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## **Beyond Writing: A case for a Speech-Based Basic Course in a Vid-Oral World**

*W. Lance Haynes*

In the contrast of electronic or “vid-oral” media, new perspectives on speech and writing come into view. Where propositional argument underlies writing-based rhetoric, recent research in orality suggests that experience-simulating narrative is the essence of speech-based suasive discourse (Ong 1977, 31-6; Havelock 1986a, 124-7; Shuter 102-9; Lentz 90-108). Haynes extends the oralist case in contemporary thought to argue that writing robs speech of its humanity and that an excess of writing-based thought can blind us to certain aspects of speech that take on new importance as the vid-oral media rise to dominance (1988 and 1990). Jamieson describes today’s public speech as a “collaborative and intimate act that enmeshes speaker and audience” (45). Arguing that “conversational delivery and natural gesture” increasingly replace “impassioned speech,” Jamieson examines speechmaking on television to note that words now function “more readily to caption pictures than to create them,” and that speakers now emerge “autobiographically in the speech” (53).

This essay reviews the premises by which orality and speech-based communication are distinguished from their writing-based counterparts. Then follows the theoretical sketch of a speech-based basic curriculum suited to the new vid-oral environment.

## **MEDIA AND "WAYS OF THINKING"**

Distinction among the three major media groups in human history, oral, written, and vid-oral, belong among the first lessons in any basic communication course because different media are suited to different communication ends. Such differences may be readily understood through the relationships among media and "ways of thinking."

Neurally speaking, one can be said to perceive the world in simple non-discriminating flashes of gestalt (Glass *et al.* 25-84). Ways of thinking, corresponding to qualities inherent in the dominant media with which one is socialized, are ways of organizing those flashes in order to comprehend them, share them with others, and thereby to socially construct reality. The world view, for example, that an objective universe is out there, apart from one's self, with absolute truths and falsehoods organized in ranks and files of abstract categories – "encyclopedic" knowledge – can be understood as an artifact of writing-based consciousness (Havelock 1963, 197-230; Ong 1982, 78-116).

Writing encourages critical thinking. By placing words before us, writing facilitates their scrutiny as well as the development of strict standards for their use. Likewise, writing-based thought promotes division of the world into dichotomies and, by exemplification, perpetuates the notion that deliberate rational thought is the optimal mode for all human choice. Such qualities are facets of nothing less – and nothing more – than a way of thinking.

In contrast, speech as a way of thinking can be understood to provide continuity of experience and tradition among a community of people *ipso facto*, without recourse to recorded (in the sense of permanently fixed) knowledge. Thus is private experience placed beyond actual events in the ongoing lore – the mythic story – of the community. As shared continuity of events proceeds from one there and then

to another, constantly through and in the here and now, distinguishing each self from others only in terms of observed behavior and without a significant store of private interior experience (Havelock 1963, 134-43; Ong 1982, 53-7). The mental lifeworld fostered by speech unadulterated with writing is a grandly flowing homeostatic story in which all the possibilities of human experience have, do, or will come to pass.

Because an oral culture's discourse is fixed only in the culture's relatively fragile memories, such discourse defies examination and critical thought is not predisposed to interfere with the natural flow. In this sense, speech does not facilitate critical thinking and can be understood as *de facto* creative. Where creative writing techniques encourage student writers to continue the flow, to avoid critical pauses, writing-based speech does just the opposite: speakers are urged to think critically before they speak to avoid mis-speaking. There are, of course, no college courses in creative speaking.

The use of speech to contain writing, that is, speech as reading or performed writing, works, but not nearly as readily or usually as well as does writing itself. This suggests that students who want to explain complicated processes or relay large amounts of detail, indeed who want to traffic in writing-based thought in any but the most trivial sense, should be advised to write rather than speak to their audiences.

Western culture long ago shifted from primary orality into literacy and it is reasonable to question the relevance of orality today. While the answer is manifold and complex, its most salient feature is quite simple: we are shifting still. Today's students pass through literacy into the new media and still another way of thinking which is yet poorly understood. However, scholars examining the issue of shifting media generally agree that rhetoric and communication are to be altered radically anew by the rise to dominance of vid-

oral communication. In particular, Gumpert and Cathcart note that "persons are influenced by the conventions and orientations peculiar to the media process first acquired and relate more readily to others with a similar media set" (23-4). Acquired media processes are precisely what is accessed through "ways of thinking."

Probably, vid-oral mediation can no more be understood through literacy than literacy could be comprehended through orality. With the coordinates of these two systems, it is possible in some sense to know our present bearings but not too much of what lies ahead. Vid-oral media do seem to resemble speech in ways that writing cannot (Haynes 1988, 80-81; and 1989, 117).

## **CAN WE LEARN ORALITY? SHOULD WE?**

Oralist research may give the impression that there is no retreat from literacy – that once literate, one's orality cannot be recaptured. Ong notes, for example, Lord's finding that "learning to read and write disables the oral poet": by introducing "into his mind the concept of a text as controlling the narrative. . . [thus interfering] with the oral composing processes, which have nothing to do with texts but are 'the remembrance of songs sung'" (1982, 59). This is not to say that such a structure is absolute, however, or that it works in reverse. That the pristine oral consciousness of pre-literate is spoiled by learning to read and write, does not imply that learning a speech-based way of thought disables the literate person. To the contrary, teaching the oral mode of thought and expression as an alternative can be argued to breed precisely the tolerance, will, and responsibility Scott tells us are required of the citizen-speaker today (1967).

A speech-based approach to communication can avoid preparation of written text, instead fostering repeated

creation of imagined "songs sung," enabling the speaker to freely and intimately interact with the audience in a natural conversational style, unfettered by need for conscious recall. The objective of a speech-based approach will be to acquaint students with their oral powers of expression in the same sense that composition classes address students' writing abilities.

Further, while writing enables one to avoid thorough subject knowledge (why learn what can be copied?), a speech-based approach demands subject mastery, thereby rendering at least that dimension of ethical conduct implicit in rhetorical success. Speech-based rhetoric requires the speaker to know fully what she or he is talking about, thus to have sifted all the facts and more likely reached a position that takes account of them all. As Plato's Socrates recognizes in *Phaedrus*, writing-based rhetoric makes no such demand and might best be used only as a reminder for persons "already conversant with the subject, of the subject, of the material with which the writing is concerned" (274-5).

Although the extent to which a person can be both oral and literate is yet undetermined, there is little reason to believe a literate person cannot learn, within certain limits, to think and live orally as a natural state of being, and to use literate thought and its products as the tools they are. Eastern cultures, especially as influenced by Zen, teach and accept the ways of thinking both of writing and of speech as quite compatible. The advent of vid-orality imports a sense of balance to writing and speech for Westerners as well.

The literature way of thinking only seems superior within its own context. All media and correspondent ways of thinking may be viewed as marginally discrete and teachable, thus generating an ever-growing spectrum of options for living. Just as learning argumentation and debate fosters writing-based critical thought, to fully grasp the inducement of cooperation in oral culture, its rhetorical process, may easily be to learn a speech-based way of think-

ing. It remains to consider briefly the fundamentals of a speech-based basic course.

## **SOME ORALIST CANONS**

Imagine the members of a proto-typical oral community, assembled as they are every evening in the village square. The community's elders, having met in this fashion for the longest time, know the most. Thus they lead the evening's activities by telling whatever tales and folklore – whatever portions of the ongoing narrative – are most appropriate to the village's current activities: farming, hunting, fishing, building, childbirth, death, healing, marriage, war, and so on.

The telling is participatory and strongly rhythmical, full of epithets, figures, echoes, and tropes that serve as signposts for recall; the community together mouth the lyrics, and perhaps more importantly, move with the rhythms, swaying and dancing together, enacting representations of the story's action. Havelock suggests that rhythm is the foundation of all pleasures – including biological ones – and its correspondent manifestation as an integral part of the oral rhetorical experience is hardly surprising (1986b, 72). Remembrance is a community effort for, when one person forgets, other will recall. The entire experience, through which community culture is sustained and evolves, is bound together in totalistic sharing. Truth and falsity are concepts with no bearing here. Rather, such knowledge has endured through natural selection to appear in the community's mythopoetic store is unquestionably correct. What is known is what is remembered, knowledge by virtue of its communal mastery.

This is something of the rhetorical experience of oral folk. To claim that classical rhetoric is the product of an oral

culture is misleading, for Luria's work on the fringes of literacy in 1930's Siberia clearly shows the oral mind to be incapable of the sort of abstraction codification – let alone the teaching of codified material – requires (1-175). Literacy must get there first. Lentz sees a symbiotic relationship between literacy and orality as writing evolved in Hellenic Greece (2 and *passim*). Havelock argues for a dynamic tension (1982, 9-10). Either concept presents a far deeper understanding of the ground from which classical rhetoric arose than does the notion that classical rhetoric came from oral culture. On the other hand, in the above description of oralist process are seen three basic dimensions of speech-based speech all but obscured in the written tradition and returned to prominence with the advent of vid-orality. These three dimensions are narrative, rhythm, and communality (Havelock 1986b, 70-8; Ong 1982, 31-77).

Pedagogically, the practical application of narrative to speech is readily accessible through three questions:

1. What does the speaker want the audience to do?
2. What experience will best predispose the audience to do it?
3. How can this experience best be simulated with narrative?

The elements of oral narrative are readily understood as those that best simulate experience. Spatially, simulation is achieved through concrete depiction; temporally, as dramatic action. Experience can be supplemented with video clips, enhanced through role-play, and enlivened with the skills of storytelling often taught as part of oral interpretation.

Coming from the critical side, Fisher argues that stories are tested intuitively through qualities of fidelity to the outside world and probability of occurrence vis-a-vis the audience's experience (14-6). The truth claims stories make,

if not explicit, are contingent on audience agreement that the facts are correct (though not all included) and that the meanings stringing the facts together are likely ones.

Such reality-testing parallels changes in the evening newscast: Where Walter Cronkite closed with "that's the way it is," Dan Rather now says "that's a part of our world tonight." Vid-oral narrative offers an intersubjective epistemology well suited for modern human affairs where facts abound to support the coexistence of multiple interpretations of "stories" or events. In discussing varieties of truth, as signified by the first letter in the word, students may enjoy the maxim: "The bigger the we, the bigger the T."

Thus a canon of communality relates closely to that of narrative: there is truth value implicit in believing that others know as we do. Research supports the notion that more credibility is accorded to messages received with the knowledge that other receive them as well (Aronson 11-43). Further, in both the village square and the modern audience, we can observe a phenomenon of resonance, of moving, vibrating, affirming together in response to the words and waves of oral and vid-oral speakers. Such resonance is compelling and contagious, as anyone at a primitive religious service can readily attest, giving rise to a sense of community, of moving together as one.

Rhythm is a third oral canon. Rhythm underlies the basic processes of life and of all existence, and can be conveyed with semantic as well as acoustic dimensions of discourse. The study of poetic is quite relevant in both semantic and acoustic aspects but lifting this study out of the reductionist writing-based frame has yet to be done. Havelock describes oral poetry as a "living body. . . a flow of sound, symbolizing a river of actions, a continual dynamism, expressed in a behavioral syntax" (1986b, 76). There is also a compelling quality to the speaking voice easily seen in the way "unnatural" breaks in speech make us uncomfortable. Rhythm can be seen as a canon of vivifi-

cation, through which the events and settings of narrative are pleasureably melded with the visceral responses of the individual, but rhythm's communal dimension must not be neglected either.

## **SOME LAST THOUGHTS**

Communality and rhythm are less understood than narrative, yet what is needed now is more a matter of re-interpreting research already done than of much new study. Havelock's chapters on special and general theories of orality, for example, offer a rich store of material as relevant to the modern-day revival of speech-based speech as to the ancient world context of which he writes. Ong's work is equally promising. Yet one must have a care to remember that these distinguished scholars, indeed all of us, work under a subtle and constant institutional pressure to champion literacy.

Whit this pressure in mind, the point of teaching speech-based speech is not to replace its writing-based counterpart. Rather the point is to give students the full range of communicative options in the vid-oral environment. Writing is best for detail; writing is best for abstraction, and, in many respects, it is best for deliberate, thoughtful interaction. Yet speech is often best when relationship matters and when emotions are important. Speech is often best also when experience, rather than abstract reason, underlies persuasion.

Students who understand the power of their own speech and how it differs from that of writing will invariably be better communicators and critics than those who blindly intermingle the two media in pretense of ultimate knowledge. Jamieson rightly would have the speech teacher's goals be "making the world safe for deliberation," "making deliberation possible," and "making it probably" (254). Yet

this goal will not likely be sustained while oral communication is taught with the assumptions of writing-based thought to students conditioned by vid-oral media.

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