

The Social Practice of Digital Literacy in the Internet Age: Multimodal Composition, Information, and Collaboration

Audio Podcast Transcript

In addition to visual communication, sound is key to digital literacy. However, aural/oral communication has not had nearly the same amount of attention as visual communication in the literature. One explanation is that Gunther Kress tends to group speech and writing into the same category, setting them in opposition to visual communication, because even more so than writing, speech is governed by the logic of time. As Kress puts it in his 2005 book, listeners “depend on the ‘unfolding’, the revealing of elements one after the other to be able to make sense of the whole” (13).

In synchronous verbal communication like the oral cultures that Walter Ong describes, the unfolding is also dependent on the listeners because there is a give-and-take that requires meaning to be constructed communally. However, the advent of radio and television made asynchronous oral communication possible, which created what Ong calls “secondary orality.” In this version of orality, the give-and-take of conversation is missing—newscasters sit in the studio and broadcast to thousands of people who are listening while isolated in their individual own home. Or, in the case of this podcast, I am creating it in my home in Davis, and you are probably listening to it several months later in a different location.

It seems, then, that any discussion of orality as a feature of digital literacy requires consideration of the difference between synchronous and asynchronous communication. For Ong, the benefit of asynchronicity (which he associates with literacy) is that written words “can be eliminated, erased, changed” (103), which is not possible in synchronous exchanges because there is “no way to erase a spoken word” (103). Before secondary orality, asynchronous communication was only possible because of tools, and synchronous communication did not require any kind of tool mediation.

Digital tools today render this distinction all but irrelevant—most synchronous chat tools do not allow you to erase the words you’ve written once they’re submitted and the submission happens in rapid real time, whereas asynchronous audio or video software allows for all kinds of erasing and editing of spoken words that can alter the temporal logic of the composition. Similarly, the give-and-take traditionally reserved for face-to-face communication is now enabled via synchronous video or audio conversation, such as video chats or the telephone. And that give-and-take is not part of asynchronous audio/video communication, meaning video lectures or podcasts. The question for digital literacy, then, is the extent to which asynchronous aural/oral exchanges and tool-mediated synchronous exchanges change the way we communicate.

In her 2009 article, Cynthia Selfe sheds some light on this issue. She offers a robust history of how composition scholars and writing instructors have approached orality in the past, pointing out that we've largely undervalued the role of sound in the composition classroom. Selfe further contends that the lack of emphasis grew from English departments' attempts to separate themselves from "old-school education in oratory, which was considered increasingly less valuable as a preparation of the world of manufacturing, business, and science" (621). The result was that, in most formal education contexts, "writing and reading increasingly became separated from speech and were understood as activities to be enacted, for the most part, in silence" (625). Nevertheless, speaking and listening continued to be key activities in the composition classroom (and in most classrooms)—students listen to lectures, they talk in small groups, and they learn to develop a unique "voice" in their writing.

In the 1960s, composition scholars began to pay more attention to orality, largely motivated by Vygotsky's work, but the primary driving force behind our current interest in sound are the digital tools that bring auditory communication to the forefront. As Selfe puts it, "we cannot hope to fully understand aural or written literacy practices and values without also understanding something about digital and networked contexts for communication" (636).

The reality is that much of the communication we receive involves audio and video—this was the basis for Ong's argument about secondary orality. What's changed in the 30 years since Ong was writing is that digital tools now also provide the "means of producing and distributing communications that take advantage of multiple expressive modalities" (637), and many of those modalities privilege sound.

Andrea Lunsford argues that this new emphasis on production and distribution has created what she calls "*secondary literacy*," which she defines as "literacy that is both highly inflected by oral forms, structures, and rhythms and highly aware of itself as writing, understood as variously organized and mediated systems of signification" (2007, 7). Lunsford further explains that secondary literacy is characterized by "a looser prose style, [which is] infiltrated by visual and aural components that mirror the agility and shiftiness of language filtered through and transformed by digital technologies and that allow for, indeed demand, performance" (8).

In recent years, several composition scholars have begun more explicit explorations into particularly aural/oral modes of communication. Of particular note is Cheryl Ball and Byron Hawk's special issue of *Computers and Composition* on "Sound in/as Composition Space," which includes eight webtexts about the integration of sound into composition studies. One of the articles in that collection is by Michele Comstock and Mary Hocks, and focuses on *sonic literacy*. Comstock & Hocks describe the ways they have asked their students to incorporate sound features into course projects, emphasizing a critical understanding of how students' voices can be

effective. They contend that their students who “create and manipulate sound files, whether in the form of voice-over narration or soundtrack” tend to develop “a stronger, more embodied sense of audience,” as well as a more cognizant awareness of “the cultural power as well as limitations of text and images” (1).

The end goal, of course, is for students to consciously combine all available communicative modes to produce effective rhetoric—none of these composition scholars are advocating for aural or sonic literacy *in place of* textual or visual literacy; instead, sound should be part of the definition of digital literacy.