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Lucia Doherty

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"THE SPARK THAT INITIATES LEARNING": ORAL LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

Lucia Doherty

Many secondary school classrooms are, all too often, silent ones. Parents, teachers, and administrators often equate the sound of silence with the studious discipline of well-behaved students. Such classrooms are also less threatening for both teachers and students. But the crucial ingredient which produces a rich learning environment is not found in silence. This ingredient is oral language, the medium through which most learning has taken place throughout history and a mode of learning particularly suited to elementary and secondary classrooms. In his article "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," Walter Ong says, "Speech wells up out of the unconscious...and is structured through the entire fabric of the human person" (40). This basic, essential core of every student is what teachers need to find, hold, and nurture in order to cultivate real learning. Ong's work, therefore, suggests that encouraging extensive oral language in the classroom should be seen as far more than an optional teaching technique. His characterization of oral cultures not only provides us with a rationale and a set of guidelines for increasing the oral language component in our classrooms, but also creates a mandate for such an increase.

Today, much of our culture is print dependent. Ong reminds us, however, that traditions of oral culture, though modified by the "secondary orality" of radio and television, still flourish in certain areas, including black urban ghettos and some isolated rural areas ("Literacy" 41). Also, Ong's description of oral cultures in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* presents characteristics of the way oral cultures learn which are similar to the ways our students learn; their culture, after all, is also strongly oral. Direct cases for using oral language and developing orality in the classroom have been made elsewhere, but Ong's study, which is only

implicitly pedagogical, shows us the depth of the connection between speaking and learning. The connection is too strong to ignore.

The first feature that links oral cultures and our own students' learning is the way that both are dependent on relating new experiences to experiences already known. Ong says:

Oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close references to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. (*Orality* 42)

If learning is to occur, people, especially those in oral cultures, need to have unfamiliar things related to something that is familiar. They relate the unknown and uncertain to something they know, of which they are certain. Ong gives examples of oral cultures naming abstract symbols with items from their "human lifeworld." Thus, a circle is called a plate, a moon, or a bucket ("Literacy" 43). In addition, knowledge in oral cultures is only relevant if it has something to do with the human condition or human relationships, and, as is often true for our students, the present is more important than the future. Ong's description of learning in oral cultures is similar to an observation Frank Smith has made about learning generally. Smith says, "Learning is something more than comprehension. It involves changing or elaborating on what is already known" (*Comprehension* 10). He points out that comprehension in reading is "the absence of uncertainty" (34). We can see that Smith's observations about the way our students learn is similar to Ong's description of how learning occurs in oral cultures. The connection between the two writers strengthens the view that oral languaging should be a preferred mode of learning in our classrooms.

Our students share with members of oral cultures the characteristic need to bring what is already known to the task of understanding what is unknown in order to reduce uncertainty and therefore make learning possible. Members of oral cultures—and our students who share this characteristic—have a special need for relating what they know to the learning activity. Ong's point is that this need is best met through oral languaging. However, many times we as teachers do not give our students this opportunity. We often don't consider their background or what they already know before bestowing them with facts which, to use Ong's descrip-

tion, are often "alien and objective." In literature, for example, students need to be able to respond orally and share their responses with others before interpreting details or critically examining the text. According to Ben Nelms, editor of *Literature in the Classroom: Readers, Texts, Contexts*, studying literature should be seen the way writing is seen, as a process. Literature, before it is a piece of art to be analyzed, needs to be experienced and felt. "It triggers in our conscious and subconscious mind a myriad of associations, memories, images, purely idiosyncratic flights of fancy" (11). These reactions need to be felt, related to personal experiences, and discussed with others in the "immediate, familiar interaction of human beings." And the best way to do so, given our students' strong similarity to members of what Ong calls oral cultures, is by encouraging oral response.

As is also typical of members of oral cultures, our students are often much more concerned about what is around them in their lives than what is in the world beyond. This fact crystalized for me one day when, as a teacher in Dallas, Texas, I was engaged with my eighth grade students in a discussion about current events as part of my effort to help them enlarge their scope nationally and internationally. Instead, our class discussion was pulled into what for them was their current world. As students shared their newspaper clippings, which included terrorist attacks, a student told of a murder that occurred a few blocks from her house. She was concerned and interested about her own backyard, not faraway lands. It was only through oral discussions of how she felt about the recent neighborhood murder—including the fear and vulnerability it caused—that these students were ultimately able to discuss the response terrorist groups use to draw attention to their causes.

If we really want students to go beyond their immediate world, we need to start in their immediate world. Then we can go on and discuss the problems of other places in the country and in the world. The way in which learning functions requires us first to make room for students to relate materials to their own personal experience. And, consistent with Ong's description of oral cultures, our students seem to do this connecting best through oral language.

A second feature of oral cultures that relates to how our young students learn, and therefore can be instructive to us, is the necessity of concreteness, rather than the mere accumulation of a store of factual knowledge for which most students find no need. Ong says, "Primary oral

culture is little concerned with preserving knowledge of skills as an abstract, self-subsistent corpus" (*Orality*, 43). Similarly, few students successfully store away a collection of abstract information. The "abstract, self-subsistent corpus" that Ong discusses reminds us of Hirsch's canon of "cultural literacy," with which many teachers, including Marilyn Wilson (1988), take issue. She argues,

Information can be taught, to be sure. But knowledge—the integration of information into already existing schematic frameworks—cannot occur by so simplistic a means. Hirsch's list of unconnected terms, or ones similar to it, determined by self-proclaimed arbiters of cultural knowledge, will not result in the kinds of knowledge required for critical literacy/critical thinking. (546)

Culture, literature, and facts are of little use to members of oral cultures, including our students, if the material is not something that can stimulate thinking and conversation. Likewise, young learners need to have the opportunity to participate in what they learn instead of being given a list of materials to memorize. For example, instead of giving a lecture on the author's life when reading a novel or poem, teachers could wait until the students have some curiosity about the author, which they usually have as they wonder where a writer came up with the ideas. Presenting a history of the time period while the students sit quietly does not allow them to integrate the information to the story or to themselves.

As an alternate to the presentation mode, Sylvia White and Rule Pritchard have students create a running list of what Mark Twain had to know to write the novel *Huckleberry Finn*. In addition to historical information, the students include items about the social system in the South, its geography, and its dialects. These topics lead to far richer discussion than topics established solely by the teacher. Similarly, James Butterfield asks his students to look at the characteristics of 1928 when studying Ray Bradbury's "The Whole Town's Sleeping." They do this by analyzing and discussing clues from their reading, such as old fashioned names, different speech, period activities, and prices for candy and movies (124-25). Teaching ideas such as these can be used for many novels or short stories to engage the students in the learning process by using their oral language to create their own concrete connections in the text. The teacher can supplement the information or delegate questions for the students to research and present

orally to the class. Students enjoy and appreciate giving presentations that the class itself generates more than ones typically assigned by teachers.

Ong goes on to describe a third feature of oral cultures which sheds light on the learning of our students. This feature involves the way vocabulary is learned.

The oral mind is uninterested in definitions (Luria, 1976, pp. 48-9). Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs. (*Orality* 47)

Just as words have no meaning outside of their context for the peoples of oral cultures, our very oral students have little use for long lists of vocabulary words (even if they may be on the SAT), and they will certainly not grow to appreciate the rich meaning of words unless the language is kept within a human context. Instead of presenting vocabulary in sterile contexts, then, we need to use oral language activities to show how words deepen their meaning when used orally attended by all of the gestures and vocal inflections. Frank Smith describes the enormous amount of print that surrounds children in the labels on products, signs in buildings and streets, etc. He says that all of this print

...functions in exactly the same way as the spoken language of the home and street which is the basis for children's learning to understand speech. It is part of the world in general, intimately related to the situations in which it occurs, and it can therefore both motivate and guide a child in learning how it works (*Essays* 76).

Whether in print or in speech, when words are extracted from their context, they lose their meaning. While reading "The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell, my eighth grade students were fascinated by the meaning of "palpable" in the beginning of the story when the main character looks out into the night for the island.

"Can't see it," remarked Rainsford, trying to peer through the dank tropical night that was palpable as it pressed its thick, warm, blackness in upon the yacht.... "It's like moist black velvet."

After we read and then talked about the language, "palpable" became a word they remembered and liked throughout the year.

Just as with vocabulary activities using isolated word lists, students can lose interest in literature by doing artificial book reports. Neither activity uses what Ong calls the "insistent actual habitat" of specific language acts so important in oral cultures. Also neither activity creates a rich and dynamic oral context in which students learn best. The solution is to use their basic desire to talk about a book. Ben and Elizabeth Nelms suggest that no oral or written book reports be assigned. In their individualized adolescent fiction classes, the Nelms have a ten-minute book conference consisting of an informal conversation about the book. They either talk with individual students, or if several students have read the same book, they discuss it in small groups. In both cases the students engage in what Stephen Judy calls "chat," a form of oral languaging which is "the spoken equivalent of the writing journal, a language form that operates on the borderline between a person's inner and outer worlds" (249).

Consistent with this description, the Nelms emphasize that their conferences with students about literature are not tests but dialogues. Any writing that is ultimately produced comes from conversation about an agreed-upon aspect of the reading. They explain,

The point is that the writings should not be burdensome and should encourage independent thinking and evaluation. We ask students to write for their peers and use these writings as a way for students to share books with one another (229-230).

Thus, the oral interchange creates an atmosphere in which literature and language are enjoyed, where students can tie their own experience to the literature and thereby create a context of understanding.

A fourth characteristic of oral culture that Ong discusses and which is also relevant in terms of our students is the participation in "verbal and intellectual combat" (*Orality* 44). Kids do this when they exchange put-

downs or try to outdo each other with puns. Students and adults alike engage in this type of "combat" when they sit around with friends, trying to tell the funniest story. This type of storytelling—even with its competitive edge—needs to be encouraged in the classroom. After reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in a team-taught symposium called "Contemporary Literature and Political Issues" held at Mid-Michigan Community College, our high school juniors and seniors were eager to tell stories about their mothers and grandmothers. This class read June Jordan's "A Poem About Intelligence for My Brothers and Sisters," and many students volunteered to read parts of it aloud, trying to outdo one another in interpreting the rhythm and tone of the piece. Despite its occasionally competitive flavor (or perhaps because of it), they loved this language play, just as my eighth graders loved reading aloud poems by Langston Hughes and others.

The time spent on storytelling and reading aloud in class, at least occasionally fueled by the friendly verbal combativeness common in oral cultures, develops oral fluency and makes students more comfortable with speaking. As Ong points out, "Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility. Rhetoricians were to call this *copia* (*Orality* 40). When students talk about their concerns, fluency with language develops (just as freewriting can increase one's writing fluency). Students are so used to the teacher doing most of the talking and initiating of questions that they seldom share and develop their own ideas. As a teacher in community college classes, I have found that ideas are generated and links are made between individuals when students are put to work in small groups. Learning takes place that wouldn't have if they didn't have the opportunity to speak.

The final instructive feature of oral cultures related to our students' learning is the way in which tellers of stories in oral cultures know their audience and their needs. Ong states, "In oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously" (*Orality* 42). Likewise, our students not only need to participate in the learning by developing the questions to be discussed in class and making informal dramas and monologues based on literature, but they also need a responsive audience they can believe in. There is an audience that young people know which has more meaning for them to address than the teacher—themselves. It is the audience of most of their speech (and writing, if you consider all the notes they write to each other), the audience that can be relied upon "to respond, often vigorously."

Stephen Tchudi has said that teenagers are culturally literate within teenage culture. Their writing would be more meaningful if they used themselves as their audience both in writing and speaking. Speakers within oral cultures know their audiences because they continually have to deal with a variety of them. Our students need to have this same opportunity. Writing is often artificial to students when, as Ong states, "No one is there to supply a real communicational context" ("Literacy" 40). When students write for each other, and share and talk about their writing, then the needed context is created.

Instead of depending mainly on print in our classes, we need to use oral language activities to tap into the characteristics our students share with what Ong calls oral cultures. In my composition classes, for example, my students agree that by talking about each of their essays as a class, we come up with more and better ideas for revision than if I or a student simply wrote a response to it. They get to share their unique experiences, and in addition to their words, we can see their body language and hear their emotion, both of which are usually absent in a brief commentary on the bottom of a page. Developing writers such as these are often not sensitive to the reader's need for examples. In an oral classroom, the class becomes the audience and requests concrete details when necessary. Our students' thinking develops as they bounce ideas off one another, and they subtly compete with each other as they talk, trying to come up with better ideas. In such a classroom, students don't memorize grammar rules or models of writing, but instead discuss problems and issues when they arise—and arise they surely will in a classroom where oral languaging is encouraged. All of this oral activity is more effective for students, just as it is integral to oral cultures. As Frank Smith states, "Learning may indeed be possible without language. But all too often the spark that initiates learning, and directs its progress, is linguistic" (*Comprehension* 109). If we don't let our students have the opportunity to get this spark, which often comes through oral languaging, much learning, along with enjoyment, is lost.

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A former secondary school teacher, Lucia Doherty is presently an English instructor at Mid-Michigan Community College in Harrison, Michigan.