The Role of Rhetoric: Ong’s Ramus Research as a Hermeneutic Opening for Mediated Communication

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THE ROLE OF RHETORIC: ONG’S RAMUS RESEARCH AS A HERMENEUTIC
OPENING FOR MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

A Dissertation
Submitted to The McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Melinda L. Farrington

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OPENING FOR MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF RHETORIC: ONG’S RAMUS RESEARCH AS A HERMENEUTIC OPENING FOR MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

By

Melinda L. Farrington

December 2016

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Calvin Troup

This project examines Walter Ong’s scholarship and further situates Ong in the field of media ecology. Ong’s conceptions of mediated communication begin to take form in his early-career graduate research on Peter Ramus. While Ong’s scholarship on secondary orality, and orality and literacy generally has an optimistic tone, this project seeks to further understand how Ong frames his optimistic perspective on mediated communication by looking at his scholarship across his career.

Beginning with Ong’s dissertation project, Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue and his related research we see thematic ideas that appear in his work throughout his career. Something that stands out is Ong’s deep affinity for rhetoric. What we learn from Ong’s Ramus research is how deeply Ramus’ system of organizing knowledge affected the practice and perception of rhetoric.
The present project begins with Ramus in the rhetorical tradition and examines Ramus’ interest in creating a system for dialectic that limited probability while also attempting to ensure rhetoric retained practical application. Next, I look at Ong’s research on Ramus. He wrote on the spread of Ramism, how it affected university pedagogy, how it influenced vernacular education. On shows how the role of rhetoric was influenced by Ramism, resulting in a divergence of rhetoric and logic.

After understanding some of the origins of Ong’s interests, we can see that he continues to explore the related ideas of system, method and mediation throughout his career seeking the opportunity to reconcile the distancing and interiority of fixed print and mediated communication. Ultimately he concludes that we have always engaged in some kind of ‘digitization’ and reinforces that rhetoric provides the opportunity for hermeneutic and deliberative engagement even within mediated communication.
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CHAPTER 1

WALTER ONG AND PETER RAMUS – HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary conversation’s about media ecology often begin with historic pivot points such as the transition from primary oral to primary written culture and the advent of the printing press. Whether it Harold Innis’ insights into the effect of the railroad system on communication, Elizabeth Eisenstein’s scholarship on the printing press, Marshal McLuhan’s understanding of media as an extension of self or Jacque Ellul’s critique of the technological world, media ecologists offer important coordinates to help us understand how technology affects human communication. Walter Ong’s contributions to media ecology are also significant. Beginning with his work on Peter Ramus, Ong shepherds an examination of orality and literacy that has touched on a wide breadth of human communication. In his work he did not draw lines of demarcation between history, religion, and education. His scholarship is inherently rhetorical and irenic because he was able to attend to human communication in relation to the historical, political, educational and rhetorical moment.

If we consider the volume of Ong’s work on Ramus, including the many different angles from which he looked examined the work and impact of Peter Ramus, we see that Ong’s approach is forensic in nature. His early published work (prior to the publication of Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue) touches on the Renaissance mind, early English literature, the American mind and Americanism, critical theory, scholastic religious teaching, on the emergence of the female voice and character in early English literature, Medieval science,
Out of these varied interests, why then such an in-depth study on Ramus? Why the catalogue of Ramus’ work? Ong (1958) begins his answer in the very first sentence of Ramus, “Within the past two decades, students of literary and intellectual history have become increasingly conscious of the presence in the Renaissance of a definite set of philosophical and literary attitudes derived from the Paris arts professor, Pierre de la Ramee or Peter (Petrus) Ramus” (p. 3). Ong is not the only one to pose this question. Just a few decades earlier, Frank Graves wrote in his preface to his popular work Peter Ramus and the Educational Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, “It is difficult to understand why Ramus has been so much neglected by writers upon the sixteenth century. He was probably the foremost French philosopher of his century, and he stands well among the great educators, effective orators, and lofty characters of the world’s history...Alcuin, Abelard, Petrarch Valla, Erasmus, Luther, Ramus, and Descartes are milestones that mark the pathway of progress from medievalism” (Graves, 2016).

Ong seeks the reasons why the impact of Ramus’ work was so profound. Imagine Ong as a young priest and scholar, seeing mention of Ramus in Renaissance literature in France, Germany, Italy and England. According to Thomas J. Farrell (2002),

Ong undertook his massive study of Ramus and Ramism because of points that had surfaced in various works of scholarship earlier . . . At the time when Ong undertook his study, literally nobody knew what to make of the material about Ramus and his influence...the territory was unexplored. (p. 11)

Mention of Ramus in academic journals must have seemed somewhat insidious to a student of English with a background in Latin and philosophy, especially when mentions of
Ramus veered from logic and mathematics and into Renaissance and early modern literature. Farrell draws our attention to three expectations that may have been at play in Ong’s choice to pursue Ramus for his dissertation project. First, the influence of Marshall McLuhan, one of Ong’s professors at St. Louis University, and specifically McLuhan’s attentiveness to the history of training in rhetoric” (Farrell & Soukup, 2002, p. 12). Second, Maurice B. McNamee, another Jesuit graduate student at St. Louis University, undertook “his doctoral dissertation on the tradition of learning as reflected in the writings of Francis Bacon” (Farrell & Soukup, 2002, p. 12). Third, Ong demonstrates a clear interest in the history of “intellectual developments in Western culture” (Farrell & Soukup, 2002, p. 13). Farrell (2002) points us to Ong’s introduction to Interfaces of the Word (p. 19). In the introduction Ong (1977) states, “major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state” (p. 9).

What Ong finds is a layered answer to the question of understanding the origins of the work of Peter Ramus that raised further questions he ended up exploring throughout his career. Adrian Johns (2004), in his forward to Ramus explained that Ramism, considered as a “cultural phenomenon”, offers us the opportunity to learn about “the relation between the practice of thinking itself, on the one hand, and, on the other, the forms or media, by means of which thought is articulated, communicated, and preserved” (pp. v-vi).

Ong’s scholarship after the Ramus project can be seen as a response to the unintended consequences of the impact of Ramist method. Ramist method is just that, a method, and a reductive one at that, of human understanding which was then carried on a wave of technological transmission through printing which allowed it to take hold throughout the Renaissance because
of its simplicity of structure. Ramus’ response to his era, specifically to scholasticism and Aristotelianism, was to codify and simplify.

Ong is deeply interested in the transition from primary oral to primary literate culture and how this affected human consciousness. Calling to the fore the static nature of the written and printed word and how human interaction is affected is one of several reasons why Ong’s work is part of the media ecology conversation. Throughout his career, Ong builds upon what he uncovers through the Ramus project and delved more deeply into the effects of literacy (Orality and Literacy), the relationship of ‘the word’ to sound (The Presence of the Word), the nature of consciousness (Interfaces of the Word), the history of rhetoric (Rhetoric, Romance and Technology), and the influence of modes of communication on our human life (The Barbarian Within). Ong helps us understand how Ramism influenced, and continues to influence, how people think and how Ramist method helped set the stage for modernity. He looks at various writers and traces the influence of Ramus within those writings including Hobbes, Milton, Newton, and the Puritan tradition in America (Walsh, 2006). The Ramus project proves incredibly fruitful for Ong and it can continue to be fruitful today because, in addition to opening up Ong’s intellectual approach, it also helps us to learn about an important historical transition for rhetoric.

Ong shows us that “the mid-twentieth century first turned to the history of rhetoric because the rhetorical tradition enfolded a lifestyle so different from the one in which modern technological man operates” (1971, p. viii). Ong is able to look at the 20th century in a self-reflective way, tracing the genealogy of the modern mind to its sources in the Middle Ages. Ong’s project is not prescriptive. He seeks to understand the present as borne out of the past.
Ong’s hermeneutic invites the extension of his work to further understanding of the modern mind and possible further implications of Ramism.

We know that Ong writes extensively on orality and literacy but this interest is preceded by his research on Ramus and the implications of method as borne out in the university classroom and through learned Latin as the language of the literate. Ramism was a reaction to the scholastic university classroom and was designed for university Latin. While Ramist method was widely distributed because of the printing press, it took hold because it began to be translated into languages other than Latin, native languages, mother tongue, vernacular (Ong, 1953, 1958, 1960, 1977, 1988). Ramist method was created within strict boundaries of scholarly language and classroom technique and seeped into native languages not typically written, languages without significant grammatical rules.

While Ong’s work on Ramus helps to sharpen our focus on the transitions from orality to literacy it also creates an opening for understanding the implications of Ramist method in terms of Ong’s perspective on mediated communication. This project is an examination of Ong’s response to Ramist method as a launching pad for further pursuit of the understanding how Ong considers mediated communication and for how Ong values the role of rhetoric (1953, 1961a, 1974).

Ong (1961a) and others note that Peter Ramus’ work was widely replicated and widely cited in works on writing and classroom technique, (French, 1949; Jost, 1991; Murphy, 1967; Walton, 1970a). Much of Ramus’ work was devoted to methodizing logical structures, mapping a path to human understanding that was highly visual, (Goulding, 2006; Howell, 1951; Ong 1953, 1958, 1961). Ong’s work highlights the visual nature of Ramist method and is related to his work on the nature of literacy and the fixity of the printed word.
Communication technology, orality, literacy and the visual were topics of interest to scholars in the early and mid-20th Century who were also researching and teaching during an historical period that was responding to an expansion of communication technology, new theories of human consciousness and who were perhaps reacting against a trend toward scientism and structuralism.

However, while Ong sees that Ramus was overzealous and that his method overly simplified, and while he sought to understand the causes and effects of literacy, he also leaves the opportunity to explore the unintended consequences of the oral remnants of a literate culture.

Ong’s study of Ramus can help us to better understand how a method, or system, still allows us the opportunity for noetic connection. Ong’s work includes both cautions us against unthinking acceptance of human communication as primary literate while it also seeks to understand how mediated communication can allow for deep human connection and understanding. He devoted himself to understanding the history of orality on literacy and the effects of literacy on human consciousness.

In beginning this project by looking at Ong looking at Ramus, we can unpack some of the unintended consequences of literacy and Ramist method that affected both education and the role of rhetoric. This project will seek to understand Ong’s critique of Ramus’ work and pursue Ong’s thinking to understanding the influence of the visual and literacy on the ascendency of vernacular education, and literature.

The greater project seeks to begin situating Ong’s work with Ramus; it may not be surprising to learn that there are identifiable similarities in the historic moments of both men. While Ong originally frames his dissertation project to seek the source of the popularity of Ramist method, his research ultimately opens up avenues of scholarly inquiry that he explores
throughout his career. To see Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue as an historic study is to exit just as the story is beginning. Ong synthesizes the complex factors that set the stage for the popularity of Ramism in relation to the concerns and trends of his own historic moment.

Consider that classical rhetoric was resurging in popularity in the early 20th century. Add to that a communication landscape influenced by a structural approach to communication that was diagrammatic and highly visual in nature as developed by Toulmin, Saussure and others. Then consider that the nature of the western university system was under attack by a tide of social and political changes. As Ong conducted his research on Ramus, historical similarities to education and rhetoric in the 16th century must have quickly become apparent.

While there are circumstantial similarities between these two centuries, Ong and Ramus did not share similar objectives. Ramus worked in reaction to his time, prescribing a technique to solve that which he found problematic, namely the scholastics and university education in general. In contrast, Ong works rhetorically and responsively, deeply attentive to how his historic moment had grown out of the past, absorbing both Ramus’ technical response and the consequences of other historic elements. We can see how understanding Ramus in the context of the 16th century informs Ong’s scholarship and we can leverage this work to further propel our own understanding of mediated communication and the rhetoric of technology in the 21st century. By studying Ramus in historical and cultural context, Ong is able to see important implications, namely the permanent shift from primary oral to primary literate culture. Ong shows us that this shift was far more complex than the matter of a printing press or a teaching method.

Ramus’ work was a reaction to the status of rhetoric, which he then developed into a technique that became highly influential. Ramus responded to how rhetoric was manipulated by
the humanists and the scholastics to suit their respective purposes. He then proceeded to develop a system of logic that addressed his concerns, countered Aristotle, and addressed abstraction from reality, for which he critiqued the scholastics. Finally he developed his own system of teaching. The early and mid-20th century faced some very similar circumstances.

Peter Ramus lived and worked when there was great upheaval in the Christian church, in university education and, at a time when the printing press was starting to have a substantive impact on the portability of the written word. Walter Ong was educated in both seminary and the American university system during an era of great economic prosperity, tremendous technological advances and social change. A Jesuit priest researching the reforming teachings of a Calvinist martyr who lived during the Middle Ages does not, at the surface, seem to be a surprising undertaking. Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue was an extensive study of the life and works of Peter Ramus.

Beginning with communication technology, there were significant and influential inventions during both men’s lives. Consider the printing press and the explosion of small printing houses throughout Europe that followed closely on the heels of Guttenberg’s invention that opened up the opportunity for the wide distribution of treatises, books, and scientific knowledge made possible by the mass production of the written word (Eisenstein, 1979; Havelock, 1982). Similarly, during Ong’s lifetime there was widespread installation of telephones in homes, the advent of television, computer technology, the internet and mobile telephone technology, (Farrell & Soukup, 2002). Scholars have studied extensively the change that the printing press has wrought on western civilization (Eisenstein, 1979; Havelock, 1982; Innis, 2007; McLuhan, 2003; Ong, 1958) and many point to the printing press as one of the factors that lead to the wide distribution of the work of Peter Ramus (French, 1949; Goulding,
While we are still in early decades of personal technologies such as computers and mobile smart devices, Ong and many 20th and 21st century scholars are sensitive to the effect of communication technologies on human communication.

Next, during the lifetimes of both men, teaching communication focused on students learning structural formulas for success in argumentation. The whole nature of the university classroom was in flux during the 16th and 20th centuries. Ramus is remembered because his method was a reform of how dialectic and rhetoric were taught. Ramus revolutionized the educational method, (Goulding, 2006; Graves, 2016; Jost, 1991; Ong, 1961a, 1974). Ong (1960, 1967, 1974, 1975) also concerns himself with university education and the “Knowledge explosion” of the 20th Century as well as Latin fading into obscurity as the language of the learned, the change in the agonistic classroom, the nature of audience and the influence of communication technology, (1960, 1967, 1974, 1975).

Third, is the re-emergence of classical rhetoric during both the 15th and the 20th centuries. It could be said that the study and use of rhetoric had run somewhat amok in the centuries prior to each man’s life. Ironically, due in part to the widespread use of Ramist technique well into the 16th and 17th centuries, classical rhetoric fell out of popularity after Ramus and prior to the 20th century in favor of a system of techniques of writing and speaking that can be traced to Ramist method, (Duhamel, 1949; Ong, 1958; Welch, 1987). Ong’s graduate years occurred on the heels of the logical positivism and structuralist movements. While Ong’s work on teaching English came after his work on Ramus, the historical moment at which he entered the classroom was post World War II and the start of the American Cultural Revolution. He was acutely attentive,
throughout his career, to the effects of literacy and the resulting interiority on human communication.

Finally, there is insight to be gained by looking the additional influences such as education moving away from Latin and toward vernacular and the role of women as influencers. Ramus work expressed frustration with the overly technical nature of scholastic teaching, he strived to help students represent lived experience, what he described as the best starting point for understanding, and proceeded from there to diagram aids for students to move from understanding to persuading (Ong, 1958). Ong (1988) deals extensively with the visual and the transition from primary oral and primary literate culture. Learned Latin is a language of few. Ramus’ method would not be so widespread if his work had not been translated into vernacular languages.

The next sections will highlight some of these four themes, but it must be pointed out these themes are not easily extracted out of historical, political, religious, social or educational situations. They existed together and overlapped, affected and influenced one another. In looking at these themes together, we can begin to understand Ong’s work as response to both Ramism and to the perspective Ramus took in his work. Ramus and Ong share historical moments where classroom techniques and the nature of rhetoric were evolving and being explored. Both teach during times when classroom pedagogy was changing. Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue sets the stage for much of Ong’s later work and continues, as Farrell pointed out, to offer opportunities to expand on some of Ong’s groundwork.

A further exploration of Ramist influence in the western rhetorical tradition will be undertaken in the next chapter.
The Background of Walter Ong’s Research on Peter Ramus

Walter Ong was born in 1912 and grew up in Kansas City, Missouri (Farrell, 2000, p. 6). One of two sons born to his parents, the Ong boys were expected to succeed at whatever they chose to pursue and were encouraged to pursue that which interested them (Farrell, Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology and I-Thou Communication, 2000, p. 35). Fr. Ong was active in athletics throughout his school years (Farrell, 2000, p. 36). He attended Rockhurst College in Kansas City, graduating in 1933 with an A.B. (Farrell, 2000, p. 37). He majored in classics but also studied a great deal of English and philosophy (Farrell, 2000, p. 37). Two years after graduation, Ong entered the Society of Jesus. Thomas Farrell (2000) asked Ong about the decision to become a priest and in a personal response to Farrell, Father Ong wrote that he had never known people more concerned with and understanding of others than priests (p. 37). “It was clear their understanding concern for others was tied to their commitment to God through Jesus Christ” (Farrell, 2000, p. 37).

Walter Ong’s interests were broad and remained so throughout his life, from serving as the editor of his school newspaper, to playing the organ, to teaching at an inner-city boy’s school at the height of his scholarly life, to trout fishing (Farrell, 2000, p. 7). We can see a similar breadth of interests in Ong the scholar. A quick review of Walsh’s Ong Bibliography illustrates the breadth and depth of his interests (Walsh, 2006). As a Boy Scout, Ong wrote travelogues (Walsh, 2006, pp. 8-9). He also wrote poetry, he wrote on Catholic life, literature, rhetoric, philology, culture, education, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Darwinism, symbolism, literary criticism, media, technology, and oral culture, to name some of his interests (Walsh, 2006).

Ong began his research on Peter Ramus during a time of renewed interest in the roots of the western rhetorical tradition. At this time, Peter Ramus’ method was being explored for its
influences on Renaissance literature and even early American Puritan ideology. For example, 20th century scholars studying Milton would read Milton’s own credit to Ramus being the “best writer on the art of logic” (French, 1949, p. 84). Also early in the 20th century Ramism was beginning to be identified as a “cultural phenomenon” (Johns, 2004, p. i). The re-emergence of interest in Peter Ramus in the 20th Century was certainly in the intellectual air at the time that Walter Ong (1958) began his graduate work and grew out of the contemporary scholarship of the time that focused on the “philosophical and literary attitudes derived from...Ramus” (p. 3).

Ong was encouraged to explore Peter Ramus by his professor Marshall McLuhan, then at St. Louis University where Ong was studying, (Johns, 2004, p. x). He would have also been in contact with the recently published works by S.E. Morison and Perry Miller’s The New England Mind, both of which dealt with the influences of Ramism (Johns, 2004, p. x; Farrell & Soukup, 2002, p. 11). McLuhan encouraged Ong to go study where he could immerse himself in the New England mind so he went to Harvard where he earned his Ph.D. in English and began research for Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue as well as the Ramus and Talon Inventory (Johns, 2004, p. x). Adrian Johns (2004), in his introduction to Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue explains that Ong was also highly influential on Marshall McLuhan, noting that McLuhan’s idea that media reconfigured the senses is, according to Johns, drawn from Ong as well as the notion of typographic man (p. xi). As Farrell (2002) points out, Ong “had acquired certain competencies that equipped him well for this undertaking” (p. 11) including knowledge of the history of rhetoric and philosophy. His studies in philosophy and theology were conducted in Latin; the exams for these courses were oral and also conducted in Latin.

While orality and literacy tend to be what we most readily recollect of Walter Ong’s scholarship, his education was grounded in traditions of the church and scholarship in American
literature and classical rhetoric. Throughout his life, he never lost sight of literacy and language as always evolving. As we know, human communication and literacy remained major themes for Ong throughout his career beginning with the *Presence of the Word*, continuing with *Orality and Literacy, Rhetoric, Romance and Technology* and a wealth of articles on rhetoric and cultural history. Ong’s doctoral study of Peter Ramus is an important, layered exploration of the reverberations still felt today of the influence of a personally unpopular logician who’s primary job was to teach middle-school boys about argumentation.

In his scholarship, Ong responded to the present by understanding it in terms of its historic trajectory. We can follow the model of Ong’s responsive understanding of orality and literacy to both avoid the pitfalls of a Ramus-like prescription and develop further understanding of human communication and the rhetoric of technology.

Walter Ong wrote in 1960 that because “the teacher’s work involves him in a constant interior dialogue with the past, the present, and the future . . . he has to raid the past for what it has to tell him. With his students, he puts out feelers into the future to orient his knowledge effectively” (p. 245). Consequently, he argued, teachers are more sensitive to changes in communication processes, (Ong, p. 245). By looking at the social, intellectual and historical landscape at the time of Ong’s research on Ramus, we can enhance our own dialogue with the past in relation to our present and future.

**Communication and Technology in the 16th and 20th Centuries**

Walter Ong, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Lewis Mumford, Brian Stock and others deal extensively with the layered nature of the effects of technologies on human civilization. The printing press, for example, as one of the most significant inventions in human history, was situated within an historic moment and amongst an
intellectual landscape that helped drive changes to the fabric of human communication. The implications of printing and mass distribution are important influences behind the popularity and distribution of the work of Peter Ramus. But in tandem with the mechanical means of reproducing written works is perhaps the more important notion of diagramming logical forms developed first as a static visual on a page then as used in oral disputation (Ong, 1958, 1961a; Howell, 1951). This notion of diagramming is a communication technology that Ong has helped us to understand as a vital part of the popularity of Ramist method. While the following chapter deals more extensively with Ramus’ work and influence, it is important to note here that Ramism included visual methods of demonstrating logical forms. As Farrell (2002) suggests, while the printing press provided transport, “Ong correctly notes that such arrays of branching dichotomies can be found in manuscripts that were composed before the printing press was invented” (p. 14).

Ramus took up diagramming in order to forward his objective that “the liberal disciplines should exist as separate entities – as departments rigidly defined and jealously divided from one another” (Howell, 1951, p. 300). He thought that invention and disposition should be their own disciplines and not taught within both areas of rhetoric and dialectic, not because he felt that rhetoric and dialectic were so distinct from one another but because they should not overlap in subject matter (Howell, 1951, pp. 300-301). In so doing, Ramus elevated his commitment to method to such a degree that he believed he was serving rhetoric and dialectic by separating them into a methodology that was simple enough for a school-boy to understand in addition to being visual in nature (Hildebrandt, 1988, p. 11-12; Ong W., 1958, p. 245; Troup, 2015).

Ramus’ objective was to develop a framework of refining the processes found in nature that helps students to understand the properties of these processes, whether in dialectic, physics, rhetoric, etc. (Ong, 1958, p. 180). Ultimately these processes could be demonstrated through
visual diagrams. The natural process of dialectic “in general...stands related to the art of dialectic as the ‘truth of nature’ (veritas naturae) to the ‘truth of art’ (veritas artis)” (Ong, 1958, p. 180). This truth can be gotten at through geometric diagrams to serve as a ‘picture’ of reality (Ong, 1958, pp. 180, 181). The demonstration was necessary, to Ramus, because otherwise the interpretation of texts, poetry, philosophy and persuasion are open to interpretation (Ong, 1958, p. 190). Ramus wanted to manage the uncertainties of interpretation.

Ramus believed in developing exercises to both aid interpretation and in training in dialectic (Ong, 1958, pp. 191-2). University students of the Middle Ages would follow a procedure that was “simple and invariable: faced with the text, one asks, What is the question? And, the question determined, What is the argument? and so on from start to finish of the discourse in hand. In do so, one discovers that the great vice of all discourse is ambiguity” (Ong, 1958, p. 191). Training in dialectic was the most important of the arts, as Ramus defined it, “Dialectic seeks to establish the all-round strength of human reason in the discovering and disposing of matter” (Ong, 1953, p. 191).

With such a great focus on developing diagrams comes another shift human communication that has to do with the technology of writing. That is, the shift from writing as record of speech to writing as preparation for speech. This was a significant change that must have been forcibly apparent to Ong as he considered the enormous changes in communication technology during his own lifetime. Ramus, we know, favored written exercises in his classroom. (1961a, p. 39).

While the technology of writing was certainly not new, the order of teaching and learning from writing to speech was. Ramus meticulously divided his classroom exercises into analysis and composition (Ong, 1961, p. 39). What was important was that, from Ramus’ perspective,
knowledge was there for our reason to grasp. We could gain knowledge through the practice of Ramist analysis in which a student would map his way to any [answer] by diagramming his way to the discovery and disposition of whatever is being studied (Duhamel, 1949, p. 163). Ramus’ objective was to simplify and to clarify in order that students may achieve the fundamental operations of dialectic, (Duhamel, 1949, p. 163).

These ‘technologies’, of diagramming and learning from writing to aid speech rather than writing as a documentation of speech, were profound changes to the order of teaching and learning in the European university system, so influential that they have remained in place in universities since the Guttenberg era. The study of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic also remained a constant in school and university classrooms into the 20th Century (Ong, 1960, p. 245).

Knowing that Ong maintains an interest in this transition in the priority and practice of the written word throughout his life, his work is also continually reinforced by his ongoing reflection of understanding the present as informed by the past and by looking ahead to the future. Much of Ong’s work, and the work of other 20th Century communication scholars, in the decades following Ramus explored the effect of writing and other communication technologies on human communication. When we consider the veritable explosion of communication technologies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries from telegraph to radio to photography, telephone and television, Ong’s Ramus project becomes a reflection on contemporary human communication in relation to the historic habits of and changes in communication technology. Neil Postman (1992) points out that about 200 years elapsed between the printing press and the onset of additional significant communication technology, (p. 65).

Ong is one of many scholars interested in the implications of technology on human communication. Ong and other contemporary scholars such as Jacques Ellul, M.M. Bakhtin, Neil
Postman and Marshall McLuhan are deeply committed to orality and the spoken word. Ellul’s response to wide spread introduction of technologies such as television and radio is to call them interfering noise that locked us into a relationship with a static visual world (Ellul, 1985, pp. 9, 31, 35, 37). McLuhan’s (1962) response is to point out the extension that media offered and the individualizing effect of the printing press. Postman (1992) points out the loss of moral, theological and cultural resting places due to ‘technopoly’s’ unpurposeful technology for technology’s sake. McLuhan (1962) and Ellul (1985) shared a continued concern with communication technology in the sense of mediating reality as a corporatization of our existence, Ellul with his idea of la technique and McLuhan who pointed out seeming obsolescence of individualism. These perspectives remain important areas of study for media ecologists and communication scholars.

Ong shares these concerns but with a sense of “evolutionary optimism” (Troup, 2015). He searches the past for clues to the present, interpreted radio, television, public address systems, dictaphones, etc. of the mid-20th century and finds them to be more about the aural than the visual, (Ong, 1988). He thinks that the move to more oral means of communication through radio, in fact, leads to “an increasing aural dominance” pointing out that even television has only a limited visual quality, (Ong, 1960, p. 248). His study is reflective. In his introduction to Orality and Literacy, Ong (1988) says, “knowledge of orality-literacy contrasts and relationships does not normally generate impassioned allegiances to theories but rather encourages reflection on aspects of the human condition far too numerous to ever be fully enumerated” (pp. 1-2). His interest in the oral remnants and aural quality of communication technology may seem counter-intuitive given the highly visual nature of a literate culture and the wealth of communication technologies that emerged during his lifetime.
Ong (1960, 1972) seems fascinated by the technological innovations of the 20th century and the increasing focus on “interpersonal” and “group” communication.

Unlike other contributors the field of media ecology, Ong (1972) points out that new media and changes in technology do not, in fact, eliminate previous technologies but rather reinforce the old, (p. 405). This comes in part, according to Ong (1960), because in the mid-20th Century we were moving beyond “typographical civilization” (p. 246). Ong’s reflective approach points not just to the aural nature of communication technology, but ever attentive to the cultural implications of these changes, Ong also makes note of the influence of technology and Ramus method on education. Beginning with his study of Ramus, Ong understands that the technology informs the educational system and, in turn, that the educational system supports the technology in a symbiotic evolution.

Changes in Education

Even his contemporaries knew Ramus as an educational reformer. Walter Ong (1961) describes Ramus’ educational reform as, “institutional organization on the one hand and curriculum and classroom procedure” (p. 36), on the other. The phrase “‘Ramist Method’ encompasses not only the method of dialectic but also the overarching program of study and was developed purposefully to “enable students to become perfect philosophers by the time they are 15” (Ong, 1961, p. 38).

University educators in the 15th century grappled with dynamic tension between scholasticism and emerging humanism with strong critiques of both coming from the opposite camp (Longwell, 1928; Murphy, 1967; Nauert, 1998; Ong, 1958; Perreiah, 1982; Rummel, 1992). The unarticulated question of the era was “is dialectic about logic or about persuasion?” Ramus sought to bring resolution to this question based on his own beliefs and priorities.
Ultimately, Ramist method was deeply influential in the orientation of teaching and learning as well as the orientation of dialectic and rhetoric. While he was at heart a logician, Ramus joined the humanist critique of the scholastics but his perspective cannot be considered fully humanist\(^1\). Humanists focused on persuasion. Scholastics focused on establishing verity through the techniques of logic. Humanists were more concerned with how persuasive an argument was rather than its formal validity (Goulding, 2006, p. 64).

In order to understand Ramus’ influence on curriculum and education, it is necessary to elaborate further on Ramus’ teaching agenda. Ramus was concerned with establishing an efficient means of teaching dialectic by working from the universal to the particular, (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). He believed his method would lead to knowledge that was already readily available to the mind. He divided argumentation into three segments “nature, doctrine and exercise” (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). Robert Goulding (2006) explains that to Ramus, “The natural workings of the mind seemed the most significant element (in dialectic). Doctrine was nothing more than a record of natural reasoning; in importance it paled next to nature and practice” (p. 64). With this approach Ramus married his logician’s heart to the rhetorician’s grounding in our everyday communicative world. He method was in essence a critique of the abstract logic of the Scholastics that functioned outside of everyday life, nature and practice. His method imposed a logical, and visual, framework on persuasive writing and speaking. For Ramus, “the only proper priority of theory over practice is in terms of its generative role rather than deductive axiomaticity” (Walton, 1970, p. 120).

Born out of his frustration that some sub-topics of university education were taught

\(^{1}\) Scholasticism had many elements to it and Troup (2015) points out that Ong dealt with both theological scholasticism and a liberal scholasticism. Theological scholasticism sought to use logic to reconcile the teachings of Aristotle, for example, with Christian (Catholic) thought. A more liberal form of scholasticism centered more on epistemology and psychology than with purely logical form or structure. See Ong, 1958, pp. 54-60.
across multiple subjects, Ramus was confident that his method could be applied to any subject, (Howell, 1951, p. 301). In their rhetoric course, medieval university students would learn invention, disposition, style, memory and delivery while students of dialectic would also study invention and disposition (Howell, 1951, p. 301). He “probably felt it was a waste of time to have students to learn invention and disposition twice over, one in their course on rhetoric and once in dialectic” (Howell, 1951, p. 301). Ramus’ concern was that the two arts were sharing subject matter he felt should be separated (Howell, 1951, p. 301). From here, Ramus applied his method to every other university subject applying the same kind of methodical approach, (Ong, 1961a, p. 35).

The method for rhetoric closely mirrors Ramus’ method for dialectic divided into style and delivery with style subdivided into tropes and figures and delivery into voice and gesture (Howell, 1951, p. 302). While Ramus was killed before he completed a treatise on rhetoric, his acolyte Omer Talon “reduc[ed] rhetoric to a subject matter and organization that would parallel” (Howell, 1951, p. 302) Ramus’ treaty on dialectic.

Not only did Ramus teach and develop a methodology for education, he also published multiple textbooks and “reflections on educational conditions or procedures which often proceed[ed] as wholesale attacks on [his] adversaries, real or imagined” (Ong, 1961a, p. 32). His works were “adopted and adapted” (Ong, 1961a, p. 33) with more than 1000 extant Consequently, Ramus’ was influential in developing a systematic and efficient curriculum and was proud that “he was turning out students who at the age of fifteen were already full-fledged masters of arts ‘in fact and not in name only,’” (Ong, 1961a, p. 36).

Ramus’ proposed reforms also touched on the functioning of the university itself including suggestions about the hiring and number of faculty and how they should be paid (by
the state), accommodation of tuition for poorer students, inclusion of classical authors rather than contemporary, (Ong, 1961a, p. 37). Ramus’ agenda was broad and became quite influential thanks to the reproduction of his and Omer Talon’s work. While any text is affected by translation and editing, (some authors’ text even tried to simplify Ramus’ work) the basic process of Ramist method and much of the classroom culture of the Middle Ages remained in use into the 20th century classroom.

While dialectic and rhetoric were torn asunder as a result of Ramist method, and while writing became a more central tool for learning, argumentation and oral presentation remained central to university education. As Ong noted “the agonistic of the past resulted from a disposition to organize the subject matter itself as a field of combat, to purvey, not just to test, knowledge in a combative style” (Ong, 1974, p. 230). The enmity between teacher and student remained central to the university classroom for centuries, (Ong, 1974, p. 229). As we know, and as Ong noted, this style of persuasion and argumentation was integral to the practice of public speaking and persuasion and was primarily limited to the elite classes such as those who practiced law, governed or taught in university (Ong, 1974, p. 230).

Ong’s (1974) research helps to highlight how Renaissance humanism complicated the rituals of agonistic style in Europe because of the influence of Cicero’s ideal that the orator should be the most learned of men. Ong (1974) pointed out that the agonistic practice was as much about content as about presentation, (p. 230). However, added Ong (1974), “by comparison with medieval scholastics, Renaissance humanists were often activists and if anything, more combative than their scholastic predecessors” (p. 229).

While oral presentation and argumentation remained a part of university learning into the 20th Century, Ong could see that the agonistic nature of the classroom was indeed shifting. As a
teacher, both at university and in a Catholic boys’ school, Ong was deeply attentive to the culture of the classroom. He stated that the ritual contest between teacher and student, as played out through ceremonial contests, waned in the mid-20th century and had been replaced with hostility and confrontation with no negotiation (Ong, 1974, p. 229). The ritual conflict of the classroom, wherein student would work toward the ability to best the teacher in an argument in ceremonial conflict, became, in the mid-1950s, a way for the students to “prove themselves” through “pranks . . . and rebellion” in “hostile” and “uncooperative” rivalry, (Ong, 1974, p. 229). While there has always been a culture of conflict between teacher and student, Ong (1974) wrote that the nature of the conflict changed in the 1960s when teacher was expected to play the role of X or nothing at all (p. 229).

In addition to the shift in agonistic style in the 20th Century classroom, Ong and other scholars in the tradition of media ecology such as Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, and later Neil Postman certainly would have seen similarities between Ramus’ response to Scholasticism and their responses to linguistics and structuralism that emerged during the 20th century, influenced, perhaps by the emergence of a deeper study of the human consciousness in the fields of both psychology and sociology. The focus on organizing consciousness and linguistics into highly structured forms that focus on logic and symbolism as influenced by Saussure, Toulmin, Levi-Strauss, Peirce, etc. seems to share some striking similarities with the symbolic and abstract reasoning of the Scholastics.

Ong could see the effects play out in the classroom. He asks “The general overhauling of language-teaching and literature-teaching processes which has been taking place for the past thirty years or more are symptoms of something stirring? What is it?” (Ong, 1960, p. 245). Ong (1960) says that it is clear that “we are leaving the Guttenberg era behind us” (p. 245). Ong’s
(1980) critique of the structuralist and systems theory thinkers is that they fail to dive far enough back into history to incorporate that the framework “to take into consideration in historical or psychological depth where writing came from” (p. 145). Whereas “in the person of the teacher, who is the depository and communicator of knowledge, mankind constantly reviews what it knows, reevaluates its knowledge, revises it, detects its deficiencies and sets up the framework for new discoveries” (Ong, 1960, p. 245).

Beyond his understanding of the change in agonistic style and approaching learning with an historical depth, Ong began his career at a time when learned Latin was fading further out of the classroom and the nave. The Guttenberg era facilitated the shift from university teaching, presenting and writing in Latin to vernacular languages. While Latin reigned supreme as the language of the university and the highly educated for centuries, by the mid-20th century, learned Latin began to ebb out of the university classroom, firmly and finally ensconcing vernacular languages in the realm of higher learning (Ong, 1974, p. 231).

One reason for this, according to Ong (1974), was the infusion of women into the classroom and classrooms becoming coed, where less agonistic structures became popularized, (p. 235). The common learning style of hardships and ceremonial battle of the classroom were replaced by less agonistic approaches. Ong (1974) suggested that changes in the classroom flowed along what is the natural dialectic of “masculine and feminine” (p. 233).

These shifts in classroom technique across four centuries are borne out of an interest in the practical nature of communication, as stated above, situated in the historical context of a world that was shifting at a faster pace than its population had experienced in the centuries prior. Writing has been around as a tool for centuries before Christ and the printing press made the mass production of writing possible. Mass production of writing was possible in the centuries
following the Guttenberg revolution but mass transportation of writing became possible through technological means beginning in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. As these technologies are explored, exploited and ultimately absorbed into human activity, unintended consequences begin to emerge. It is these unintended consequences in the shift in the nature of consciousness that Ong spent a great deal of his career exploring.

\textbf{The Visual and the Vernacular}

In Ramus, Ong identifies the change in the practice of how we think (Johns, 2004, p. vi). Never before Ramus were logic and dialectic organized in a spatial fashion. By situating logic along schematic diagrams, Ramus moves early Renaissance thinking firmly toward the modern mind which sees knowledge as “held in place” on the printed page. “By making logic spatial, they (Ramists) in effect bound reason and memory to the kind of page that the press made” (Johns, 2004, p. vii). Knowledge, as Ong and others identify, becomes a commodity. Because Ramus’ work happened around the time of the printing press and consequently because so much of teaching started to move toward vernacular language rather than learned Latin, Ramus was uniquely situated at a point in history where all of these events conspired to make him so vitally popular into the early 17\textsuperscript{th} century.

When we shift forward to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, we see a similar instrumentality in rhetoric and writing. For example, Peirce’s writings would have been in circulation as the young Ong undertook is graduate and undergraduate work. Considering symbolic methods of understanding truth for Peirce meant that meaningful concepts must be able to be understood from empirical observation (Stanford University, 2010). Entitled pragmatism, the influence of thinkers such as Peirce and their belief in but focus on the truth of abstract and symbolic relationships can be seen in parallel to the increasingly abstract logical formulations of the scholastics. One would not call
Ong’s work on consciousness or interest in the nature of argument a reaction to these thinkers. Rather Ong continues the conversation, in his own scholarship, steering it, as did Ramus, toward the practical.

It must be remembered that within an oral culture, how human roles are defined is essentially a social process (Comprone, 1986, p. 138). By whatever technique and at whatever point in history, there are “the presence of repeated phrases, word, rhythm, and commonplace content in oral epics [that signify] not simply a different style or technology in the discoursor but a qualitatively different consciousness of the world and self” (Comprone, 1986, p. 139). As technologies and distribution made wide shifts in both Ramus’ and Ong’s times, it seems natural that Marshal McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong and others would turn their attention to the examination of processes of communication.

While Ramus lived and taught at the doorway of modernity, Ong’s scholarship begins as modernity transitions to post-modernity, where technology and social and political events are reshaping the world. It must also be pointed out that the nature of a university education was also being questioned during Ramus time and during Ong’s early years as a scholar. A major distinction between the two historical moments is that Ong considers Ramus’ era to be yet a primary oral culture, although this was shifting with the printing press and the distribution of written materials. Still, reading and writing were left primarily to the clergy and the universities during Ramus time. Ong’s scholarship begins just as the world emerges from the horrors of two world wars. Technologies are evolving quickly from improved home appliances to telecommunications, radio and the emergence of television.

Ramus gained and kept traction in the history of modern rhetoric because he grounds dialectic practice in the practical. His critique of the universities was that their logic “bore no
resemblance to the true, natural dialectic” (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). Ong (1958) helps to see that Ramus is interested in working at argumentation with an interest in the object of knowledge rather than knowledge as subject, (p. 151).

**Walter Ong and Peter Ramus: A Response Across Centuries**

Ong’s work explores the historical and cultural shifts in literacy that have occurred throughout history. In this, Ong opens up the opportunity for understanding the implications of the methodology of Peter Ramus that are important in additional ways beyond simply seeing Ramus in the context of university education and the re-found influences of ancient texts on logic and rhetoric. Ong’s own scholarship identifies his interest in mediated communication and literacy. But the relevance of Ong’s scholarship can be further explored in terms of media ecology. Ong’s work on Peter Ramus is important to help to better entrench some less studied aspects of media ecology. We tend to look at Guttenberg’s invention of the printing press as the seminal influencer in the shift to literacy. What Ong opens up in his work on Ramus are additional elements at play that expand our idea of media ecology beyond what Ong is best known for (change in consciousness) and to refine it to incorporate elements that can be explored beyond this project for their relevance to media ecology.

In a way, Ong’s scholarly interests are similar to those of Peter Ramus, although unlike Peter Ramus whose intellect Ong acknowledged was not strong, Ong’s intellect is humanistic, open, genuine, and humble. Both men share an interest in the nature of human communication and both lean heavily on the available resources in intellectual history to both build upon and explore how ideas found in history could be applicable or evolved for their [respective] pursuits.

Ong’s (1958) interest in Ramus touches on the history of university education as well as asking the basic question: why was the work of Peter Ramus so popular when Ramus’ thinking
was somewhat simplistic and at times muddled? (p. xvii). Ramus was known for his frustration with the scholastic approach to rhetoric and dialectic. He saw it as having diverged from reality to a point where these fields were literally academic and abstract to the point of seeming ridiculous. Certainly Ramus found the techniques of the scholastics overly complicated without reason (Ong, 1958, p. xvii).

But in addition to the change in university education, Ong’s work on Ramus also identifies the point at which learning begins to move away from solely happening in an environment of Latin and, due in part to the printing press, moves into the vernacular. In this shift and due to the wide popularity and availability of works written on the Ramist method, Ong shows the literary and rhetorical influence of Ramus that has influenced attitudes around literature and language.

Ong’s work on Ramus can be viewed as a foundational point for many of the themes found throughout his scholarship and the Ramus work seems to be under-acknowledged for the important connections Ong makes between linearity and visual nature of knowledge, as implemented by Ramist method, to the genesis of the modern mind.

Importantly, Ong explores in Ramus the intellectual history of this transition and the influence of Peter Ramus’ method which became ingrained into our education, writing and affected the role of rhetoric, that the origins of indexing and diagramming and using space as a knowledge holder were largely unexplored before Ong in terms of how we think and how we store knowledge. One need only read the complete title of Ong’s work on Ramus for clues to the valuable insights he has contributed to the history of western intellectual thought: Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue: from the art of discourse to the art of reason.
While Ong’s work on Ramus is clearly related to the medium of writing and printing, there are additional elements of his seminal work on Ramus that remain unexplored and that could inform how we think about mediated communication at the present historical moment.

While we still deal with knowledge as a commodity and while words still have a ‘place’ to be stored, the very nature of these spaces has changed in the last 25 years with the onset of the digital era and the ‘age of information’. What has also changed is our ability to transport the commodity of these words via means that do not involve printing presses, paper and transportation. Rather, words are transported virtually and instantly. What this project will show is that Ong’s study on Ramus serves as the starting point of an exploration that Ong conducted for his entire career. He sought to understand the implications of communication technology and to how present-day dialogue is again evolving (or decaying?).

We find ourselves in the early 21st century again at a transition in communication media. While we cannot move ourselves to an Archimedean point of history or physical distance to examine this transition, as Ong was able to do 300 years after Ramus’ death, we can acknowledge that the spatial nature of storing words on a page is again in transition. While we still deal with knowledge as a commodity and while words still have a ‘place’ to be stored, the very nature of these spaces has changed in the last 25 years with the onset of the digital era and the ‘age of information’. What has also changed is our ability to transport the commodity of these words via means that do not involve printing presses, paper and transportation. Rather, words are transported virtually and instantly. These are significant topics for scholars of rhetoric, history, culture and communication.

This project explores two parallel fulcrums: the fulcrum between Peter Ramus and the influence of Ramist “logic” on western consciousness; and the fulcrum identified by Walter Ong
who stood at the entry of the historic moment where again consciousness is evolving due, in part, to the influence and use of new communication technologies. What Ong explores in Peter Ramus are elements that can be explored in issues in media ecology in a post-modern world.

Guttenberg’s printing press offers us a parallel study that is cannot be fully ripened without the additions of an understanding of the shift away from Latin toward vernacular and the methodology involved that we see during Ramus’ time and which Walter Ong so carefully teased out. We can then carry these ideas forward and explore them in the post-modern world. While Walter Ong opened up these ideas for us by helping our understanding of the transition to the modern mind, these elements have not yet been fully explored or recognized as valued parts of Ong’s scholarship or of media ecology; nor have they been explored in terms of the communication transition in which we currently find our global, no longer primarily western, communication.

The basic question to be explored in this project is how Ong’s work can be leveraged to help us better understand human communication in a mediated world. Ong, like Ellul, Postman and even McLuhan to a degree, looks to rhetoric as a moderating force in mediated communication. By engaging with the same kind of curiosity in Ramist method as Ong did, by reviewing Ong’s scholarship on Ramus and by teasing out some Ong’s thematic interests, especially his understanding of method and the vernacular, we can gain a greater understanding of Ong’s irenic and apparently optimistic perspective on mediated communication. Though Ong touches on rhetoric throughout his scholarship, he ultimately seeks to return rhetoric to a place of truth seeking and meaning making. This project seeks to explain Ong’s path on both the rhetoric and mediated communication fronts.
CHAPTER 2

RAMISM IN THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

By situating Ramist method in the historical trajectory of rhetoric we can, as Ong does, understand some of the origins of the modern mind and scientific method. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for further pursuit of the idea that method and vernacular are necessary components in major shifts in communicative practices. It is too simplistic to look at the spread of Ramism as solely a factor of the printing press or to look at Ramus as simply a logician. While Ong’s extensive Ramus study greatly furthers our understanding of the transition to literacy that happened post-Guttenberg, it can also be leveraged to help us to explore communication in today’s mediated landscape.

This chapter will look at Ramus in the rhetorical tradition beginning with the intellectual roots of Ramism as understood through his affirmation of Agricola and his dismissal of Aristotle. Next, it will examine the tension between scholasticism and humanism, also highly influential to the development of Ramist method. Further, it will spotlight Ong’s acknowledgement of who owns the rights to rhetoric and who dialectic. Finally, before moving into Ong’s decades-long Ramus research in Chapter 3, I will provide a brief primer on Ramist method and Ramus’ pedagogy. It is Ong who connects the historical, intellectual and pedagogical influences out of which emerged Ramist method.

Biographical Background of Pierre La Ramee

Born in 1515 in the French village of Picard, Peter Ramus was from noble lineage that had fallen on hard times (Ong, 1953). Ramus travelled to Paris to begin his university education
someplace between the age of eight and 12 (Ong, 1958, p. 19). He was able to afford college only by serving as a valet to a wealthy student (Ong, 1958, p. 19). He completed his formal degrees at the University of Paris by the age of 21 and became an arts professor (Hamilton, 1987, p. 21). Ramus began his teaching career, as did many newly minted instructors, by reviewing his own course textbooks and reworking his lectures for his younger students which, according to university rules, were supposed to be given by the professor not from notes but extemporaneously (Ong, 1958, p. 21). This was done, according to David Hamilton (1987), for the ease of understanding by the arts course student, a boy who was typically 10 or 12 years of age (p. 21).

To his students and colleagues Ramus was known for his fine elocution and mastery of Latin (Ong, 1958, p. 22). In addition, Ramus’ career was marked, in large part, by the development of his method of teaching dialectic. This method grew out of his claim that he had fallen prey to the tactics of the sophists and therefore undertook to appropriate ‘socratism’ (Walton, 1970a, p. 120). This pedagogical entrepreneurialism, however, was considered controversial in an already entrenched university system. Consequently, Ramus was condemned by King Frances I of France on more than one occasion. He was forbidden to teach two different times, in 1544 and in 1549 and, ironically, was accused of ‘corrupting the youth’ (Walton, 1970a, p. 121; Hamilton, 1987, p. 21). He was killed during the massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day in 1572 (Hamilton, 1987, p. 21).

**The Intellectual Roots of Ramism**

Ramus, the teacher and scholar, was an active participant in the intellectual conversation ongoing in Europe from the 12th through the 16th centuries, which centered on the aims of human knowledge and whether truth was achievable by abstraction or analysis. As Ong (1958) explains
Ramism, it is “not properly a philosophy or a theology or a type of classical humanism or a literary school, although it affects philosophy, theology, literature and many other things besides. Its central element is a logic or dialectic” (p. 7).

Like all university students and faculty, the education Ramus received in dialectic was grounded in the work of Aristotle. While scholasticism had many variations throughout the Europe of the Middle Ages, the commonality was “in the tendency to look to Aristotle for guidance and in . . . possession of a common method of intellectual inquiry, the dialectical method” (Nauert, 1998, p. 430). It is important to first point out here that the emerging humanist leanings in the universities coincided with an increasing disfavor of Aristotelian logic, found to be somewhat sterile with the resulting logical judgments existing completely outside the realm of human inquiry and communication (Walton, 1970a, p. 152).

Ramus’ first major publication was an attempt to displace Aristotelian dialectic as the standard. In his Remarks on Aristotle, Ramus somewhat famously argued that Aristotle’s dialectic did not follow the “real” dialectic of “Prometheus, Zeno, Socrates, Hippocrates and Plato” (Ong, 1958, pp. 174-5). According to E. Jennifer Ashworth (1991), Ramus’ reading of Aristotle assumed that “argument or reasoning applied only to the syllogism . . . namely a particular kind of formally-valid deductive structure . . . leading to certainly-true premises” (p. 231). Ramus sought to right what he saw as Aristotle’s tactical wrongs believing that Aristotle’s “original intention had miscarried, and the resulting confusion has been increased by Cicero and Quintilian” (Duhamel, 1949, p. 164).

Ramus’ frustrations with the untenability of anything Aristotelian are multiple. For example, Ramus found it “useless and impractical” (Duhamel, 1949, p. 167) to define beauty through such logical terms as quantity. Ramus’ mistake was to assume that Aristotelian dialectic
sought only certainties (Ashworth, 1991, p. 231). To Ramus and the humanists, the art of
[Aristotle’s] logic did not properly imitate nature because it meant using a system of ‘ridiculous’
terms to define things our reason can perfectly well understand (Duhamel, 1949, pp. 166-7).
Ramus also accused Aristotle of working through causality in both physics and metaphysics
when causes should be properly assessed in logic (Duhamel, 1949, p. 165). In addition, Aristotle
neglected the nuances of judgment, important to Ramist method, in favor of the syllogism, (Ong,
1958, p. 174). In short, Aristotle’s logic was too complex. Ramus called Aristotelians
“obscurantists [who] foster barbarism” (Ong, 1958, p. 175).

Aristotle’s rhetoric also came under critical scrutiny by Ramus. As Ong (1958) states, he
[Aristotle] was “wrong in assigning three ways of invention from cause, from universal argument
. . . and from something in between the two; he is also wrong in relegating dialectic to the topics
alone, for it rules all discourse” (p. 174). Pierre Albert Duhamel (1949) points out that Ramus’
intent was not to be a revolutionary or radical in diverging from Aristotle but rather his intent
was to clarify and simplify (p. 163).

Ramus’ solution was to turn to Agricola, calling him “the logician of the new age” (Ong,
1958, p. 94). The irony of this, as Ong (1958) shows, is that Ramist method does not and cannot
come into existence without the blending of dialectic with humanism that is built directly out of
Agricola’s logic. In essence, Agricola defined two logics of discourse, one dealing with the most
probable (as in debate) and the other resulting in probable as sufficient, (Ong, 1958, p. 101). This
definition of discourse is humanistic in that one could discourse “with probability on any subject,
insofar as the nature of the subject is capable of creating conviction” (Ong, 1958, p. 101).
“Agricola’s logic is ‘humane’ in a sense which makes it also amateur, graceful, and as logic,
scientifically irresponsible” (Ong, 1958, p. 100). “Agricola’s definition of dialectic...echoed in
Ramus’ early dialectical works” is defined as the “art of discoursing” (Ong, 1958, p. 101). Agricola moved the intended purpose of dialectic toward a singular focus on certainty (Ong, 1961b, p. 102).

Placing logic in the realm of discourse placed it in the realm of the every day. Ramus called Agricola’s dialectic “the ‘true dialectic’” (Ong, 1953, p. 93). That everyday discourse had little concern on reaching “probability or certitude” (Ong, 1958, p. 101) addressed the scholastic obsession with verisimilitude above all else. “Agricola’s work...[was] calculated to replace the old scholastic dialectic or logic...[wherein the new] dialectic is taken here in a large, loose, and practically indefinable sense to cover the whole field of discourse, in its rational, emotional, and other elements” (Ong, 1958, p. 100); no small project. Ong (1958) shows us that Ramus’ humanism is grounded in Agricola’s dialectic, while at the same time intentionally leaving behind Aristotle’s “sophistic” logic (pp. 96, 97).

Like Agricola, Ramus saw dialectic as a practical endeavor, which had two important and key characteristics: first, it was meant to be teachable; second, it was meant to be written (Ong, 1958, p. 97). Ong (1958) explains that Agricola’s dialectic was, “congenial to the real needs and to the humanists’ pupil-oriented teaching as against the universities’ teacher oriented teaching” (p. 97). “Agricola and his followers [wanted] [dialectic] to be true and scientifically acceptable, but first and foremost they wanted it accommodated to what they felt was real ‘life’ and to the real pedagogical situation” (Ong, 1958, p. 97).

In sum, Ramist method grew out of both the humanistic response to the narrow strictures of scholasticism and was also influenced by the dialectical approaches of Agricola, Peter of Spain and even St. Thomas Aquinas in that dialectic was not meant so much as a tool to achieve logical certitude but rather intended to explore probability with an outcome resulting in
“practical decision or action” (Ong, 1958, p. 97). Ramus’ purpose was deeply rhetorical in nature. However, as Ong (1958) notes, humanism could not “negate the scholastic experience,” but rather “only minimize scholasticism in certain areas where it obtruded” (p. 93).

**Scholasticism and Humanism: Not Versus**

Ong invites us to understand Ramism in terms of the visceral pull of scholasticism as influenced by the practical purposes of humanism.

While there were clear differences in approach and goals between scholastics and humanists, it must be remembered that neither was a pure element completely demarcated from its opposition. Rather, the distinctions can be seen as a 400-year conversation [and conflict] about interests in Christian doctrine, methodology, pedagogy, philology, poetry and rhetoric. The characteristics of each also bear many regional influences that would make arguing for some clear historical, religious and tactical differences overly simplistic. These nuances are beyond the scope of the present project. Rather, the “conflict” is highlighted to further illustrate the backdrop of Ramus’ lifetime and the intellectual influences that shaped his work.

Scholasticism in general is “the first steady and substantial effort of truth seeking under the guidance of reason” (Longwell, 1928, p. 221). Dialogue was the path along which reason flowed and was seen as “an instrument of search,” and the “scholastic...by long training and practice, worked out the inner purpose of the dialogue to its furthest possible limit. Question and answer, solution and reply to objection; all of these are in the dialogue loosely thrown, but in the scholastic procedure they stand four square and each in place” (Longwell, 1928, p. 222). Scholastics considered humanists to be “mere” grammarians and rhetoricians, (Nauert, 1998, pp. 431-2).
Humanists had a different purpose and were critical of what they saw as an increasing distance between logical practice and the real world. "Logic no longer concerned itself with real human reasoning and had instead it become a discipline studied for its own sake using its own incomprehensible jargon, and was of no practical interest" (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). Humanists critiqued the scholastics because they were so reliant on logical formulations that they lost sight of the original text about which they were drawing logical conclusions. Scholastics would argue on any topic and take any side of any topic in the argument (Perreiah, 1982, p. 11). Alan Perrhiah (1982) offers an excellent summary of the humanist critiques of scholastic dialectic:

1. Scholastics are said to speak a peculiar dialect of Latin – one which is . . .
   ‘meaningless.’ What is the nature of that language? And what relationship does it have to the rest of the Latin Language?

2. Scholastic dialectic includes a large number of doctrines, e.g., ‘signification,’ ‘supposition,’ ‘consequences,’ ‘syllogism,’ etc. Is it, then, a mere medley of logicalia? Or do these doctrines have any coherent relationship to one another?

3. The notorious readiness of Scholastics to argue with anyone on practically any issue and their willingness to dispute either side of an issue raise questions about their sincerity no less their certainty. Are these characteristics peculiar to Scholastic dialecticians? Or do they follow from the nature of dialectic itself? (p. 11)

Rhetoric was the “focal center of humanist interests”, but this was denounced by scholastics as “deceitful, superficial, and unable to satisfy the mind’s hunger for truth” (Randall, 1940, p. 117). Humanists were seen as only interested in whether the argument was persuasive (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). Influencing the growing humanist perspective, Europeans in general
were taking a keen interest in the poetry, philosophy and rhetoric of the classical Greek and Latin authors from the twelfth century on (Randall, 1940, p. 117; Perreiah, 1982, p. 3). As Nauert (1998) explains humanism is, “not a philosophy at all but at best a movement to improve society by reasserting the value of the studia humanitatis” (p. 430).

While scholastics analyzed texts through logical formulae, humanists encouraged looking directly to texts for interpretation and intention of the author, (Nauert, 1998, pp. 430, 434). The scholastic theology faculty would extract “isolated statements from a text and then [treat] those sentences as accurate reflections of the author’s opinion, without attention to what the sentence implied in its original context” (Nauert, 1998, p. 434). These sentences would, in turn, be interpreted using traditional scholastic commentaries. The purpose of text for scholastics was minimized in pursuit of moral certitudes. Nauert (1988) points out that while the scholastics charged the humanists with imposing human interpretive “fancy” on sacred texts such as the Bible, that it was in fact the scholastics who knew “little beyond scholastic commentaries . . . but [who applied] their sophistical dialectic to twist and distort the sacred texts” (p. 435).

In contrast, the humanists’ “emphasis on rhetorical argument on the attainment of moral rather than metaphysical certitude, together with their dismissive attitude toward syllogistic argumentation, shows that under the surface there was a yawning chasm between the two antithetical conceptions of proper intellectual method” (Nauert, 1998, p. 433).

As we can see, the center of the conflict was in essence a turf war over the purpose of dialectic and how it should be taught to university students. The aim of dialectic from a scholastic perspective was to achieve certainty. This was a central ideal in the instructional methods of the medieval university (Perreiah, 1982, p. 4). Counter to scholasticism, the humanist
belief was that dialectic “should not be studied for its own sake...but is rather one step in a program of liberal learning” (Perreiah, 1982, p. 6).

There is an additional tension between two sects of scholasticism: the arts scholasticism and theological scholasticism. While not solely based on the Greek gymnasium, the university students of the Middle Ages were required to master the trivium before moving on to more specialized areas of education such as law or medicine (Jardine, 1974, p. 31). The basic arts course “was designed as a survey course of all knowledge, in which the allocation of course material to subject heads and the order and emphasis of study were derived from the Latin West of late antiquity, and depended crucially on philosophical beliefs about the scope and function of learning” (Jardine, 1974, p. 32).

The arts scholasticism was the influential scholasticism of the 13th – 16th centuries and also “framed the mentality of those who governed the university” (Ong, 1958, pp. 132-3). The arts faculty members were “masters” who, upon completion of their studies, were invited into the guild of teachers. A master could opt to teach or to go on to the higher faculties and continue study in medicine, law or theology (Ong, 1958, p. 132).

Scholastics, according to Longwell (1928), wanted both revelation and reason, but wanted to “save reason” (pp. 223-4). Consequently,

religion [had] within it the power of impelling man to a more industrious and thoroughgoing inquiry than has any other single motive. Thus we may understand why and how it came that the dominant religious interest and concern of the Middle Ages furnished that energy and staying-power which made possible the minute and detailed survey of reality which scholasticism exhibits. (Longwell, 1928, p. 222)
The faith of theological scholastics was not only in God but in the emerging modern deity: reason, (Longwell, 1928, p. 222).

The whole scholastic system represents at bottom an attempt to lay doubt, to quiet skepticism [sic]. This doubt and skepticism [sic] are evidenced just by the fact that they [scholastics] reasoned so much...Each thing they say is said out and addressed, in the very nature of their situation, to reason; and to give reason is to give answer to objection.

(Longwell, 1928, p. 223)

It is the “scholastic aspiration [to attain] absolute truth” (Nauert, 1998, p. 432). Hence the temporal and the eternal intermingle in scholasticism and “experience necessarily became hierarchical in the Middle Ages; people, branches of knowledge, theories, and all things were meaningful in so far as they fitted the levels of pre-arranged patterns” (Myers, 1939, p. 115).

Ong (1958) explains that “Medieval logic in its plenary form was very suggestive of modern formal or ‘mathematical’ logic, also called ‘logistics,’ or less aptly, ‘symbolic logic,’ which is typified in the work of Boole, Russell, Whitehead, Carnap, Lkasiewicz, or Quine” (p. 53). Ong (1958) goes on to say that medieval logic was criticized for “its aridity, its difficulty, its finicky attention to detail, its highly technical vocabulary, its concern with real or apparent impossibilities, not to mention Ramus’ celebrated charge that ‘ordinary people don’t talk like that’” (p. 54). It is no wonder that Ramus sought to find a better way to present logical argument. Logic was seen as out of touch with reality or any sort of practical usefulness. The scholastics were not interested in practicality, they were interested in provability. These are not epistemological or metaphysical concerns but rather they are “concerned with the labyrinthine complexities of logical structure” (Ong, 1958, p. 54).

This extreme notion of reason is what the arts scholastics reacted against.
Erika Rummel (1992) states that during this time, “the classic controversy over rhetorical form versus philosophical content entered a new phase, pitting humanists trained as grammarians, rhetoricians and textual critics against scholastic theologians trained in the arts of dialectics” (p. 713). It was a conflict about whether doctrinal formulations could be arrived at through knowledge of biblical languages or [through] dialectic procedure, (Rummel, 1992, p. 714). “The early debate over rhetoric and philosophy . . . was to a large extent a matter of judging relative merit and establishing rank and at the lowest level nor more than a jockeying for position, whereas the debate over biblical humanism and scholastic theology was a question of methodology and ideology” (Rummel, 1992, p. 714).

Adding to the tension between the interpretive approach of the humanists and the abstract certitude of the scholastics was the viability of Latin that was beginning to come under fire for being a language that was not useful outside the church or university. Humanists argued that learned Latin itself was “meaningless” outside of everyday life (Perreiah, 1982, p. 11). As Perreiah (1982) explained it, the dialectic of the scholastics was necessarily situated in a language suited to the task. He called it a “‘meta-language’, whose purpose is to analyze the logical regularities inherent in other languages” (p. 13). In other words, Latin was not situated and not ordinary.

It is amid the arts-scholastics and the theological scholastics that Ramist method takes root, appropriating from each to suit the needs of the arts student (Ong, 1958, pp. 132-3). Ramus wanted the study of the *trivium* to remain committed to an everyday usefulness, yet he veered into a system of analysis and classification that was ultimately analytic. Add to this that Ramus was nothing if not purposeful in his intent to develop a pedagogy that would help university students grasp a dialectic that could diagram what our reason reveals.
Ownership over subject matter, namely philosophy taught solely by the arts faculty and theology taught solely by theology faculty, also contributed to an environment ripe for Ramus’ system, (Ong, 1958, pp. 132-5). Ramus appropriated from both scholasticism and humanism. According to Craig Walton (1970), Ramus “broke with traditional humanism by extending dialectic from the liberal arts to all of nature; and he broke with traditional scientific logic by eschewing ‘pure definition’ and the superiority of theory over fruitfulness; [finally] he sought to unify...humanities...and sciences under one art of humane learning” (p. 122). It is ironic that Ramus meant dialectic to address all avenues of human knowledge because the unintended consequence was to sever it further from its counterpart rhetoric, altogether losing the notion of a rhetorical [or probable] outcome that would be more akin to the rhetoric of Aristotle and Agricola. Ong (1953) helps by explaining “the scholastic, scientific passion for fixity and exactitude, [newly] dependent upon written documents, was extended by the humanists to the matter of literary style” (p. 92).

By digging into the arts course and by gaining an understanding of Ramist method, we can begin to understand Ong’s subtitle: method and the decay of dialogue. Ong helps us to see that Ramus’ drive for simplicity and ordering manifests in a method that ultimately severed dialectic from rhetoric for the next 500 years.

An Overview of Ramist Method

Until the time of Ramus, dialectic was understood primarily in terms of its triadic relationship with rhetoric and grammar. But, as Ong is so astute in showing us, the prevalence of rhetoric in relation to dialectic or dialectic in relation to rhetoric is a living process that continually evolves. Ramus elevated dialectic above rhetoric and grammar. By understanding the
purpose and nature of his method, we can better understand the reasons behind rhetoric’s steady
decline from the Middle Ages into the 20th Century.

As stated above, elevating dialectic was not simply a Ramist but also a humanist
objective, critical of a scholastic approach that had distanced dialectic from lived discourse.
Dialectic, from a humanist perspective, was supposed to aid us in cultivating our natural
reasoning, not serve as a series of exercises in verity. In fact, Ramus defined dialectic as
consisting of "nature, doctrine, and exercise" (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). In line with humanism,
Ramus worked from the affirmation that everyday discourse is comprised of natural reasoning,
(Goulding, 2006, p. 65). We naturally (even the uneducated) have some grasp of the arts. Ramus’
project was to organize and refine this natural ability (Goulding, 2006, p. 64). At the same time,
Ramus was enough a part of the scholastic tradition that he did not intend to eliminate or escape
teaching dialectic. Rather than use logical formulas to solve ‘to’ the truth, Ramus was interested
in developing a method that offered explanations from truths already in front of us. “In common
with many late Renaissance figures, he believed that philosophy should serve practical purposes,
enabling students to extract and apply the ‘truths’ embedded in the written and spoken discourse
of great thinkers” (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22).

Ong (1958) helps us to navigate the complexity of the backdrop against which Ramus
worked by explaining that, “although [Ramus] followed the humanist line in calling for more
training in classical Latin, Greek and even Hebrew . . . so as to make the ancient texts rather than
scholastic aridities the focus of attention, the end result of the use of his ‘analysis’ . . . on a text
was inevitably the recreation of aridities in their most opprobrious sense” (p. 34). Ramus wanted
training in classical rhetoric to aid understanding; and while he eschewed the logical certitudes of
the scholastics, he could not escape the attraction of a diagrammatic system. The diagrams came to stand for Ramist method that became popular and remained influential for hundreds of years.

Ong’s work fastidiously teases out Ramus’ change from rhetorical sensibilities to logical sensibilities. Craig Walton (1970a) explains that Ong looks at Ramus as “a watershed of human sensibility between Aristotle and Kant,” explaining that until Ramus, logic “gave its primary consideration to human utterance” (p. 120). In other words, logic did not give primary consideration to texts. Ong (1953) described the Ramist method as a place that those who followed the technique could return to again and again, regardless of the complexity or nuance of the subject matter under examination (p. 242). Consequently there is a slavish and simplistic reliance on logic that was taught to every schoolboy. It should be acknowledged here, as Ong himself notes, that the turn to the visual (i.e. text) made possible through the printing press also made possible Ramus’ methodological approach.

It is the misappropriation of Plato and the simplification of Aristotle out of which emerges Ramist method. Comprone (1986) explained that “Ramist logic was not logic at all but a superficial rendition of rhetorical arrangement, falsely separated from invention and style” (p. 144). To Ramus, “rhetoric and logic were to work together like the heart and the head to give expression to the thoughts of man. Thus we have a system of the arts which corresponds to the two universal and general gifts given to man by nature, reason and speech” (Duhamel, 1949, p. 163). Ramist method itself diverges from a practical lived application and instead developed into dichotomizing dichotomies, ultimately analysis that excluded synthesis (Troup, 2015). Ramus was almost obsessively interested with order and classification, traits that seem more scholastic in flavor. While he cared about context, Ramus’ drive to simplify and organize took precedence.
Ramist method turns out to be a distinctly humanist text-based method of scholastic-flavored analysis.

Howell (1951) concisely explains the appeal of Ramist method: he simplified the ancient lore of invention so that ten clear-cut subject-predicate relations remained out of the mass of material involved in the places of dialectic and rhetoric (p. 309). He also simplified the ancient lore of *elocutio* so that only the tropes and figures remained out of the elaborate Latin theory of rhetorical style (p. 309).

“To make rhetoric and logic practical, logically consistent, and natural, Ramus proposed to limit logic to a treatment of the discovery and disposition of arguments...[and] rhetoric...was to be concerned with the ornamentation and delivery of material produced by logic” (Duhamel, 1949, p. 163). Note that the focus on tropes and figures as the sole purpose of rhetoric helps to further erode the value of rhetoric beyond anything but ornamentation. Instead, under Ramus’ system, arrangement fell under the rubric of dialectic.

Assigning a single definition of method pertaining to Peter Ramus' approach is complicated because he changed his own views on it throughout his life as he grappled with resolving doubt, (Freedman, 1993, p. 106; Ong, 1958, p. 176). Even the terminology surrounding Ramist method is complicated in that, as Ramist writings dispersed throughout Europe, different terms were used to describe it such as "*modus* (manner), *via* (way) and *ratio* (reason)" (Freedman, 1993, p. 106). Ong (1953) explains Ramist method as “some sort of simple arrangement of the content of an “art” or ‘discipline’ or ‘doctrine’, that is to say of what we call a subject of a school curriculum” (pp. 240-1).

Ramist method is then a method of inquiry rather than a particular philosophical stance. Ramus did not charge his students with the task of merely absorbing the ideas and theories in the
university curriculum. Rather he provided them with a roadmap for how to get to ideas and conclusions based on his understanding of a Socratic method. Much of his writing was intended as instructional rather than as philosophical.

Ramus focused on “what he took to be the pivotal and Socratic form of the problem of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric [asking] What can we understand to be the limits and phases of development of human judgment in any use of conscious thought whatsoever?” (Walton, 1970b, p. 152). Ramus placed a high value on human experience and judgment. This is different than applying human reason to achieve the greatest possible certainty. For Ramus, this is the beginning point for a dialectic system as a method of knowledge management that allows us to refine what we know and informs how we present what we know. While Ramus also wanted to make 'distinctions' (classifications of) between logical and natural topics, he intended for his organization of knowledge to cover all realms, both the humanities and the empirical sciences (Walton, 1970a, p. 121).

Ramus placed a high value on judgment, which allows us to order knowledge (Walton, 1970a, p. 128). Judgment also unifies the “theoretical with practical wisdom,” and “becomes the art of evaluating relationships between discoveries” (Walton, 1970b, p. 155). To
place human judgment as a necessity in argumentation above pure definition and, perhaps more troubling for his time, above that of other authorities such as the church, was a dangerous idea. Yet this is the very sort of idea that was taking hold as humanism gained traction.

It is Ramus’ understanding of judgment as an arranging force that leads to an increasingly formalized method and arrangement of ideas. “Relationships between simple reasons and the ordering of those relationships in levels of increasing complexity are accomplished by the art of judgment” (Walton, 1970b, p. 157).

In addition to judgment, Ramus also included invention and practice in his method. Invention has to do with man’s ability to comprehend the simple reasons for things (Walton, 1970b, pp. 155, 156, 157). “Ramus borrows the notion of invention of arguments from rhetoric, but he redefines it to fit what he takes to be man’s condition in the hinterland between knowledge and ignorance” (Walton, 1970b, p. 155). Invention is to “learn how to perceive as many variables as there are in a particular object for inquiry” (Walton, 1970b, p. 156). As Ong (1982) explains it, invention is the middle term between subject and predicate, (p. 182). These are, as Ramus defined them, the loci or seats of arguments, and are generic consisting of arguments such as causes, effects, subjects, genus, form, name, testimonies, etc. (Ong, 1958, p. 183). He equates “invention” with reasoning well (Walton, 1970a, p. 124).

Regarding practice, Ramus did not believe that one could truly learn from memorizing precepts (Walton, 1970a, p. 122). Rather, his dialectic was developed “to be the art of finding, arranging and then synthesizing the fruits of God’s creative art so that we might learn how to practice ‘analysis’ of His ways, then how to on to ‘genesis’ of our own” (Walton, 1970a, p. 122). Ong (1953) asserts that “Ramus...is in effect denying that method, together with the conclusions of a science or indeed the whole field of human knowledge, which method ultimately rules, can
be viewed in any other way than in a strict logical vacuum” (p. 242). Walton (1970a) points out that Ramus’ intention was to find a way for human judgment to bring understanding as close as possible to the divine (p. 122). “The art of dialectic seeks the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of God’s wisdom” (Walton, 1970a, p. 122). Dialectic was more about aptitude in developing the skills of dialectic rather than a technique in and of itself. Thus invention was a skill that could be developed in order to move human understanding closer to the true nature of things, something akin to Platonic forms but not, as Plato’s forms, intuited. Rather, invention allowed for discovery (Walton, 1970a, p. 125). “Eventually, the Ramist ‘method’ (as it came to be known) comprised the clustering of related notions along the lines, quite literally, of a branching taxonomy” (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22).

“Ramus graphed dialectic onto his method” (Farrell, 2000, p. 61) and laid claim to the logic and method of both Plato and Aristotle. Ong (1958) says that practice or exercise is “dialectic come to life” (p. 190). Farrell (2000) points to Ong's exploration of Ramus' addition as being the assumption that motion from the universal to the particular applied to speech as well as logic thus appropriating a methodological and monological approach to dialogue (pp. 61-2).

Despite this apparent rhetorical-mindedness, Ramus was deeply attracted to certainty, which seems a counterpoint to the interpretative nature of a rhetorical approach. According to Duhamel, Ramus sought to reform grammar, rhetoric and dialectic (logic) minimize interpretive power and organize discourse, (Duhamel, 1949, p. 165). Importantly, as Palmeri (1991) pointed out, the change Ramus made is one of judgment (p. 53). For Aristotle, the audience judges what the orator says whereas for Ramus, judgment was procedural and about organization and arrangement (Palmeri, 1991, p. 53). Ramist method also reduced rhetoric to simply style and delivery (Palmeri, 1991, p. 54).
In sum, the practice of Ramist method begins with inquiry at the source. To Ramus, this meant the source text. Moving from the source, one could then lean on the framework offered by invention, judgment and practice arranged visually, along taxonomies that can be referred back to again and again. The emphasis on textual interpretation combined with the procedures involved in judgment, invention and practice found a hospitable environment amongst the students of the university classroom of the Middle Ages.

**Ramist Pedagogy**

Ramus took full advantage of a university culture that was focused on developing material that was first and foremost learnable for younger students. This is important because, as Ong (1958) reminds us, Ramus’ interest in providing content that was learnable evolved [or devolved] into a singular focus on learnability despite the content (p. 23). As the university professors continued to simplify the arts course for a young audience, more and more students enrolled, (Ong, 1958, p. 136). Ramist pedagogy and method were responses to the notion that scholasticism is reason extraordinaire as informed by the divine, philosophy as subordinate to theology (Myers, 1939, p. 115).

Ramus’ teaching career was often embroiled in scandal precisely because he worked to change the standard pedagogical practices of his time by, as stated above, developing a ‘method’ that followed what he believed was a ‘Socratic’ way of engaging in logic, philosophy and ultimately the liberal arts overall (Walton, p. 121). While Ramus favored training in dialectic, he insisted that his methodology could be used across any discipline (Ong, 1961, p. 39).

His shift in pedagogy could first be seen upon publication of his lectures on philosophy, which were immediately and “publicly denounced by a group of powerful teachers on the grounds that they represented a dilution and vulgarisation [sic] of the established arts programme.
After being publicly reproached, his books were also banned from publication (Hamilton, 1987, p. 21). Despite these setbacks, ultimately, Ramus became highly influential in the university system.

Still, Ramus pursued development of his dialectic through his classroom practice. To achieve this, Ramus “stripped down the philosophy course, retaining only those materials relevant to a range of thinking and study skills” (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22) hoping to avoid that for which the scholastics were critiqued: logic interested more in validity than meaning. Ramus wanted to develop a system of dialectic that would be useful to more than clerics and university professors. To do this, he took the conceptual framework of the trivium and, over a period of 30 years, subjected it to a number of important revisions.

First, he gave scant attention to grammar . . . Second he placed heavy emphasis on dialectic, believing that the careful sorting out of ideas was the key to effective thinking...finally he gave less than usual attention to rhetoric, believing that the arrangement of ideas (i.e. dialectic) could, if suitably conducted, serve both communication as well as thinking. (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22)

Remember, Ramist method was centered around helping students to develop the faculty of “reasoning well” (dialectic), (Walton, 1970a, p. 124). His method consisted of helping students to sort and arrange these ideas so that thinking consisted of a process of sorting rather than iteration (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22).

Ramus’ stated objective in his “reformation of the liberal arts curriculum” was to “carry philosophy to the youth of his day” (Walton, 1970a, p. 120). His work and method were disliked within the established university pedagogy because he advocated for a method that was democratic in nature. Ramus “believed that philosophy should serve practical purposes, enabling
students to extract and apply the ‘truths’ embedded in written and spoken discourse of great thinkers” (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22). Ramus was not an innovator but instead sought to simplify the great ideas found in philosophy so that they would be accessible to his students (Hamilton, 1987, p. 22).

As we know, part of how he taught his dialectic was through diagrams that helped students sort knowledge. This also meant that he focused more on the procedure of writing than on speaking (in all subject areas. It is a method after all, which was intended to work across every human discipline). Class time was divided into two distinct areas, explanation and practice (Ong, 1961a, p. 38). Each subject was allowed exactly the same amount of time and was comprised of “one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon assigned to hearing the teacher’s explanation, and the rest broken down into ‘meditating, studying, and exercise work concerned with what is explained’” (Ong, 1961a, p. 38). Even the students’ time away from the teacher was meticulously divided “into two hours of study, one hour of recitation, and two hours distributed between conversation, disputation, imitation and exercise” (Ong, 1961a, pp. 38-9).

Ramus was also noted for a decided lack of interest in the art of conversation, something for which the humanists were known. Ong (1961a) understands that Ramus’ distaste with the use of aphorisms (also made widely available by the printing press) came from his own ineptitude in using them, consequently finding them frivolous (p. 41). By rejecting the use of aphorisms, proverbs and the like, Ramus also placed rhetoric in subordination to dialectic, written dialectic (Ong, 1961a p. 45). Even when Ramus did find it useful to use commonplaces he “found matter which was relevant to the subject in hand which he arranged in statements and syllogism, availing himself of ‘method’ to give the whole its proper over-all organization” (Ong, 1961a p. 41).
It is the dismissal of aphorisms and proverbs that Ramus moves communication further into the realm of textual analysis, (Ong, 1961a p. 45).

Ramus method became popular, in part, because it was accessible. Recall that the methodological landscape of the university of the Middle Ages which was, in essence, a “normal school”; that is, a school to teach the basics of a liberal education, “an introductory training of the mind, in preparation for more arduous academic enterprises” (Jardine, 1974, p. 43; Howell, 1951). Ramus method ended up being used widely in the “normal school” (Duhamel, 1949, p. 163) or less advanced university classes and subjects because it was accessible to the less sophisticated students.

Ong helps us to see that Ramus’ use of diagrams and textual analysis contributed to the subordination of the spoken word to the written. This happened in tandem with a distancing from “the collections of sententiae, apothegms, and the like for the use of students which formed a kind of centerpiece in the educational designs of other humanists” (Ong, 1961a p. 41). Ramus considered these sorts of ‘canned’ expressions to be lacking because they were not borne out of analysis, (Ong, 1961a p. 41). In addition, this trajectory of the ascension of the written word, according to Ong (1961a), was also possible because Latin was no longer a vernacular in the Medieval classroom, so that supplying students with aphorisms and the like as tools for learning and conversing was a technique of the humanist approach to education, (p. 41). In other words, apothegms and the like are worthless prior to textual analysis, (Ong, 1961a p. 41).

Because of its simplicity, and because of its prevalence in the university arts course, Ramist method began to gain a foothold throughout Europe and the New World by the end of the 16th Century. To further understand the somewhat unsung influence of Ramism in the emergence of the modern mind, it will be helpful to take a brief look at how and where Ramist method
became inculcated. Just as the development of Ramist method was not a clear-cut path, neither was its widespread distribution and adoption.

**Inculcation of Ramist Method**

The works of Peter Ramus were widely distributed throughout Europe from approximately 1570 through 1630 (Freedman, 1993, p. 99). As we have seen, Ramus’ writings, and those of his acolyte Omer Talon, were used extensively in university education during this period (Freedman, 1993, p. 99). His most popular publications were on logic and rhetoric. Walter Ong developed an index of the works of Ramus and Talon, originally as a compendium to his book *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue*. As Ong, Howell, Friedman, Sharrott, Walter and others have shown, the diffusion of Ramus writings was due in part to the great affection of his acolyte Omer Talon who expanded upon the works of Ramus and facilitated the translation of his writings into vernacular languages making them accessible for those outside the university system throughout Europe in English, German and French.

These publications “went through almost 750 editions within 100 years of his first work’s publication” (Walton, 1970a, p. 119). And, as the 20th century opened, Ramus’ method re-emerged as a point of inquiry for scholars because of a developing interest in the “influence behind the great literary figures of the English Renaissance and the Puritan revolution” (Howell, 1951, p. 299). Ramus did not figure largely in the intellectual thought of the 18th century “possibly because as a philosopher and a humanist he was greatly overshadowed by his older contemporary Erasmus and by such giants of the next generation as Descartes, Bacon, and Hobbes” (Howell, 1951, p. 299).

The popularity of Ramism in England began in the late 16th century when Roland MacIlmaine published Ramus’ dialectic in English (Howell, 1951, p. 303). MacIlmaine had also
published Ramus’ dialectic in Latin, (Howell, 1951, p. 303). The rhetorical and dialectical landscape in England at the time was constituted similarly to that the French university landscape. According to Howell, once Ramus’ works were introduced (along with those of Omer Talon), the result was a complete victory over “the heresy of allowing dialectic and rhetoric to duplicate each other in important areas of subject matter” (Howell, 1951, p. 304). From here the works caught on and were annotated and republished with contemporary commentary through the next century by several different authors both in English and Latin, most notably by John Milton, Charles Butler and Thomas Hobbes (Howell, 1951, pp. 306-308).

Milton, notably, overtly credits Ramus in his Plenior Institutio and notes it as a “fuller institution...arranged after the method of Peter Ramus,” taking what he called Ramus’ density and expanding it into “those aids to a more complete understanding of the precepts of the art [of logic] which must of necessity be sought in the Scholae dialecticae of Ramus himself” (French, 1949, p. 84).

Transmissions and translations of the works of Ramus and Talon also began to be conflated with the works and theories of 17th and 18th century thinkers through the addition of extensive commentaries and simultaneous publications in English and Latin. Through this process the name Ramus was sometimes, literally, lost in translation and contemporary authors are given credit for work that was meant, in many cases, to add to or respond to Ramist method. All this is said to point out that the simplicity and appeal of Ramist method contributed to its endurance throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the colonists were building a system of university education that fell right in line with the European fashion for Ramism. In the American colonies of the 17th and early 18th centuries, the educational focus was less on the trivium or the teachings
of Cicero and Aristotle. Warren Guthrie reviewed rhetorical texts in early American colleges and finds that there are almost no works by Aristotle included in, for example, the founding Harvard College Library. In fact, the classical authors are not noted as part of university libraries until the early decades of the 18th century. Further, the writings of Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero were not widely popularized until the middle of the century (Guthrie, 1946, p. 16). While Cicero’s oratories were known and studied in the 17th and early 18th centuries, his rhetoric remained fairly unknown until this time as well (Guthrie, 1946, p. 16). The same is true for Aristotle’s rhetoric.

Ramist method enjoyed a great deal of popularity in the Colonies. He was the preferred source of instruction on grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, and his work was certainly elevated above that of Aristotle, (Guthrie, 1946, p. 16). That Ramus limited the contributions of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian in his own writings, resulted in a further de-valuing of rhetoric (Guthrie, 1946, p. 16). Keep in mind that what colonists were reading was a compendium of Ramus’ work, which would have included his commentary on Aristotle, his dialectic and the treatise on rhetoric written by Omer Talon. Further lessening the importance of the classical authors, Ramus’ method assured students that all that was relevant from Aristotle, Quintilian and Cicero was included in his treatise on logic. Further, recollect that Ramus has demoted rhetoric to the decorative, stating that it “should treat only of style and delivery” (Guthrie, 1946, p. 16).

Conclusion

The enduring influences of Ramism play out through his embrace of the visual and the simplicity of his method which made it accessible to more people, thereby “democratizing the liberal arts” (Walton, 1970a, p. 120).

However, there were other factors at play. Among these are the greater use of vernaculars and the influence of Ramist method on Puritan and Calvinist thought, to wit, “Ramus and his
followers, in the name of scientific method, made this organization and vocabulary [of faith and obedience] an explicit characteristic of theology” (Sprunger, 1966, p. 137). In addition, the language of business and government began to move into the vernacular languages of French, German, English, etc. (Bonjour La France, 2012). There was a powerful sense at play that things could be known if we could but leverage our human reason to its fullest capacity. Ramus provided us with a path. Hamilton (1987) pointed out that the “idea that logical maps could aid the teaching of any field of inquiry was a new and powerful idea in the sixteenth century…the Ramist approach to the mapping of knowledge furnished students with a ‘universal skeleton key’ which, if ‘properly applied’, could unlock any of the arts or sciences” (p. 23).

The groundwork laid by the intellectual home base of Ramist method and its accompanying commitment to logic provided western consciousness an entree into the 18th century “cult of reason” (Ong, 1953, p. 244).

Ong’s scholarship on Ramus has been influential in tracing Renaissance rhetorical practices to Ramist method. The formulary tradition of rhetorical tropes had, “by the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, …been gradually replaced by the visual, and highly literate and print oriented emphasis on romantic expressiveness and private consciousness” (Comprone, 1986, p. 144). From the technical, oral, and agonistic to the “visual, highly literate and print oriented” (Comprone, 1986, p. 144), it must not be forgotten that the method absorbed into western consciousness was visual in nature.

Through the printed page, the availability of rhetoric in native and vernacular voices, leaving behind dialectic and the oral voice, “the way was cleared for the Romantic emphasis on the writer as a private composer, separated from other composers in space and time, writing in
private study apart from the play of voices so important to oral dialectic” (Comprone, 1986, p. 145).

Ramus’ prioritization of the written word as part of the learning process furthered an engagement with the internal voice. This did two things. First, it allowed for a voice that comes from an internal dialogue with self, rather than a voice that communicates from a locus of regenerative tropes and commonplaces as part of a collective conversation. Second, the method moved away from the necessity of a fixed point of truth while at the same time providing an exacting procedure for understanding what we know. “Ramus is explicit about the universal applicability of his analysis as finding the whole of an art in one or another work representing the subject in question, or as near the whole as possible” (Ong, 1961a, p. 39). The analysis is a key pivot point in distinguishing between the Ramist method and Renaissance “procedures” (Ong, 1961a, p. 41).

Ong helps us to see all of the elements of Ramist method, from the intellectual roots in Agricola, to the environment of the university and the changing roles of rhetoric and dialectic. It is from Ong’s thoroughgoing study of Ramism, which included a series of articles published prior to and after Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue (1958) in which we can see the seeds his later projects such as Presence of the Word (1967) and Orality and Literacy (1982). Ong is attentive to history but also attentive to his own historical moment. By further reviewing Ong’s scholarship leading up to and from the Ramus project, we can build on his insights on method, the visual and the vernacular and leverage them as a lens for understanding mediated communication today.
CHAPTER 3

ONG’S RAMUS

As discussed in Chapter One, Ong’s intellectual interests were quite broad, from religion, to literature, to psychology, to history, to rhetoric and beyond. However, one of the most valuable facets of Ong as a thinker and scholar was his ability to synthesize knowledge across disciplines. Many of the themes that come under Ong’s thoroughgoing interest in Ramus, *Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958) emerge in his scholarship in the decades following, culminating, perhaps, in his most popular work *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Some of the fascinating intellectual connections Ong continues to explore, a few of which were touched upon in chapter two, include his interest in the shift from oral to visual, the evolution of the western literary tradition, the emergence of interiority, the history of rhetoric, education and the effects of the shift from chirographic to print culture.

In this chapter I will explore Ong’s early scholarship leading up to and beyond the Ramus project to show how it laid the groundwork for his future work. Ong is a scholar of rhetoric and is always interested in its ebb and flow throughout history, which I think sometimes gets lost amidst his important work on the cultural and intellectual changes that happen when cultures become literate. Ong’s work on Ramus lays the foundation for how he understands and writes about rhetoric and literature for the rest of his career. Ong (1971) explains rhetoric, from Aristotle to the 20th century, as the “intermediary stage between the unconscious and conscious”, arising “out of the primary oral world . . . [and coming] into being as a formal discipline only through the use of writing” (pp. 12 - 13).
**Farrell and Johns on Ong’s Scholarship and Interests**

Throughout his career Ong asks how our present use and understanding of language evolved over time and how this evolution has affected human consciousness. While Ong’s psychoanalytic study of the shift of human consciousness from primary oral and public to a greater interiority upon literacy is one of the most significant of Ong’s contributions, there is much more we can learn from his scholarship. He continually traces the status of language from one historic point to another. For example he studies the transition of literature and business from being primarily written in Latin, to literatures appearing primarily in the vernacular. Ong seeks to help us understand underpinnings, influences, and slow-forming habits of culture that have lead to our communication practices of today, rather than focusing on final solutions and universal answers. These influences and practices are deeply rhetorical. To Ong, language is immediate and portable, moving across borders of countries and time, via physical artifacts as well as through styles of teaching, business practices, and religious perspectives. Ong’s work also points out the slow erosion of a particular understanding of rhetoric and dialectic into something different, affected by politics, religion, technology and inertia.

As a writer Ong is engaging and clear. But Ong’s scholarship is built upon understanding what came before and how it continues to be implicated in the present. His additions to the understanding of the origins of 20th century language, communication and literature can add to our understanding of rhetoric today, in the age of continually emergent tools of communication technology.

By looking at Ong’s scholarship as it is related to and built out of his larger Ramus projects, we will be able make further inquiry into his understanding of an ascendance of vernaculars and method leading into the 21st century in the following chapters. Ong sees that the
changes that Ramist method affected, directly and indirectly, still reverberate today. Some of the questions Ong poses in essays published around the time of the Ramus projects include: Why did the logical system of a man who many called, an intellectual lightweight endure well into the 19th century? What was happening in the university system that was hospitable to Ramist method? How is the literature of the 20th century still influenced by Ramism? How did the writing and printing of Latin texts influence the development of vernacular literatures?

Ong is clearly influenced by the research climate surrounding literature and rhetoric in the early part of the 20th century. There were books published during Ong’s early years as a Jesuit priest and graduate student that would have come to his attention, such as S.E. Morrison’s accounts of “Ramism in seventeenth-century New England life” and Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind* (Johns, 2004). Ong’s in-depth study of Ramus offers us a foundation for understanding the historic trajectory of rhetoric and the genesis of the modern mind.

Thomas Farrell reminds us that while Ong was a graduate student in English, Ong himself framed his research as “a kind of phenomenological history of culture and consciousness...elaborated in terms of noetic operation” (Farrell & Soukup, 2002, p. 19). To look at Ong’s scholarship on Ramus, or on pedagogy or at the effect of the visual turn in human communication is to segment Ong’s work in a way that he himself never did. The point is Ong would not draw a line between the historical impact of communication technology and rhetoric, media revolutions as Adrian Johns called them (Johns, 2004, p. xi). Farrell tells us that Hannah Arendt once told Ong he had a dialectical mind (Farrell & Soukup, 2002). One can indeed see this dialectical approach in the way that Ong leaves no stone unturned in his Ramus research, revisiting the Ramus scholarship and then examining next the primary texts for dialectic and rhetoric in use in Europe and North America into the 20th century.
It is clear that Ong maintains a deep interest in rhetoric and the human impact of rhetorical practices on human consciousness and communication. These underpinning interests are informed, in Ong’s research, by attentiveness technological innovation, tracking the transition from primary oral to primary literate, understanding the recession of Latin in favor of vernaculars, and recognizing the impact of both university education and the vernacular education of the merchant and guild classes. As Farrell points out, Ong’s education in philosophy, English and his preparation for Jesuit priesthood uniquely equipped him to pursue his scholarship from this dialectic framework (Farrell & Soukup, 2002).

Thus equipped through his religious and humanities education, and with the encouragement of his dissertation director Marshal McLuhan, Ong begins a decade-long in-depth quest to understand Ramus and Ramism. But Ramus and Ramism turned out to be just a part of the story Ong unfolds. There are lines of inquiry that lead Ong to and through his Ramus study and which frame the trajectory of his scholarship. These lines of inquiry are: the history of rhetoric; study of educational practices including the agonistic tradition and the role of education in the home as overseen by women; the slow decline of learned Latin and rise of vernaculars as languages of literature and learning; the evolution of literacy and the influence of method. By drawing from Ong’s research, we shall be able to better understand today’s communication landscape, one that consists of myriad publishing and distribution technologies, evolving educational practices, and a broad embrace of sophisticated rhetorical practice through a mediated vernacular.

**Rhetoric Constrained**

Ong begins publishing articles about Peter Ramus and the influence of Ramist method in 1949, years before he completed his dissertation and almost a decade before he published *Ramus,*
Method and the Decay of Dialogue (1958). While Ong looks at many avenues of Ramist method and its influence on western literatures, rhetoric is the framework within which Ong situates much of this study. He explains,

we have found rhetoric a more and more fascinating subject of study – not so much as a skill to be used by ourselves but rather as a historical phenomenon. Seen through history in its full sociological and noetic context, rhetoric throws a great deal of light on much in the past which is otherwise obscure and mystifying. (Ong, 1971, p. vii)

Throughout his Ramus project, Ong concerns himself with the divergence of rhetoric and logic, formerly parts of a unitary whole when combined with grammar. As we shall see below, he also attends to this divergence in his many writings on pedagogy, English literatures of the Tudor era and in his understanding of the diglossic nature of learned language as primary written.

Rhetoric began to recede in importance during the Middle Ages, falling below philosophy and dialectic in pedagogical priority, and this in part because of the diffusion of Ramist method. Perhaps more importantly, the practice of rhetoric moved away from a focus on oral performance and instead became a study of “advanced instruction in grammar, leading to what is...called ‘theme’ writing as well as to declamations and orations” (Ong, 1968, p. 42). Ong defines this shift in rhetorical practice from the Middle Ages through Renaissance as of refining oral argument to a process that begins with writing, meaning that “rhetoric is...the ‘art’ developed by a literate culture to formalize the oral communication skills which had helped determine the structures of thought before literacy” (Ong, 1968, p. 40).

Ong was acutely attentive to the use of learned Latin in university up into the 20th century. Peter Ramus wanted education to take place in vernacular language and the unintended consequences of his efforts are a topic Ong writes about and that will be dealt with more fully in Chapter 4.
Rhetoric could move from an oral to a literate practice, in part, because Ramist method offered up a convenient logical framework. However, we must remember that Ramus did not leave rhetoric completely behind. Rather, rhetoric was subsumed within dialectic, where, like every topic, it is dichotomized into its component parts: in the case of rhetoric stylization and ornamentation (Ong, 1954, p. 132). These are then further sliced into (stylistization) “tropes and figures and tropes into the four species of metonomy, irony, metaphor and synechdoche” (Ong, 1954, p. 132). Within Ramist method, everything has an order and everything moves from the general to the particular. Rhetoric was considered an overarching framework from which language flowed, a written framework, reducing or eliminating contingency (Ong, 1954, p. 135).

As we have seen,

Ramus felt it his mission to liquidate the probable logics, insisting that all logic was pure science; indeed that it was precisely a technique for doing away with probability. Rhetoric, as he conceived it, was something neatly cut off from logic, applying ornamentation to logically organized discourse. (Ong, 1954, p. 136)

Ong (1954) is attentive to the implications of seeing rhetoric as distinct from logic. He notes that while “the Ramus tradition” is attractive in its simplicity, it is “impoverished” (p. 136). When logic is made the overarching framework of discourse and writing, language becomes impoverished, not because it has need of the ‘ornament’ that rhetoric can provide, but rather because it has lost all touch with any rhetorical ground.

Logic is not psychologically integrated with the rest of conscious life, a growth out of this life. It is something detachable, capable of being clamped indifferently onto any one of the arts of discourse. With such a logic, it was only natural to think of rhetoric, too, as something equally
detachable, an absolute something applied without further ado now to on language and now to another. (Ong, 1954, p. 136).

Ong (1954) points out that the modern rhetorical tradition can be traced quite specifically to the publications of Peter Ramus although many of the works shown to be influential in French literature were not overtly authored by Ramus. Ong (1954) explains that many of the rhetoric and dialectic publications were either commentaries on Ramus’ and Talon’s publications or were works that were overt, if unintentional, plagiarizations of the Dialectic and Rhetoric, (pp. 127-29). One such example Ong (1954) writes about is the case of Fouquelin who, as it turns out, was a student of Ramus and translated the Talon rhetoric into vernacular French (p. 130). Fouquelin gave Ramus credit in the introduction to the book of Ramist rhetoric that he published in French. Ramus dialectic had already been published in French but the rhetoric was rarely translated into a vernacular, (1954, p. 130). Ong (1954) also notes that others overlooked the fact that Fouquelin’s rhetoric was not simply influenced by Ramus, rather it was Ramus’ rhetoric, published first in vernacular French, going on to see more than 100 editions, (pp. 128-9). Ong (1954) sees that Ramus meant for the rhetoric and dialectic to work together, although he subsumed rhetoric within dialectic, which gave him the orderly framework within which to reason (p. 130).

Ong further opens up rhetoric in his study of Ramus through his understanding that in the transition from primary oral to primary literate, we find the divergence of rhetoric and logic, some would say in favor of logic, and the beginning of a centuries-long recession of an appreciation of rhetoric. Donald C. Bryant (1950) explained that while the logical proof is an important part of the rhetorical tradition, there is:
A distinction between rhetoric as a scholarly study, and rhetoric as a body of principle and precept available to the speaker and critical for ‘discovering in any given case all the available means of persuasion.’ It is the distinction between a philosophy and a code of behavior, between scientific research and technological application, the one resulting in a theoretical treatise, the other in a manual of instruction. (p. 169) Certainly Ramist method falls within the definition of ‘manual of instruction’.

The result of this, which Ong (1968) identifies, is a complete flip in how arguments are created and delivered. Declamations and orations are conceived of and practiced in writing and then delivered to an audience (Bryant, 1950; Murphy, 1967; Ong 1958, 1968). While Ramus had his students learn from example and first-hand knowledge, it was so that they could use those examples in writing to support their points. The way that points were supported was through the visual diagram in which any topic under the sun could be understood by moving from universals to particulars (Ong 1953, 1958, 1961b, 1968). While this approach is not new, the fact that Ramus developed it as a visual/logical theme rather than an oral/enthymemetic theme had revolutionary effects. It is these remnants that Ong perhaps sees in his literature studies.

As literacy grew throughout the Middle Ages, rhetoric’s role became limited to ornamentation of primarily written work, no longer developed in conjunction with logic. Ong (1982) explains that rhetoric “migrated” from oral culture to chirographic culture and “by the sixteenth century rhetoric textbooks were commonly omitting from the traditional five parts of rhetoric...memory, which was not applicable to writing. They were also minimizing.... delivery” (p. 114). By the Age of Romanticism, rhetoric is no longer dominant in the culture, (Ong, 1982, p. 107). As Ong (1982), Havelock and others show, “the study of rhetoric, dominant in all western cultures...had begun as the core of ancient Greek education and culture. In ancient
Greece, the study of philosophy...for all its subsequent fecundity, was a relatively minor element in the total Greek culture, never competitive with rhetoric either in the number of its practitioners or in its immediate social effects” (p. 107).

The move away from rhetoric, as Ong (1982) says, is a move toward the quantification of knowledge, (p. 127). Further, the addition of new communication technologies in the following centuries come at the cost of what Ong (1967) calls,

cultural squint [which] shows how the communication media of our own culture impose themselves on us surreptitiously as absolutes, with crippling effect. For centuries the inability of literate thinkers to conceive meaningfully of what the spoken word actually is has blocked our fuller understanding not only of . . . the massive rhetorical tradition which underlies Western culture. (pp. 21-2)

While Ramist method helped to move rhetoric from its central position in academic study once literacy took hold, Ong builds on this to help our understanding of the visual focus of literacy. Ong helps us to see Ramist method primed the process for the quantification of knowledge.

**Method Expanded**

For Ong, to understand method is to find the doorway between the Middle Ages and modernity. Ong is not satisfied by understanding Ramist method as a technique. Ong looks at the practice and the term method in the broadest of senses. Consequently, method must be understood in terms of the reach of Ramism, the broad adoption of “methodism”, and the methodology of writing. Ong helps us by explicating the nature of Ramist method thereby making the historical, geographical and pedagogical connections with ‘method’ in a much broader sense.
Ong identifies the roots of “method” and “methodist” in both ancient practice and their meanings in the Middle Ages. Beginning with the etymology of method Ong (1958) explains that method in the “radical sense” is a “pursuit” or “following after” or “way through,” which evolved to mean the “pursuit of knowledge or an investigation” (p. 225). For the ancient Greeks, method meant more of a “mode of prosecuting such inquiry, with emphasis on logical rather than physical procedure” (Ong, 1958, p. 226). The word method, according to Ong (1958), is also strongly associated with medicine that involved not only a routine of healing, for the ancients, but also “the broader paralogical notion of an intelligent approach to a complex problem” (p. 227).

During the Middle Ages, Ong (1953) notes that “Methodists” were those persons who observe “a more regular method of study and behavior than was usual with those of their age and station” (p. 236). Ong (1953) points to the origination of methodism in the dispute surrounding the nature of science which, as we have seen, Ramus develops into his method (p. 237). Here, Ong (1953) begins to note the divergence of rhetoric and dialectic and the demotion of rhetoric into grammar, an idea that is central to Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue (p. 236).

In addition to methodists, we also find in Ong’s early published work on Ramus an exploration of the word ‘method’ itself, linking it back to John Wesley and the naming of the “Methodist” sect of Christianity. According to Ong (1953), Wesley’s understanding and description of methodism failed to take into account any pre-Cartesian roots and certainly did not link it back to the controversy incited by Peter Ramus teachings and writings, (p. 235). While

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3 Ong looks at the terms ‘method’, ‘way’, and ‘methodism’ across much of his work in an effort to understand the evolution of dialectic from Ramus to the present. For the purposes of this chapter, we capitalize “Method”, or not, according to the corresponding Ong reference. Ong began looking at method before he completed his dissertation initially in an article entitled “Peter Ramus and the Naming of Methodism: Medieval Science Through Ramist Homiletic” in which he sets out to understand John Welsley’s attempt to control the sense of the word as distinct from he understood its classical meaning. Welsley did not want method to mean an absurd attention to following procedure but rather redefined it as an expected set of orderly behaviors. See Ong, "Peter Ramus and the Naming of Methodism: Medieval Science Through Ramist Homiletic", 1953, p. 237.
Ong (1953) credits Wesley with identifying Methodism as having to do with broad procedure, such as attending church every Sunday, he notes that there was not much more methodical about it, (p. 236). Procedure in sermons, eschewed the need for rhetorical persuasion and the only argument needed was logical argument, (Ong, 1953, p. 239). Ong (1953) also explains that Wesley had absorbed certain approaches and assertions of Ramus without any direct link or credit to Ramus as the source of the ideas, (p. 238). For example, Wesley’s writing on rhetoric and logic insisted on moving from the general to the particular, a central tenet of Ramism, (Ong, 1953, p. 238). Ong (1953) also points out Wesley’s continued dichotomy between rhetoric and logic, which Ramus also insisted should be taught separately (p. 237).

Procedure is at the core of Ramist method. Ong (1953) calls Ramism:

A cult of of disjunction-for-simplification and this cult as manifested in the Ramist view of ‘method,’ which pared down the structure of all oratory, and, indeed, of every sort of discourse including the of the simple interjection, to a one-dimensional logic, forms the background in which the term Methodism was set. (p. 237)

Method for Ramus, then, meant the art of arrangement of the content of an art or discipline, (Ong, 1953, p. 240). The rhetorical method was divided into three steps, as Ong (1953) explains it, the same as in dialectic, nature, art and exercise. Ramist method looked first to nature and to what our human understanding experiences and then moved, essentially from genera to species. In fact, Ramus’ frustration was that it was very “difficult to produce genuinely first principles” (Ong, 1962, p. 79). Ramus’ solution was to ‘methodize’ all fields of human knowledge. Ong (1962) sees the hubris and lack of scope in Ramus’ approach and calls Ramus’ attempts at organizing all of human knowledge, “the amateurish works of a desperate man who is not a thinker but merely and erudite pedagogue” (p. 80).
This method could be applied to various topic areas that allowed individuals to arrange knowledge from what is known in the first, to the second, to the third place. Method, in this instance, according to Ong (1962), can be seen as a ‘way’, (p. 76). Every field of human knowledge could be ordered utilizing the same method. Method itself must be seen in the larger context of the emergence of the scientific method with modernity on the horizon, (Ong, 1953, p. 235). Understanding not just how a blood vessel works but how it works in conjunction with the entire system of the body serves as a metaphor for the search for a relation of knowledge to first principles and eternal truths (Ong, 1953, p. 242).

It is important to note here the visual nature of ‘way’ or ‘method’. “Method is patently a concept based on visualist analogy, which takes up the concept of ‘way’ and further visualizes it by conferring on it a fuller implication of direction” (Ong, 1962, p. 78). Even the terminology of method is something Ong (1962) calls “psychogeometrical apparatus used to describe the intellectual processes” (p. 78). This way “was free or gradually freed itself, from auditory or oral commitments” (Ong, 1962, p. 78).

Ong’s interest in the meanings of method and way seem to be an important notion for his future work. Consider, for example, his interest in the irenic, especially in Presence of the Word as technological communication continues, from the Middle Ages on, to separate us from one another, (Ong, 1967, p. 294). He seeks a way to allow for meaningful discourse within mediated environments, beginning with print and the visual, in the ancient sense of seeing a way through that is not visualist or spatial in the sense Ong (1962) describes method and Methodism are, (pp. 77-8).
Ong and Pedagogy

Ever the teacher, Ong is interested in pedagogy and writes about it throughout his career. In some ways he understands Ramist method as a pedagogy. But, as Ong reminds us, all pedagogy has an historic trajectory. Recall that Ramus was steeped in classical training while innovating a method to accomplish the work of teaching youngsters basic principles of dialectic and rhetoric. The transitions in the practices of education and, more importantly, the significant changes to our communication practices once western cultures moved from chirographic to literate, are to be found within the framework European and American University systems. Throughout his career, Ong thinks about teaching and the role of the university classroom and its pedagogy in terms of their influence on communication practice over time.

Throughout the 1950’s Ong publishes several essays on pedagogy and teaching, many of them then combined into the collection *The Barbarian Within*, published in 1962. In the preface, we can see that Ong’s *Ramus* project opens up landscapes for further exploration we see later in *The Presence of the Word* (1967) and *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Ong (1962) writes, “Education is intimately connected with the study of the word, for it is essentially a communications process, and one most central to society – the process whereby society reviews what it knows about everything while it undertakes to pass what it knows on to its newer members” (p. 10).

While the structure and pedagogy of the university of the Middle Ages was discussed in Chapter 2, it is important to note that Ramist method was also taught not just to future clergy, lawyers, doctors and professors but was beginning to be taught to the guild and merchant classes. Consequently, Ramist method was absorbed both within the university practice and in communication practices outside of those more scholarly fields such as medicine and law. In
“Ramist Method and the Commercial Mind”, published in 1961, Ong looks at “the extraordinary diffusion of [Ramus’] works during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (p. 155). In the essay, Ong (1961) explores both the distribution and traction of Ramism within “Protestant groups of merchants and artisans more or less tinged with Calvinism” (p. 155). Here we have the blending of a Calvinist frame of mind, methodism [or way as explained above] combined with the need to conduct business matters efficiently. One can see quickly that a simple method would be appealing. Craftsmen and merchants would have been educated to the point of learning Ramist method in the ‘normal schools’ of the universities, but would not have moved on to specialization of Master in university (Ong, 1961b, p. 159). Because of its simplicity and applicability, Ramist method was especially commercializable amongst these classes of people (Ong, 1961b, p. 160).

At the root of the university system, Ong (1962) tells us, was a sense of guild. Universities were centers of learning for students preparing to join guilds such as medicine, law and theology (p. 151). In his article “Educationists and the Tradition of Learning,” Ong (1958) explains that all university students of the Middle Ages were considered apprentices upon completion of the bachelor degree, and who were expected to teach for two years upon completion of the Master degree. Students were taught to teach students. Students, in essence, hired their own teachers. By papal bull, graduates of the Universities of Bologna and Paris were granted the right to “teach anywhere” (Ong, 1958, p. 62). Ong (1962) points out that things are not so very different today. Bachelors “commence” into the commercial (guild) world and those Masters (doctorate equivalent today) are welcomed into the “guild” of teachers (pp. 152-3). With teachers teaching teachers and masters granted the right to teach anywhere, Masters then also aided in the distribution and practice of Ramist method.
A major difference between the Medieval university and the university of the mid-20th century, according to Ong (1962), was in the understanding the nature and purpose of logic, (p. 152). During the Middle Ages logic was not, as we tend to consider it today, symbolic and abstract in nature. Logic was considered dialectic, most closely understood as “the art of discourse” (Ong, 1962, p. 154). Logic and dialectic were synonymous throughout the Middle Ages (Ong, 1962, p. 154). Bear in mind, as Ong 1971) asks, that all teaching was conducted through the teaching and practice of oration, and that Ramus’ devotion to discourse is what set it apart and helped it to endure, (p. 3).

While dialectic was understood as the art of discourse Ramus’ dialectic ultimately helped facilitate the development of a private mind and voice. Ramist method focused on writing in order to speak. Ong (1958) shows us that the focus on dialectic in university of the Middle Ages, on which he writes extensively during the 70’s and 80’s, allowed for private thinking in the preparation and practice of oration, (p. 63). This changes the trajectory of both education and our consciousness in significant ways that Ong addresses in Orality and Literacy, Presence of the Word and in several monographs.

With the focus on dialectic and the practice of writing, Hildebrandt (1988) points out an emphasis placed on writing by the demands of the business person of the Middle Ages and explains that, “as fledgling commercial ventures between and within countries gathered momentum, there was an increasing need on both the political an commercial level for recording communication between groups or individuals” (p. 8). While there was not yet a fully articulated theory of “written composition” the models began in oratory, and later became the subject of “compendiums of rules and models for writing” (Hildebrandt, 1988, pp. 8-9). Rhetoric then loses its standing because the need for it grows dim. Oral discourse outside of the university, the law
court and the church begins to take a lesser role as the documentation of business transactions takes a more primary role, (Hildebrandt, 1988, p. 9). Rhetoric is seen as ceremonial, although the precepts were absorbed into writing, (Hildebrandt, 1988).

Add to this the change in the focus on the trivium as a learning framework. Ong (1968) notes that the understanding of rhetoric came to mean the management of expression in general, not just oral expression (p. 40). This can only happen when language moves from oral and chirographic to visual and literate (Ong, 1968, p. 40). Consequently, the development of argument and persuasion takes a major shift in the decades following the emergence and distribution of Ramism, which at its core is a literate and visual practice. In Ramism, even when intended for public performance, argument was drawn up first in writing in preparation for performance. According to Ong, Ramist method contributed to the transition to the modern mind with its focus on logic and the development of scientific method. It is through his understanding of the history of education practices that Ong helps to track how logic overtook rhetoric in precedence in the university. He explains that calling dialectic or logic “the art of arts and the science of sciences...is even stronger in its didactic orientation than it appears...the definition thus reads almost as if to stay that logic is ‘the curriculum subject of curriculum subjects, providing the way to the principles of all curriculum subjects” (Ong, 1958, p. 64). We can see the appeal to Ramus who sought to systematize the subjects of oration and indeed all of human knowledge.

Furthering Vernacular as a Language of Learning

As we look at the shift from oral to literate practices in education, we must also look at the seepage of these practices from the Latin classroom into the vernacular realms. Ong maintains an ongoing fascination with Latin as the language of learning and the learned. For
centuries, Latin was the language of the educated class. But, as Ong (1984) notes, those who spoke Latin had learned it as boys by writing it.

Long past the completion of his *Ramus* (1958) work Ong continues to ponder the nature of Latin through the Middle Ages into modernity. Latin was distinct from other languages in that, until the 18th century, vernaculars remained chirographic in nature. Latin language was built upon a grammar, rules for use and structures of argumentation, persuasion and analysis. The popularity of Ramism and its imitators aided in the continuance of Latin as the language of the learned. Vernaculars in general were considered vulgar. They operated without rules of grammar and without the neat deductive character of Ramist method (Ong, 1984). It is fascinating to consider the persistence of Latin given that, according to Ong (1954, 1984), both the influences and remnants primary oral communication remain visible and in use, even unto the present day.

Vernacular, on the other hand, historically resided in the realm of hearth and home, the realm of the feminine featuring less formal structure and grammatical rules. Formal education was for most of western history for boys and boys alone. Whatever skills of language and writing girls were taught happened almost exclusively in this less formal realm. While very young boys were taught basic reading and writing in the home, around age seven they were sent to university where masters taught them to speak, write and conduct all learning in Latin, (Ong, 1959, p. 109). This transition to university and the realm of Latin, Ong (1959) explains, was the threshold between clan life and tribe life for males, and why he refers to the vernacular realm as feminine (p. 105).

Still, there was an interest in elevating vernaculars amongst the humanists. They attempted to develop an education system from the home, which included educating women (in Latin), but the scholastic system was too entrenched (Ong, 1959, p. 109). The humanist approach
would wish to harken back to classical times when Latin was the mother tongue which children were taught in the home, but the reality was that the mother tongues of the Middle Ages were vernacular languages (Ong, 1959, pp. 104, 109). At this time, university teaching materials were, almost exclusively, produced in Latin, (Ong, 1959, p. 104).

Ong (1954) explains that Ramus himself was interested in furthering his mother tongue, the French language. He wanted more than to promote teaching and writing in Latin, (p. 140). This makes sense in the context of Ramist method for it would follow that if Ramist dialectic is applicable to everything knowable that it is also applicable to everything knowable in any language. In fact, Ramus’ dialectic and grammar were both first published in French (as in a grammar guide for the French language) but both were quickly translated into Latin (although his Latin grammar was not translated into French), (Ong, 1954, p. 140). Even Fouquelin, about whom Ong (1954) wrote, published his rhetoric [basically the Ramus and Talon rhetoric] in French and it too was quickly translated into Latin (p. 139).

Publishing works in vernaculars was not typical at this time. In fact, vernacular publications were more typically translated into Latin because authors found more commercial success with Latin publications. Ong (1954) points out that this interest in publishing in the vernacular did not take a firm or quick hold in Europe during the 16th or 17th centuries and adds that when works were published in vernaculars, the interest was often in ‘scientizing’ the vernacular, that is, to put an order and method to it to give it a greater sense of legitimacy, such as that found in Latin texts, (p. 141). The transmission of Ramist ideas and methodology, even if begun in vernacular language, remained ensconced in Latin for more than a century.

Ong shows us that there was not an overt grappling between humanists and scholastics over where Latin education began. Rather, we must note the powerful assumption at play that all
learned communication and writing was to be conducted in Latin, regardless of whether the classroom was in the home or in the university. It was expected that Latin would remain the language of scholarship, business and religion, separate and distinct from the vernacular language of home and hearth. In fact, if one wanted to study any profession, it was absolutely necessary to be first educated in Latin in order to even have access to that learning, (Ong, 1974, p. 232). As Ong says, it was simply the way things were done, (1959, p. 122).

In addition to the assumption of Latin as the language of learning, Ong (1984) also calls attention to the dissociative nature of text that happened as writing became a greater part of university curriculum. Teaching was primarily oral as was lesson learning. Exams were oral and there were no written assignments. Writing, it seems was intended as an aid in studying disputation. Hence Ramus’ system of organizing thought, highly diagrammatic and visual, was intended to aid students in their argumentation. Ong (1984) sees that although texts and writing were widespread, the nature of them was still primary oral in that plays and books tended toward the episodic and featured heroic archetypes, much in the fashion of the oral epic (Ong, 1984, p. 3).

Ong notes that these forays into vernacular at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries do not indicate that contemporary teachers and scholars were aware of or were even concerned with a transition to university vernacular and growing literacy. While there were certainly scholastic and humanistic agendas at play in the university system, what Ong, Havelock, Eisenstein and others help keep at the fore of communication research is that changes in communication practice play out as slow changes in habit that happen over time. While every culture has a mother tongue, Ong has identified a point in history where vernaculars begin to be
elevated to the place of ceremony and art. Ong’s contribution is that the source of this evolution rests, in part, on Ramism.

Ramus developed a system within which students could organize and store their thoughts, in writing. By making writing a generative rather than documenting activity, Ramus creates the opportunity for words, phrases and ideas to be shifted around within the structure of the system. This might serve well the needs of a Latin schoolboy, but Ong identifies that Ramus’ system when combined with the facility of mother tongue opened the opportunity for literatures beyond those required by the classroom. It’s helpful to keep in mind that the structures of Latin and Ramist dialectic learned in the university classroom were often applied outside of the university setting in the vernacular realm.

Vernaculars did not take hold as respected languages of literature until a grammar was applied. And although many romance languages were commonly written, because the nature of writing tended to be chirographic rather than grammatical, they remained considered low and unlearned languages (Ong, 1968, p. 8). Ultimately, the combination of the precedence of Latin as the language of learning and the influence of Scholasticism set the stage for the emergence of modern atomist mentality. Indeed, Ong (1968) states that the prospect of modern science was enhanced by “a textualized, chirographically controlled language such as Learned Latin [which] aided greatly in establishing the distance between observer and observed, between the knower and the known” (pp. 8-9).

What Ong’s work on Ramus shows is that Ramism was a hospitable catalyst as Renaissance humanism began to emerge. It is a period of increasing literacy, education and of elevation of vernaculars. It is also the point at which the turn to the visual becomes permanently entrenched and even chirographic vernacular culture becomes writing culture.
This brings Ong to a point in his scholarship where he can begin to explore the nature of literacy. He has a commanding understanding of the genesis of a (necessarily visual) literate culture, never quite free from its oral/aural heritage. Ong helps us to see that in the visual commitment of literacy, knowledge itself becomes an ironic dichotomy. With writing we can lose the codification and structuration of knowledge that was necessary for oral cultures. Biakolo (1999) explains oral discourse as “[traditionalist] and conservative [demanding] continuity and stasis and [eschewing] experimentation” (p. 45). Writing cultures, in contrast “are innovative and inventive. Information storage and retrieval no longer present any problem, the spirit of novelty is given free reign” (Biakolo, 1999).

**Literacy and the Degradation of Sound**

Early in his research career Ong begins to get a fix on the complex factors affecting the transition from a primary oral to primary literate culture. He explores this in several essays prior to completion of the larger *Ramus* project and continued to explore it in the decades after.

The transition from orality to literacy is not only huge in the scheme of human communication but the transition is largely unacknowledged. Once literacy takes hold it is assumed and the study of oral traditions and cultures absorbs even the language of literacy (Ong, 2002, p. 250). Language and communication are further atomized into their component parts. This in turn degrades orality and sound into a “by-product of an unreflective graphic culture” (Ong, 2002, p. 250). Ong continues to write about orality, residual orality and secondary orality throughout much of his scholarship. Having woven together, into a coherent cultural overview, his research on university education, humanism and scholasticism, pedagogy, method, the endurance of Latin, and the recession of classical rhetoric into a tool of ornamentation, Ong can turn his attention to some effects and outcomes. He has found a path from the intellectual world
of the Middle Ages leading into the Renaissance and modernity. It is a path that Ramism helped hew.

Ong (2002) remains interested the very nature of the process of writing which both situates language in space and invites dissection as works can be broken into syllables and organized into parts of grammar, which generally is much easier to apply to a written rather than spoken language, (p. 250). Thus structure of language strengthens in the written realm and rhetoric becomes a tool to be applied to the structure. In oral cultures, grammar was certainly used but in concert with rhetoric and not as an independent element of language use and study, (Ong, 2002, p. 250). The increased fixity of grammatical rules was made possible through the fixity of the word in space and through the increased delineation between grammar and rhetoric affected by pedagogical methodologies such as Ramism. Ong (2002) points out that when sound is “reduced to spatial equivalents by writing, the resulting product has, if not eternal duration, at least a repose that suggests imperishableness. Science favors fixity and repose [and]...scientific-type knowledge involves concepts formed by reference to space rather than to time: it is interested in ‘structure’” (p. 251).

The growing literacy of the European population further entrenches words committed to space. The conditioning of the mind to oral structures of rhetoric becomes possible through writing (Ong, 1984, p. 4). Because words were situated in space, they were certain and fixed, opening up the possibility of an expansiveness of language not possible in an oral culture, in which the greater focus of energy is spent on retention and transmission rather than massage. Ong (1984) explains that this allows for a greater complexity in “‘intricate interactions’ and affects philosophy and theology . . . psychology . . . [and] on [the] development of Christian
As Ong (2002) shows us, “written composition...began as an adaptation to a new medium of skills perfected in another, quite different medium” (p. 331). In his essay “Written Transmission of Literature”, published in 1967, Ong (2002) points out that our broad sense of “literature” is overstepping itself and questions need to be asked, namely:

What brought about the writing down of elaborate verbal expression, which for thousands of years had been an exclusively oral affair? Second, what happened to the ‘Matter’ when expression shifted from oral to written? That is, was the same ‘thing’ (incident, plot, characterization, attitude toward life, worldview) that had been communicated in oral performance also communicated when writing took over? Third, what happened to the forms of expression, in the sense of genres, as the use of writing developed? Finally, how have the oral and written influenced one another? (p. 332)

Ong wants to correct the overuse of the word literature to mean any form of intentional or performative communication. We have unthinkingly used the word literate to describe all forms of expression at all points in history. This is how powerful the notion of literacy is. It is no short endeavor when a culture becomes literate. In the transition from primary oral to literate culture, often literate was of a functional rather than the playful or creative endeavor it evolved into during the Renaissance. During the 15th and 16th Centuries more writing is done in mother tongue and writing becomes more widely available thanks to the printing press. In addition, while writing continues to be used for the transcription of oral performances, it is also bound up with the growing passion for record keeping, (Ong, 2002, p. 334). Transmission of knowledge in oral cultures was much about style, cadence, and repetition whereas “writing created new kinds of

Ong (1961a) again points to Ramist method in seeking an influential predecessor to this transition. Within Ramist methodology, students began with analysis of primary texts in order to generate composition, (p. 46). According to Ong (1961a) this focus on analysis “fixes attention on the written word rather than the spoken word, for analysis is primarily an exercise conducted upon a written text” (p. 46).

Many commentators on the transition to literacy have pointed out the fixed nature of the printed or written page but Ong (1984) points out that this fixed nature, during Middle Ages, also created the opportunity for the refinement of phraseology that could not have happened in a primary oral recitation (p. 3). “The calculating, analytic cultivation of such devices made possible by written rhetoric textbooks brought such forms to perfectionism that would have eluded a purely oral performer, no matter how skilled in other ways” (Ong, 1984, p. 3).

Ong looks at the oral residue in various literary artifacts. He notices that as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries opened, the “loose episodic structure, ...one of the central characteristics of oral culture was on its way out as narrative worked its way toward the modern novel and short story, [influenced by] devices such as Ramist “method [which] charmed the mind with prospects of organization that were basically visual, chirographic and, even more, typographic” (Ong, p. 147). It is important to note that Ramist method did not achieve greater credibility over time, but it did endure and did have an influence. Despite its endurance, during the Tudor era Ramist method, while inculcated in the culture, was not considered a serious logic to be taught. Instead it was considered a “petty logic” appealing “largely to the class of rising bourgeois” (Ong, 1968, p. 65). University scholars who favored Aristotle’s rhetoric never found
Ramist method to be “academically respectable on a large scale within the universities” (Ong, 1968, p. 65) but more the purview of the schoolmaster or university graduates not pursuing a further degree.

Instructed in the rules of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric in Latin, great writers of the 17th century such as Shakespeare then applied those rules to their own mother tongues with a tremendous sense of play and creativity. Latin rhetoric and dialectic were absorbed and into mother tongue, which in turn influenced writing in the mother tongue. Ong (1954) points out the astonishing irrationality of this procedure for “Latin was studied not to better one’s English or French but to better one’s Latin” (p. 141).

**Conclusion**

With Ong’s ability to see and assess the events both leading up to and the affects generated out of Ramist method, we can begin to see that his mind was indeed dialectic in nature. Yes, knowledge can be organized visually, as is in Ramist method. But if one looks at Ramist method as only a clever logic chart, a spectrum of influences and affects – some vital to the spread of Ramism – are left out. This is where Ong, Eisenstein, Innis and others help to cultivate an understanding that is more rhetorical in nature.

When we follow Ong’s research through the 1950’s and ’60’s, we can begin to see the emergence in his interest in the interiority that follows the silence of an audience that is reading or a speaker who is writing first. The ultimate dichotomy and question for Ong was and remained: what comes first – the writing, or the speech act (including oneself as audience). As the act of writing, or at least transcribing and revising oratory, began to become primary, even the illiterate are affected because the written revision process affects the nature of oral communication. The manner of language changes from commonplaces and enthymemes to
language that is more tightly controlled, that can be referred to in its exactitude (Ong, 1984, p. 432).

Ong’s research on Ramist method helps to open up our thinking about the human experience with language. He looked at the dialogue with the self or with the (unknown) audience when we write. He looked at classroom pedagogy. While Ong was incredibly thorough in his research and ultimately in his understanding of the historical influences that lead to the widespread distribution of Ramism, it is Ong’s interest in the dialogic encounter, I would argue, that is the overarching theme of his life of scholarship and teaching. Ong was foremost and always interested in the speaking person speaking and the effects of the way we communicate with one another, whether through speech, writing or other communication technologies.

There is opportunity to build on Ong’s work is by following his mentions and thoughts on vernacular languages and attend to his continued focus on orality and residual orality. Taking a lead from Ong, we must note that training in Ramist method and training in Latin certainly influenced an increasingly literate (in the vernacular) public. In addition, this emerging vernacular literacy was of course influenced the predominant educational practices and topics of the time, including Ramist method and formal Latin training. However, to build further on Ong’s work, we must examine the unintended consequences of Ramism and their affect on vernaculars and how they developed into literate languages.
CHAPTER 4

THE PARADOX OF RAMIST METHOD

In ancient oratory and classical rhetoric, oratory was a formal structure, practiced by few and created for the purposes of being performed in and heard by the public. From Ong’s work on Ramus we learn about the transition of formal rhetorical structures that dwelled amongst the learned classes to less formal (outside of the classroom) structure in the vernacular. We shall see in this chapter that the needs fulfilled by Ramist method the Latin university classroom are different than the needs of a vernacular public. We have seen that Ramus intended for dialectic to dwell in the realm of the practical and so it came to pass, but we must also acknowledge that the Latin university classroom was not the realm of the practical. Everyday life did not require the rhetorical techniques of the trivium such as polemic. The agonistic style of verbal combat was not necessary in the commercial life of the Middle Ages. In both the lay-world and the in the university, writing continued to gain in its adoption to fulfill the communication needs of each audience.

Ong’s scholarship, along with that of Eisenstein, Ellul, Innis, McLuhan and Mumford, among others, points out the significance of the shift to interiority that consciousness experienced as humans moved from primary oral to primary literate culture. We know that consciousness changes with fixed type. And Ong shows us that Ramist method was an important part of the fulcrum that allowed this shift. Yet oral practices do not cease, they change. Ong sought to see orality through literacy because orality is still a factor in literacy. Ong (1982) explains that oral speech “underpins all verbal communication” (p. 5) including writing and
newer technological forms of communication such as television and computer mediated communication. At this point, it will be helpful to look at how Ong understands the changes in oral practice as it evolves through the advent of literacy and beyond. This chapter will explore a paradox of Ramism that Ong’s research brings to light. The paradox is that Ramist method is both freeing and limiting to human communication. Oral cultures are necessarily limited by the ability to store and retrieve information, a limitation that goes away with fixed print. If one looks at Ramist method as a basic system of organization, it becomes possible to place a greater creative emphasis on the written work one is producing because there is a simple framework within which to work. The Ramist method by its very nature is limiting because it is a visual method, meaning that language becomes static and the author and reader/listener are not necessarily able to directly interact with one another. This paradox comes to light when we examine the Ong’s notion of residual orality, the decline in polemic practice, increasing education in vernacular, the influence of the feminine and the commodification of language, made possible by literacy.

As we have seen, Ramist method was intended to organize both thought and speaking under the single rubric of dialectic. Part of the unintended consequence of Ramist method was that the work was so widely distributed throughout Europe and the colonies. In addition, as shown in chapter 3, the Ramus’ dialectic and rhetoric were translated into the vernacular languages of Western Europe. But the influence of Ramist method on vernacular practices amounts to more than its availability in the mother tongue.

We can adopt Ong’s hermeneutic and examine 20th and 21st century systems of human communication to see how they are both freeing and limiting. An important element of our exploration must include vernacular, the word on the street, the informal and residually oral
language of bar stools and playpens. Ong helps us to see that in addition to the printing press and the wide adoption of Ramus method (or something of its many imitators), vernacular played a part of the equation to modern thinking, writing and literature. As with much of history, the development of vernacular literatures and the evolution to vernacular university education happened gradually as a result of other trends at play from the 16th Century on. With regard to the relevance of vernaculars, one might wish Ong would be occasionally prescriptive and point out that any significant change to human communication culture must be made accessible if it is to be adopted and what is more accessible than the language we learn from infancy.

**Residual Orality and Declining Polemic**

It is counterintuitive to think of a structure or system of language such as Ramist method as freeing. By freeing I mean freed from the yoke of memory needed to maintain continuity and economy of knowledge that are necessities of oral cultures, (Ong, 1988, p. 21). Looking at Ong’s research on the factors at play in the Middle Ages, when literacy became more widely adopted, can help our understanding. We begin with an explanation of residual orality and then proceed on to changes in the polemic style of teaching, the Latin classroom and the influence of what Ong and Farrell call the ‘feminine’ and vernacular education. Each of these, as will be shown, plays a role in how the system of Ramist method is a freeing rather than a limiting structure for human writing and literacy.

As we know, both formal learning and religious practices in Europe of the Middle Ages were conducted in Latin. This transitional period of increasing literacy, according to Farrell (1977), was also a period of residual orality, wherein clergy and professors applied *schemata verborum* – similar sounds and symmetric organization – of the classical rhetoric of Gorgias and Cicero, to be “intelligible and intriguing and to [the] audience, (p. 445). Farrell (1977) points out
Ong’s use of the term “residually oral culture” to characterize how “people have mastered the rudiments of reading and writing but oral habits of thought and expression still permeate their thinking. In other words, they have not fully interiorized the new symbolization processes of literacy” (p. 446). The late Middle Ages was a hybrid time when Latin was both written and spoken, as opposed to simply spoken, and a time during which students were expected to think, speak, and write in Latin, (Ong, 1958, p. 11).

Still, as Ong (1958) is careful to note, it must not be assumed that there was any sort of unified vernacular ‘agenda’ in either university or in business (p. 13). Latin was ‘assumed’ for its purposes of education and vernacular was ‘assumed’ in its realms of home and business. There was also not a hostile stance against vernaculars but a wish by the bourgeois to elevate it to the level of Latin, (Ong, 1958, p. 12).

In addition to the changing practice of Latin, during this time of residual orality, polemic remained a central characteristic of communication in both oral and literate practices (Ong, 1967, p. 246). This is understandable because we know that the university system was still largely based on the trivium and quadrivium. Ong explains (1967) that even when rhetoric was made to be about ornament rather than understanding, “it never lost its combative cast entirely. The medieval universities erected dialectical jousting into the sole and prescribed way of intellectual life, unable to find a way to truth except for cutting through whole phalanxes of adversaries real or imaginary” (p. 200). Verbal sparring comes out of ancient rhetorical practice where our human world could be understood in the binary of hero and villain.

Throughout the Middle Ages, polemic remained largely within its traditional dichotomy of virtue-vice or praise-blame. (Ong, 1967, p. 201) Ong (1967) explains that this is because there was a “tendency in oral or residually oral cultures to cast up accounts of actuality in terms of
contests between individuals” which can in turn be traced back to the ‘heroic age’, (pp. 201, 202). Also, not only were subjects ordered in such a way as to test knowledge on the field of verbal combat, but “the student was not taught to be objective”, but rather developed facility in either defending or attacking theses” (Ong, 1974, p. 230).

Polemic understood in this way is entrenched in oral culture. The roots of polemic, according to Ong (1974), “are buried in procedures for managing knowledge and are fostered by the oral noetic economy of early man. Oral modes of storing and retrieving knowledge are formulaic in design and . . . tend to be agonistic in operation” (p. 230). Originality of thinking and arrangement do not work well in the oral nature of polemic, which Ong (1974) calls “extreme noetic conservatism” (p. 230).

This continuation of the oral tradition in the agonistic style was “simultaneously reinforced, weakened, and endlessly complicated by Renaissance humanism” (Ong, 1974, p. 231). This brings to the fore the notion of the rhetorical/oral ideal and the ideal of the orator as “the most learned and accomplished of all human beings” (Ong, 1974, p. 231).

While polemic functioned well in the realms of the university and the clergy, Ong (1967) investigates an important shift away from it that was happening between “the Latin-centered, academic, disputatious education and the vernacular, commercial, fact-centered education” (p. 245). Here is where we begin to see a significant move toward literacy in the vernacular. Commerce was conducted in the vernacular where the agonistic practices of the European University were, frankly, irrelevant. In the business transactions of the bourgeois there was little need for rhetoric. Ong offers an important insight. He points out that while tradesmen certainly conducted some business in [vernacular] writing, it contained little of rhetorical forms or polemic. Rather this writing contained “litanies of sheer fact, the accounts of goods sold or not
sold, bought or not bought . . . The commitment of the commercial world to neutrally verbalized fact of itself undermined the Latin polemic tradition” (Ong, 1967, p. 245). With writing and print, the need for the dichotomy of virtue-vice (and hence rhetoric) recedes as writing becomes more widely used for record keeping, (Ong, 1967, p. 205). “Bureaucracy is based on written storage of records . . . and as bureaucracy becomes more and more of an effective way to successful government . . . the heroic figure . . . is no longer needed as a rallying point . . . Loyalties can be otherwise mobilized” (Ong, 1967, p. 205). While tradesmen conducted business both orally and in writing, the essence of rhetorical practice was not necessary in business negotiations as these were not public performance of speech, (Ong, 1967, p. 248). “The manufacturing, technological, commercial world can never live far from cold fact. It tends to use words for reportorial purposes” (Ong, 1967, p. 243).

At the same time, in order to meet the demand of the ‘market’, vernaculars were infiltrating the academic world, “encouraged . . . by manufacturing, technology, and commerce” (Ong, 1967, p. 245). “Vernacular schools, established in England and France and elsewhere for more or less commercial training, neglected rhetoric in favor of ‘business’ styles of expression” (Ong, 1967, p. 245). Business was fact-based and thus vernaculars, written and spoken, were fact-based with little need for the disputation practices of the Latin classroom (Ong, 1967, p. 245). Knowledge, at this point in history, begins to become a commodity, (Ong, 1967, p. 246). It should be noted that the traditional Latin education of the university system was not much affected by the emergence of these new vernacular schools, (Ong, 1962, p. 179). Boys of means were still sent off to grammar schools and trained in Latin, (Ong, 1962, p. 179).

This fact-based content of the vernaculars used to conduct business in the late Middle Ages draws us again back to Ramist method. “Ramus’ commitment to the ideals of the bourgeois
world [is] shown for example in his desire to found mathematics on the practice of bankers, merchants, architects, painters, and mechanics” (Ong, 1961b, p. 159). Consider, Ong (1961b) suggests, the primary concerns of the burghers and artisans, namely they “were concerned with commodities, with things visible, definite, and things moreover demanding itemization and inventory” (p. 169). This is precisely the interest of Ramist method, the arrangement and classification of all things knowable.

Even so, teaching in vernacular languages was slow to take a significant foothold and it took until the 18th century until vernaculars were taught broadly in the university system” (Ong, 1958, p. 12). There is a side note in this that Ong touches upon but never expands in greater depth. That is, that while scholars of the 17th century, including Ramus himself, were interested in translating works on dialectic, rhetoric and grammar into vernaculars, these were for the most part non-starters, (1954, p. 140). Latin was abandoned over a series of centuries beginning with its cumbersome nature in the elementary classroom, (Ong, 1958, p. 12).

Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) suggests that we examine these changes as they affected those who were already literate, (p. 61). She points out that a movement of vernacular cannot be limited to a certain class of persons (such as middle class) nor can it exclude nobility, clergy etc., (Eisenstein, 1979, p. 63).

It is true that the sixteenth-century physician who used Latin was regarded as superior to the surgeon who did not, but also true that neither man was likely to belong to the highest estates in the realm. Insofar as the vernacular translation movement was aimed at readers who were unlearned in Latin, it was often designed to appear to pages as well as apprentices; to landed gentry, cavaliers and courtiers as well as to shopkeepers and clerks, (Eisenstein, 1979, p. 63).
Drawing these ideas together we see two things. First, the vernacular was the realm where commodification of language, during the centuries of growing literacy, found a welcome home. Attempts to forward broader use of vernaculars were, “attempts to scientize the vernacular rather than to fertilize it” (Ong, 1954, p. 141). Second, although literatures begin to emerge in vernacular languages, they emerge from men who applied the structure, method and rules of Latin learned at university upon vernacular languages. Ong (1954) uses Shakespeare as an example of this and explains:

The linguistic skills of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, after growing unattended until the boy was some seven or eight years old, had grafted on them the foreign Latin bud. All the effort of education then centered on making the new bud grow. It was for this last that nourishment was furnished out of the standard Latin authors and that the schoolboys’ minds were watered with the abstract ‘rules’ of rhetoric. Then, suddenly, the native stock – not the sterile bud – produced its astonishing flowers, (p. 141)

Conversely,

Though Renaissance humanism invented modern textual scholarship and presided over the development of letterpress printing, it also harked back to antiquity and thereby gave new life to orality. Learned Latin was meant to aid in the practice of speaking. English style in the Tudor period and even much later carried heavy oral residue in its use of epithets, balance, antithesis, formulary structures, and commonplace materials. (Ong, 1988, p. 113)

Even with a heavier emphasis on writing, it was still presumed that all verbal expression was meant, ultimately as oratory, (Ong, 1974, p. 231).
Ong’s idea of residual orality matters to understanding the paradox of Ramist method because the structure of the method allowed for language, most easily in the vernacular, to be arranged and rearranged [in writing] in a way not possible in a solely oral culture but for the purposes of oral performance. Latin centered education was, after all, instruction in a foreign language. The curriculum of the sixteenth century provided an intense “linguistic experience . . . Students notebooks and annotated notebooks yield corroborative evidence of how doggedly the student was forced to immerse himself in words” (Ong, 1962, p. 196).

Writers like Shakespeare “lived at the end of the pre-typographic script world, a residually oral world devoted to retooling the wisdom of the past through the new invention of print” (Ong, 1977, p. 48). Bear in mind that texts were, well into the 19th century, meant to be read aloud which in turn greatly influenced literary style, (Ong, 1988, p. 114). Writing is and remains “totally artificial, a technology consciously and reflectively contrived” (Ong, 1979, p. 2).

We must also bear in mind that Ramus’ *Dialectic* was printed and reprinted in hundreds of editions across a century or more. There were also many contemporary respondents and critics of Ramist method who perpetuated knowledge of his dialectic. There was also a tremendous appropriation of Ramist method, without the necessary acknowledgement of the origin of the work, as was shown in Chapter 2. So, while Ramist method was not necessarily named “Ramist method” as the western world moved into the Renaissance, the mindset of this dichotomizing system became inculcated in the increasingly literate culture. After all, fixed print begs for the sort of organization and analysis that is not typical and, Ong (1979) would say, not possible in oral cultures.
Here is an important confluence. Training in dialectic and Ramist method, in Latin, opened up a sort of playfulness and creativity in written vernacular that harkened to oral tradition. In oral cultures, knowledge . . . is managed and manageable only if formulas are kept rigid and relatively unchanged: otherwise it is distorted and vanishes. Originality threatens disaster, as it no longer needs to when writing can store or “park” knowledge outside the mind for use at any future time. (Ong, 1974, p. 230).

In contrast, verbal play could happen because vernaculars became fixed in space with writing and printing, words that could be arranged and rearranged – as every boy had been trained to do – within the system provided by Ramus taking advantage of the facility of the native tongue. This sense of word play, fixed in space, in the vernacular, had not heretofore existed.

The technology of writing and the spread of literacy, aided and abetted by the printing press, also change our human consciousness and behavior. “Print encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing-like, impersonal and religiously neutral. Print encouraged the mind to sense that its possessions were held in some sort of inert mental space” (Ong, 1982, p. 129). “Print was . . . a major factor in the development of the sense of personal privacy that marks modern society . . . Print created a new sense of the private ownership of words” (Ong, 1982, p. 128). “The impact of this technology is felt no less than in the very consciousness of the members of society. The way they reason and therefore the types of discourse they produce . . . are determined by this one technology” (Biakolo, 1999, p. 46).

The impact on the development of vernacular literatures was not immediate, by any means. Vernacular literatures remained at the periphery of the Renaissance consciousness (Ong,
1958, p. 13). More typically, English was neglected in preference for Latin epics and other popular publications, (Ong, 1958, p. 13). Creative endeavors were undertaken in Latin. Ong (1962) explains “the academic world officially attended only to the classical languages and literatures . . . But the extra-academic world attended explicitly to the classical languages and literatures too” (pp. 179-80). Works of literature were published in both Latin and vernacular languages but the little of the vernacular literature remains because they were rarely reprinted, (Ong, 1958, p. 10).

However, vernacular literatures did begin to emerge and rules of organization began to emerge. Early vernacular literatures were considered a bit vulgar and the intended audience was women, (Ong W, 1958, p. 11). The works of this time were romances, devotional books, sermons for mixed audiences and were meant to be read for amusement, while Latin still retained a monopoly in the classroom and for most works of literature, (Ong, 1958, p. 11). As Ong (1958) notes, “Latin dialectics and rhetorics, black with manuscript annotations, their title pages often worn loose or missing, which come down to us today, the vernacular rhetorics and dialectics uniformly survive in beautifully preserved, unused copies” (p. 14).

Vernaculars reside more naturally in orality. Ong (1967) explains that oral culture itself is closer to the human life world, (p. 204). “Oral discourse relies heavily on the shared context of the speaker and audience to impart meaning, and in this way, formal language construct becomes less important” (Jarc, 2014, p. 22). But the nature of vernacular changes, first when it becomes chirographic, then when it becomes a literate language. From the Middle Ages on this structure includes grammar but is primarily dialectic method, further entrenched in the visual thanks to Ramus’ dichotomous diagrams.

Vernaculars remain informal until a structure – a written structure - is imposed on them.
During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Latin training in Ramist method was to vernacular languages in both creative and commercial settings. Yet neither of these, the Shakespeare or the tradesman, had much need for the polemic style of the Latin classroom. The purpose of a Shakespeare or Milton was not to ‘win’. Neither was the purpose of the tradesman ‘to win’.

We could consider the chirographic language of mediated communication in a similar vein today. Presently, it is a vernacular comprised, in large part, of emoticons and acronyms. While there is some structure (influenced by English grammar), it is more organic than language that is written according to the rules of a grammar. Vernaculars allow for social norms, but are less concerned with formal rules.

**The Vernacular and the Feminine**

We have seen that vernaculars began to adopt more chirographic and eventually more literate practices. But we have also seen that Latin and training in dialectic with a polemic bent also hung on into the 19th century in the Latin classroom if not in the vernacular setting. While print culture changes our consciousness, it is ‘non political’ change. In other words, the change to culture and consciousness with print culture are not forwarded with intentionality by a segment of society.

Ong sees the influence of Ramus’ system in the vernacular setting, which includes less need for polemic and polemic training. But a shift in focus and practice of human communication, even over time, must have roots in previous or surrounding communication practices. Ong asks what else is at play in this shift to the vernacular and why the shift includes a decline in polemic practices. To answer, Ong considers from where our vernacular practice emerges. It emerges from the home. It is called the mother tongue and we learn it from our first moments, at our mother’s knee.
We learn to speak in the first instance by matching our expressions with our infantile insights and needs, and that in the social context of family, where our errors themselves are prized as achievements. At the time when we are first being introduced to the reality around us and encouraged to form those initial concepts which will permanently orient our thinking, language is a vocal experience. (Ong, 1962, p. 196)

Ong, and his student Thomas J. Farrell, call this influence the feminine. Ong sees that one cannot consider emerging vernacular literatures and education without seeing that women and a feminine ‘style’ of communication are part of the equation of the freeing nature of Ramist method as a structure. Women influenced learning and began to enter [vernacular] schools in greater numbers beginning in the Middle Ages. Just as greater numbers of women entering universities had an effect in the 20th century, so to did women entering ‘grammar’ schools have an impact on educational practices of the Middle Ages. One could wonder whether Ong was influenced by the women’s liberation movement beginning in the 1960s and ‘70s but I think it would be more accurate to understand Ong’s interest in the feminine as part of his hermeneutic approach to scholarship in general. When we seek to understand the role of vernaculars in tandem with literacy, we must include women and the ‘feminine’.

Ong looks at both cultural and biological effects of women entering more formal education in vernacular schools. First, women were not acculturated to participate in what Ong (1967) calls “the rough and tumble of the disputatious Latin world” (p. 249). Entering school for boys was a puberty rite in a culture of polemic and “aggressive masculine world” (Ong, 1967, p. 251). These agonistic and oral traditions remained steadfast elements of the university classroom into the 20th century, (Ong, 1974, p. 231).

Because Latin was not mother tongue by the Middle Ages, Ong (1988) explains, “its base
in academia, which was totally male . . . Learned Latin . . . for well over a thousand years . . . was sex-linked, a language written and spoken only by males, learned outside the home in a tribal setting which was in effect a male puberty rite setting” (p. 111). This puberty rite included physical punishment, behavior expectations and extensive reading of “epics and histories full of violence and tales of valor, together with orations pitting one speaker against another” (Ong, 1974, p. 232). It was culturally important that boys be removed from home, hearth and the softer feminine mode of communicating in the mother tongue so that they could “assimilate the language [of Latin for] . . . it was not possible . . . to learn grammar or metaphysics or medicine or most other academic subjects unless one knew Latin” (Ong, 1974, p. 232).

In contrast, it is not that women were illiterate, but their use of writing and reading was conducted primarily in vernacular. So, the success of male children, for whom Latin and functioning in a polemic landscape would be a part of their adult lives, depended on boys being removed from the female influence by about age seven so that they would cleave more closely to the use and inculcation of Latin. Attending Latin university was thought to toughen up young boys and help them maintain a sense of the heroic character” (Ong, 1959, p. 123).

Ong (1959, 1974) also calls attention to the fact that the style of learning from male to female was different, indeed because of the location of the learning. In both “Latin Language Study as a Puberty Rite” and “Agonistic Structures in Academia” Ong (1959, 1974) points out the highly structured and ritualistic nature of the Latin classroom. This learning environment, oral in nature, was agonistic. It was felt that teaching in Latin more closely connected students “with the ancients . . . the sources of all human knowledge” (Ong, 1959, p. 103). But the agonistic nature of the classroom was not just a celebration of ancient oratory. Ong (1959) argues, “teaching of Latin involved a survival, or an echo, devious and vague but unmistakably
real, of what anthropologists . . . call puberty rites” (p. 104).

Still, the increasing preoccupation with texts by the humanists begins the shift in a system of learning dominated by orality, to one less agonistic and more literate, (Ong, 1974, p. 231).

The entrance of women onto the academic scene everywhere marked the beginning of the end of agonistic structures. None of the conspicuously agonistic structures had place in the early girls’ schools. As females entered schools originally only for males...Latin was first dropped as a means of instruction and then as a required subject; the agonistic, thesis method of teaching was replaced by less combative methods; written examinations were substituted for public oral disputations and examinations. (Ong, 1974, p. 233)

The presence of women affected the nature of the ceremonial rites of passage that a young [male] person would undergo in the university classroom resulting in a classroom procedure that was less agonistic in nature in its modern vernacular iteration than it was during the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Ong, 1974, p. 236). The ceremonial and agonistic recedes from the classroom and education in vernacular is no longer interrupted but continues through puberty into adulthood (Ong, 1974, p. 237).

Ong (1982) explores several additional things about the feminine and vernaculars. Women, from the 16th century on, had almost no training in oratory or polemic, (p. 110). Like the burghers and tradesmen mentioned above, women were educated to be effective household managers, for whom the commonplaces, epithets, etc. of rhetorical training were not necessary” (Ong, 1988, p. 110). By the 17th century, when women went to schools outside the home, they attended “newer vernacular schools [which were] practically oriented, for commerce and domestic affairs” (Ong, 1988, p. 110). This served to “eat away at the Latin base for training in verbal expression and in thinking which connected the old dialectico-rhetorical academic
tradition with the highly oral culture of antiquity” (Ong, 1967, p. 241). The academic and bourgeois worlds were moving closer, further eroding the polemic in education, (Ong, 1967, p. 249). As women’s education had historically been focused on the economy of the home, so too more formal vernacular schools for women were focused on the practical rather than the theoretical or the agonistic, (Ong, 1967, p. 242). This is not to say that Latin declined in the university. In fact, the program of vernacular education for the bourgeois world did not much affect the academic program of the university, (Ong, 1962, p. 178).

The ‘style’ of women’s learning, writing and speaking also influences the development of narrative style. While writing generated by university educated males was greatly influenced in structure by Ramist dichotomies and still retaining the adversary/hero contrast made possible by such dichotomies, women “tend[ed] to use small details, heighten the emotional pitch and rely heavily on the simple temporal sequence in narrative structure” (Farrell, 1979, p. 912). This is a move away from analysis (Farrell, 1979, p. 912). Farrell (1979) describes this style as relying on, “enumerating detail without explicit analytic commentary or the framework of a thesis, and the no adversary or non-combative stance” (p. 912). The female mode of writing did not include antithesis as a necessity, (Farrell, 1979, p. 919).

Both Ong (1967) and Farrell (1979) add that the additive nature of the ‘feminine’ narrative style is an inductive form rather than the deductive nature of formal rhetoric and Ramist method. This moves away from dichotomy and agonistic. It does not seek to entertain or ingratiate or persuade, (Farrell, 1979, p. 917). While neither Ong nor Farrell state this explicitly, it could be said that the ‘feminine’ narrative style clings more closely to its oral roots than its deductive, methodized Latin cousin. While we would think that the more oral-influenced vernacular would be freer and more creative, Farrell explains in that the opposite is true. Recall
that in orality, how we “build out” our communication is dependent in memory. The heavy lifting of communication is done in the retention and ordering. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it is the structure of Ramist method that frees us from the obligation of memory and order, allowing us to arrange and rearrange words and language on a very granular level. We no longer need be dependent on tropes and figures to the same degree as an oral culture is.

It is in this vein that Farrell makes an interesting point about the playfulness that makes possible writers such as Milton and Shakespeare, versus female modes of feminine writing style. He argues that there is a greater possibility of playfulness in the male mode because males have received formal dialectic education in Latin. This training in dichotomies was training in opposites and offers:

The advantage of having the conclusion at the beginning . . . [which requires] one have the ability to distance oneself from the situation at hand, to recognize a boundary, to differentiate between oneself and the object of the discourse; it is, then, related to the antithetical struggle commonly expressed in the male mode of rhetoric, (Farrell, 1979, p. 917).

Farrell and Ong both offer insights about the exteriorization of rhetoric, as opposed to the interiority of literacy. According to Farrell (1979), Ong says that rhetoric is “movement of hope that is preoccupied with unifying . . . It unifies speaker and audience in a common struggle against another somebody or something” (p. 918). However, this language is not analytic in nature, despite our inclination to believe so. It is formulaic. It is writing that allows for analysis, (Ong, 1979, p. 4).

Farrell (1979) explains that he sees the female mode of rhetoric as “low-keyed, supportive,” “integrative,” “open,” “less concerned with boundaries,” “generative,” and
demonstrating a “respect for the audience” (p. 919). As the Renaissance wore on into modernity, there was no longer the necessity of combative style of learning and speaking found in the male centered universities. “Fighting among females is less ceremonial, more real and “commonplace” . . . [it] is typically more straightforward, less spectacular and more lethal” (Ong, 1974, p. 235).

It is not simply this one thing, such as decline in polemic, or that one thing such as vernacular schools and feminine styles of communication that opens up less formulaic and more visually bound communication. The patterns of print are hospitable to the needs of the housewife and the merchant. The print also offers a framework for the poetic patterns of the literary giants of the 17th and 18th centuries, without need for the potentially alienating and combative tact of a polemic style, (Troup, Regular Meeting, 2016). Each influences and is influenced by the other leaving a communication landscape that still anticipates that writing is intended for oratory, that takes Ramist method from the Latin classroom and practices it in the vernacular realm. In addition there is the very practical addition of a vernacular education to best serve the needs of a growing commercial class and an increase in the number of women being educated outside the home. This education did not need for polemic or a more deliberative interaction between persons to be a central part of its learning objectives or practice.

Beyond the structuring of language in writing and oratory, there is still at base a dichotomy of male/female with vestiges of the agonistic foundation of education that remains in academia. The effects of these transitions continued to have an influence into the 20th century. According to Ong (1974), these changes can help us understand the changes in human consciousness that occurred with increased literacy and use of vernaculars, (p. 233).
Ong (1974) also points out that there is also a sheer physical ability of a male voice to project further in orality than a female voice, (p. 233). But when you add the ability to amplify and distribute said voice via some form of media, the need for the culture of agonistic, a male culture, recedes further into necessity. Add to this the formulaic nature of oratory, which was elaborate, repetitive and formulaic now replaced with transmissions made to “millions in a style like that of a tete-a-tete”, less formally structured but still bound by writing (Ong, 1974, p. 234).

The paradox of the freedom of structure comes from the confluence of these shifts in classroom polemic, vernacular education and a more ‘feminine’ style to writing and teaching in vernacular schools. Without the expectation of polemic, communication can proceed along more narrative and additive lines. With the structure of Ramus’ system, vernacular writing is no longer dependent on a fallible and finite memory but rather words and phrases can be arranged and rearranged thus freeing communication from what is limiting in primary oral cultures.

But a paradox itself necessarily involves a dichotomy. The structure that frees one from memory is conversely restricting for the reasons Ong wrote on for his entire career. The visual system of Ramist method restricted with its focus on writing and analysis and removed the ‘speaker’ from the presence of the audience. Perhaps most important, the structure of Ramist method placed a great value on dialectic, the analysis and dichotomizing of our experienced world and very little value on rhetoric.

**Method as Limiting**

As stated in the introduction, Ramism is a visual system of organizing what we experience in the world. By virtue of being a visual system, the information within it is static and the “speaker” is not present to the “audience”. Ramist method begins with analysis of information and then proceeds to creation and arrangement.
It is the visual nature of static text that has occupied and concerned communication scholars in media ecology for decades. The shift to the visual is central to the work of Ong, Eisenstein, Havelock, Innis, McLuhan, Ellul and others. The visual structure of Ramist method could be considered in the same light of today’s concerns with ‘dumbing down’ reading and learning through the profound accessibility of information through information technologies. For this section, we take strong cues from Ong, McLuhan, Eisenstein, Innis and Havelock and instead explore in order understand Ramist method as situated, both influenced and influencer, just as we should understand today’s mediated landscape as situated, influenced and influencer.

While certainly the wide distribution of Ramus’ works, as explained in Chapter 2, was facilitated by the printing press, Ramist method was embraced because of its simplicity. Its diagrams could be referred to again and again, and the process of dichotomizing allowed students to categorize and order information. Bear in mind that Ramus claimed his method was applicable not only to writing and speaking but to the whole field of human knowledge. While critiqued for being weak and inconsistent over the decades and centuries since, the influence of Ramist method endures. Rather than a rhetorical system, one that allows for interpretation, Ramist method is an information system, a system of information analysis, storage and retrieval.

Jacques Ellul and Neil Postman have also articulated the concern with overly simplistic and non-reflective systems. Ellul (1985) points out that once the word is written, it “changes hearing into sight, and transforms the understanding of a person, with his words’ halo of mystery and echoes, into the understanding of a text” (p. 45). Postman (1992) talks about the unprecedented information glut in which we are driven to access more and more information without limitation, all possible because of the Gutenberg press, (p. 61). In Chapter 3 of this project we touched on the commodification of words into things through Ramist dichotomies.
But what Ong and others point to are the ramifications of the visual nature of a system such as Ramism, including its inelegant simplicity and its accessibility.

We learn from Ong that Ramus conceived of his system as visual map of reality. That is to say, Ramus did not first develop his method and then develop a visual tool to help his students learn. Rather, Ramus saw the whole of reality as an image that human reason could grasp and map. The art of dialectic, according to Ramus, was in fact a picture of reality, literally, (Ong, 1958, p. 181). Ong explains that this is conceptually important because here is where we begin to see ‘pictures’ and ‘concepts’ begin to be thought of as commodities (Ong, 1958, p. 182). Concepts can be mapped and mapping is how we exercise our innate ability to reason. It is all there to be grasped, but, according to Ramus, we must practice.

Ramus placed a great deal of emphasis on human reason in his natural dialectic. Reason is what allows us to view reality and then categorize and arrange it (dialectic). Ramus refers to dialectic as a natural art, one which is “indeed a picture of reality – not in any complex or abstruse sense . . . but in the way in which a map is a picture of a terrain” (Ong, 1958, p. 181). According to Ong (1958), Ramus understood “the contents of the mind as a set of objects . . . [and had a] tendency to regard knowledge as a set of objects and to identify these objects with curriculum content” (p. 197). One needed to arrange these objects in order to understand them.

As Ong (1958) explains, at this time, “‘Reason’ is beginning to take on contours which will characterize it in the next few hundred years and make of it in the age of the Enlightenment a kind of unerring power bearing straight for the truth” (p. 193). This understanding of reason is practically identical with memory. Rather than use mnemonic devices to help his students to ‘reason’, Ramus turned to the mind’s abilities as reasoning (Ong, 1958, p. 194). Rather than situating topics of inquiry in oral-mnemonic “places”, Ramus situated topics of inquiry in visual-
memorization “places”. These visual representations are Ramist dialectic, breaking down each topic of inquiry into its component parts. These things are already ‘real’ to Ramus, because they come for our experience and are readily available, (Ong, 1958, p. 195).

Recall Ramus’ certainty that logic was the key to all knowledge, (Ong, 1958, p. 33). The consequence of this is that Ramus’ kept dialectic intentionally distinct from rhetoric. Ramus considered his dialectic to “be uncontaminated from rhetoric” (Ong, 1958, p. 35). Ong (1958) describes Ramus’ dialectic as: 1) the ability to discourse “which is equated with “conversing,” with “disputing,” with “discriminating,” and with “using one’s reason,” 2) dialectic has 3 parts, nature, doctrine and exercise, (p. 176). However, Ramist method, while perhaps not a strong logic, is ‘excised’ from rhetoric, (Ong, 1958, p. 35).

Nature is our innate ability to reason. Doctrine is found in the work the great reasoners such as Cicero, (Ong, 1958, p. 177). We develop our innate ability to reason by imitating the great orators and dialecticians through exercise, (Ong, 1958, p. 177). “Ramus makes the art of dialectic itself the copy” (Ong, 1958, p. 177). It is important to remember Ramus’ practical-minded intent, which was that dialectic was not intended to solve for truth but were rather “oriented toward action and knowledge simultaneously” (Ong, 1958, p. 179). Doctrine is for Ramus the art of teaching discoursing, (Ong, 1958, p. 178). Exercise is the use of dialectic. For Ramus, “exercise could take any one of three forms: interpretation (interpretatio), writing (scriptio), and speaking (dictio)” (Ong, 1958, p. 190). What is different from the classical trivium is that each of these three forms of exercise proceed from writing; first reading and interpreting the works of great thinkers and speakers, then identifying their arguments and finally, in essence, visually mapping the arguments. The challenge to Ramus was that the arguments of the great orators are not always clear or exact. He could only achieve the exactitude
he desired by mapping the arguments into dichotomies. Ong (1958) shares how Ramus writes about this process as literally a cutting apart, almost a dissection of language, (p. 191).

Ambiguity, which Ramus despised, can hence be eliminated by the use of our natural dialectic, (Ong, 1958, p. 191).

Applying reason in order to understand nature was an idea embraced in Renaissance humanism. Ramist method was a system that allowed us to order and understand reality. This ‘picture’ of reality involved words as objects that are fixed in space. When words become our picture of reality, then knowledge too becomes seen as a thing located in objects outside of the mind that the mind may come to know. Ong (1961b) explains that the popularity of Ramist method was aided by “the shift in sensibility marked by the development of typography [which] brought western man to react to words less and less as sounds and more as items deployed in space” (p. 156).

The idea of arranging things in diagrams was not new nor was it uniquely Ramist. The origin of Ramist dichotomies is found “in the printed commentaries and epitomes of Agricola’s Dialectical Invention” (1958, p. 199). Dichotomies are in essence class logic in which one considers “primarily the way in which certain classes include other classes” (Ong, 1958, p. 201). However, Ramus takes dichotomies to a whole new extreme. Remember, Ramus believed that every facet of human knowledge could be managed and understood through dialectic. Ramus believed he could deal with all of reality by developing elaborate dichotomies, (Ong, 1958, p. 201). Ong (1958) describes the narrowness of Ramist thinking:

As a popularized class logic, the Ramist dialectic manifests a quantification system which is almost certainly the most recklessly applied one that the world has ever seen . . .

Ramus . . . regard[ed] every thing, mental and physical, as composed of little corpuscular
units . . . it dominates all of his thinking, subconsciously, yet stubbornly and absolutely. Ramus thus tends to view all intellectual operations as a spatial grouping of a number of these corpuscles into a kind of cluster or as a breaking down of clusters into their corpuscular units, (p. 203).

This was indeed a method and ordering of things, simple and visual. Ong (1958), in the above section of Ramus, ‘sounds’ frustrated in his writing because this ‘corpuscular’ epistemology “constitutionally opposes allowing words to mean more than one ‘thing,’ and regularly frowns on discussion of divergent meanings” (p. 203). Here we feel again the blow to the rhetorical mindset, which at its heart is focused on the contingent and helps inform our understanding. By eliminating interpretation, Ramus’ eliminated ambiguity and, to his own mind, achieved certainty while appropriately exploiting our natural ability to reason. What was intelligible could be organized according to logic, the principles of which can be applied to every human endeavor. This is how, as Ong (1958) notes, logic and rhetoric could become completely disparate studies (p. 242). To Ramus, only way to persuade with certainty was logic (Ong, 1958, p. 239). While Ramist method could appear epistemological in nature, for it examined from first principles to particulars within the purview of human intelligence, Ramist method was non-discriminatory in the subject upon which it could be applied

**Conclusion**

Ramus intended that this ordering and classification remove ambiguity and interpretation. They also remove any vestige of rhetorical thinking, writing or speaking. But the notion of a mind that can give life to what it observes can be freeing, and provide a sense of playfulness within the structure that Ong says would not be possible without the structural impositions of Ramism, as noted above.
As we know, Ong spends a great deal of time exploring the shift in the sense of knowledge and human consciousness. To this classification and commodification Ong (1962) adds that the sense of knowledge, which could be contained in books also bleeds over into the sense of the mind ‘containing’ knowledge, (p. 75). “At this point, the whole intellectual world goes hollow. The mind now ‘contains’ knowledge, especially in the compartments of various arts and sciences, which in turn may ‘contain’ one another, and which all ‘contain’ words, (Ong, 1962, p. 75).

Here is where I would like again to touch on how Ramus understood the art of dialectic. Life is breathed into [static] art only once human reason through dialectic is applied to it. For Ramus, this process did not involve interpretation. He wanted to limit interpretation. Interpretation is not exact. Interpretation leaves room for doubt and can lack clarity. Ramus hoped to offer up an encyclopedic, but finite numbers of possibilities from which to choose in order to firmly account for and order the whole of human knowledge. Thus he satisfied both his humanistic and scholastic inclinations. Ong (1958) explains this as, “stressing observational attitudes by [developing] this cartography of the mind” and adds that, “this stress was something new. Indubitably, it was effective in preparing the human sensibility for a still further stress on observation of the external world. The printing press, the first assembly line, assembled not tools, but a pattern of words, a pattern for things in the mind.” (p. 195).

What Ong shows us is that the visual organization of our world made possible through Ramist method, combined with the application of our reason, is limited because it excludes the polemic and the opportunity for interpretation. It excludes rhetorical interpretation. As we have seen, the popularization of Ramist method came about for several reasons beyond its learnability. While developed in the Latin-centered university, it also served the needs of the merchant and
guild classes, including women. These segments of the European population were already communicating to order, count, and classify. It is no surprise then that Ramist method found a hospitable audience amongst these peoples as well as amongst the Latin educated student of the university.

Ramism lead to language moving into space and knowledge becoming commodified. Ramist method ‘thingifies’ language as something to be ordered and knowledge as something to be classified. In *Orality and Literacy* Ong (1988) refers to ‘“autonomous discourse’ which cannot be questioned or contested as oral speech can because . . . [it] has been detached from its author” (p. 77). When we see the decline in polemic, we can see, as Ong (1988) shows, that it is impossible to question what is written because the author is not present. Even when refuted, the printed thing is still exactly the same, it does not change, (p. 78). What Ramist method has helped to do is to move the oral world “to a new sensory world, that of vision” and hence the human life-world is restructured, (Ong, 1988, p. 84).

The elements at play as Ramist method became inculcated into both the Latin and vernacular schools of the Middle Ages and Renaissance help to illustrate the paradox of Ramist method as a system that had both freeing and constricting impacts on human communication. It was freeing because the structure helped release language from the limitations of memory creating the opportunity for development of more narrative styles of writing in both Latin and vernacular. It was also freeing because style could be broadened beyond the hero/villain characteristics of polemic. Ramist method was limiting in that it severely damaged the classical sense of rhetoric as an interpretive art. Ramus facilitated the idea of reason as atomistic rather than interpretive by removing reason as a part of rhetoric. When knowledge was visualized and commoditized, interpretation became a solitary rather than communal affair.
We see that the commodification of language has been transformative. Its expansion in the vernacular has been positive in that “the mind simply cannot engage in the sort of thinking [analytic, sequential, linear organization of thought] . . . where thought is exquisitely elaborated, not in analytic linearity, but in formulary fashion, through ‘rhapsodizing’, that is, stitching together proverbs, antitheses, epithets, and other ‘commonplaces’” (Ong, 1979, p. 1). The polemic style of the Latin classroom began to evolve, with a greater and greater focus placed on writing and less focus on verbal sparring.

The creative product of writing, as Ong (1988) explains, is a thing located outside of ourselves and distinct from ourselves. The knowledge and creative thought therein is something we can possess almost as if it were a physical object. “Writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set” (Ong, 1988, p. 104).

While public speaking certainly continued to play a central role in public life, the craft of preparing to speak changed from oral/aural practice with one’s classmates and colleagues to written analysis in order to prepare/rehearse to speak. The purpose of speaking and writing, for those outside the university was primarily instrumental. There was no great demand for training in adornment and enthymeme when one is negotiating or recording the sales of goods.

With the greater availability of written texts, language was further commodified. Ultimately, rhetoric was relegated to ornamentation, nice but not entirely necessary in the day-to-day world. While Latin and rhetoric remained cornerstones of education into the 19th century, both were outside the realm of the everyday. To Ramus, rhetoric was completely outside of and irrelevant to reason. While the Renaissance, as an era, valued classical thought and practice, the
obsession with reason and objective knowledge overshadowed and reduced the interpretative and dialogic role of rhetoric.

Ultimately the divergence of rhetoric and dialectic, facilitated by the system of Ramist method, is residually problematic. The recession of deliberative practices such as polemic, Ong (1967) tells us, leaves empty the place where rhetoric and interpretation once stood (p. 240). Deliberative rhetorical practices become outmoded when one has the devices of writing and dialectic to foster objectivity with no need to take into account the hero/villain rhetorical interpretation, (Ong, 1967, p. 240).

We have examined how Ramist method is a paradox that both allows for the development of creative language and limits interpretation in a framework not possible in oral culture. Ong has helped us to understand how Ramist method as a language system downplayed interpretation and the presence of the other. If a language system, such as Ramist method, can help us to be creative in our application of words and can help us to organize and retain knowledge, how we can avoid excluding deliberative practices that open up the opportunity for rhetorical interpretation?
CHAPTER 5

RHETORIC REARRANGED

Ong’s wide-ranging Ramus research serves as a preview of the development of Ong’s thought throughout his career. His Ramus project was a staging ground for ideas that Ong returned to again and again. In looking at Ong’s work holistically we know that Ong helped open up our understanding of the importance of the implications of language from aural/oral and public to written and private. But we can continue to learn from Ong’s hermeneutic approach and keep at the fore of the present endeavor that a change in practice in one arena affects how we think of and practice rhetoric and communication.

Ong traces a trajectory of communication practices from the mid-twentieth century back to Middle Ages, a point in history when words became fixed in print. Written communication spread beyond churches and universities to the general populace. Written communication was further democratized through the printing press and vernacular education. While this is not the only important turning point in the history of human communication, it is one of the most significant and anchors much of Ong’s research interests. This project has looked at Ong’s scholarship in terms of this anchoring point. In addition, we have examined Ong’s work to further tease out consequences and effects of the transition to widespread literacy that began in the Middle Ages.

While Ong conducted scholarship on many topics (he even published poetry), we have shown in Chapter 3 how thoroughly he explored the impact and unintended consequences of scholasticism, humanism and Ramist method. Ong continues to touch upon Ramus and Ramist
method throughout his career. However, ultimately, *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* is less widely read than what many would consider Ong’s most popular work, *Orality and Literacy*.

The book reviews revolutionary new work on orality-literacy contrasts from ancient through present cultures, with attention to implications for structuralism, deconstruction, speech-act and reader-response theory, the teaching of reading and writing skills to males and to women, social studies, biblical studies, philosophy, and cultural history generally.

(Saint Louis University, 2016)

The accessibility of *Orality and Literacy* has perhaps resulted in an over-emphasis on an orality/literacy dichotomy, leaving out or ignoring that methodizing of language is as important in Ong’s scholarship as is his continued seeking for the direct connection made between humans in oral/aural communication in both *Orality and Literacy* and the *Presence of the Word*, in addition to other essays. Perhaps this was due in part to the fact that Ong (1967, 1982) is always aware of the present historical moment and in both *Presence of the Word* and *Orality and Literacy*. Ong (1967, 1980) attends to issues relevant to the mid-twentieth century identity and communication practice such as a wildly expanding mediated environment (through radio and television), the aftermath of the Second World War, a Freudian/Jungian perspective of human consciousness, and the repercussions of structuralism and critical theory perspectives as they moved into post-structural and post-modern perspectives.

Ong always looks to understand the present in terms of the past. In *Orality and Literacy* he examines the intertwined and evolving nature of both as they evolved through history. Ong has been critiqued for discussing literacy in opposition to orality. A careful read of Ong’s work demonstrates that he is very deliberate in his use of *and*. It is *Orality AND Literacy*. Ong seeks
both orality and secondary orality in every communication medium. Ong’s work does not excise oral and literate practice from each other. That is because he is interested in examining our lived communication practice, which he understands as both oral and literate and, as we shall see below, according to Ong, digitized. While not all of the history of human communication is a history of literacy, it is, for Ong, a history of interpreting agreed upon signs and symbols, in addition to the aural/oral, to create meaning. Much of Ong’s work deals with how those systems affect our consciousness, our writing, and our teaching. His work on Ramus touches both on the distancing of communication from lived reality through method and Ramus’ commitment to the everyday purpose of communication. Ong’s work seeks to find the human connection in every communication medium, regardless of what it is and this can be seen in scholarship from his early graduate studies right up to the end of his life. This is what might be frustrating to scholars of media ecology: the unwavering hopefulness about our human connection, the I/Thou connection, in any form of mediated communication. It is important to consider Peter Ramus’ method when we look at environments of media because Ramus was a trailblazer in the sense of moving communication into the visual, writing in order to speak and bringing these practices out of the university into the vernacular realm. Ong brings these historical shifts to the fore in his work.

In addition, this project has shown that Ong maintains a deep interest in rhetoric and the history of rhetoric, as he returns again and again to the topic. While we can continue to learn from Ong about communication technologies that have affected our consciousness and communication habits, I believe Ong’s research on and concern about the practice and role of rhetoric have been somewhat upstaged his writing on the “technologizing of the word” (Ong,
1982). For Ong, communication is rhetorical and rhetoric is communication. It is what we value and the perceived or acclaimed purpose of communication that changes as technology changes.

Ong (1971) explains, “Until the modern technological age . . . Western culture in its intellectual and academic manifestations can be meaningfully described as rhetorical culture” (p. 1). In addition,

with the advent of . . . the technological age . . . rhetoric was not wiped out or supplanted, but rather disrupted, displaced and rearranged . . . Rhetoric was a bad word for those given to technology because it represented “soft” thinking, thinking attuned to unpredictable human actuality and decisions, whereas technology, based on science, was devoted to “hard” thinking, that is, formally logical thinking, attunable to unvarying physical laws (which, however, are no more real than variable human free acts (Ong, 1971, p. 8).

With his work on the history of orality and literacy and his continued appreciation for rhetoric, Ong is always interested in technological shifts that affected human communication and consciousness. He writes extensively on how evolutions in communication technology affect our sense of knowledge and our sense of self. He identifies the shift in human consciousness resulting in a greater interiority and distancing from the world that evolved out of an increasingly literate public. (Ong, 1972, 1980, 1992, 1996).

Ong conducts his research in broad terms not limiting himself to the study of literature, religion or rhetoric. A small overview of how Ong explores his interests is seen Chapter 4 where I touch on Ong’s interest in the role women have played in communication practices throughout history and, in the past century, exploring the effect of women entering schools and universities. Ong is always aware that these gradual shifts are not without implications. Beyond his interest in
“the feminine”, we can include in this list the shift from Latin as the language of learning to vernaculars, the implications of the printing press and the availability of written works, university education, the influence and endurance of Ramist method. More nuanced ideas emerge from Ong’s scholarship such as the removed audience and/or the internal audience of “I” in addition his well known work on interiority and the shift in human consciousness that comes with literacy.

Here, I would note that Ong’s research approach remains noetic in its focus. He is curious about how words could be enacted and situated, whether in discourse or in writing. By understanding that Ong’s interests are noetic in nature we can also understand his curiosity about the endurance of Ramist method. With Ong, we could wonder if, without the existence of Ramist method, whether literatures would have found structure in the vernacular, whether rhetoric would have retained its prestige within the trivium and whether the commodification of knowledge would have been slowed. But Ong teaches us that Ramist method needs to be considered in its historical situation and understood through a 360-degree examination. The influence of Ramist method did endure and had an impact on thinking and writing just as rhetoric was demoted to arrangement and ornamentation while the world learned to categorize, methodize and scientize its knowledge in all arenas.

This commodification of knowledge continues to be an area of concern. In recent decades scholars and cultural observers have expressed concern about of less-than-reflective momentum about “advances” in communication technologies and information transmission. Ong has helped us to see that the collateral and unintended consequences of this commodification can bear beautiful fruit in literature and science. But beginning in the early parts of the 20th century, we begin to see renewed interest in the nature and role of rhetoric – less ornamental and more as
situated communication. And, despite rhetoric seen primarily as a technique of ornamentation and arrangement from the middle ages into modernity, Ong (1967) reminds us that the “study of oratory, remained in effective academic charge of literature from antiquity through the eighteenth century” (p. 3). So while Ramist method contributed to a writing and literate culture because of its visual nature, the real outcome is that orality was supplanted to a degree by structure and mechanics and rhetoric came to be focused on ornamentation rather than situation. This more structural approach to communication continued to be taught as ‘speech communication’ well into the 20th century.

To address this shift from primary oral to primary literate, Ong (1967, 1982) coined the term “secondary orality”. The age of secondary orality was arrived at through the use of “telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape” (Ong, 1982, p. 133). According to Ong (1982), “this new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas” (pp. 133-4). This is important and a point central for Ong. Secondary orality is not exclusive of primary orality and vice versa. Remember that Ong always seeks the I/Thou connection; he is not promoting a dichotomy, quite far from it.

**Communication Today through the Experience of History**

The residue from oral cultures that resulted in the development of visual methods during the middle Ages can find a parallel in mediated communication today. The two are parallel because the method of mediated communication with its systems of emoticons and abbreviations are again visual devices meant to stimulate recall and aid as a conduit to meaning. We find ourselves in a realm of chirography where we are not giving full written structure to our communication but are using shared symbols and abbreviations that are more reflective of the
way we communicate in the vernacular. Ong’s hopeful view of the possibility for real human connection and communication in the mediated realm is reflected in his attention to vernacular literatures and education.

Ramist method facilitated literate culture. This facilitation, as we have learned from Ong, is embedded in a complex environment comprised of many influences that we have touched on throughout the project such as the visual nature of Ramist method, its simplicity and adaptability, its usefulness to the merchant and guild classes. In addition, we have seen that Ramist method was adapted in many different vernacular languages and was adopted in vernacular schools.

Ong helps us to see the influence of Ramist method in more nuanced ways. First, mediated communication in general is hospitable to a mother tongue. While English remains our mother tongue in the United States, it is the formal language of learning and so we are drilled in parts of speech, diagramming sentences and the five-paragraph essay, for example. This structure does not play a large role in present-day computer-mediated communication. We have yet to impose a significant grammar on very immediate communications such as texting. I would add that grammar is losing ground in what was originally a far more epistolary structure found in language used in emails. Second, we must further consider the unintended consequences of fixed print on our ability to do more than commodify language. Fixed print has allowed us to play with language, as Ong saw (see Chapter 4). From the Middle Ages to the 20th century and Ernest Hemingway’s famous one sentence story (“For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” (Guardian, 2007)), fixed print allows for the distancing pause that in turn creates the space for creative endeavor, whether the end product is literature, speech, film, etc. Finally, we must consider Ong’s explanations of secondary orality and secondary literacy. Ong is hopeful because he is concerned about interiority and the restructuring of the mind that comes with communication
that is other than oral/aural. One could argue that Ong’s scholarship continually seeks the
oral/aural in our human communication because it is here, in the sense of Martin Buber and
Emanuel Levinas, that we not only encounter the other but also interact with and find common
ground in understanding the other. “To consider the work of literature in its primary oral and
aural existence, we must enter more profoundly into this world of sound as such, the I-thou
world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best of all provided,
persons commune with persons, reaching one another’s interiors in a way in which one can never
reach the interior of an ‘object.’” (Ong, 1962, pp. 27-8).

Ong’s work certainly places him in the realm of media ecology, the study of media
environments and how they play a role in human affairs (Strate, 2009). Like McLuhan, Ellul and
more recently Postman, Ong identifies rhetoric as key to maintaining our humanity in these
myriad places of the fixed and visual, rather than oral/aural, language. Spoken words are always,
according to Ong (1982), “modifications of a total existential situation” (p. 67). Rhetoric was
considered an ‘art’ prior to literate culture where the subject presently tends to mean “the study
of how to write effectively” (Ong, 1982, p. 114). The noetic world of places that were formerly
places in our memory, arranged through the practice of rhetoric, have become fixed places in a
print landscape, (Ong, 1982, p. 123). In turn, fixed print “eventually removed the ancient art of
(orally based) rhetoric from the center of academic education” (Ong, 1982, p. 127). The removal
of rhetoric is a thread we can follow through all of Ong’s work and for which Ramus is the
starting point.

The Given Nature of Orality – Primary and Secondary

Ong’s work, especially in Orality and Literacy, points out a rather unthinking insertion of
literacy into our history as a given. That is to say, literacy has been assumed for enough centuries
that we forget to leverage the past and the continued centrality of orality to our communication practices. One of the assumptions we tend to hold is that literacy itself has remained somewhat unchanged over time. From Ong’s *Ramus* project and beyond we learn that that adaptation and purpose of literacy have evolved a great deal over the past six centuries. We can see this change in record keeping, to textbooks to Renaissance literature, literacy and its use and purpose. Second, Ong (1979) criticizes the lack of contrast between aural/cultures and visual literate cultures saying, “those interested in writing and reading processes, either from a practical or theoretical point of view . . . have done little to enlarge understanding of these processes by contrasting writing and reading processes in depth with oral and oral-aural processes” (p. 1). Ong (1982) points out a sense of closure with fixed print that does not occur in the realm of the aural/oral. Fixed print, he explains, “fostered . . . the fixed point of view . . . With the fixed point of view a fixed tone could now be preserved through the whole of a lengthy prose composition” (p. 132). Aiding and abetting fixed print was a new style of teaching that leaned heavily on the visual, Ramist method.

Thus we come to Ong’s sense of literacy. Beginning with a chirographic culture that uses writing to transcribe and record, literacy transitioned from being a notation of declamation to “foster[ing] truly written composition, in which the author composes a text which is precisely a text” (Ong, 1982, p. 94). That is to say,

functionally literate beings . . . are: beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but of these powers structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing . . . Literacy, though it consumes its own oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. (Ong, 1982, p. 77)
We are reminded by Ong (1982) to look at unintended consequences and while there may be a loss of memory, “literacy . . . is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art and, indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself” (Ong, 1982, pp. 14-15).

We know too that Ong looks at literacy in terms of how it changed our human consciousness. The practice of writing itself demands that we absent ourselves from a present other. Ong (1979) calls this artificiality, (p. 3). Writers know nothing of their reader, with the exception of letters and personal communications, (Ong, 1979, p. 3). So writers must do a great deal of anticipating of what an unknown reader may want to know. This is distinct from oral exchange where two or more parties are present and can question one another to ask for further clarity. In writing, “there are no live persons to clarify his thinking by their reactions. There is no feedback. There are no auditors to look pleased or puzzled” (Ong, 1979, p. 3).

Thus Ong’s understanding of literacy sets him up for interpreting all mediated communication. What we may overlook in Ong’s work is that he is not assessing orality in opposition to literacy. Rather, he is interested in the interplay between the two. For Ong (1982), “in a deep sense language, articulated sound, is paramount” (p. 7). He is, however, very attentive to the affects, both intended and unintended, between persons, which includes our own interior voice communicating with ourselves, and the I/thou relationship. Ong does not think communication technologies, beginning with fixed print, are barriers to this possibility for connection. He studies the interplay between orality and literacy because at heart there are humans launching those words onto the page, over the airwaves and along computer networks. Humans are, in turn, interpreting whether the words are between a 12-year-old girl reading *Jane Eyre* or between a husband texting his wife to please pick up milk on the way home. Immediate,
asynchronous, heard, read, spoken, the words emerge from humans and are meant for humans to engage with and interpret.

Out of literacy grows literature, a form more nuanced and internal than the instrumental tasks demanded of writing such as recording. According to Ong (1962), “all language faces toward the interior, and the interior of the both speaker and hearer” (p. 30). Literature then, “has in a sense most interiority because more than other forms of expression, it exists with the medium of words themselves and does not seek to escape this medium” (Ong, 1962, p. 30). However, while the ideas and thoughts in literature open up this interiority, the technology of the writing can make literature a thing or product wherein we lose track of both “vocalization” and the sense of human utterance, (Ong, p. 26). We must keep in mind that writing is a channel which, “relays an utterance from a source” (Ong, 1982, p. 78).

Television and radio also came under Ong’s thoughtful scrutiny. As the popularity of television took hold in the mid Twentieth Century, it will be no surprise that Ong is attentive to the growing concerns expressed by scholars, social scientists, psychologists and parents that the now literate culture was becoming less and less literate. Ong (1992) is aware that media technologies appropriate previous media technologies, (p. 6). In his monograph “Literacy and Orality In Our Times” Ong (1979) is quick to criticize the perspective of declining literacy saying that it is ‘naive’ to think that children who are now spending time with television formerly spent commensurate time with books” (p. 1). To Ong, focusing on television displacing literacy was asking the wrong question. First, according to Ong, the reading and television viewing public was a completely different sort of public than in the past. “A few generations ago, there was no academic population with today’s mix of family and cultural backgrounds, with the same assortment of skills, of desires and aims” (Ong, 1979, p. 1). Second, literacy education even into
the 19th Century was education for the oral performance, (Ong, 1979, p. 1). However, at the beginning of the 20th Century, public education began to shift away from the notion that literacy was in preparation for oral performance to a greater focus on silent reading, when teaching rhetoric morphed into teaching writing technique, (Ong, 1979, p. 2). In brief, by the mid-twentieth century, literacy no longer understood as serving the needs of orality, (Ong, 1979, p. 1).

However, as Ong 1979 identifies, visual media is completely dependent on literacy, which of course includes television, (p. 3). Ong’s (1979) point is that without the linear, analytic, and storage capacity of writing, it would not even be possible to produce a technology such as television (p. 3). In addition, television does not function without a strong oral component; it is never purely visual (Ong, 1979, pp. 3-4). Television and radio are technologies that have lead to our western culture developing a “secondary literacy” (Ong, 1979, p. 3). But at their core, television and radio are sound mediums (Ong, 1979, p. 3).

In thinking about the development of literature and other mediums, the difference we must keep in mind is not so much the technology difference but the difference between orality and literacy. In his article “Literacy and Orality in Our Times” Ong (1979) reminds us that while literacy allows for analysis, orality does not. Orality is inductive, whereas literacy is deductive. Orality consists of “identification, participation, and feeling affinity with a culture’s heroes” (Ong, 1979, p. 4). In a literary, secondarily oral, culture we tend to scorn oral tools such as formulas and clichés, although these are embraced and help cultivate the senses of affinity and participation primary oral cultures (Ong, 1979, p. 6).

We are well aware of the shift from orality to literacy. But as we have seen, this shift is complex and comprises more than an aural/oral culture which suddenly becomes a reading
culture. But reading eventually did become central and our consciousness shifted. The private self and the change to human consciousness is an important part of Ong’s work. However for this project a brief gloss, at this point, will suffice to add to what I have touched upon in previous chapters.

When examining the shift from primary oral to primary literate, an understanding of the interplay between the two is helped by Ong’s explanation of how human consciousness has changed. Ong (1982) calls the realm of consciousness “the new world of autonomous discourse”, and adds that more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness (p. 77). Unlike oral communication, written communication “transposes language to a spatial medium, but the language so transposed has come into existence in the world of sound” (Ong, 1967, p. 3). With writing comes a fixity, a permanence, and a removal of language and “the word” from the temporal presence of the oral/aural realm. Words become permanent. The author is no longer in the presence of the audience. We write for an audience we cannot see. In writing we move from the realm of the aural to the realm of consciousness wherein an unknown author speaks to us and the only place we “hear” these words is in our minds.

Writing, beginning with Plato, is an imitation of oral communication. “It is an inhuman thing that destroys memory” (Ong, 1982, p. 80). It is “removed from the human life-world” and paradoxically “its rigid visual fixity assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers” (Ong, 1982, p. 80).

Ong (1982) is quick to explain that this shift is not a negative. In fact, the shift of consciousness that comes with a literate culture “is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials” (p. 81). Ong goes on to explain:
Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many ways essential for full human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does. (1982, p. 81)

Ong (1982) always sees writing and other technologies that communicate something in light of their potential for enhancing our human consciousness and communication, (Ong, 1982, p. 82).

Here is where we can lose track of Ong’s purposefulness. Ong wants to understand the interplay between orality and literacy and how he understands is through understanding human consciousness in terms of communication. He is sensitive to the resulting interiority and distancing that comes with fixed print, and ultimately all mediated communication. For the purposes of the present project, we accept this shift to interiority and distance and acknowledge it as a consequence of literacy. With a greater interiority comes consciousness of the inner voice. While I am my own first interlocutor, print and other mediated communications and their inherent structures allow me to organize, arrange, and analyze to a degree not possible in a primary oral culture. But orality is not lost nor is it completely distinct from literacy, an idea for which Ong has been criticized. To address that mediated communication is different than oral, Ong develops the idea of secondary orality. When we consider communication technologies such as television, radio and computer mediated communication, all of which Ong is acutely attentive to, we must remember that Ong works from the premise that all communication technologies still maintain elements of orality.
Distancing, Systems and Objectivity in Secondary Orality

We have seen how Ong maintains an interest in the evolution of communication technologies throughout his career as he applies his idea of secondary orality. That is to say, for Ong, no mediated communication completely leaves behind the oral/aural. James Jarc (2104) in his mapping of Ong’s psychodynamic characteristics onto users of mobile technology finds much that still reflects Ong’s sense of secondary orality in today’s mediated landscape. He calls this a hybridized culture of “mobiliteracy”, (Jarc, 2014, p. 21). The very immediacy that is possible through computer mediated communication in addition to the fact that those communications tend to be about what’s happening right now give them, in operation, a commonality with oral communication, (Jarc, 2014, p. 24).

Ong continues to reflect on the intersections of orality and literacy throughout his career. He reminds us to hold them both in our minds as we consider the limitations and possibilities of mediated communication. His interest in these intersections begins with his Ramus research, as I have shown, in which he examines the unintended consequences of Ramus’ visual method, which include both a movement to greater interiority of human consciousness and a distancing from the life world. In his later career Ong begins to look at digital communication beyond fixed text, television and radio. He is acutely aware of emerging computer-aided communication and in fact wrote on digital communication. He calls the late 20th century a stage of digitization as illustrated by “the overriding technology of computer communication” (1992, p. 6).\(^4\)

\(^4\) Ong thought of digitization in terms of its historic origins, which he traced back to the earliest transcription of concepts represented by cardinal numbers. He identifies the Mesopotamian culture in 3100 BCE as one of the first instances of digitization. Ong defines digitization as calculating numerically in discreet units. Ong applies this explanation of digitization to what we presently refer to as computer-mediated communication. For more on this topic see the Ong Manuscript Collection housed in the Saint Louis University Digital Collections, Item 0005.
Distancing

Ong’s career-spanning interest in mediated communication shares the same concerns of philosophers of communication and media ecologists. While we accept that oral speech creates no product and leaves behind no trace, we also understand it is not possible to achieve the kind of contextualization in any kind of mediated communication that we can have in person (Ong, 1992, p. 7). While Ong (1992) identifies that “digitized” communication can bridge a temporal gap, sound and visual gap, still, it is not direct oral discourse which is:

Fully contextualized by the nonverbal as well as the verbal, whereas oral discourse that has been technologized . . . has lost its full original context, and acquired additional artificial contexts enforced by the technology which controls it, although these artificial contexts are also, to a degree, manipulable by the human interlocutors. (p. 7)

However, Ong’s work shows us that the either/or dichotomy of mediated vs. aural/oral communication can be reconciled in some ways. We must bear in mind that Ong is interested in orality and literacy. Yes, the contextual nature of aural/oral communication is a different animal than mediated communication. Yes, the written and technologized word allows for a distancing and an internal conversation that is not a part of how we think about aural/oral communication. However, Ong (1992) points out that there is nothing sinister about this “distancing” and states that we can never truly distance a technologized word,

for all texts—written, printed, electronic—are designed to be read at some point or other. Reading means, ultimately, rendering a text into words which are not simply visible marks but which are sounded . . . linking the text to the existential human world of the reader to give the text meaning. A series of marks which cannot be read hardly qualifies as a text. (p. 8)
George Khushf (1995) also touches on this distancing:

The context of speaking requires that the distance separating people not be too large. The word must be heard in order to be effective. Just as speaking serves rhetoric by enabling act without physical contact, so writing initially services rhetoric by enabling act without oral contact. (p. 34)

In essence, what Ong shows us is that this distance is not new. This distance has ever been so and we should not be surprised at it. Ong’s research helps us to reimagine the nature of distancing that happens in mediated (written) communication. Beginning with his study of Ramist method and continuing to the end of his career, Ong points out that all systems are distancing. And we need not think of distancing in terms some complex computerized system. Ong argues that we have experienced the distancing of mediated communication, including writing, for as long as humans have been communicating. He gives the example of counting on our fingers. We make numbers discreet by identifying them with our ten fingers. They help us to identify things but also distance us from things by applying such a concept as ‘number’ to them, (Ong, 1992, p. 10). Counting “breaks up the child’s world . . . into discreet pieces” (Ong, 1992, p. 10). In other words, the distancing that happens when we communicate through another medium than the aural/oral is a given and is not a post Ramus, post printing press, post literate culture phenomenon.

**Systems**

Ong also addresses the notion of a system itself. If we reflect back on Ong’s research on Ramist method and its origins and consequences, we see again that Ong is grappling with the limitations and unintended consequences of a system.
The concept of a system such as Ramist method is problematic because they tend to be closed systems, (Ong, 1980, p. 136). “Present-day systems analysis however, is intimately aware of the impossibility of totally closed systems” (Ong, 1980, p. 136). However, what systems can do is allow us to reflect on how our interior world interacts with the exterior world, (Ong, 1980, p. 137).

In considering the limitations of systems, Ong comes to the conclusion that the challenge is not the systems we create, whether digital or written. The challenge is to remember that the system itself was devised by humans, unless it is a purely biological and/or autonomic system, (Ong, 1996, p. 4)

Information systems specifically, according to Ong (1996), are necessarily sociological, “which means generated by communication beyond the realm of simple information” (p. 4). “Thus an information system devised by human beings cannot result simply from other information but needs also previous communication, motivation tied in with discourse between conscious human beings” (Ong, 1996, p. 4). Here Ong draws a distinction between information systems and communication systems. He points out that human communication systems “have been the . . . subject of human attention and reflection. They have, in various ways, commanded widespread and acute conscious attention long before writing developed” (Ong, 1996, p. 6). Ong (1982) explains that communication is intersubjective but media are not (p. 173). Information, on the other hand, by itself has no intention. It can be contained and managed within a system.

To restate, humans have studied human communication for millennia but in contrast we have not studied information systems. From his earliest years as a scholar Ong expresses concern and even criticism about Ramist method while ultimately Ramist method had a far greater impact than managing the information necessary to write and speak well. It is writing, which Ramus
championed, that allows us to begin to think of language as a system. While Ramist method was meant to be a system to manage what we know (recall that Ramus intended for his system to be a literal map of reality), the system itself is devised with the intention of it being graspable and useable in the everyday world. Behind his system is Ramus’ commitment, if unsuccessful, to rhetoric. As Ong shows us, Ramus’ method veered heavily into diagrammatic and logical formulae, demoting rhetoric to the limited role of ornamentation.

Ong’s purpose is to find and identify the points of human contact, regardless of mediated environment. First, he does this by reimagining the necessary distancing of our consciousness from our lived world in a positive light. When we write and communicate through various technologies, is not necessarily a bad thing because the text is a link to the external human world. Second, he does this by reframing how we think of information systems, such as Ramist method. Ong considers information systems to be the intentionally created structures and tools of information transmission and storage. Such a system is not possible without first a purpose that emerges out of and is generated to facilitate human communication.

**Language as Objective**

While we may agree that there is a connection to the external human world even in a mediated environment, we must consider that language in a mediated environment, because of its fixed state, and because it may reside within an information system, has come to be thought of as objective and fixed in meaning.

Objectivity of language is the child of modernity. Its conception was made possible by the printing press and sustained by an increasing fascination with method, which included the breadth and influence of Ramist method. The challenge is that historically, “from antiquity until well through the eighteenth century the formal educational system that trained the Western mind
at no point trained a student to be ‘objective’” (Ong, 1967, p. 215). Ong (1982) gives the example of a Ramist textbook which “had no acknowledged interchange with anything outside itself. Not even any difficulties or adversaries appeared” (p. 132).

This is not to say that objectivity did not exist in oral/aural cultures. But the sort of objectivity of a primary oral culture has more to do with an Aristotelian mean than a dissection of language and its meanings into component parts. Ong (1967) explains that in oral cultures there was objectivity having to do with fairness and impartiality, (p. 222). “This kind of objectivity or impartiality is evaluative and personal, belonging to a world where reporter and his material (another person or quasiperson), really do interact rather discernably” (Ong, pp. 222-3). It is “judging of an individual’s merit without regard to his impact on one’s own world . . . Words . . . are closely tied to living interactions of man with man” (Ong, 1967, p. 223). Spoken language is, literally, existential, (Ong, 1967, p. 223).

Ong shows us the places where the present sense of objectivity of language grew out of scholasticism and Ramist method. “This objectivity, essential for scientific explanation, becomes possible when one envisions the world as set off from oneself as essentially neuter, uncommitted, and indifferent to the viewer” (Ong, 1967, p. 223). Knowledge in this world “regards not persons or quasipersons but neutral objects” (Ong, 1967, p. 223).

Fixed print makes analysis of a language possible, as in Ramist method. Analysis is possible once we can write down and store what it is we wish to analyze. We must wonder how the valuation of objectivity took hold since it was not a goal of education, per se into the Renaissance. Once we apply method to print fixed in space, we amplify objectivity despite the fact that objectivity was not the goal of fixing print in space. The goal of fixing print in space, at
least where Ramist method was concerned, was to cultivate our ability to reason, not to limit it, about the world in which we interact every day.

The objectivity afforded by fixed print, however, is not the arena of rhetoric. Yet Ong returns again and again to rhetoric throughout his scholarship, though his stated purpose was often stated otherwise – to study rhythm, oral residue, pedagogy, literary criticism, scholasticism, dialogue, etc. Throughout his career Ong sought to find the point of connection for human meaning and interpretation. He carefully considered the limitations and possibilities of language as objective, information systems, communication technology and the distancing from our life world that is a consequence of print.

The Opportunity for Rhetoric

Near the end of his career, Ong (1996) identifies rhetoric as a way to manage communication within technological frameworks because, “rhetoric has to do with human communication as such, not with merely information” (p. 9).

Writing and reading establish a special situation marked by absences, gaps, silences, and opacity. Faced with a text, the reader finds that both the author and original context are absent. The reader himself or herself has to produce the equivalent of both: the equivalent, for he or she can produce neither author nor context in total actuality.

(Ong, 1980, pp. 133-4).

Ong’s interest in digitization and the study of communication and information systems leads him back to the realm of rhetoric. Rhetorical activities, he explains, are guides to human behavior, intellectual, political and other, (Ong, 1996, p. 8). In one of the few places we hear/see Ong being prescriptive, Ong (1996) says that the study of communication systems should be but is not necessarily a reflective art, thus the popularity of communication studies in the past 100
years can be “seriously misleading” (p. 8). We have studied communication “reflectively and analytically” but we have not studied information systems. Ong (1996) suggests that, “in skilled, reflective study of rhetoric, study of communication systems takes formal shape as a reflective art” (p. 8).

Ong both seeks rhetoric in the history of communication and returns to it as a solution because he always seems to be seeking reconciliation of communication technology and systems with the humanity behind them.

Ong offers rhetoric in much the same way that McLuhan, Ellul and Postman do. “Rhetoric has to do with human communication as such, not with merely information, although it of course now includes the use and study of information systems” (Ong, 1996, p. 9).

Bearing in mind Ong’s point about information systems from above, we are reminded that despite our efforts to move writing and communication and information systems into a static realm of analysis, the origin of the writing and system is not neutral, the source is human. And despite the seemingly static nature of text (whether chirographic, print or digital),

any use of words, oral, textual, or digitized, is not just words but is also a speech act, and as a specifiable speech act, is entangled in all sorts of other nonverbal matters – these persons speaking and these listeners listening, the physical setting, the mood . . . and much else. Text always relies directly or indirectly, on more than textual. To hold together, even as a text, it needs something more than text. (Ong, 1995, pp. 4-5)

Information systems are not closed, stand-alone entities. They have an origin and are in open interaction with existence; dasein, if you will. When an information system works well, as writing does for example, we do not think about it, (Soukup, 2014, p. 19). “Fundamentalism results from people’s presumption that a text constitutes a closed system, that written
communication works perfectly, without . . . the rhetorical or information management that supports it” (Soukup, 2014, p. 19).

We see how Ong grapples with what might be found in common between an in-person conversation and our interaction with text, digital or otherwise. The source is human even if the interaction and its context are removed from face-to-face interaction.

While we have seen that Ong does not see information systems as closed but as platforms to enable speech acts, he goes further than to offer rhetoric as the reflective antidote to information and communication systems. What he adds to, or perhaps focuses on in a rhetorical approach, is the evaluative and interpretative. His solution is hermeneutics. Ong (1994) says that hermeneutics makes “clear that all language is and will always be interpretation – negotiation between two or more persons, even though one of them may well be dead as in the case of authors of texts read by a living interlocutor” (p. 3). Hermeneutics is interpretation but in the sense of “in-betweenness, encounter. Encounter involves basically an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ (thou), so that the names of the interlocutors are basically irrelevant” (Ong, 1994, p. 3).

Ong explains:

That texts must be interpreted. Interpreting a text means inserting it somehow into ongoing conversations you live with . . . Interpretation . . . actualizes potential meanings submerged in the text, making the text more fecund than oral utterance can normally be. (p. 134)

“With digitization, something must reconnect the elements. The more abstract the relationship, the greater the need for the reintegration of the experience” (Soukup, 2014, p. 19). It is human agency that can [must] reconnect the elements.
From chirography to print to digital storage, we find ourselves in an information glut. Part of this glut is comprised of human communication fixed in space as information. Recall that Ong (1996) points out that the systems of information have not been studied for millennia but only for the past few hundred years, with the onset of the scientific method, (p. 9). Ong (1996) reminds us that we saw another information build up that began with the printing press, (p. 10). While we have a breadth of access to information and a lot of immediacy possible, “digital communication can never be fully contextualized because we lose some portion of the non-verbal” (Ong, 1992, p. 7).

When we consider Ong as a media ecologist, his work serves to remind us that texts in any medium are not monologic, although we do fear that they are become monolithic. Text of any kind, by its nature and existence is interpretable. Interpretable means that there are persons, in context temporally, in demeanor, etc. doing the interpreting, (Ong, 1995, p. 3). However, text is bound to interiority. Unlike sound, which exists only as it is uttered, text remains. In 1962 Ong was seeking to reconcile how the immediacy of sound and the permanence of text could both exhibit the exteriorization of a verbal expression.

Language retains this interiority because it, and the concepts which are born with it, remain always the medium wherein persons discover and renew their discovery that they are persons, that is, discover and renew their own proper interiority and selves . . . The pitch of utterance which bears toward the interior of the speaker – and by the same token toward the interior of the hearer . . . can never be done away with. (Ong, 1962, pp. 29-30)

We can look at the corpus of Ong’s work and see that he was willing to evolve in his understanding of what we may call simplistically “the problem of mediation”. The problem is
how are we certain of the other and the interiority that voice lays bare for us? To move toward interpretation as a pathway of connecting with the other, Ong shows the development of his thinking after the *Ramus* project. Decades earlier, Ong (1962) states that it is only in the voice – the hearing of voice – that we are certain of another – that is the evidence of the interior, (p. 28). “All verbalization, including all literature, is radically a cry, a sound emitted from the interior of a person, a modification of one’s exhalation of breath which retains the intimate connection with life which we find in breath itself” (Ong, 1962, p. 28).

However, if we read a bit more closely, the basic idea of human connection and our seeking for it does not change in Ong’s thought. What changes is his idea of how the connection is made and whether it is possible in any kind of mediated scenario. By the end of his life, Ong shifts how he articulates this, concluding that any communication, regardless of the media in which it is situated, manifests the interior. In “A Dialectic of Aural and Oral Correlatives” (even the title is suggestive of Ong’s (1962) seeking reconciliation between interiority and mediated communication) he says, “but when the interior . . . from which a cry is emitted ceases to function as an interior, the cry itself has perished” (p. 28). More than 30 years later, Ong (1995) rather deconstructs the nature of showing one’s interior to another in dialogue pointing out that we are using pronouns (I and you, specifically) that are already unspecified outside of the interaction because there is no referent outside of the direct interaction, (p. 22).

Rhetoric has been tumbled about in history and Ong, beginning with his work on Ramus and into his work on information systems and digitization, reminds us that rhetoric enhances our ability to understand one another. Rhetoric gives us the opportunity to say, “this is where I stand” (Soukup, 2002, p. 91). But, Ong reminds us, the interaction changes us so that the position is not
a static one, but an open one, (Soukup, 2002, pp. 90-1). Ong (1996) seeks a role for rhetoric today. He argues that,

rhetoric is more comprehensive than logic. Rhetoric is not contained in logic, since logic has no use for rhetoric . . . But logic is contained in rhetoric, since it can be used and is used within rhetorical thinking and expression for rhetorical purposes . . . Rhetoric has to do with human communication as such, not with merely information, although it of course now includes the use and study of information systems. (p. 9)

For Ong, hermeneutic and rhetoric are possible in print and digitization but rhetoric is necessary because the nature of information systems and the notion of objective language work against the reflection that rhetoric embraces.

**Conclusion**

Ong’s work and historical attentiveness opens up ways for us to better understand our mediated world. While Ong shares the concerns of philosophers of communication and media ecologists, he shows us that today’s digital environment is not a new environment. He shows us, beginning with his work on Ramus, that information systems are developed through humans communicating with humans to achieve a purpose intended for humans. Ultimately language systems/structures allow us to do more than store information. And yes, there are risks in blindly adapting to these structures. Perhaps foremost among these is Jacques Ellul’s idea of *la technique*. That is, "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity, (Ellul, 1964, p. xxv). If provided with a simple means of storing or organizing information, such as Ramist method, we humans tend to lean into it and cease working very hard for further understanding. There is comfort in structure and perhaps even agreement in how we go about organizing what we know.
This is really no different in literate cultures than in oral cultures. The difference is that we are, in a way, freed from the limitations of our own memory.

From Ramus to the present, Ong reminds us that any communication system or structure was created by humans. The intentions in the creation of these systems have varied over the centuries, from mapping knowledge, as in Ramist method, to freeing us even from even having to type out a ‘I love you’ on a digital keyboard because instead we can send a heart emoji. Although visual communication systems necessitate distance and interiority, there is a still a human creating the system, with intention, who is communicating using the system, with intention. Ong assumes that what we encounter has meaning that we can grasp and even share.

Ong’s commitment to studying the history of communication, orality and literacy, has helped expand our understanding of information systems such as Ramist method. It has pointed to the human intention behind the creation of an information system. In the case of Ramist method, we have learned that while the ‘system’ was simplistic and limiting, it also created a framework within which we could play with language and begin to develop literatures. Ong points to the value of rhetoric in helping us weather various communication technologies with thoughtfulness and intention. When rhetoric is demoted to ornamentation or absorbed into a sophistic commitment to carrying the day, it ceases to help us make sense of our world. Ong’s work reminds us to look for unexpected influences and unintended consequences such as the widespread embrace of Ramist method as a way of organizing our knowledge, Ramus’ influence on university pedagogy and the impact of female students entering the university system, resulting in a decline of polemic practices. Ong also helps us to understand how Ramist method had a tremendous impact in expanding education conducted in vernacular languages.
Ong’s work has its critics. He is sometimes misread as seeing human communication as a dichotomy of orality or literacy. As I have shown, this perspective neglects Ong’s nuanced understanding of human communication, rhetoric, communication systems and mediated communication. Ong speaks of orality and literacy. Ong might perhaps be better thought of as a hermeneutic historian of language, literature and communication. Saint Louis University sought to acknowledge the breadth of Ong’s interests and scholarship by making him a professor of the university, who reported not to a department chair but to the central administration of the school, (Saint Louis University, 2016). This is further supported by wide range of journals in which he published.

This project was initiated with a curiosity to understand how mediated communication and everyday rhetoric can function together. I understood that, in general, Ong’s perspective remained hopeful about the possibility of rich human connection and communication outside of the immediate aural/oral realm. His perspective seemed to go against the grain of the concerns expressed within media ecology, for example the thoughtlessness with which we celebrate progress and adapt to new communication technologies.

This project allows us to draw two conclusions from Ong’s work.

First, while our structures and systems of communication are always shifting, rhetoric will continue to play a far greater role in human existence than mere ornamentation and arrangement. Rather, as Ong shows, one cannot keep rhetoric down. However, we risk losing sight of it in our human tendency to systematize and objectify our world so that we may better understand it. Ong identifies the humanity and human intention behind information systems. His dialectic approach reminds us to seek a benefit in conjunction with the identified limitations of fixed print and mediated environments.
Second, Ong shows us how to remain optimistic about our human capacity to connect in meaningful ways despite mediated situations. This is a perspective that is important to include with the cautionary work of Ellul and Postman. While we should be cautious and intentional about our mediated interactions, and while Ong’s (1996) answer of hermeneutic may seem simplistic at first glance, the generator of the communication has intention and the recipient has the ability to interpret. Our challenge is to cope with the proliferation of communication, (p. 10). This is not to say that technology has made things easier in every way. “If our expanded media can be put to uses that increase genuine human communicative interaction, they need not thereby improve true communication between human persons at all, and can, in fact, numb and decrease it” however we must “inject into them massive intelligent and moral management” (Ong, 1996, p. 10).

Ong’s work serves to continually remind us that at heart we are attempting to connect with one another in meaningful ways. When there are systems and technologies involved, we can err on the side of over-systemization or we can disregard that even technology and communication systems are human endeavors. By stepping back and taking a broader rhetorical view, we too may be able to absorb some of Ong’s optimism and enact the discernment that is central to rhetorical practice. The thoughtful reflection of rhetoric creates such an opening to interpret because rhetoric can always recall us to our situated and lived experience.
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CHAPTER 1


CHAPTER 2


CHAPTER 3


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CHAPTER 4


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CHAPTER 5


