

Comparing and contrasting oral and literate societies¹

	ORAL	LITERATE
	"The Great Tradition" – hunter-gatherer, pastoral and agricultural. Concerned with duration in time	"The Little Tradition" = 1/400 th of known human history. Enabled for extension in space and time
	Intimate, closed/exclusive (family, clan, tribe), obligatory, tradition-governed relatively ethnically and racially homogeneous community (<i>gemeinschaft</i>)	Distanced, formalized & impersonal social relations, bureaucratized, rationalized, individualized, relatively open and elective society (<i>gesellschaft</i>)
	Hot exchange of gifts in a relatively cool social and economic process – barter, raiding, dramatized market and gift exchanges	Cool exchange of commodities in an hot economy and social process – with increasing intensification markets, finance, the price and monetary systems
	Space is bounded incorporating both sacred and profane locations; home or source to various faculties or powers that must be accommodated, worked-with, and/or propitiated	Space perceived as quantifiable extension, abstract and devoid of any but instrumentalist affordances, qualities and values, individual ownership among them
	Space conceived as the "ground of being," and the "common," or commonly "owned." Idea of individual ownership of space uncommon	High premium is placed on control of space and things
	Time is cyclical or recursive, non-uniform and punctuated with public ritualized observance of seasonal and natural cycles and phenomena	Time is quanta, uniform, spatialized, and instrumental for command and control of process and production
	Natural environment experienced as resonant, acoustic, enchanted, and a largely bounded, animate and sentient surround	Natural environment experienced as "standing reserve" for enterprise or its rewards; environment is inanimate, calculable and exploitable for profit
	World experienced through an array of negative feedback (restraint) loops: myth, ritual, minimal technologies, rigid hierarchies, limited resources; suspicious of novelty; conservativist, and homeostatic	World experienced through predominantly positive feedback loops derived from science, technology, progressivist and progress ideologies, hegemony of change and the "new and improved," mass production of cultures;

¹ The chart is an abstraction – that is to say, it posits categories for explanatory purposes that may need serious surgery when taken out into the global "anthropological record." Secondly, but of equal importance, the schema violates historical chronologies as some of the content of the Literate column is more in line with a hyper-mediated techno-culture and media ecology such as ours, than the media circumstances of, say, the Renaissance (scribal) or Reformation (typographic). These limitations, however, need not prevent us from schematizing the various related accounts of pre-literate and literate societies to provide a rough or survey-base to begin correcting, but also to guide inquiry. The contents of the schema have been pilfered variously from G. Simmel, M. Weber, M. Heidegger, C. Levi-Strauss, R. Babe, J. D. Peters, W. Ong, E. Havelock, W. Leiss, H. A. Innis & M. McLuhan, among others.

		expansionist
	Low tolerance for deviance and Otherness – xenophobic, if not hostile to strangers; neighbouring is problematic	High tolerance for difference if it can be mobilized for benefit; neighbouring is possibility for advantage and benefit through trade, alliance or acquisition/conquest
	Little individuation (identifiable “authorship”), specialization; widespread and publicly accessible store of craft-knowledge; meaning is public	Intensified individuation, extensive specialization, little craft knowledge or mainly accessible through “monopolies of knowledge,” meaning is private
	Speech is in real time, programmatic, formulaic, and – as evidence of credibility and wisdom – drawing from the mnemonic archive of <i>epea</i> (proverbs, sayings, stories, aphorisms, songs, legends and aphorisms) of the given culture – poetry	Dependant on specialized and professional education, extra-somatic knowledge archives, and favouring a CBS style – “characterized by clarity, brevity and sincerity” – prose
	Meaning of expression is integrated within the lived and immediate context; truth emerges from common-sense reference to lived experience.	Concerned with text as source of meaning; logical, supported or coherent argument; provides techniques for discovery and extraction of truth
	Learning dependent on presence of those who know, and can show and tell	Learning dependent on instruction in skills of access to extra somatic mnemonic technologies; technique and texts
	Resistant, or slow, to change; rooted in the sacred and ritual, imitative of the Book of Nature	Eager and facilitating for change; secular in concerns, materialist in interpretations, and oriented to the domination and control of Nature.
	Dependent on reassembling the extant tool kit to adapt to new needs and opportunities than to create new tools or approaches – <i>bricolage</i>	Enabled by science and technology as tools for invention, invention of new processes and technologies to maximize on opportunities and threats
	Can be rigid to the point of boredom and decay	Can be expansionist to point of over-extension, un-sustainability, ennui, and decadence
	Mask and vertigo	Agon and chance