

Orality Talks

journal.oralitytalks.net

Journal



ORALITY & HERMENEUTICS

Vol. 2 No. 1 (2025)



Institutes *for* Orality Strategies

The OralityTalks Journal (OTJ) is published **tri-annually** by the
Institutes for Orality Strategies (I-OS),
OralityResources.International (ORI).

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ARTICLES

Rethinking the Old Wineskins of “Academic” for the New Wine of Oral and Oral-Preference Learners

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Abstract: For too long, the West has dominated theological education worldwide. This reality is primarily due to the West’s past centuries of colonization of the non-Western world, which has ramifications for theological education even today. In light of this continuing Western theological dominance, it is critical that the “old wineskins” of the Western academy and what it considers to be “academic” be rethought today, especially in light of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners. This article explores such necessary rethinking in four parts. First, examining the West’s hegemony of what is considered academic today and the implications of this for theological education in the non-Western world. Second, exploring the new concept of “theological intelligence” (TQ) and its implications for other understanding of what is considered academic, especially for more orally-based pedagogical models. Third, looking at how one theological institution—Kairos University—is using Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) to help bridge the gap between readers and non-readers in the academy. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations for theological institutions and educators. It is hoped that this rethinking of what academics is will help theological institutions worldwide better meet the training needs of the Christian constituencies that they serve, including oral and oral-preference learners.

Keywords: Competency-Based Theological Education, colonization, Kairos University, oral learners, oral-preference learners, theological education, theological intelligence

Orality reliance level: very low orality reliance ■□□□□

This article is adapted from Caldwell (2022).

Introduction

Jesus told us not to put new wine into old wineskins (Lk. 5:37-39, NIV). Instead, he argued that “new wine must be poured into new wineskins.” Unfortunately, theological institutions for the past two centuries have not considered Jesus’ words when creating curricula for the greater Church and the training of her pastors and missionaries. Theological institutions, in fact, have been and still are discriminating against one of the larger constituencies of Christendom: oral and oral-preference learners. These institutions are forcing the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners into the old wineskins of curricula based on the needs of a reading minority. Of course, both oral and oral-preference learners have been around

since time immemorial. What is “new” in the “new wine” of today is the fairly recent recognition among dominant reading cultures that there are indeed vast numbers of both oral and oral-preference peoples throughout the world. The “orality movement” itself is indicative of such recognition.

As a result, it is time to carefully consider why being able to read is equated with academic standards of excellence while not being able to read is equated, at least by academia, or “the academy,” with ignorance and inability to think in academic ways. We desperately need to rethink the old wineskins of what is considered “academic” as we try to meet the training needs of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners who are pastors and missionaries today. Why do we need to do this? Because theological

education, as it currently stands in all its deference to an understanding of the “academic” that is reading dominant, will never meet the theological training needs of the vast majority of pastors and missionaries worldwide who are oral or oral-preference learners. Furthermore, the vast majority of theological institutions worldwide turn a blind eye to the oral realities of their learners, learners who either come from (and will return to) oral contexts or learners (both Western and non-Western) who may know how to read but who prefer not to.

What this rethinking requires is an embracing of an entirely new philosophy of how theological education is done. This includes how theological institutions view what is and what is not considered “academic.” Traditionally, an understanding of academic is viewed from the perspective of the old wineskins of the academy, where students typically listen passively to lectures, read lots of books and articles, do research and write papers, take tests, and so on, often done in isolated settings far removed from contact with regular people. While none of these aspects of the old wineskins need to be abandoned out of hand, what is traditionally considered academic must be carefully reassessed in light of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners.

This article will explore the new academic wineskins that are needed in four parts: first, examining the hegemony of the academy’s understanding of what is considered academic that currently dominates theological education worldwide and the implications of such an understanding; second, examining “Theological Intelligence” (TQ) and how it might help theological institutions better incorporate other understandings of what is academic, especially more orally-based pedagogical models; third, showing how one theological institution, Kairos University, is using Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) to help bridge the gap between readers and non-readers in the academy. The article concludes with several

recommendations for theological institutions and educators.

But first, I would like to begin with the story of a leader named Jing. His story is a composite of several individuals I have known over the years.

Jing became a follower of Jesus as a young boy in a remote rural tribal area of a non-Western country. Most of his tribal group were non-readers. Though he had some “formal” schooling, the local reader-dominant educational system was rudimentary at best; Jing could read at the fourth-grade level. However, Jing was steeped in the more “informal” local oral cultural ways of his people and, as a teenager, distinguished himself in his ability to communicate the Bible in ways that made sense with both his fellow teenagers as well as with his elders in the community. He often preached in the small bamboo and thatched-roof local church, and all spoke well of him. A Western missionary to Jing’s tribal group observed his leadership gifting and convinced Jing’s family to send him several hundred miles away to the nearest city to attend Bible college and receive formal Bible training. Since no one in their family, and few in the area, had ever gone away to college, everyone was excited about Jing’s opportunity.

Jing, however, struggled at the Bible college, especially at first. Though intellectually gifted, he had never studied so hard in his life: reading books, writing assignments, taking written quizzes and tests—all far away from his own family and people. In his mind, what he learned at the Bible college was like having to learn an entirely new way of thinking. Somehow, though, Jing made it through Bible college; in fact, he excelled. When he went back home during the summers, his local friends and family started to find it more and more difficult to understand what Jing was talking about when he was invited to preach. For now, when he preached, he often spoke of context, original languages, and what so-and-so Western person said about the Bible. Every time he preached, he had three points that he wanted to get across. To his friends and family, it was almost as if Jing was speaking a foreign language; he seldom referred to aspects of his own culture.

Jing himself grew increasingly frustrated every time he journeyed home. However, he did so well in Bible college that, upon graduation, he

was given a big scholarship by the Western missionaries to travel to an even larger city for a seminary education. Here, Jing again excelled, but he didn't go home as often, and when he did, he really didn't have much in common with his own people. Eventually, Jing ended up teaching at the seminary in the big city. He seldom returned home, and when he did, he was rarely invited to speak in church.

At least five observations emerge from Jing's story. First, Jing was extracted from his own culture and cognitive environment. One's cognitive environment encompasses a "set of assumptions which the individual is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true," including "a person's current and potential matrix of ideas memories, experiences and perceptions" (Higgins, 2010, p. 190). Second, Jing's local orality-based cognitive environment and oral system of learning were not considered adequate for church leadership by the Western missionary; the missionary acquainted formal academic training with ministry success. Third, similarly, the Western missionary thought that Jing needed to learn another educational system—a reading preference system—in order to excel in his spiritual gifts. Fourth, Jing struggled to learn the new reading culture but soon viewed it as superior to his own oral culture's learning style. Finally, as Jing's new reading-culture knowledge and ability grew, he increasingly could not communicate with his own people.

Unfortunately, Jing's story has been, and continues to be, reproduced around the world. While there are many reasons for this a basic one comes down to the unquestioned dominance of the reading culture worldwide.

Part 1: The Hegemony of the Reading Culture of the Academy

Though the motivations of the Western missionaries in Jing's story were not malevolent, the fact is they were rooted in a colonial mentality of "West is best," including the Western reading-dominant educational system. Elsewhere (see Caldwell 2013; cf. Caldwell 2010, 2018, and 2025), I have written

on colonization and its effects on theological and missiological education, especially in the dismissing of local ways of teaching and learning. In summary:

Colonization—and the resulting paternalism that has oftentimes remained—has affected theological and missiological education in many ways, but primarily with regards to curriculum relevance and to dismissing local ways of teaching and learning. Recent ethnographic research has come to label the influence of colonization as "authoritative knowledge." A result of colonization is that those who are colonized eventually take on as authoritative a certain way of thinking or knowing that was at first foreign to that particular culture. (Caldwell, 2013, p. 5)

It is the concept of authoritative knowledge that is especially pertinent to any discussion of the place of orality in theological institutions, both past and present. Brigitte Jordan (1997) expands on the oftentimes insidious role of authoritative knowledge:

... frequently one kind of knowledge gains ascendance and legitimacy. A consequence of the legitimation of one kind of knowing as authoritative is the devaluation, often the dismissal, of all other kinds of knowing. ... The constitution of authoritative knowledge is an ongoing social process that both builds and reflects power relationships within a community of practice. It does this in such a way that all participants come to see the current social order as a natural order, that is, the way things (obviously) are. (p.56)

Compare these words with those of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), who refers to authoritative knowledge as "civilized knowledge," whereby "[t]he globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge" (p. 66).

One example of the legitimization of Western culture on theology involves the Bible and its interpretation. Today, around the world, one Western understanding of hermeneutics dominates: the grammatical-historical approach. However, as good as it may be, the grammatical-historical approach came with the colonizers and was soon accepted as “authoritative” by those who were colonized (cf. Caldwell, 1999 and 2025). This acceptance led to the neglecting of local forms of hermeneutics, most of which were orally based, as indeed was the Bible itself (see Steffen and Bjoraker, 2020 and Acker, 2024; cf. Barber, 2007 and Moon, 2009). Unfortunately, this foreign understanding of what Bible interpretation should be still dominates all theological institutions worldwide.

This example resonates with the case of Jing. The American colonizers, including Western missionaries, brought a foreign understanding of what formal Bible college should be. The colonized, Jing, and his tribal people saw such formal schooling and the required print-based learning as the way things should be done. So, of course, Jing was forced (even if it was voluntary) to adapt to an entirely new way of thinking and learning that he saw as authoritative and, therefore, did not question. He eventually viewed it as superior to his own culture’s way of doing things and subsequently lost relevancy with his own people.

Unfortunately, Jing’s experience continues to occur worldwide in theological institutions today. We must acknowledge, at the very least, that much of the curricula—as well as the educational models and techniques that are used—have been unquestionably set up the way the print-dominant colonizers did it. All parties have unquestionably assumed that print learning is superior to other learning approaches. However, it does not have to be this way. We must look for other alternatives, including using both curriculum and educational techniques, that are culturally appropriate for all learners, both

readers and non-readers alike. As George Spindler (1997) says:

A transcultural perspective on education is essential, for education is a cultural process and occurs in a social context. Without attention to cultural difference and the way education serves those differences, we have no way of achieving perspective on our own culture and the way our educational system serves it or of building a comprehensive picture of education as affected by culture. (p.272)

A transcultural perspective on education is imperative today, given the fact that, according to Lynn Thigpen (2020), only two percent of the world’s population is able to read at the high level required for success in most theological institutions (p. 3). This, coupled with the fact that today there is an increasing number of oral-preference learners in the West (Moon, 2013a and 2013b; cf. his 2010 and 2012), means that all theological institutions—in the West and non-West—need to move beyond the old wineskins of the hegemony of the reading culture of the academy to new forms of education that will truly meet the needs of all learners, especially the new wine of oral and oral preference learners.

Part 2: How Theological Institutions Might Better Incorporate Oral-based Pedagogical Models

I believe one way that theological institutions today might better accommodate the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners is by viewing the individual learners in terms of what I call their “theological intelligence,” or TQ. We are all familiar with IQ (the measurement of a person’s reasoning ability or rational intelligence) and EQ (the measurement of a person’s emotional intelligence). Like IQ and EQ, I would argue that every person also has a TQ. I define theological intelligence as follows (Caldwell, 2022):

Theological Intelligence (TQ) is the innate ability that every individual has to think theologically within the confines of their own cultural context and cognitive environment. They are able to do this through having mastered the techniques of their culturally appropriate educational systems (both informal and/or formal). As a result, each individual is able to successfully comprehend their culture's theology—and communicate that theology—to their own people in ways that are both culturally appropriate and understandable. (p. 70)

As Patricia Lamoureux (1999) points out, both IQ and EQ “are not inherently opposing competencies, but rather separate yet interconnected ones, ... which operate, for the most part, in tight harmony” (p. 143). In the same way, I would argue that an individual's TQ builds on and is connected with both their IQ and EQ.

Here is another way of saying all of this: TQ is the innate ability that every person utilizes to understand and express religious concepts and philosophies in terms of their own culture and cognitive environment. TQ is a fully orb'd understanding of theology appropriately learned in one's cultural context. Whether Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, animist, or whatever, each individual has the TQ to both think theologically and to communicate those theological thoughts in ways that their unique cultures and cognitive environments have shaped. As a result, there are several sub-points in relation to TQ:

1. Every individual has a TQ. Individual TQs are developed over the lifetime of the individual, with foundational TQs typically in place by the individual's teenage years.
2. All TQ's are equal. There should be no privileging of one TQ over another; in other words, all learning styles that undergird one's TQ—whether reading-based or orally-based—are culturally conditioned.

Hence, all learning styles are valid and equal.

3. Cultures default to the TQ that works best for them in light of their own cognitive environment.
4. Both informal and formal educational systems within the culture will default to the culture's dominant TQ.

What all of this means for theological institutions worldwide is that we must both understand and value the individual TQs of our learners and take them seriously as we develop specific training programs. Unfortunately, most theological institutions tend to disregard the TQ of their learners. Instead, they typically default to the authoritative knowledge of reading cultures, to the neglect of the TQ of oral cultures, and, increasingly, to the TQ of their learners who are readers but who prefer oral learning. In the past, the academy, the “gatekeeper” of authoritative knowledge, determined that academic theological knowledge is best achieved through:

- book learning;
- credit hours and seat-time;
- a top-down process where the teacher pours content into the learner;
- independent research done silently in a library;
- results presented logically and systematically;
- assessment linked to quizzes, tests, and academic paper writing; and
- little concern for formation and practical application.

As a result, the academy concluded that anything considered to be “academic” needs to fall within the above parameters; it defaulted to an understanding of academic in terms of a typically privileged Western understanding of what TQ is. Any alternative TQ was categorized as inferior and “non-academic.”

But here we must raise the question, “Who says?” Is defaulting to the hegemony of a

print-based reading TQ the only, or primary, way for theological education? I think not. Instead, I think that an understanding and valuing of all TQs causes us to redefine what is and what is not academic. As a result, the learning styles and educational methods worked out in the cognitive environments of oral and oral-preference learners should be equally considered academic. Such an oral-based academic TQ will consider the following elements:

- group learning that is connected and relational learning;
- learning achieved through both formal and informal gatherings of the community;
- learning that values “hands-on” learning experiences more than lectures;
- peer learning, where the “elder”/“teacher” guides the group in communal scholarship, coming to proper conclusions through extended and lively conversations;
- results—both individual and group—presented appropriately according to the cognitive environment of the specific group;
- assessment linked to the individual and group’s ability to actually communicate theology to others in the same cultural context; and
- much concern for formation and practical application.

The elements listed here are but a select few. For additional elements, see Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker (2020, esp. pp. 65-72; cf. Steffen, 2010).

This is precisely where CBTE’s educational philosophy can help us. Increasingly, there is a growing interest in theological educational models that are a hybrid: flexible enough to meet the educational needs of both reading-based and oral-based learners (cf. Seng, 2016). CBTE offers just such flexibility. My own experience at Kairos University demonstrates how such a hybrid might work.

Part 3: Kairos University and CBTE

For 160 years—like most seminaries—Kairos University (KU; formally known as Sioux Falls Seminary) was exclusively a reading-dominant seminary. Then, in 2014, KU developed and launched a CBTE model called the Kairos Project (for more information on KU’s philosophy of CBTE see this link: <https://kairos.edu/engage/white-papers/>.) The Kairos Project is a whole new philosophy of how to do theological education, emphasizing theological education that is affordable, accessible, relevant, and faithful. It is the “accessible” and “relevant” pieces that are particularly germane to the topic of this article.

Accessibility and relevancy can be seen in a variety of ways. First, Kairos, as a CBTE model, emphasizes mentor teams (made up of a faculty mentor, a vocational mentor, a personal mentor, and the learner) who help learners achieve competency in outcomes specifically designed for their specific degree (ranging from the BA to the PhD). Second, because it is competency-based, Kairos emphasizes learning experiences that are accessible to those learners that God places in our midst, no matter where God has called them to serve or what learning style they prefer. Our primary goal is to meet learners where they are, both literally and figuratively. We take seriously the learner’s TQ. Third, Kairos emphasizes the importance of the learner’s vocational context and allows the mentor team to determine what kind of learning is most necessary and appropriate for the learner and how such learning should occur and be assessed. Fourth, Kairos seeks to fully integrate each learner’s life, vocation, and calling into their educational journey of discipleship.

Accessibility and relevancy involve a key shift in thinking for all in the Kairos Project: learners and mentors alike. This key shift views knowledge as more than just content. I believe one of the past impediments to seeing the validity of oral learning was (and still is) the academy’s limited understanding of

knowledge as primarily content. If academic knowledge is limited to content, and content is primarily gained through reading and writing, then to “be academic,” a theological institution must have an educational pedagogy that defaults to the reading of written documents (printed texts and articles), as well as to the production of written documents (papers and written answers on tests and quizzes) that, taken together, somehow demonstrate the overall competency of their learners. Instead, for the Kairos Project, knowledge is defined as involving three essential pieces: content, character, and craft. This “three-fold” understanding of knowledge as a mutuality between content, character, and craft is the key to designing educational pedagogy—from start to finish—that can privilege both the reading learner and the oral learner, as well as the emerging oral preference learner. Of course, there has to be some content, but the more holistic three-fold view of character and craft allows us more pedagogical options.

So, how do accessibility and relevancy work out, practically speaking, at KU? Let me briefly touch on three ways. First, for KU, this means that though we still default to reading-related methodologies—since the majority of our learners still come from reading-dominant TQ cognitive environments—we at the same time recognize and value those learners whose TQs are more orally-based. We ask this simple question: How does the specific learner prefer to learn? As a result, some of us are trying to incorporate more stories into our lectures rather than just content monologues. We are also allowing ample time for group discussions on content presentations. For specific assignments, learners are usually given the option to either write a paper or prepare an oral video response. Though textbooks are still used, we allow learners to find print or oral parallels in their own language or trade language for greater clarity. Likewise, by seeing knowledge as content, character, and craft, we use the vocational mentor to help us. Here, the vocational context in which

ministry for the learner happens helps determine what is considered “academic” for that specific vocational context. Likewise, if the vocational context is primarily oral, then presentations that demonstrate competency will be more orally based, especially if this is the TQ of the learner as well.

Secondly, since most oral TQ learners typically come from, and will return to, ministry in oral-based vocational contexts, we here at KU are seeing that learning and assessment should be adapted to methodologies that are more typically oral. We give both reading-dominant and oral-dominant learners the opportunity to write up a response to an assignment or to present their results orally, oftentimes through a video report. Unfortunately, oftentimes, reader-dominant academics view such video reporting as less than academic. The truth of the matter, however, is that oral summations or presentations are not necessarily easy. They can entail much thought and preparation, oftentimes involving the same amount of time as the preparation of a written document.

Thirdly, we here at KU are finding that increased sensitivity to oral and oral preference learners also includes peer learning in groups, working on and presenting assignments as a group, and even group assessment. This latter item—group assessment—is one of the hardest aspects for the academy to grasp. Assessments have become so individualized that we seldom think that there might be another way. The fact is, all types of learning can be evaluated in terms of knowledge acquisition, ability to function within the explicit TQ category, and whether or not the resulting applications are relevant to particular TQ contexts. At KU, all learners have the same targets for the various outcomes, but they are allowed to demonstrate competence according to their unique learning styles and cultural backgrounds.

CBTE is an emerging alternative to the old wineskins of the academy. CBTE’s emphasis on contextual learning, team-based mentoring, integrated outcomes, adapted

assignments, and especially competency in ministry may help theological institutions make the changes necessary in their understanding of what is academic, especially for the new wine of oral and oral preference learners.

Part 4: Recommendations for Theological Institutions and Educators

There are many recommendations of this study for theological institutions as well as for those who both teach and learn in such theological institutions. I will address a few of the most pertinent.

Recommendations for Theological Institutions

Pay attention to theological intelligence (TQ). We of the academy must admit that our place of privilege and power has caused us to default to the old wineskins of the academy and its understanding of what is and what is not considered academic. As a result, we focus on the TQ of readers (where we are most comfortable) and embrace a print culture and the print technology that goes along with it. This default has been to the detriment of oral and oral-preference learners. Such privilege and power have no place in theological institutions today, especially as we seek to help meet the training needs of the global Church. We must acknowledge the mistakes of our past and agree to move forward to better understand the TQ of all of our learners, including oral and oral-preference learners.

Develop appropriate curricula. We academics need to develop curricula, courses, and other academic learning experiences with the TQ needs of oral and oral-preference learners in mind. This is especially crucial in academic settings (particularly in the non-Western world), where the majority of learners come from oral and oral-preference cultures.

Adjust assignments and assessments appropriately. We of the academy need to

rethink our propensity towards individualized assignments and assessments, which must be rethought in light of the needs of oral and oral-preference learners. This will involve less attention to individualized learning and evaluation and more attention to the involvement of the group in both processes. Developing both learning outcomes and assessment tools that more holistically deal with learners, regardless of specific reading or oral learning preferences, will aid both groups.

Recommendations for Educators

Embrace the TQ challenge. Value the TQs of your individual learners, and be willing to adjust your courses, teaching styles, assignments, and assessments accordingly. For most educators, this will be a huge challenge. But, given the realities of the leadership needs of the worldwide Church today, we have no other choice.

Exercise humility. Since we educators have oftentimes enjoyed the privilege and power of academia, we oftentimes expect others to go through the same challenges in their educational journeys that we were forced to go through. But what we must all come to see is that, for example, learning the Chicago Manual of Style—and being able to cite sources, footnote, and compile bibliographies correctly, and the like—really has nothing whatsoever to do with whether or not something is to be considered academic. The reality is that those in academic power have invented such supposedly “academic standards” which result in—paraphrasing here the apostle Peter—“putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear” (Ac. 15:10, NIV). We educators must move beyond our privilege and power (and, I daresay, our pride) and thereby truly meet our learners where they are at. All of our learners, including oral and oral-preference learners.

Recognize that it will not be quick and easy. Do not expect quick solutions to the reality of the educational needs of oral and

oral-preference learners. Be in it for the long haul. Changing curricula, courses, teaching styles, assignments, and assessments is a marathon, not a sprint.

Conclusion

Theological institutions have a long journey ahead in redefining the old wineskins of what is and what is not “academic” in light of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners. Nevertheless, a growing awareness of oral and oral-preference learners and their unique educational needs is beginning to happen. The educational philosophy which undergirds CBTE is one model for the way forward.

I dream that the Jings of our world will soon be able to receive a theological education that is indeed both accessible and relevant. Furthermore, I dream that oral and oral-preference learners like Jing will no longer be regarded as “second-class citizens” in the world of the academy. Instead, their educational backgrounds and learning preferences will be respected and utilized just like those of the dominant reading cultures. When this happens, theological institutions worldwide will be closer to truly meeting the training needs of the Christian constituencies that they serve.

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