

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Beyond Orality and Literacy: Reclaiming the Sensorium for Composition Studies

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In this dissertation I conduct a historical and theoretical reexamination of Walter Ong in order to explore the extent to which technology transforms consciousness. I discover within his work an understanding of literacy, technology, and humanity that can help us negotiate change without succumbing to the teleological urge to dichotomize. Technology transforms consciousness, but consciousness also transforms technology. This relational aspect of evolutionary change, which is essential to Ong's work, is often missed or misread. The misreadings obscure important concepts in Ong's work that can help us negotiate questions that occupy our own present and near-future.

How do we teach writing in the presence of technology? What is literacy becoming and how can we understand the increasing multiplicity? Are our students being transformed by the latest technologies? Ong's work offers answers in a somewhat unexpected way. Rather than continuing or redefining the orality, literacy, secondary orality continuum, I demonstrate that Ong's work is grounded in more relevant concepts that should no longer be overlooked. A deeper understanding of "the word," "interior," and "presence" leads to the revelation that understanding "noetic economy" and "sensorium" not only clarifies Ong's work, but also offers

tools for transforming pedagogy, understanding literacies, and advancing historical understandings.

Ong's work is an enactment of scholarship within the sensorium. That enactment was somewhat unconscious; he did not always articulate the interaction of aural, oral, visual, kinesthetic, olfactory, and tactile, but merely referred to the human sensorium to explain the interactions of the physical and intellectual aspects of human existence. This recovery of Ong's work demonstrates our need for conscious enactment of the sensorium.

One such enactment includes rereading Alexander Bain, who failed to respond to the shifts in the human sensorium occurring alongside developments in writing technologies. Changes in the noetic economy shifted invention away from oral and memory-based composition towards visual and kinesthetically-enacted shaping and revising of ideas. Bain's assumption that ideas come fully formed from the mind, shared with his students, became reified in current traditional pedagogy. Enacting the sensorium offers us an opportunity to avoid passing on problematic pedagogy to our own students.