

**NUNAVUT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT
IN THE CONTEXT OF
INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT (IQ)
(Inuit Traditional Knowledge)**

A Discussion Paper

by

**Mike Bell
Inukshuk Management Consultants
5404 50Avenue
Yellowknife, Northwest Territories X1A 1G3
PH: (867) 873-5042
Email: mikebell@theedge.ca**

INTRODUCTION

In May, 2002 I served as a group animator for a family literacy workshop, sponsored by the Nunavut Literacy Council, in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.¹ During the workshop, staff gave a presentation on the literacy workshops they are delivering in Inuit communities. One of the issues that arose in discussion after the presentation was how to relate literacy to the traditional Inuit Culture—a culture in which there was an absence of literacy—in terms of the usual understanding of literacy meaning the ability to read and write.

The issue is important. Literacy educators recognize that it is not enough to simply try and teach the ability to read and write. All learning occurs within a ‘learning context’—a framework within which the skills have meaning. One must adopt an existing learning framework or create one. The learning context must be culturally relevant. If it is not, then by default the learning context will be the context of the dominant Qallunaat Culture.² Since this culture does not need or use the Inuktitut language, literacy development could result in the loss of the Inuit language and the consequent deterioration of the Inuit Culture.

The importance of a learning context emerged during the workshop as participants defined the meaning of literacy.

“Literacy is a skill that enables people to interpret and effectively respond to the world around them. Based upon language development from birth, it includes the ability to learn, communicate, read and write, pass on knowledge and participate actively in society.”

As I listened to the discussion, two things occurred to me.

First, though Inuit in the past may not have had the ability to read and write, they did have a sophisticated language, Inuktitut, along with the ability to learn, to communicate, to pass on knowledge and to participate actively in society. They also had an ingenious ability to interpret and effectively respond to the world around them. So much so, that they are admired throughout the world for their ability to have survived and flourish for thousands of years in what is undoubtedly the harshest environment on the earth.

Second, it occurred to me that Inuit Traditional Knowledge (“Inuit Qaujimagatuqanginnuit” or “IQ” for short) was precisely the context that could facilitate the development of the modern skills of reading and writing—if literacy instructors could find a way of translating this knowledge into the modern era and have it do for today’s Inuit what it did for their ancestors.

For several years preceding the workshop in Cambridge Bay I’d had the opportunity to become acquainted with IQ. I’d spent a great deal of time working with Community Justice Committees³ in Nunavut, trying to assist them to find a way of restoring their traditional ways of resolving conflicts and maintaining them as a parallel Community

Justice System to the Criminal Justice System. More recently I had been invited to work with members of an Inuit IQ Task Force. It had a mandate to help the Nunavut government incorporate IQ into its day to day operations. Both of these projects had a similar purpose: to bring the past forward into the modern age as a context for learning and problem solving. This seemed to be precisely the same challenge now facing the Nunavut Literacy Council.

My purpose in this paper is to explore ways and means by which the basic values and principles of IQ can be brought forward to serve as a useful learning context for the development of modern literacy. But before proceeding, a brief comment about myself and my purpose.

I am not an expert in literacy, nor an expert in either the Inuit Culture or its traditional knowledge. The observations I pass on have come from my limited experience with traditional elders who lived on the land and with the “younger Inuit elders”—those with both a knowledge of the wisdom of their elders and a knowledge of modern organizations, systems and governance structures. It is this latter group, often unrecognized, who have a passion for their culture and are working to bring the best of the past into the present in an effort to create a modern Inuit society.

My effort in this paper is not to create a new learning approach but, simply, to create some linkages—to provide some ideas on how traditional knowledge might serve as a foundation and learning context for teaching literacy skills in Nunavut.

This paper takes the form of a discussion paper in the hope that those who are much more knowledgeable than I am will take the discussion further.

THE FALL AND RISE OF INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT (IQ)

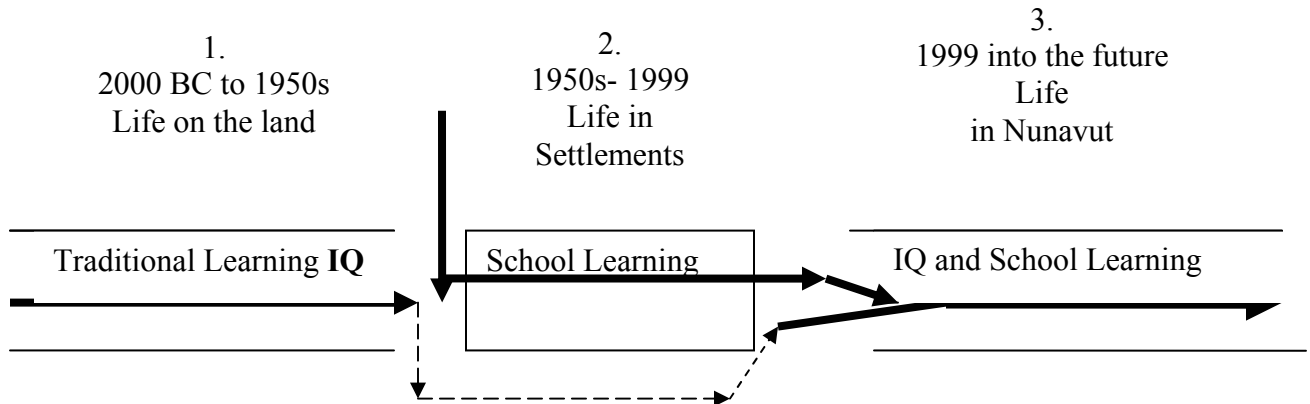
Though it has become commonplace to translate the Inuktitut term “Inuit Qaujimajatuqanginnut” as “traditional knowledge” the term does not simply refer to past knowledge.” More properly the term is defined as *The Inuit way of doing things: the past, present, and future knowledge of Inuit Society*.

Thus the concept is dynamic. IQ is not a collection of rules or precepts set in stone. It is a set of values passed from generation to generation through oral tradition and found in the hearts and minds of a people. What is happening today—the way families, communities, Inuit organization and the Nunavut government define what it means to be Inuit—becomes the “traditional” knowledge of the future.

Because many people tend to see IQ as a thing of the past—something residing exclusively in the minds and hearts of the elders-- it is having difficulty finding its place and role in modern Inuit society. We can understand why by retracing the fall and rise of

IQ over the past sixty years. The following illustration illustrates what happened to IQ in terms of learning.

THE TWO WAYS OF LEARNING IQ and School Learning



We can divide the history of the Inuit in Nunavut into three stages: 1) life on the land extending back for thousands of years up until the 1950s; 2) life in settlements, extending from the 1950s (in some cases from the early 1960s); and life in Nunavut, extending from 1999—the creation of Nunavut—into the future.

When people lived on the land, the land itself, the family, and the small extended family or community were the source of learning—they were “the classroom.” The “teachers” were the parents and elders. Wisdom and experience was passed on from generation to generation. Pedagogy was strongly based upon modeling, observation and practice.

When people moved into settlements in the 1950s and early 1960’s they encountered another kind of learning system, the Qallunaat education system based upon schools. Learning took place in the classroom. The teachers were usually Qallunaat teachers hired from the south. Their pedagogy was based upon oral instruction, written texts and memorization. While parents and elders still had some influence, their influence as teachers was very much limited. Traditional ways of learning were marginalized (signified on the chart above by the dotted line). One of the consequences was the destruction of the traditional learning context and an attempt, by a dominant Qallunaat culture, to replace it with a new learning context—the school-based learning context. As a result, today’s youth find themselves caught between two learning contexts reflecting two different cultures.

With the coming of Nunavut, the Government of Nunavut has committed itself to creating an *Inuit* Public Government. One of the ways of doing this is to bring into the present the traditional knowledge (IQ) and use it as a part of the context for modern systems. Thus, ideally, there will be a blending of the new with the old.⁴

THE NATURE OF IQ: RELATIONSHIPS AND VALUES

IQ is part of the Inuit culture. A culture is a total body of traditions borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It includes norms, values, and standards by which people act, view the world and give it meaning.

As I will show in what follows, the essence of the Inuit Culture is a set of four basic relationships. It is these relationships that are the life-principle of the culture. They are what make the culture a culture. The culture grows and flourishes through the preservation and strengthening of these relationships.

The relationships manifest themselves in certain values or guiding principles. According to Jaypeetee Anakak,⁵ there are six key values. These signify “the Inuit way of doing things.”

Together, the relationships and the guiding principles constitute Inuit Qaujimajatuqanginnut—or IQ.

At the risk of oversimplifying things, we can link the relationships to the guiding principles in the following manner.

1. The Relationship with the Land.

In many respects this is the *primordial* relationship (the first relationship and the one from which the others flow). It is the thousands of years of living and surviving on the land that is the foundation of the Inuit culture.

Inuit Cosmology (traditional stories of how the Earth was created and how the people came into existence and continue to develop) stresses an intimate relationship between people and animals.⁶ The human community is part of the greater earth community. Inuit concept of the relationships of people to the land and its species seems to closely parallel the belief of other aboriginal peoples that the people and animals form a single community. This idea is best summed up in the traditional North American definition of community as: “*An intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate.*”

It is the Inuit experience with the land that is the source of Inuit learning, healing, nourishment, propagation and child rearing. It is the respectful relationship with the land and its species that is the core of traditional Inuit spirituality

Principles

- ***Avatittinnik Kamattiarniq*** is the concept of “environmental stewardship.” But, the concept goes well beyond the modern concept of environmental protection or land and wildlife management. Deep within the concept is the idea that the land and its animals have “rights” that must be respected.
- ***Qanuqtuurniq*** is the concept of being resourceful to solve problems. It is the ability to survive on the land through an ability to improvise with what is at hand that is the source of all fulfillment and self-realization. It is what makes an Inuk and Inuk.

2. The Relationship with One’s Family.

The family kinship model is fundamental to Inuit Culture. The family provides the environment within which children grow and develop, families prosper, marriages take place, elders are cared for, communities and coalitions are formed so the group can survive. In all respects, the family comes first.

Principle

- ***Pijitsirniq*** is the concept of serving and providing for. It expresses the obligation and responsibility to the family and its survival—and by extension to other members of the community. It is one of the fundamental characteristics of the leader in Inuit society.

3. The Relationship with One’s Own Inner Spirit

As the child grows into an adult in the family context, he or she must develop a strong sense of inner worth and personal identity. Part of this discovery of “who I am” brings with it an awareness that “I must have a purpose or direction in my life.” Along with this sense of purpose comes an awareness of responsibility.

Principle

- ***Pilnimmaksarniq*** is the passing on of knowledge and skills through observation, doing and practice. Because of the lifestyle on the land in harsh conditions, the child must be able to adapt to continually changing situations, learn the art of discipline, and become prepared to take his or her rightful role in the family and community. The concept of skill

development and knowledge acquisition (what we would call today, “capacity building,”) strengthens the sense of personal identity and worth.

4. The Relationship with One’s Own Social Grouping (the community or organization) and Between Social Groupings.

As the child grows, he or she must be able to relate to others outside the immediate family. The development of relationships with others—social grouping and organization within and outside the community—helps ensure the survival of the group. These relationships are critical for the survival of the family and the community. And they are more than a practical necessity; they are firmly rooted in the culture, they are an expression of the culture. One of the traditional teachings of many aboriginal elders is that the community and its organizations will only be as strong as the culture; and the culture will only be as strong as the community and its organizations.

Principles

- ***Piliriatigiingiq*** is the concept of collaborative working relationships--working together for a common goal.
- ***Ajiiqatigiingniq*** is the Inuit way of decision-making. The term refers to comparing views or taking counsel or the concept of consensus decision-making. Though these two principles are essential to many aspects of Inuit Culture, they seem to have a special significance to leadership.

In linking these principles of IQ to essential relationships, we wish to note that our divisions may be somewhat arbitrary. Both the relationships and the principles are integral to the culture as a whole. Together they form the bedrock foundation and the context for Inuit Culture and for IQ.

APPLYING IQ TO LITERACY

The Need to Reframe

How do we use IQ as a context for teaching literacy?

We cannot simply take the values that emerged out of centuries of living on the land and try to force them into a totally new environment—life in settlements and the realities of modern society. We have to go through a transitional step—a step I call reframing.

A frame is a living context within which we send, receive, and interpret messages, establish relationships, view the world and give it meaning.

Each one of us has our own personal frame—we carry it with us. It surrounds us and helps define us as a unique individual. It contains physical emotional, psychological and

spiritual elements based upon our culture, family upbringing and values, religious beliefs, education, skills and abilities, work experiences, and so forth. We use these elements within our frame to interpret the world around us and give it meaning.

When we move from one life situation to another, we learn to *reframe*. We learn to “step outside” our usual frame, examine the demands of the new environment in which we find ourselves, and adapt accordingly. And we do this both on an individual and a social or group basis. Thus, in recent years Inuit have learned to adapt to settlement life, the realities of modern technology, and the development of their own new form of government which is very different from the forms of self-governance people used when they lived on the land.

The key to successful reframing, in terms of a culture, is to find ways of bringing forth the essential elements of a culture—the primary relationships and values—and give them meaning in the new context so that they can do the same thing for the modern generation that they did for past generations. This is not an easy task because the new context often brings with it its own priorities and values. If the new context is dominated by a different culture—in the case of Inuit by the Qallunaat Culture—it tends to superimpose Qallunaat values and relationships on the Inuit Culture. (Thus, as I noted in the diagram above, the Qallunaat school systems tends to become identified as the primary form of learning and overshadows all other forms of learning.)

One of the ways of successfully reframing (and making a successful transition one context to another) is to reinterpret the new realities by broadening their scope and making them more flexible. The Government of Nunavut is presently trying to do this in a number of areas.⁷ So how can we do this in terms of literacy?

We can do this by reframing our usual understanding of literacy—by stepping outside the narrow confines of literacy as reading and writing—and viewing it in terms of its ultimate objectives: a skill that enables people to effectively interpret and respond to the world around them. We can then link this broader understanding of literacy to the fundamental relationships within the Inuit Culture.

In the final section of this paper I will do this by broadening the definition of literacy. I’ll be discussing four different types of literacy which correspond to the fundamental relationships within the Inuit culture.

- Earth Literacy
- Family Literacy
- Personal Literacy
- Community Literacy

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

IQ AS A LEARNING CONTEXT FOR LITERACY

Earth Literacy

Several years ago I went on an Earth Literacy Retreat. It was all about learning from the universe and from the Earth through cosmology (origin stories about the beginnings of the universe, earth, and people), the development of species, the relationship of the human species to other species and to a living universe. The instructors were life scientists: ecologists, biologists, cosmologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, political activists. As I listened to the speakers, I became aware that I was listening to the same stories I heard from elders at workshops two decades ago on Baffin Island, and later from Dene elders in the western communities up and down the MacKenzie Valley.

The elders told a straightforward story.

- Each person born into this life is a unique individual with his or her own Spirit or energy force that manifests itself in one's personality or lifestyle. This Spirit confers upon the individual a role or purpose in life.
- Our primary relationship as spiritual beings is with the land. It is the gift of the Great Creator, the source of our energy and vitality--and is our guide, our teacher our provider and healer.
- We are called to live as a community— with the land and its creatures, with our families and extended families, our local communities and with people in other communities with whom we share the land.
- If the land is living, and we and our families and communities are living, then our organizations must be living. Our organizations will be health if our culture is healthy; our culture will be healthy if our organizations are healthy.
- If we are to succeed in our calling, we must find a way of realigning our primary relationships and maintain a balance of Spirit with others and with the land and its creatures.

The scientists I was listening to were communicating the same basic message, though their way of expressing it was different. The scientists would talk about our relationships to animals by talking about the similarities of our genetic coding, our DNA. They would discuss the minerals in our bodies as coming from the explosion of the stars, the creation of our planet and emerging from the crust of the earth. They would speak about maintaining a balance with nature by talking about man as part of inter-relating ecosystems. But in most respects the message was the same. The only difference seemed to be that the wisdom of the elders came from their first-hand experience on the land. Unlike the scientists, they were able to pass on survival skills.

Because families have moved in off the land, there is a real danger today that much of the wisdom and skills of the past may be lost—especially among the younger generation. The relationship with the land is so essential to the Inuit culture, it is critical that children

learn the stories of their origins, that they have some experience living and travelling on the land, that they learn the traditional knowledge that flows from their culture and gives them a sense of their own identity.

Earth literacy is about learning from the land and developing the skills needed to survive on the land.

Family Literacy

The relationship with the family is critical for the ongoing development of the Inuit culture. In almost all respects, the family comes first. It is the health and development of the family that is the fundamental strength of the Inuit as a people.

The family environment provides the foundation for literacy. It is within this environment that children learn their first language, that they learn how to learn, that they first experience the meaning of inter-personal relationships, that they become aware of their relationship to a larger community, that they find the strength they need to venture out into a broader world.

A literate family is one that is involved in the development of children, talks to them, tells them stories, sings with them and play games, prays with them, passes on the practices of their culture, exposes them to new learning experiences. A literate family values life long learning. As family members grow and become older, it makes sacrifices so that all family members can improve their literacy skills and improve their ability to become independent. It develops a learning environment where learning is valued and respected.

In recent years many families have undergone severe strain and even breakdown as a result of severe social problems. Alcohol abuse, child abuse, family breakdown, are not uncommon. Though many of us may not normally associate literacy with health and healing, there can be little doubt that the two are inter-related. Literacy development requires a healthy family environment; and literacy development helps create a healthy family environment.

Family literacy is all about developing the capacity of family members to become literate in the full sense of the word.

Personal Literacy

Personal literacy is the ability of individuals to interpret and effectively respond to the world around them. It includes incorporating values from the culture, as well as learning the skills required to survive and flourish in the modern wage economy. In a sense, the Inuit of today have to be able to live in two cultures. In the West the Dogrib refer to this phenomenon as becoming “strong like two peoples.” Specifically in modern society it means acquiring the ability to read, write and handle numbers, as well as acquiring those

skills that are specifically needed in the modern work place. Chief among these is undoubtedly the requirement to become “computer literate.”

In a rapidly changing world, where most people can expect to have several careers, basic literacy is not enough. Individuals must become truly literate—able to continually interpret and adapt to the world around them as that world continually changes. Thus literate is not a defining moment—a magical border that one crosses and instantly becomes “literate” when one can read or write. It is an ongoing life-long process.

As we ponder the reality of personal literacy, we note two trends in communities. There are a number of individuals returning to school—individuals in their 20, 30s and 40s who may never have had the benefits of an education and or who dropped out of school. They can see the relationship between literacy, ongoing education and employment. But there are many other young people who continue to drop out of school, and because of the realities of modern life, may be preparing themselves for long-term dependency on government. It is this group that is the major challenge for those committed to fostering and promoting literacy

What is the essence of personal literacy? It seems to be the desire of individuals to take control of their lives and to develop through hard work and discipline the skills required to “make it” in the modern world. No one can give literacy to another person. People “become literate” by developing their capacity to interpret and respond to the world around them.

Community Literacy.

Perhaps more than any other vehicle, the recent movie *Atanarjuat—The Fast Runner* has illustrated the importance of being able to enter into relationships with members of the extended family. It describes in graphic detail the problems that arise when relationships break down. Though the movie was set in historical times, the situation is not dissimilar today. Survival depends upon the ability to enter into meaningful relationships with other groups—whether those other groups are other aboriginal organizations, communities, governments, or corporations.

Community literacy is not simply the place where literacy activities take place. It is the “stuff” of literacy—the curriculum if you will. It is about developing the ability to “read” and respond to the realities of community life. In today’s terms it is still about the ability of communities to survive and enable residents to live independent lives, to speak out and represent their own best interests. It is about helping create the kind of environment—physical, economic social spiritual and cultural—that the community needs for its survival

Community literacy is very about developing leaders—skilled leaders that are trustworthy and accountable. Since so much of community life focuses upon organizations, it is about creating healthy organizations that are confident and able to enter into relationships with other organizations and groups for mutual gain. And it is

about ensuring that leaders and the organizations they develop are culturally responsive: that they sustain and strengthen the primary relationships of Inuit life.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have shown how IQ can be used as a foundation and learning context for literacy. I began by deepening our understanding of the nature of literacy and then by fleshing out the full implications of IQ. Then I showed the linkages.

I realize that this paper only touches the surface of a major challenge. I have not taken the discussion down to the level of how, precisely to use IQ as a basis for literacy development. This task I leave to others. But I do believe that the fundamental relationships of the culture and the principles of IQ can provide a wealth of material for creating a culturally relevant learning context.

Today, with literacy as with other realities in the new Nunavut Territory, residents have come to a fork in the road. They can pursue the path of the dominant culture and look upon literacy as a way to “make it” in the Qallunaat world. Or they can take the more difficult but ultimately more fruitful path of developing literacy in the context of their own culture and traditional knowledge. Whatever path they take, the decisions they make will ultimately become the Inuit Qaujimajatuqanginnut for future generations.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to the Board and Staff of the Nunavut Literacy Council for the workshop discussion that gave rise to this paper. I have worked with Council a number of times over the past few years. In my opinion they are on the leading edge of literacy development especially in a cross-cultural context. Those interested in knowing more about the Nunavut Literacy Council should contact: Kim Crockatt, Executive Director, Nunavut Literacy Council, Box 1049, Cambridge Bay, Nunavut X0B 0C0. Telephone: (867) 983-2678. Email: kimcr@polarnet.ca

² The term “Quallunaat Culture” refers to the Euro-Canadian Culture—the culture of the predominant non-Inuit people living in the North

³ These community committees have emerged in recent years and are part of what the Qallunaat Culture calls an “alternative justice system”—alternative to the Criminal Justice System with its police, courts, lawyers and correctional institutions. But Inuit tend to think of them as a revival of a traditional form of justice. It is based upon a philosophy of healing and restorative justice (restoring relationships with the community caused by the offender and the offence) as opposed to punishment. These committees enable community residents to address many of their own local problems, mostly with younger offenders, in a culturally relevant manner.

⁴ The Nunavut government is pursuing this strategy on a number of fronts including efforts to make Inuktitut the language of government, support programs for hunters and trappers, support for elders programs, support for Community Justice Committees and an overall effort to include IQ in the day to day workings of government.

⁵ I am indebted to Jaypeetee Arnakak for these principles and for his various articles explaining IQ. They have been most helpful. See, his article “What is Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: Using Inuit Family and Kinship Relationships to Apply Qaujimajatuqangit.” in the August 25, 2000 edition of the *Nunatsiaq News*.

⁶ “Inuit emphasize that the core of the relationship between humans and animals is human recognition that an equity exists with animals as participating members of a shared environment... Through a life that unifies the land, the animals and the community past and present, the Inuk hunter acquires, reconstructs, and lives out a world-image which provides both security in his own identify and direction for his behaviour. He does not hunt only to eat, but also to structure his community, and ultimately to build a cognitive model of the world by which he is defined and directed. To be *inummarik* (the process of becoming a genuine person), is to be actively engaged in lifelong cycles of interaction with, and cognitive interpretation of, the human and the non-human environment.”
Arlene Stairs and George Wenzel, “I Am I And the Environment: Inuit Hunting,

Community, and Identity." *The Journal of Indigenous Studies*, Winter 1992, 3:1, p 4 and 6.