

Oral, Literate, or Appropriate

Author: David

Date: 09.06.2010

Category: Media & Technology, Unreached People Groups, Ethnicity

Sometimes it is easy to try to make one size fit all, but people are all different and what works for one may not work for another. Still we can categorize some to help us strategize better. But what do some of the categories mean. In dealing with orality, the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary primary definition of "oral" is: "Uttered by the mouth or in words." Orality is the noun of oral.

The vision of International Orality Network (ION) is: To influence the body of Christ to make disciples of all oral learners. In this context "oral learners" are those people that only know or prefer communication styles that employ characteristics typical to oral societies. These styles include other communication art forms beyond what Merriam-Webster defines as "oral."

"Orality" in this context is defined as communicating thought through culturally appropriate styles or art forms by way of unwritten (other than literate) expressions. Of course, for most of history, these oral communication styles were the primary way of communicating. It includes communication art forms like: Narratives, Proverbs, Songs, Music, Poetry, Dialogues, Drama, Riddles, Parables, Thematic Questions, Dance, and Visual Arts.

Visual arts include the art of "signing" which the deaf primarily use to communicate. Often we think of signing as communicating with the hands, but in reality it includes virtually the whole body. Last year I was exposed to extensive interaction with deaf people at a conference and, besides the use of various sign languages simultaneously, they worshipped in these languages with great beauty. To them, it is a real communication art form, but not an oral form of communication, even though it does fit in the broader context of the people ION desires to serve.

Sometimes people talk about "orality" when they talk exclusively about "storying," which actually is a very popular way of communicating in an oral fashion. True "orality" is more than storying, even though in some way stories most of the time communicate the message. These stories don't need to be shared as a narrative, but they can be in any communication art form. Considering that writing is an art too, stories are then also not exclusive to oral communication and they have been and certainly will continue to be written down.

Now, from a traditional literate perspective, there is nothing like being able to read and write, because we feel that ink provides a much better permanent record than anything else. It also helps us to research libraries full of books (if they are at least in a language that I can understand). I would say that, if it ever was true, this is certainly not true anymore, since most things are stored today in an electronic format and that can be just as easily be an audio recording, a video, as a document with words using letters or any combination of these. Of course, print will remain an important way of communicating for the foreseeable future, but its role is changing and oral communication art forms are being recognized more and more again as important factors in effective communication.

So, it is not "oral" versus "literate" at all, but rather we need to look at which forms of communication are "appropriate." It is the people we're serving can help with that best, if we just recognize the value of their communication art forms, give them the freedom to use these art forms, and help them to strategize with these art forms wisely. It is for example important to be aware of issues where certain local ways of communicating may conflict with the message they are intending to share, while others may actually enhance communication. I think that it would be great if we put our focus then on "appropriate" and, even though many would have to grow beyond their perspective of using primarily literate approaches, it would foster the use of the best communication art forms for the situation.