Open Admissions, Orality, and Literacy

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Open admissions students tend to be highly oral. Their modes of thinking are different from the modes of thinking demanded in the highly literate (i.e., detached, objective, and scientific) world of college. They can learn the more literate modes of thinking, however, but this requires special awareness and effort on the part of their teachers. Some assumptions and instructional approaches made with traditional students cannot be made with highly oral students in a community college. Moreover, the effort to move the students into the more literate modes of thought cannot be limited to a couple of "remedial" courses in reading and writing. The promise of the open door can be realized for highly oral students only as more and more teachers change their assumptions about student learning and modify their instructional practices accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

Cross (1971) has reported that the nontraditional students entering community colleges do not read well and don't like to read. She advocates changing the curriculum to conform to the capacities of these students (rather than trying to change these highly oral students to meet the demands of the curriculum). But that is a limited hope. Only a limited number of skills can be passed on through apprenticeship, and old-time "vocational education" is being replaced by science- and technology-oriented middle management career programs. The more traditional students are able to succeed in the transfer and the newer career programs because they have already developed the requisite verbal and quantitative abilities, but it is precisely the nontraditional, highly oral stu-

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dents who cannot cut it in either the transfer or the career programs. They have not developed the verbal and quantitative abilities to succeed in most of these programs. There are few courses, much less programs, where the students can avoid reading either texts or tests — and pass! Community colleges are, therefore, the interface between highly oral students and our complex society. Technologized society depends on highly literate patterns of thought to sustain itself, and education for this society cannot responsibly avoid developing literate patterns of thought in students.

All youngsters entering college now are more oral than college students were a generation ago. However, there are still many students entering selective colleges who meet the traditional expectations of literacy (some of them are also entering community colleges), even though they have grown up with the electronic media that have accentuated the oral-aural features of our culture. Ong (1967, 1971, 1972) speaks of the recently accentuated oral-aural features variously as the new orality, electronic orality, literate orality, or secondary orality. The oral is more prominent now than a generation ago, but the literate way of thinking is still present and dominant. Just as people didn't stop talking after they started writing, so too the new media and their effects have not wiped out the old media and their effects, although the new have changed the old while at the same time reinforcing them. The problem for community colleges is that the nontraditional students entering through the open door are more a part of what Ong (1971) describes as a carryover of the old orality, or what he calls residual orality. Even though they have mastered the rudiments of reading and writing, oral habits of thought and expression permeate and dominate their way of thinking. Literate patterns of thought have not been interiorized, have not displaced oral patterns, in them.

RESIDUAL ORALITY

While highly oral students know how to read and write, they have not attained facility in the detached, impersonal reasoning fostered by literacy. Their thinking as manifested in their talking and writing is more concrete than abstract, but more rhetorical than empirical; more categorical, gnomic, and inclusive than clearly spelled out in detail and exclusive; more formulary and polemical than investigative or deliberative; more moralistic than logical; more syncretic, elliptical, and assertive than analytical, carefully reasoned, and supported with qualifications; more additive than either inductive or deductive; more concerned with the real than with the possible; more focused on the obvious than interested in the subtle, polysemous, elusive, conditional, or hypothetical; and more oriented to the immediately present than to the past or future. Highly literate students, by contrast, are capable of achieving a greater balance in their thinking in regard to each aspect of thinking described here and can shift the