



*Connecting People*

Communication  
Across Barriers

## Oral and Print

### Two Distinct Communication/Learning Styles

#### Two Distinct Communication/Learning Styles – Oral and Print

The ways in which people give and receive information for living their lives impacts their world view and values, as well as their communication and learning styles. Understanding the preferred communication and learning styles of people in poverty increases our chances to succeed in reaching out to them, establishing relationships, and learning about their strengths, assets, and resiliency characteristics. My personal experiences of growing up in poverty and my research (Beegle, 2000) revealed that people living in poverty develop styles of communicating and learning that are very distinct from those developed by those in the middle class. A better understanding of these differences in communication and learning styles helps professionals to effectively serve people in poverty, and empowers them to ease the impact of the trauma inflicted by living in poverty conditions.

There are two distinct styles of communicating and learning—oral and print—that can be used to frame understanding and provide us with useful language to describe how to improve communication across class barriers. These two communication styles come from their respective cultural and contextual roots:

- **Oral culture** (orality) is a natural state in which we are highly attuned to our senses (touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste) and devote a great deal of attention to sensory information. Orality emphasizes our interconnection with the environment and the people in it.
- **Print Culture** (literacy) is a learned way of relating to the world, where people learn to process and analyze (breaking things down according to parts) information collected through sight, sound, hearing, touch, and smell according to categories, classifications, and styles of reasoning developed by reading (Ong, 1982\*).

According to Walter J. Ong, all people are born oral culture and learn to be print culture if they grow up around adults who get information for living their lives through reading. Oral culture does not mean that a person can not read; it means that people prefer to seek information for living their lives

from other people or through verbal means, not print. For example, if someone is sick in a family, the print culture communicator would likely consult a medical text book or find an article about the illness. The more oral-culture communicator would find a family member or someone who knew someone to ask about the illness.

From the context of poverty, I learned an oral-culture style of interacting and processing information. When I learned about oral and print culture communication styles, for the first time in 1989, I finally had a language to describe my strengths and frustrations as I was being challenged to acquire print-culture skills. Most systems are set up to serve and value print-culture styles of communication. However, both oral and print-culture styles of communicating and learning have value. Each brings rich opportunities for human growth and connections to our world. Understanding the two styles of learning and communicating can break significant barriers for educating and working with people who live in poverty.

My mentor, Dr. Bob Fulford, told me that I was the most oral culture person that he had ever met. He said, "I want you to gain the skills of print culture, because that is what you need to be successful in the workplace and in education. However, I want you to maintain your skills of oral culture because many people in our society have lost the abilities to develop relationships, to see the big picture, and to be spontaneous." He always taught that in order to take care of ourselves and our planet, we needed to use the skills and strengths of each style as situationally appropriate.

### Characteristics of Oral Culture



- ❑ Relationships are at the heart of everything and are first priority.
- ❑ Spontaneous - Strong desire for variety-Great abilities to "go with the flow" or jump from subject to subject
- ❑ Repetitive - Storytelling and repeating the same over and over are important for maintaining the knowledge.
- ❑ Holistic - Focus on the "BIG picture" tendency to take everything that is going on around them.
- ❑ Comfort with Emotions - Shows emotion readily in most any situation.
- ❑ Present Oriented - Highly in-tune with the here-and-now.
- ❑ Agonistic - More physical.

### Characteristics of Print Culture



- ❑ Linear - Organizes thought and actions by "first this, then this" thought process.
- ❑ Time - Is at the heart of everything and has high priority in daily activities.
- ❑ Analytic/Abstract - Knowledge is outside of self--ability to step back from a situation and separate and disconnect self from what is going on.
- ❑ Self-disciplined/Focus - Strong ability to shut out sense data and focus on one idea at a time.
- ❑ Ability to delay gratification - Strong understanding of relationships between parts.
- ❑ Ability to strategize, plan ahead, set goals, and focus on the future - Ability to break things into parts promotes the ability to connect small efforts to end desires.

## Strengths in Communication: Broadening Our Skills

Walter Ong (1982) strongly emphasizes that one style of communicating and learning is not better than the other. To be truly effective communicators, he argued that people need to have the skills from both oral and print cultures. Furthermore, he says the ideal communication style is to be balanced; having the ability to maintain both the characteristics of oral culture (which keeps one connected and spontaneous) and the characteristics of print culture (which allows one to set goals, plan ahead, analyze, and stay focused). For example: if you need to be more relational, you can tap into your oral culture skills. If you need to be on time, you can tap into your print-culture abilities.

Many people who are print-culture communicators lose touch with their natural style of communicating and become so dominant in the print culture that they struggle to acquire some of the characteristics that oral culture people exhibit readily, such as the ability to develop relationships and to be in the moment. Likewise, people who stay steeped in their oral culture struggle with print culture characteristics, such as having difficulty breaking things into manageable steps or planning ahead. Poverty compounds this because often you plan ahead and then do not have the resources to follow through.

There is a dominant belief in the United States that portrays the oral culture style of communicating as inferior and requiring less intelligence. However, there is evidence that oral culture has unique strengths. Many of the cultures that have been ecologically sustainable over hundreds or thousands of years are oral cultures. Many of the characteristics of these oral cultures (emphasis on relationships, respect of the limitation of the earth resources, closer connection to the earth and its cycles, less focus on material possessions, in flow with relationships and time) are characteristics found in societies that live within the ability of the earth to replenish itself.

Print culture, while admirable in many ways, contains within it many of the characteristics that contribute to ecologically unsound ways of living: a focus on technological solutions; a “management” orientation towards nature; distancing self from the world, self, and others through abstract reasoning and reliance on print; focus on material growth; fast pace; and relationship with time as a commodity. When one takes ecological sustainability as the ruler for judging culture, oral societies have much to appreciate.

Currently, the majority of our institutions are set up in a way that honors, validates, and serves people with print-culture skills. We send important information in flyers, handouts and letters. We write notes on students’ papers instead of talking with them. We lose talent and potential by shutting out the gifts of oral culture and focusing only on print-culture styles of learning and communicating. We have to find ways in our schools and organizations (which are largely print culture) to establish, value, and include some of the oral-culture styles of communicating and learning. We must move to models that honor oral-culture styles of communicating, while teaching the skills of print culture.



Effective communication is a necessary step toward eradicating the barriers to success for people to move out of poverty. Effective communication cannot be achieved without educating all people on ways to broaden their repertoire and develop their less dominant style of learning and communicating. The following chart outlines a few basic steps toward teaching the skills of both print and oral culture.

## To Teach Skills of ORAL Culture

- Pay attention to intuition and act on it.
- Focus on how you feel and tell others how you feel about them.
- Practice active listening to stay in the moment and to build better relationships.
- Practice empathy to gain insights into how you are like others.
- Respond immediately without thinking.
- Stay focused on the moment.
- Sing, dance, and be silly!
- Pay attention to your environment.

## To Teach Skills of PRINT Culture

- Model reading as a primary source for gaining important daily life information.
- Create lists. Practice sorting and categorizing.
- Practice outlining key points from the concepts being taught.
- Break assignments into explicit baby steps—doable, manageable steps.
- Show examples of completed work as models to follow.
- Have people tell their life stories and then help them to write those stories down.
- Give examples of how the “in the moment” behavior leads to future experiences.



## Five Powerful Communication Strategies

**People from poverty backgrounds shared the following strategies that made a difference in their lives:**

- Tell stories—use vivid examples to allow people to feel the impact of what they are doing.
- Model appropriate behavior in supportive ways.
- Develop relationships based on identification while sharing information.
- Use simple, familiar words and examples with which people can relate to.
- Give information verbally, often, repeatedly and with good eye contact.

## Helping Oral Culture People Learn

- Help them to feel confident. Research shows that self-confidence affects the ability to remember. Help them to not focus on mistakes, but to focus on what they have done well.
- Spread-out repetition is most effective. Have them make a list. Set it aside. An hour later, look at it again. An hour after that, look at it again. This helps transfer the information to long-term memory.
- Share information in multiple ways. Hearing it, writing it, seeing it, creating models of it all help with recalling information.
- Use gestures and facial expressions as another way to get the message out.
- Have people imagine an image of what you want them to remember. If it is a date or a name, give an image to associate it with. For example, “My name is Donna Beegle, like the dog, but with two ees.” This is a mnemonic device that can make a difference.