each faculty member was then asked to select one of the five issues and form a new small group to address the question, “What are the most important challenges and opportunities to address these changes?” At this point, the faculty was getting ready to stroke the water and swim.

Stage 5: Stroke the water

Once the small group # 2 reconvened and presented their suggested actions to the group, it was time for individual faculty members to select an action that they would take this school year to address oral learning in their courses. I used the “body part debrief bag” to assist in the selection process. This debriefing tool is a collection of fourteen spongy body parts including a hand, foot, eye, brain, heart, liver, etc. After I spread the body parts on the table, I described how each part of the body relates to something they may have learned today. I requested that they pick up the part that relates to the action they want to take and describe the action for the rest of the group. E.g., the liver filters toxicity from the body. If they want to stop doing certain things in the classroom that have been preventing students from learning well, then state this action. The metaphorical significance of each body part was presented.

One by one, each faculty member picked up one of the spongy body parts and described the action that they would take this school year. The faculty actions, along with my comments included:

a. “For my online classes, I will start the first week with a video introduction.” A program such as Animoto.com could facilitate this. In addition, a
screen capture program like Jing.com allows you to record a narration of the most important parts of the online course. The students see your (recorded) screen as you move the mouse over the parts that you want them to be familiar with.

b. “For an assignment, I will ask the students to draw a picture.” Students can either post a photo of the picture or describe it to the class. I had an interesting discussion with students when I asked them to draw a picture that comes to mind when they hear the term “Kingdom of God.” The pictures helped some students to visualize and then articulate difficult concepts.

c. “I will use more storytelling, pictures, and rituals in my classroom.” These oral art forms are very engaging and provide memory hooks to promote long-term recall and learning. In one class, I gave the option for students to compose lyrics for a song, based on the reading material. Another student presented their final project in the form of a collage. As she described the collage, it was clear that she captured well the course contents, had reflected on it, and integrated it with other learning.

d. “I have used many of these oral methods at home. Now, I want to combine the oral and print methods in my classroom.” A good way to combine both approaches is to require a final project in the class that includes both a written paper and an oral presentation with each aspect receiving 50% of the grade. For the oral learners, they will shine in the oral presentation and be challenged to strengthen their writing skills. Oral learners will also appreciate that their oral presentation factors into their grade. After all, once they finish seminary, most pastors are assessed by their oral presentations, more than their written works. If you grow tired of PowerPoint for presentations in class, try Prezi.com for a non-linear and creative presentation tool.

e. “For oral learners, I will develop an oral rubric to assess their learning.” For those interested in assessment rubrics, I have an oral presentation rubric that I have used in many classes (see rcampus.com for sample rubrics). This rubric measures how well the student presents what they learned using oral methods.

f. “I will use more team teaching in the classroom.” Since oral learners thrive on dialogue, they appreciate the dialogue between professors in a team taught class, as well as the dialogue between students and professors.

g. “I want to integrate oral and print learning methods in my online class.” For online classes, the natural tendency is to make this a print medium (a lot of printed words on a computer screen). To help oral learners, think of the online class as a visual medium instead of a print medium. To start, incorporate images in the online class to make it more visually appealing. Instead of long threaded discussions with a lot of printed words, consider using programs like Voicethread.com. This site allows you to post a picture and then students can respond to the picture via a voice post, camcorder post, type-written post, text message, or a simple drawing tool that allows you to draw on the picture.

h. “I watched you today. You modeled what you are advocating.” The best way to start teaching oral learners is to observe those who model this. I learned how to teach oral learners from observing African teachers who did this well. One student from India explained, “We did not learn as much in class as by what we observed when the professor related to students, his family, and others.”

i. “Before I started my PhD studies, I painted all of the time. If I had a problem with a sermon, I would paint and it would unblock the clog so that it would flow again. The PhD program destroyed that. I want to restore this in my own life and in the classroom.” It has been said (probably by an oral learner) that you only truly understand what you can draw. For this professor, the path to promote oral learning in the classroom is likely linked to restoring the life-giving practices that were part of his background. For many PhD students, they often get stuck when they attempt to formulate their dissertation. Instead of using an outline approach to formulate their thoughts, many oral learners can conceptualize and process their thoughts with a mind map (developed by Tony Buzan). A program
like imindmap6.com can get students unstuck. A demonstration of the mind mapping process can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wZ5wV5dPZc

In addition, oral learners may consider writing portions of their dissertations using a narrative approach. I incorporated a fair amount of narrative in my own dissertation. The professor who has lost his painting background during his PhD program reminds me of a duck that was encouraged to walk on land instead of swim in the water. There is still hope to learn to swim again, though.

Conclusion

I just finished a presentation on the subject of secondary orality to Religious Studies students at Le'Tourneau University in Texas. These were undergraduate students that would likely populate the future incoming class for American seminaries. As the time for questions approached, a hand shot up from the back.

His question was simple and direct, “Are seminary professors listening to this?”

Not knowing specifically how to answer this question, I did what many professors do. I asked him a question!

“Would you like them to?” I responded.

Without a second’s hesitation, his voice raised as he exclaimed, “YES!”

I looked around the room at this group of 32 students that would likely become the next generation of pastors and church leaders, and I saw several heads smiling and nodding in agreement. Their LPA results revealed that 78% of them were oral learners. Yet, I also knew that only 22% of the seminary professors I tested were oral learners.

Images of the duck raced across my mind. Will we encourage ducks to walk on land, or swim in water, or do a bit of both?

How would you respond to the pleas of these students?

Endnotes

1. Portions of this article are drawn from the article “Understanding Oral Learners” (Moon 2012).

2. The research results will be presented at the fall, 2013 International Orality Network (ION) Conference and then published in the ION journal.

3. The seminary students were from the Sioux Falls Seminary in South Dakota and Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky during classes taught by the author and Terrence Mournet, Assistant Professor of New Testament studies at the Sioux Falls Seminary (at the time).

4. The various cultural backgrounds represented were Native American, African, Asian, South American, and North American. They were enrolled in the Master of Arts, Master of Divinity, Doctor of Ministry, Doctor of Missiology, or PhD programs.

5. In order to assess a person’s learning preference, an “Orality Assessment Tool” was developed by Lynn L. Abney (2001) for use in primary oral cultures, based on Ong (1982). To test the learning preferences of secondary oral learners in a seminary, the students were asked to complete the “Learning Preference Assessment” (LPA) as a class assignment. This assessment measures the importance of: learning via dialogue with others, traditions, stories, engaging real-life experiences, learning in context, the importance of sound and drama, etc. The students were not informed that this assignment was to assess the preference of oral vs. literate learning; rather, they were told that this simply assessed their learning preference without any correlation to intelligence or IQ. The assessment provides 40 learning preference pairs and students are asked to respond with a score from 0 to 4. A total score of 80 or below indicates that the student has a preference for oral learning.

6. The LPA was conducted for seminary professors at Sioux Falls Seminary in South Dakota (2012), the Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond in Virginia (2013), and the William Carey International University in California (2013).

7. This is a free website that acts like a bulletin board for posting notes that all can read. It is very user friendly, visually attractive, and easy to create. The notes can later be rearranged into common categories/themes for further discussion. Recently, this site has been improved and changed to: Padlet.com

8. Michelle Cummings designed this group-debrief-
ing tool. It can be purchased online at: http://store.
training-wheels.com/bodyparttools.html

References

fjseries.org/low/Orality_Assessment_Tool_Work-
sheet.pdf.

Oral Cultures.” International Journal of Frontier Mis-
sions 21 (3): 26–32.

1975. Group Techniques for Program Planning: A
Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes. Glen-
view, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.

and the ‘Google Brain.’” Scientific American guest
blog. http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-
blog/2011/08/20/genius-across-cultures-and-the-

of Oral Learners: Lausanne Occasional Paper 54.”

Moon, W. Jay. 2010. “Discipling Through the Eyes of


com/education/pdf/globalimperative.pdf.

Ong, W.J. 1982. Orality and Literacy. London, UK:
Routledge.

Sachs, Jonah. 2012. Winning the Story Wars: Why Those
Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Rule the Fu-