

Orality-based pedagogy in theological education

How orality can promote a fusion between traditional classroom-based theological education with Sub-Saharan African cultural models of instruction.

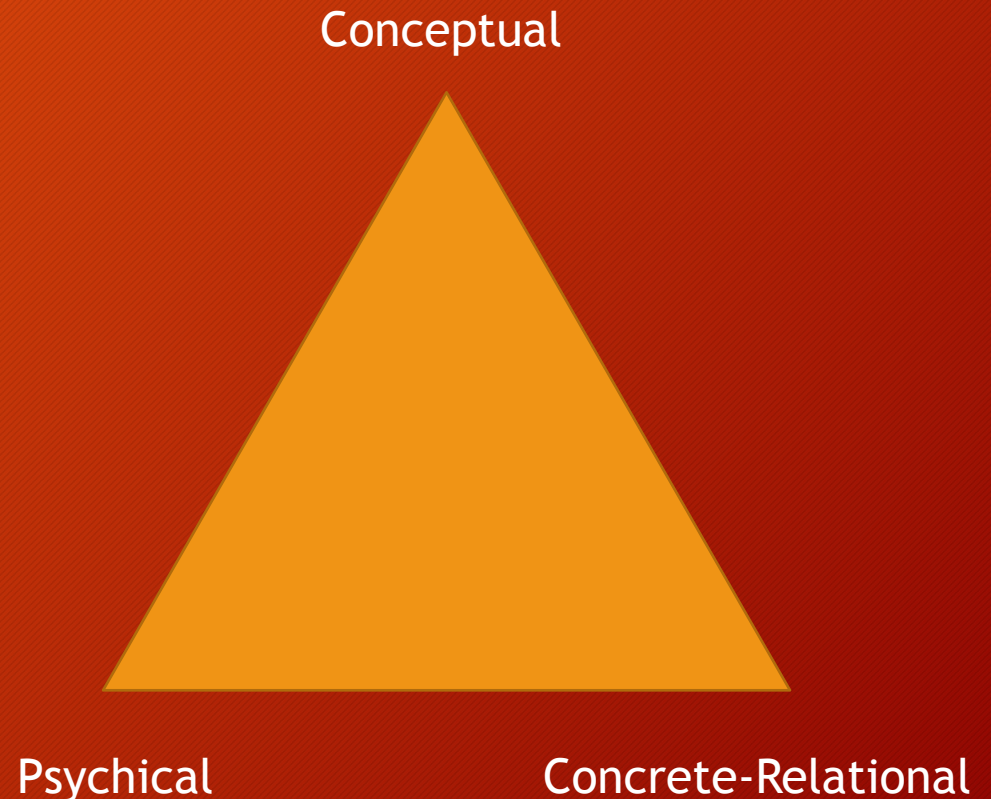
The challenge of formal theological education in Sub-Saharan Africa

- Theological seminaries and pastor schools in Sub-Saharan Africa face some sobering challenges concerning their curriculum and pedagogy
- They have received a Western curriculum and pedagogy
- This Western curriculum and pedagogy does not always fit with the educational needs of the students
- Moreover, the graduates return to their place of ministry and attempt to teach the people in the same way that they learned at the theological institution. The outcome is usually one of disillusionment and frustration.
- The schools risk losing credibility if they do not continue their practices of formal theological instruction.

Why do these Western models not fit well in Africa?

David Hesselgrave notes that there is more than *one* way of thinking in any culture. In fact, there are three: **conceptual** (cognition by postulation); **psychical** (cognition by intuition), and **concrete-relational**, in which “life and reality are seen pictorially in terms of the active emotional relationships present in a concrete situation.”

E. M. Smith insisted that people of all cultures think in these three ways. The differences in culture are due to the priority given to one or another type of thought.



A simplified summary of the challenge to traditional theological education

- Traditional theological education in Sub-Saharan Africa follows the classic university system imported from Europe and the United States
- This system favors a conceptual intellectual framework
- Institutions favoring a conceptual model are operating in a continent that is predominantly concrete-relational in its intellectual orientation.
- This clash of intellectual frameworks is responsible for the resulting cognitive dissonance
- The challenge of traditional theological education is in developing a curriculum and pedagogy that are simultaneously localized in their approach but are also globalized in their application

Possible Responses to the Challenges of Formal Theological Education

1. Continue with the traditional educational curriculum and pedagogy.

-Globalized without being sufficiently localized

2. Abandon the traditional educational model altogether in favor of an educational program that is more localized (ex. traditional storying groups)

-Localized without being sufficiently globalized

The Curricular Conundrum in formal theological education for Sub-Saharan Africa

Formal theological institutions must engage their students in a manner that engages their own cognitive framework in order to promote learning and lasting impact for their local ministries.

At the same time, African theological institutions must prepare leaders who are equipped to engage with issues of concern on the world stage. They must also have the knowledge, skills, and capacities to interact with global leaders worldwide.

“Fusion” as a solution to the African curricular conundrum

“To manage and make the best use of old and new external relations, some have proposed the idea of fusion as one way to take stock of Africa’s reservoirs of knowledge and frames of reference. The notion of fusion proposes a deliberate choice by Africa to appropriate some elements of their received institutions, values, and ways of doing things. These chosen elements can be added to, mixed, and fused with African institutional, cultural, and other realities to create an enriched original system. Part of the argument is that even though Africa did not initiate the coming of the Europeans and the transfer of their institutions to Africa, to make it work, Africans must appropriate this inheritance and make use of what it considers the most relevant for itself while it is firmly grounded in its culture in order to have a sense of direction.”

N’dri T. Assié-Lumumba, “Higher Education in Africa: Crises, Reforms and Transformation” 2006.

What would “fusion” look like in an African theological institution curriculum?

Orality in formal education as one application of “fusion”

What is “Orality”?

Orality is the study of how the dominant sense used in information exchange impacts the noetic faculties and culture of human societies.

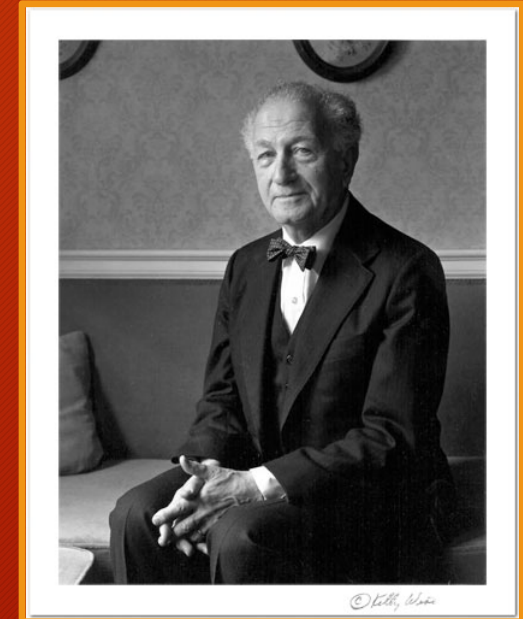
Orality studies began by accident during the literary research of Milmann Parry. Parry sought to resolve the literary debate known as the “Homeric Question.”

Parry realized that the Iliad and the Odyssey were composed over a long period of time by oral storytellers who memorized these tales by using lengthy formulas.

Fieldwork in Serbia with Albert Lord confirmed Parry’s conclusions in what later came to be called the “Oral-Formulaic theory.”



Milmann Parry



Albert B. Lord

Eric Havelock

Eric Havelock built on the ideas of Milmann Parry and Albert B. Lord and proposed that the Greeks' development of the first alphabet with vowels explains how Greek civilization, including philosophy, literature, and the arts, flourished c. 450-400 BC.



Eric Havelock

Walter J. Ong

Walter J. Ong, a Jesuit priest and professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, wrote *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Ong argued that writing is a technology that shifts language from an oral to a visual medium. This shift affects the psychodynamics of a given culture in how it perceives reality, how it develops as a culture, and how it processes information.



How did Christian scholarship engage orality?

Biblical Studies and Christian Missions

Orality Research in Biblical Studies

Old Testament Studies

Susan Niditch, *Oral World and the Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*

Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE*

David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*;

The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction

New Testament Studies

Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*

Werner H. Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives*

Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First Century Performance of Mark*

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*



How did practitioners in Christian ministry
begin to apply orality?

Trevor McIlwain of New Tribes Mission

Trevor McIlwain of New Tribes Missions in 1981 sought to develop a method of evangelism and discipleship that would curb the syncretism occurring in Brazil and Columbia among New Tribes ministries.

McIlwain used biblical theology and developed a narrative approach to evangelism and discipleship. His approach was called the “Chronological Bible Teaching” method.



Mark and Gloria Zook of New Tribes Mission

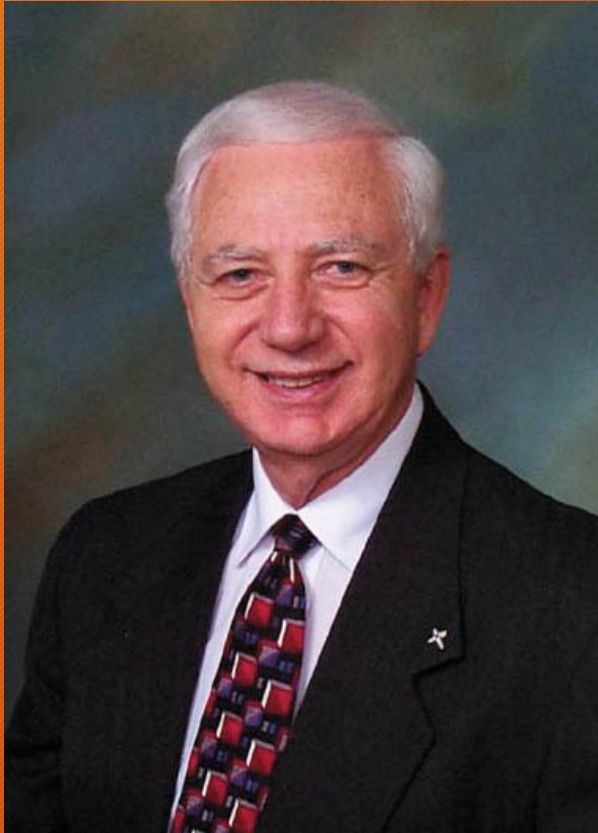
Mark and Gloria Zook in 1986 used Chronological Bible Teaching to the Mouk people in West New Britain.

To a village of over three hundred people, the Zooks witnessed mass conversions during their presentation of the stories of the gospel.

A video of their experience is available, called *Ee-Taow!* (It is true!)



International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention



Avery Willis



Jim Slack



Grant Lovejoy

The Future of Orality in Ministry Practice: How New Insights in Orality Aid Formal Theological Education

The pioneers of orality research in Christian ministry have provided us with a tremendous benefit. However, their understanding of orality is dated and requires reevaluation. As with any field of study, we must continue to adapt and grow in our understanding of orality so as to avoid any unintended harm.

The Interpretation of Orality is not Monolithic

In applied linguistics, there are two competing interpretations of orality and how the medium of language affects human cognitive function:

1. The Unilinear Evolutionary View (Structuralist)

Preferred by most Evangelical ministry practitioners (evangelists and missionaries)

2. The Contextual-Ideological View (Post-structuralist)

Comparison of the Two Schools of Orality

Unilinear Evolutionary View

1. Sounded word as power and action
2. Mnemonics and formulae
3. Additive rather than subordinative
4. Aggregative rather than analytic
5. Redundant or 'copious'
6. Conservative or traditionalist
7. Close to the human lifeworld
8. Agonistically toned
9. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
10. Homeostasis
11. Situational rather than abstract
12. Interiority of sound
13. Verbomotor lifestyle

Contextual or Ideological View

1. Oral cultures do not use "embedded" or "illogical" language
2. Rationality is ideological and political
3. Formal vs. informal educational bias
4. Impossibility of assessing logic trans-culturally
5. Erroneous construal of sentence and textual neutrality
6. Literacy is restrictive and hegemonic
7. Interrelatedness of orality and literacy
8. Local rather than universal understanding of orality and literacy

A Via Media in the Orality Debate

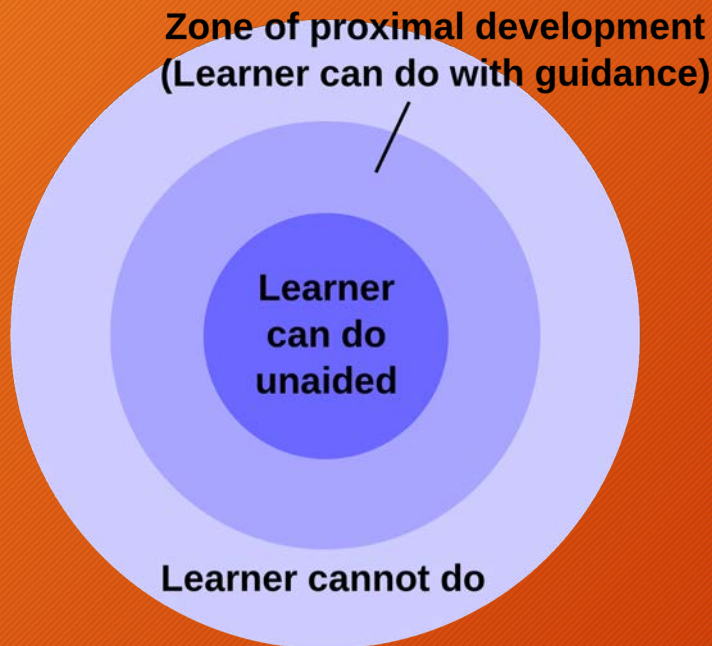
- Whereas both schools of thought (unilinear-evolutionary and contextual-ideological) rely upon different streams of Continental philosophy (structuralist and post-structuralist hermeneutics), we submit speech-act theory from the Analytic school as the way forward.
- Some speech-act theory proponents recognize a hermeneutical realism contra the subjectivist understanding of language in Continental thought.
- Speech-act theory proponents would accept the contextual-ideological argument that orality should be considered local rather than universal.
- Speech-act theory could be used in such a way as to acknowledge the complex interdependence between orality and literacy
- *This interdependence between orality and literacy reveals how we can implement orality-based educational interventions for a dynamic fusion of African/Western pedagogy and a future contextualized curriculum.*

Examples of orality-based pedagogy from a social constructivist perspective

Examples of orality-based educational interventions used on the field in Togo, West Africa between 2010-2018

Orality-based pedagogy: narrative

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development



New Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains



Role of narrative

Narrative can be used by the educator to assist the students, as a social unit, to understand a complex problem that they could not unaided.

In so doing, they move along the continuum from concrete operations to formal operations in a social learning environment through the medium of narrative. The concrete elements of the story represent abstract concepts and realities. The students move beyond application to the levels of comprehension in formal operations: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity.

Orality-based pedagogy: proverbs

Learning Challenge

Higher education demands critical thinking skills. Critical thinking represents the formal operations stage of cognition, which is along the levels of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity in Bloom's New Taxonomies of Learning Domains.

Abstract thought (formal operations) requires reflection on hypothetical possibilities, or contrafactual reason. Conceptual cognition is better suited to this type of thought.

Concrete-relational cognition does not reflect in abstract propositions. Rather, it requires concrete expressions of the abstract propositions for the subject in question.

Proverbs: Orality-based solution

African proverbs provide the bridge between conceptual and concrete-relational modes of cognition.

Proverbs are the medium by which members of a social unit employ concrete elements of the proverb so as to produce contrafactual reasoning.

At the level of contrafactual reason, students will engage hypothetical problems, not through abstract concepts or propositions, but through the manipulation of the proverbs themselves.

Example of an African Proverb

"The crab walks sideways but it always finds its way home." - Ewe proverb

Explanation: Even though the crab appears to be impeded by its manner of movement, it always arrives at its intended destination.

Application: Use this proverb to teach the abstract theological concept of *simil iustus et peccator*.

Provide scenarios in which the crab appears to be "lost," but then finds its way back to its destination.

Orality-based pedagogy: role-play

Learning Challenge

Formal theological education must engage three dimensions in formative development: cognitive, spiritual, and practice. Intrinsicly, classroom instruction faces a challenge at the practice dimension.

Role-play: orality-based solution

Role-play allows the educator to engage all three dimensions simultaneously. The learner must understand the concepts of the instruction that should be embedded in the role-play. The learner must analyze and evaluate the subject in question. The student must then engage the problem not with a simple abstraction but with a role-play solution that engages the problem in a concrete scenario.

Example

When teaching a course on Great Religions and Cults, I arrive at class dressed as a member of the religion or cult for that lesson. I then engage the class as a representative of that group along three levels:

1. Information: I summarize the basic beliefs and history of the group.
2. Logic: I summarize the beliefs of the religion/cult and ask the students how and why they differ with orthodox Christianity.
3. Practice: I role-play an evangelistic encounter with one of the students in the classroom.

The future of orality-based educational research

Majority World Educational Philosophy, Educational Psychology, and Learning Theory

African theological institutions have inherited a curriculum without critically examining the philosophy of education implicit in it.

Most educational psychology has performed fieldwork in Western environments. Little has been done in Majority World contexts.

Without a solid Majority World educational psychology, there is no learning theory that is informed by fieldwork in the local context.

The principles of orality offer insights into the development of a Majority World educational psychology and learning theory.

Mixed-Methods Fieldwork in Orality-based Educational Interventions

A longitudinal study combining quantitative analysis (statistical surveys) and qualitative research (discourse analysis, focus groups, participatory action research) would be beneficial as a means of field testing orality-based educational interventions.

Discourse analysis of student responses should reveal the level of impact an orality-based pedagogy has made to the students' plausibility structures at the implicit level of culture (Paul Hiebert).



Paul Hiebert's Levels of Culture

Conclusion

Producing a working African pedagogy and contextualized educational curriculum has many challenges. The latest research in orality may provide the clues for how we may move forward.