

How to Introduce Oral Methods To Church Leaders in Oral Cultures

By Grant Lovejoy

I use this approach when I am speaking to a group of educated pastors and/or denominational leaders who live in highly oral cultures. I learned this approach from LaNette Thompson and have shared it with others who have also found it to be effective. Avery Willis used it widely after I taught it to him.

Resources needed: chalkboard, whiteboard, flip chart, or other writing surface with chalk, marker, etc.

Procedure: You greet the group appropriately, thank them for their hospitality, and acknowledge that as a visitor you are not familiar with their culture and their traditions. But you express your desire to understand more about their culture and their traditional ways of passing along their values, beliefs, their way of life, heritage, identity, and so forth.

Ask, "How in your traditional culture do you pass along your identity, heritage, values, beliefs, and religious practices to the next generation?" Sometimes this question is too abstract, so I narrow its focus: "How do you teach a boy to be the right kind of man? How does a girl in your community learn to be a good woman who can do the things a woman needs to do and who knows what a woman is supposed to know?" In a few cases I have had to narrow the question even further in order to get the group started. I might ask, "How does a farmer teach his son to farm?" Or I may ask, "How does a girl learn to cook?" The participants then will begin naming methods they use. I (or a helper who can write the appropriate local language) step to the chalkboard, whiteboard, or whatever and on the left-hand side of it writes at the top "traditional culture." As the leaders in the meeting state how they pass along their culture, we write under that heading the things that they name. I listen as they tell me how their culture works, but if they get stuck or seem to be overlooking some common methods, I will use some additional clarifying questions to prompt them. Example: "Do you have any ceremonies by which a boy becomes a man or a girl becomes a woman?" "What methods of teaching are used in those ceremonies?" Or, "How do children grow up knowing who your people's heroes are and what makes them worthy of respect?"

Participants often name things like the following:

<p><u>Traditional Culture</u> they watch adults do it working together at a task singing songs from our culture proverbs coming-of-age ceremonies stories the elders teach the children in the evening you show them, then they do it religious ceremonies they watch the older children do it</p>		
---	--	--

It is not unusual for someone to begin giving a detailed description of how a boy learns to farm, starting with learning to dig the field properly, then how to develop a row, then how to plant, then how to hoe the weeds, and so forth. I thank them for explaining all of this to me, then ask, "As a comparison, how is teaching and learning done in the schools in your area? What does the school teacher do as his or her teaching method, and what does the teacher expect the pupils to do in order for them to learn?" I write "school" at the top of the column and then list below it the things that they name.

<p><u>Traditional Culture</u> they watch adults do it working together at a task singing songs from our culture proverbs coming-of-age ceremonies stories the elders teach the children in the evening you show them, then they do it religious ceremonies they watch the older children do it</p>	<p><u>School</u> the teacher gives lectures the students take notes written examinations the teacher has them recite students do projects sometimes students read textbooks older students may be asked to write something play games teachers write on the board</p>	
--	---	--

Once the local participants have described what happens in schools adequately, then I move to the third column, and ask the third question: "From what you understand in the Bible, what methods did Jesus use in order to teach his followers? What did he expect them to do so that they could learn to be the kind of people that he wanted them to be and to be able to do the things that they needed to be able to do?" I or an assistant write the word "Jesus" at the top of the third column and list below it whatever the group tells me about Jesus' teaching and his disciples' learning.

<p><u>Traditional Culture</u> they watch adults do it working together at a task singing songs from our culture proverbs coming-of-age ceremonies stories the elders teach the children in the evening you show them, then they do it religious ceremonies they watch the older children do it</p>	<p><u>School</u> the teacher gives lectures the students take notes written examinations the teacher calls on to recite students do projects sometimes students read textbooks older students may be asked to write something play games</p>	<p><u>Jesus</u> he modeled what he wanted them to do he taught using parables he asked them questions and dialogued with them he answered the questions that they asked him he sent them out to do ministry and then report back to him he corrected them when they made mistakes he gave them assignments, like feeding the 5000 he lectured them proverbs</p>
--	--	---

If they need help, I will again ask a few additional questions to prompt their thinking, but usually this is not necessary. Once they have completed all three columns, then I ask the group, "Which of the first two approaches is most like Jesus' approach to teaching and learning?" I give the group time to look at the three lists and think. Without fail, the majority of the group says that the method of Jesus is much closer to their traditional cultural way of passing along their heritage. Once the majority of the group acknowledges this, then I ask, "If the way that Jesus taught is very similar to the way that your culture already knows well and has used to transmit its heritage successfully for many generations, can we agree that this is a good method to teach people in your culture how to be good followers of Jesus?"

Note well: In this presentation I say *nothing whatsoever* about literacy or illiteracy, or even education levels. We have learned through unfortunate experience that talking about oral methods as being well suited to the needs of illiterate or uneducated people is unwise. The approach outlined above is superior by far. Occasionally a local leader will look at the three columns and exclaim, "The method Jesus used would also work with illiterates." To that response, I simply say, "You are right. Everyone can learn with Jesus' methods." That's all I say about literacy or illiteracy. Highly-educated members of oral cultures often retain the teaching methods of oral culture. If, however, we leave the erroneous impression that oral methods of instruction are only for illiterate or functionally-illiterate persons, we thereby stigmatize the use of oral teaching approaches that otherwise would have been familiar, popular, and effective.