



Connecting People

Communication
Across Barriers

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Oral and Print

Improving Communication Across Social Class Barriers

Overview

Research reveals two distinct styles of communicating based on the ways in which people give and receive information for living their lives. Linked to social class, each style illuminates thought processes and learning styles. **Oral** culture communication is strongly associated with poverty. **Print** culture communication is observed among middle-class families. Both communication and learning styles have value and bring rich opportunities for human growth and connections to our world. **Understanding the two styles of communication has strong implications for helping people in poverty move forward.**



- **Oral culture** (orality) is a natural state in which people get information for living their lives by talking to other people. They are highly attuned to senses (touch, smell, sight, sound and taste) and devote a great deal of attention to sensory information and relationships with people.



- **Print Culture** (literacy) is a learned way of relating to the world. Through reading, often to obtain information for living their lives, oral communicators become print communicators by training their brain to think in a “first this, then this” thought process. This enhances the brain’s ability to analyze and classify information and develop advanced reasoning skills.

Oral and Print communication styles were first discovered by Walter J. Ong (1982). According to Ong, all people are born oral culture. If they grow up in an environment where adults practice getting information for living their lives through reading, they *learn* to become print communicators. Oral culture does not mean a person is illiterate; it means they prefer to get information for living their lives through verbal communication, not reading.

Dr. Donna Beegle’s doctoral research (2000) validates Ong’s theory. Beegle’s research on people who grew up in generational poverty and received a bachelor’s degree found that all participants gave anecdotal evidence that they primarily communicated in an oral culture fashion before entering college. As they slowly learned the print style of communicating, they experienced frustrations and struggles.

This learning guide examines characteristics of oral and print communication and offers strategies for applying the concepts to improve outcomes for people struggling in poverty.

The Communication Gap

Currently, the majority of our institutions are set up in a way that honors, validates, and serves people with print culture skills. Yet most people from generational poverty communicate in an oral culture fashion. The communication gap between the



social classes creates a major barrier that prevents people from breaking through the iron cage of poverty. For example, we expect people in poverty to fill out long applications, follow many steps, meet deadlines, pay attention to tasks...all print communication characteristics. Not having print communication skills is exacerbated by having to dodge bullets of poverty (not having resources, responding to daily crisis, etc). When people in poverty fail to follow the print communication rules, they are often punished through denial of services and/or labeled as “not trying hard enough (lazy).”

Applying Oral and Print Communication in the Work Place

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 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. Applying knowledge of oral and print to the work world has powerful implications for more effectively serving people in poverty. Doing so involves four aspects:

- 1) **Understanding** the characteristics of oral and print communication
- 2) **Practicing** a balanced style of communicating
- 3) **Honoring** oral culture communication style
- 4) **Teaching** print skills

Outcomes of an Oral and Print Model in the Workplace

The benefits of practicing oral and print strategies when working with people in poverty are tremendous for effectively serving people in poverty and helping them move forward. The strategies recommended in this learning guide can help you:

- Empower people
- Ease the impact of trauma inflicted by poverty conditions
- Understand behavior
- Connect meaningfully and establish relationships
- Uncover strengths, assets, and resiliency characteristics
- Motivate people to take advantage of opportunities



1. Understanding the Characteristics of Oral and Print Communication

Walter Ong (1982) strongly emphasizes that one style of communicating and learning is not better than the other. To be effective communicators, he argued, people need to have the skills from both oral and print cultures. The chart below outlines the characteristics of oral and print communication. 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).

Oral Culture

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

Print Culture

- **Time** - Is at the heart of everything and has high priority in daily activities.
- **Linear** - Organizes thought and actions by “first this, then this” process.
- **Analytic/Abstract** - Knowledge is outside of self; ability to step back from a situation, separate and disconnect oneself from what is going on.
- **Self-Disciplined/Focus** - Strong ability to shut out sensory data and focus on one idea at a time.
- **Strategic** - Ability to plan ahead, set goals and focus on the future.
- **Delay Gratification** - Ability to break things into parts promotes the ability to connect small efforts to end desires.



2. Practicing a Balanced Style of Communicating

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 you often plan ahead and then do not have the resources to follow through.

To become more balanced, practice the strengths of your less dominant communication style. For example, if you need to be more oral, you can practice paying more attention to your intuition and how you feel while making a point to be more of a listener than speaker. If you need to be more print oriented, you can practice creating lists, outlining key points and breaking tasks into smaller steps.



To practice more ORAL skills

- 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 practice more PRINT skills

- Practice reading as a primary source for gaining important daily life information.
- Create lists. Practice sorting and categorizing.
- Outline key points from concepts and discussions.
- Break tasks into explicit, small steps that are specific and manageable.
- Seek examples of completed work as models to follow.
- Write your life story to practice recording information.
- Use a calendar and address book to keep track of dates and contact information.



3. Honoring Oral Communication Style

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 are characteristics found in societies that live within the ability of the earth to replenish itself:

- Emphasis on relationships
- Respect of the limitation of resources of the earth
- Closer connection to earth and its cycles
- Less focus on material possessions
- In flow with relationships and time

Too often, oral communicators are punished for their style of communicating. Think about the student who gets in trouble for not raising their hand to speak in class, the client who misses an important legal meeting because they rely on getting information verbally, or the co-worker who shares too much private information with colleagues who are print communicators and becomes a social outcast. Punishing people for their oral style of communicating is a way of devaluing them. However, when people feel valued, they are more engaged and productive. We must find ways to see the strengths in oral communicators, while teaching them the print skills they need to be successful.



Strategies to Honor Oral Culture

- Develop relationships based on identification. Oral cultures learn best from someone they feel connected to. Find ways to show that you have commonalities.
- Tell stories. Use vivid examples that draws people in and gets their attention.
- Use simple, familiar words and examples with which people can relate to.
- Give information verbally, often, repeatedly, and with good eye contact.
- Help oral culture learners feel confident. Research shows that self-confidence affects their ability to remember. Help them focus on what they have done well, instead of their mistakes.
- Share information in multiple ways. Help your oral culture learners hear the information, write it, see it, and practice it. Learning something new in multiple ways helps with recalling information.
- Use gestures and facial expressions when communicating.

4. Teaching Print Skills

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. Below are some strategies for teaching print skills to those you serve.

Strategies to Teach Print Skills

- Model appropriate behavior in supportive ways, such as helping people to research information in a book or on the internet.
- Create template sheets of paper that have numbered lines and instruct the person you are working with to write the steps you are asking them to perform. For students, put their photo on the form so that it will get parent's attention.
- Practice repetition. Have people in poverty make a list and then set it aside. Review it an hour later and then review it again. This helps transfer information to long-term memory.
- Use mnemonic devices. 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 'e's.'"



Individualized Plans

The strategies offered in this learning guide are general in nature. Communication Across Barriers can consult with your organization to help you examine practices, policies and/or curriculum and suggest tailored strategies for honoring oral communication and teaching print skills to those you serve. For more information, contact our office via the contact information below.

Sources

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Beegle, Donna (2000). *Interrupting Generational Poverty: Factors Influencing Successful Completion of the Bachelor's Degree*. Doctoral Dissertation, Portland State University.

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