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Tertiary Orality: Teaching in an Age of Artificial Intelligence

Thanks to artificial intelligence, the reading/writing nexus as the primary modality of education has become fundamentally untrustworthy. This essay revisits aspects of Walter Ong's classic text Orality and Literacy in order to reconsider orality as a serious technique of teaching and learning. Because folklorists are trained in the verbal patterns of primary orality and contribute well-developed expertise to the study of secondary orality, we are well positioned to foster the skills of a "tertiary orality" in our students.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus):

Orality, artificial intelligence, education, advocacy, verbal arts and literature

The challenges of teaching during an age of artificial intelligence (AI) were certainly on my mind as I was sipping an Aperol Spritz and gazing across the *Piazza Grande* of Arezzo, Italy last summer, thinking about the class I was about to teach for the students arriving from Oklahoma. Concerns about how to facilitate any kind of learning when chatbots can be employed to design an assignment, complete that assignment, and then grade that assignment with the absence of any engagement on the part of either teacher or student is certainly the nightmare scenario with which all of higher education is currently struggling. But what I remember being most preoccupied with at that moment on the Piazza was *auditing*.

I had designed most of my "Music, Language, and Culture" class around studying the transition from orality to literacy in both language and music—a fitting topic for a class taught in the birthplace of Guido d'Arezzo, the inventor of modern music notation. I had recently spent a great deal of time with Walter Ong's classic 1982 work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. A passage from that book catalyzed for me one of those moments when, like an

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optical illusion, an alternative view of reality pops out and the familiar is suddenly very strange. According to Ong, the verifying of financial record books is called auditing because of the root “aud-” (shared with audio/audible). It was called this because all the way up until the Middle Ages in Europe “checking even written financial accounts was still done aurally, by having them read aloud” (Ong [1982] 2002:117). Perhaps it was the thought of how mind-numbingly boring it must be to listen to someone read financial accounts that caught my attention, or perhaps it was the surprising fact that even though I knew written record keeping had been around for over 3,500 years, aural recitation of the financial books was common practice only 600 years ago (I was sitting in a café in a building that had been around longer). Either way, I began to think seriously about whether the deep common human inheritance of orality could provide a path forward to educating in an age of AI and what training in folkloristics could do to light that path. In this essay, I consider whether the fundamental transformations to intellectual life forced on us by AI have opened a pathway to embrace new educational techniques in what I call “tertiary orality.”

AI and the Loss of Veracity

In framing the concept of tertiary orality, I build upon Ong’s concepts of primary and secondary orality. For Ong, primary orality is “that of persons totally unfamiliar with writing” (6). Ong has been rightly criticized for over-exoticizing (and romanticizing) heavily oral—especially African—traditions as “primitive” and not indicative of the analytically sequential, linear thought facilitated by writing (Royston 2023). His claims about the mental patterns (and social effects) of oral versus literary cultures may never have been about those cultures as much as they were idealized frameworks to inform Ong’s own Christian spiritualist tradition (Sterne 2011).¹ But what I and other folklorists have generally found useful in Ong’s work is the way it deciphers textual markers of oral communication that remain recorded (and thus able to be read) in written texts, which Ong calls “oral residue.” Textual features that folklorists will be familiar with (texts that are additive, redundant, carefully balanced, highly agonistic) are that way, says Ong, because they arise from primary orality and therefore don’t sit easily in the literary tradition.² As I find the concept useful, then, primary orality describes communication practices and technology with social impact, not cognition or cognitive ability.³ And while it may seem that humans would rapidly adopt any new technology that enhanced their ability to record and remember through written notation, Ong reminds us that the transition from primary orality to primary literacy (widespread reading and writing) was neither rapid nor accomplished without controversy. Both facts are relevant as we consider what to do about educating in an era of AI.

As I taught my Arezzo students, the invention of writing by the Mesopotamians around 3,500 years ago did not lead to an abandoning of primary orality. Most knowledge in most parts of the world continued to be communicated orally for thousands of years more. According to Ong, history shows that the introduction of writing is first regarded as “an instrument of secret or magical power” (92), then as a specialized trade (where scribes function to dictate the oral). Orality remained the dominant mode of communication of all knowledge through the Greeks and

Romans, all the way up through at least the early Middle Ages. Historian Michael Clanchy studied administrative documents of eleventh- and twelfth-century England and found that “documents did not immediately inspire trust,” that oral testimony of witnesses or even objects (like a rusty sword) were given weight over written titles (which could, after all, be faked), and that even administrators who wrote records conceptualized what they were doing as a form of dictating to themselves (Clanchy 1979: 218). In fact, says Ong, it wasn’t the invention of writing that started to transition humans out of primary orality at all, but rather the invention of the printing press in 1440. According to Ong, “print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did,” leading to greater legibility and enabling rapid, silent reading and the mass commercial distribution of text (Ong [1982] 2002:120). The implication here is that a transition away from primary orality to primary literacy isn’t more than a few hundred years old, compared to an oral tradition that goes back thousands, maybe millions, of years.

In the age of AI-produced texts, it has occurred to many of us that the written record and our interaction with it has become fundamentally untrustworthy. How do I know if what I’m reading was produced by a human brain or a large language model (LLM)? If it was generated by a chatbot, how do I know it’s true and not a hallucination? Given these concerns, it is worth noting that trustworthiness has always been a critique of written texts. Plato’s critique of writing appears in his *Phaedrus* through the mouth of Socrates, who criticizes writing for destroying memory and weakening the mind. A text, says Plato’s Socrates, is unresponsive, cannot be questioned or defend itself, and is therefore uselessly passive (summarized in Ong [1982] 2002:78). Critiques of writing as weakening the mind were also leveled by early printers such as Hieronimo Squarciafico in 1477 (79), and even the founder of linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that writing had shortcomings and dangers (de Saussure 1959:23). A survey of early written texts shows how writers struggled to bridge the gap in the “lack of verifiable context” implicit in writing (Ong [1982] 2002:100), with authors employing several different tactics to try to compensate for the lack of a verifiable speaker or verifiable listener. Some of these techniques will be familiar: “Overhearing a dialogue, objecting-and-response, recalling a ‘storytelling session’ frame story, the ‘Dear Reader’ address” (100). All these techniques suggest attempts to reassure the reader of the text’s veracity.

The trustworthiness of texts, the long history of the study of textual veracity, and the implications of this study in the age of AI were to be a major focus of the University of Oklahoma Center for Creativity and Authenticity in AI Cultural Production. It was envisioned by myself and my two co-project leaders from the departments of History of Science and Art/Technology as a place where the contributions of the arts and humanities to the study of AI could be fully realized.⁴ This center was one of five “AI in the Humanities” centers funded with a \$498,000 grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2024. Unfortunately, in April 2025, before work could begin, our grant was terminated by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).⁵

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Regardless, the veracity of AI text remains a pressing issue. And just as we are adapting to concerns about the veracity of AI-produced texts in the present, human populations adapted to concerns about the veracity of print and largely adopted literacy as the primary mode of human communication, despite their concerns. But for the purposes of this essay, I want to briefly focus on the major impacts of the transition from primary orality to primary literacy on the domain of education.

In place of apprenticeship models, listening and repeating, recitation of texts, and other dominant oral modes of learning, primary literacy has facilitated an understanding of “studying” something to mean learning that is abstractly sequential, classificatory, and explanatory (Ong [1982] 2002:9). This kind of “study” is both facilitated by literacy and expected by it. Even the study of speeches is largely reduced to texts to be analyzed. Study became a solitary activity: a quiet and contemplative process of introspection.⁶ The act of studying now passes through a reading/writing literary nexus. However, if AI has made it so that we—as educators—can no longer be sure that students are reading a text, contemplating a text, and then reflecting on that text in writing, it would behoove us to keep in mind that this mode of “study” through the reading/writing nexus is not what learning looked like until a few hundred years ago.

Domains of Memes and Masters

Folkloristics may be able to help conceptualize “studying” in a different, more oral form. The study of verbal art is core to contemporary folkloristics (Bauman 1983). And indeed, the improvised poetry dueling tradition of Tuscan verbal artists—*Contrasto Rima*—was a focus of much of the course I taught in Arezzo. But folkloristics has tended to treat orality as a domain of expertise for a few and the domain of informality for the rest of us. Thus, folkloric study of orality has been influenced what Ong calls “secondary orality” (or what Royston terms “new orality”)—where literacy is the default register for normal educated competence. We will need to modify these expectations to meet the moment of an AI-entextualized world.

First, it is important to say that folklorists have led in unearthing the norms and pathways of primary orality. Whether through overturning the primacy of the narrative arc through the serious study of the underlying structures of folktales (Propp 1968), reconstructing the oral-formulaic recitation technique (Lord 1960, building on the work of Milman Parry), or insisting that analysts not rob the texts of their poetry or social life (Hymes 1981; Sherzer 1983), folklorists have helped lay the groundwork to highlight the richness of the oral tradition, not its lack.

However, the oral traditions folklorists study today have typically been impacted by literary primacy, so that orality is secondary. Ong defines “secondary orality” as our “present-day high-technology culture, in which the new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print” (Ong [1982] 2002: 11). In an attempt to distance Ong’s theoretical concepts from implied social

evolution, Royston's study of podcasting in Africa instead proposes "new orality" to define contemporary audio media production. For Royston, new orality "describes the hybridization of written and oral forms of communication via podcasting and other digital tools" (2023:2461). Secondary/new orality is similar to primary orality because it is highly participatory, it is social and fosters a sense of community, it is immediately relevant and present-oriented, and it uses formulas and verbal forms of tradition/innovation (Toelken 1996).

However, according to Ong, secondary/new orality is also affected by a bifurcated formality of the oral tradition that scholars have noted, especially in the domain of music. Instead of being the common inheritance of any human of average intellect, the entextualization of music has created a divide between experts and listeners (Turino 2008). I argue this has happened with the folkloric study of verbal art as well. Folklorists do a fantastic job elevating the verbal art of master orators. The class in Arezzo was enormously enhanced by a visit from Italian scholar Dr. Rosalba Nodari from the University of Siena, who not only lectured about the *Contrasto Rima* tradition itself, but also brought with her a singer in the tradition. While my students were happy to suggest to the master a series of topics upon which he would compose a long-form poetic improvisation (I remember a discourse on "coffee vs. tea" in particular) none of us were under any illusions that the students would be able to do so themselves. After all, he is a master at his art. I myself have written about the oral mastery demonstrated in the bilingual sermons of Navajo (Diné) preachers (Marshall 2016). My focus was on those who demonstrated mastery of a difficult verbal craft. And while we celebrate masters, folklorists also valorize the informal oral culture of the masses, from Dundes and Pagter's photocopy lore (1975) to the circulation of memes (Michelle 2026). What we do less often is to study skill in oral tradition as the common inheritance of all humans, to normalize oral mastery.

Ong notes this bifurcation of formality in secondary orality and comments on the way that secondary orality fosters a kind of "new, self-consciously informal style" (Ong [1982] 2002:133). He speculates that this lowering of register in secondary orality is because "typographic folk believe that oral exchange should normally be informal (oral folk believe it should normally be formal)." Folklorists are experts on orality both as artistic mastery and as informal (vernacular) practice, which is how orality most often appears in the era of secondary/new orality. How might we use this expertise to transform "study" and education itself in an era of highly suspicious textuality?

Orality for All

I propose that AI has moved us, rather unwillingly, into a third era: one of tertiary orality. Orality is no longer the absence of textuality (primary), or hybridized with it (secondary), but rather an orality in rebellion against the text. The (always strained) veracity of texts has collapsed. But in place of primary literacy, at least in the classroom, folklorists can show the way: moving out of a secondary/new orality that regarded oral knowledge as the domain of masters and memes and into a tertiary (new new?) orality that uses oral techniques for formal and serious study.

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Texts have become unreliable as a marker of a student's authentic understanding. But I find Ong's writing about "study" reassuring. Texts really haven't been a marker of a student's authentic learning for all that long. They were a feature of what Thomas Pettitt (2012) has called the "Gutenberg Parenthesis"—a blip in the human timeline when print was primary. There are other ways to both teach and learn. Ong emphasizes that the study of "rhetoric" was both much broader than it is today and one of the four core "Rs" of western education for centuries. "Rhetoric was," says Ong, "at root the art of public speaking, of oral address, for persuasion ... or exposition" (Ong [1982] 2002:107). So in this final section, I will provide a few thoughts and preliminary experiments in teaching tertiary orality.

Humanists will often say that one of the crucial skills taught in the humanities is clear communication in writing. But we used to also train articulate speakers—a skill that has now been outsourced to professional programs, social science "communications" departments, and Toastmasters International. Articulate communication in face-to-face contexts will become an ever more useful skill as it becomes one of the only remaining markers of human veracity. But since the full embrace of primary literacy hundreds of years ago in educational settings, we have shifted to visual-dominant education. We cannot assume that students will automatically be able to shift to aural-dominant education overnight. But we should think of oral communication as a skill that can be cultivated in our students with practice, and one that will help give them an edge after graduation.⁷

Since considering Ong in the context of AI during my Arezzo course, I have attempted to put into practice the teaching of tertiary orality in a few different domains. The first of these is oral defenses.⁸ Ten years ago, I remember discussions with my colleagues and graduate students about why we still did oral defenses in graduate school. They seemed like an unnecessary vestigial holdover of times past, and possibly a bit cruel. Students didn't really know whether they were presentations of completed research or markers of in-process learning, and the examiners didn't really know how hard to push students in public. Of all the awful hurdles of the graduate school process, the oral defense surely caused graduate students the most anxiety. But through my reading of Ong, I began to understand that the anxiety of the oral defense was linked to the fact that we had stopped developing oratorical mastery in students in lieu of advanced skills in writing.

And so in Fall 2025, I tried implementing a new, lower-stakes oral defense as part of a mid-course assessment in the graduate "Foundations of Social Thought" class I've taught for years. Instead of asking students to write a few midstream short papers to check for unit-wide understanding, I instead asked for a detailed outline (with quotations from the readings). I then conducted oral defenses where the students had to explain to me their thinking. I could check for understanding with probing questions during the conversation, and I could assign a grade immediately, via rubric, after a half-hour conversation (no more stacks of ungraded papers worrying me for weeks). The students loved the exercise; one commented, "It required you to still go through the intellectual rigor of structuring the paper and placing the readings and

theorists in context, discussing the ideas without taking an excessive amount of editing/drafting/etc.” (course evaluation, December 23, 2025). This type of oral defense for assessment worked well for a small graduate seminar.

In my larger lecture class in Spring 2026, I started reading aloud to my freshman from the primary source texts. It was interesting to see how they responded to being read aloud to for what is probably the first time since elementary school. But I was optimistic about the technique because it guaranteed that they had “done the reading” and because robust skills in aural processing are part of a tertiary orality framework. Students didn’t praise the practice, but they didn’t complain about it in course evaluations, either.

Finally, to the extent possible, I find my teaching is increasingly focused on developing the skills of oral communication among my students. When possible, I assign presentations over papers, oral in-class responses over written ones. Like many, I no longer feel that writing is an accurate measure of their learning. I don’t know what the future of reading and writing in an age of AI might mean. But I do know that the skills of folklorists in the study of the oral tradition are newly relevant. And I know that if learning about the world and communicating that learning must move out of the written and into the oral domain in order to preserve veracity, then we should hold in mind that oral traditions are the way that human knowledge has been learned and assessed for millions of years and that written communication was perhaps only a temporary oddity in the human timeline anyway.

Conclusion

In an age defined by AI’s collapsing of textual veracity, I encourage folklorists to approach this era celebrating tertiary orality. This is not a time to mourn the text, but a time to focus on the real advantages that do exist—and have always existed—in oral modalities. Educating through orality allows for checks in understanding and for a real dialogue through probing questions. It requires a focus, a presence of mind, and a “being in the moment” that is surely needed as the speed of everything moves past the point of comprehension. It is a learning that is fundamentally social, not individual, and so the learning process is an all-encompassing social experience. This social nature of learning has implications both for how well something is learned and for the transferability of that learning outside the classroom. And as every critic of writing has pointed out from Plato to the printing press, orality strengthens the memory and the mind in ways that a dependence on textuality just cannot. The widespread mastery of oral communication by an educated population is a potentially unexpected gift of AI, and folklorists are well positioned to lead the way to a new era of tertiary orality.

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¹ And certainly, Ong's work on orality as it was extended by his mentor Marshall McLuhan (of "the media is the message" fame) problematically dwelled in fantasies of the "Global Village" (McLuhan [1964] 2001; Hagood 2026).

² Numerous folklorists have also noted these textual features as markers of orality. Some of the most well-known of these studies include Finnegan 1977, Foley 1990, Gray 1971.

³ And I certainly do not mean to imply that primary orality or primary literacy are somehow ordered on a human evolutionary framework. Even Ong is as likely to romanticize the advantages of primary orality as he is to criticize their capacity.

⁴ Co-project leaders include Hunter Heyck, Peter Froslic, and Julia Abramson.

⁵ It is possible that this funding will be restored due to the successful lawsuit by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the American Historical Association (AHA), and Modern Languages Association (MLA).

⁶ One of the critiques of Ong is that this introspective form of study is valorized as evolutionarily superior, but—as a Jesuit—he also believed that "listening is an activity closer to the divine than seeing" (Sterne 2011:218).

⁷ There are, of course, accessibility concerns in using an oral-dominant form of pedagogy. But accommodations have been developed for written communication. Presumably they could also be developed for this modality.

⁸ I am not the only professor whose teaching has increasingly adopted the oral exam as a measure of student learning in an age of AI. This trend was documented by Beth McMurtrie for *The Chronicle for Higher Education* (2026).