

## Building Language and Literacy Skills Through Oral History



# Unipkausivut

Building Language and Literacy Skills  
Through Oral History

Produced by  
The Nunavut Literacy Council  
2004

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Nunavut Literacy Council  
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# Foreword

By Rachel A. Qitsualik

By 1000 A.D., three cultures existed in the eastern Arctic. The oldest was a people archaeologists call “Dorset”, a Mongolic people who had migrated out of Alaska 3,000 years earlier. For millennia, they had survived unimaginable cold with no dog teams, lamps, igloos, or toggling harpoons.

Between 800 and 1200 A.D., however, the world was warming. Soon, the Dorset were faced with strangers from the west, distant cousins whose dog sleds brought them explosively eastward, toggling harpoons and waterproof stitching allowing ample harvest of the marine mammals they ever pursued. These archaeologists would call “Thule”, and they were the earliest Inuit.

Simultaneously, another people was making its way westward, across the Atlantic. This was a people in whose grip Europe was held, adventurers of mixed Scandinavian descent, today derogatorily called “Vikings”. They settled in Greenland, but explored Baffin Island’s eastern coast, calling it Helluland or “The Place of Flat Stones”.

It would all play out oddly, with the Viking colonists being the first to disappear from the Arctic. And by the time Genghis Khan had begun to form his empire, around 1200 A.D., the Dorset, also, had all but disappeared.

One will never meet a Dorset person today. They are extinct. Yet the memory of them lives on in two peculiar places. The first source is a written record of the Vikings, who called them Skraelings or “Weaklings”. The Vikings note them as a shy people, too easily killed.

The other source, the Inuit oral tradition, remembers these people as “Tunit”. They are said to have originally built the inukssuit – man-like rock structures that drive caribou. Tunit were squat, incredibly shy, immensely strong. They were a paradox, for they taught Inuit a number of survival tricks, and yet used very poor tools and no dogs. Being without lamps, they burned heather for warmth, and so were sometimes called the “Sooty Ones”.

Pre-colonial Inuit lived in nomadic camps. Family was their society. Their challenge, then, was to strengthen social ties between each other and other families they occasionally bumped into. Consequently, while their oral tradition became a way of record keeping, it at once served a more immediate purpose: a means of socially connecting a disconnected population. The oral tradition specializes at drawing human beings together on an interpersonal level, where concepts often times penetrate the soul more deeply than via script.

Above, we have an example of the oral tradition being just as strong as the written one. Each tradition, oral or written, is a specific tool to suit a specific need. Each having a different focus.

Writing is most concerned with hard facts and figures. Conveying an emotional, social message through writing requires great art. Yet this is where the oral tradition naturally excels.

We live in an age of unprecedented information exchange, ironically marked by great social isolation. Perhaps the oral tradition is the heart that can balance writing's brain. This interpersonal need, in humans, is the very reason why many prefer live concerts to recorded music. Like our ancestors of old gathering around a campfire, it touches us on a fundamental, primal level.

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*“There are some words that are still spoken by real Inuit today, but there are some other words which are not used anymore and will not likely be spoken in the future. These words from long ago will remain known only if they are written down.”*

*Donald Suluk in Inuktitut, Winter 1987*



# Introduction

Unipkausivut is intended to help communities to incorporate the important field of ‘Oral History’ into their language and literacy programs. Why?

- Nunavummiut agree that Elders’ knowledge is valuable and must not be lost. Through oral history projects language and literacy learners can participate in preserving the important history which is their birthright.
- Learning about one’s culture through oral history builds self-esteem and a sense of personal and cultural identity. These qualities are essential if people are to meet their personal goals.
- Participation in oral history projects can help build literacy and language skills. For many adults, one of their personal goals is raising their literacy levels in order to support their children’s learning, to participate more fully in society or to get a good job.
- Nunavummiut are concerned about the strength of the Inuktitut language. Working on oral history projects means communicating with Elders in Inuktitut in meaningful ways.
- Many Nunavummiut feel that parents, grandparents and Elders should play a stronger role in education. The study of oral history recognizes the expertise of Elders.

Building language and literacy skills through the study of oral histories is a way to address all these concerns. Working on oral history projects can bring communities together and get people engaged and excited about their learning.

Unipkausivut is a collection of resources that you can use in your programming in any way you find useful. It is intended for community groups and adult literacy and language programs. However others may be able to adapt it to their needs. You are welcome to photocopy any section of this manual.

Unipkausivut is divided into nine sections:

1. *Storytelling and Culture* offers a number of written texts by different authors about the importance of storytelling in defining culture and passing along history.
2. *Language and Literacy in Nunavut* includes writing by different authors about language and literacy issues.
3. *Building Language and Literacy Skills* discusses various principles and approaches to teaching and learning.
4. *Planning Your Project* takes you through the steps in planning your oral history project and offers guidelines on recording equipment and writing funding proposals.
5. *Sample Documents* includes sample proposals, consent forms and reports which you can adapt for your project.
6. *The Process of Collecting Oral Histories* offers guidelines for the different steps in carrying out a project.
7. *Project Ideas* gives suggestions of creative ways you could present the knowledge you collect to the community.
8. *Stories* includes written versions of 15 oral stories from Nunavut.
9. *Useful Resources* includes the names of organizations, books, web sites and other resources you might need to help you understand oral history, language or literacy issues.

# What is Oral History?

An oral tradition is the passing on of knowledge from one generation to the next orally (by speaking). All the important beliefs, values and social or religious customs that make each culture different from another were passed along to younger people from their Elders through the spoken word. Survival skills such as hunting, building houses and making clothes, tools or medicine were taught through telling, showing and doing.

For centuries the communication of information was entirely oral. After the creation of writing, however, people began to count on written documents for information about the past. A lot of the knowledge that was communicated orally was lost. Much later sound recording technology was invented. Then people who were interested in the past were able to collect and use information that was communicated by speaking.

Oral history refers to recorded interviews with people about events of the past or their memories of their life experiences. The recorded human voice is the main form of an oral history. This can be used directly as a sound recording or the speaker's exact words can be transcribed (copied) into written form.

Oral history is often done by talking to several people about one topic. Just as no book can tell you everything, each person has different memories and experiences of the past. Oral history uses the actual words of people who lived and witnessed history. The spoken words of everyday women and men give us a more powerful understanding of the past than books alone can offer.

*Oral history brings alive a past that the written word fails to capture.*

*Studs Terkel, Oral Historian*

