

“This is the way we were told . . .”: Multiple Literacies in Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories

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The birth of a literacy project

In 2002, Emily Kudlak, from the community of Ulukhaktok in the Northwest Territories (NWT), sought support from the NWT Literacy Council for two literacy projects – one on names and naming, and the other on amulets. She insisted these knowledge domains contained important forms of traditional literacy. The NWT Literacy Council subscribes to the view that literacy is a social, cultural construct (BARTON & HAMILTON 1998, 2000; BRICE HEATH 1983; GEE 1990, 1992; STREET 2003; TAYLOR 1983), but these projects, as described, appeared to focus more on traditional knowledge (TK) than literacy. This led to the question: What constitutes literacy in the community of Ulukhaktok from the perspective of the people who live there? The NWT Literacy Council speculated that perhaps in its work it did not fully recognize the complexities and meanings of contemporary literacy in the everyday lives of Aboriginal communities (COLLINS & BLOT 2003); perhaps its work largely reflected Western (English) constructs of literacy (STREET 2003). The Literacy Council also wondered how it could possibly support literacy

development if Aboriginal literacy is so highly complex, when nine of the eleven official languages in the NWT are Aboriginal? During initial forays into the feasibility of a research project in this area, community members from Ulukhaktok were quick to provide examples of traditional literacies, such as how people could (and still can) “read” the weather. These multiple literacies of Ulukhaktok are how the people made meaning and passed on those meanings prior to colonization and the introduction of linear print-based literacies. This begged the question of which multiple literacies are still present in contemporary Ulukhaktok. This was the birth of the research project into literacy in Ulukhaktok.

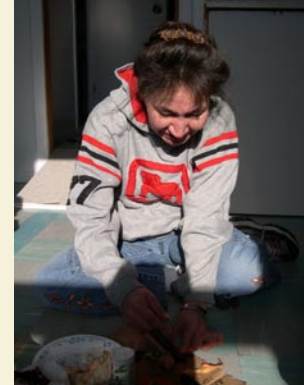
The research site

Ulukhaktok (formerly known as Holman) lies on the western coast of Victoria Island. It became the research site for a number of reasons. First, the topic originated from the community. Second, people from Ulukhaktok had worked with the NWT Literacy Council in the past, so there was already a working relationship based on mutual trust. Third, Emily Kudlak was the part-time community language coordinator, interested in working more extensively on Inuinnaqtun, the language of the community. Fourth, her employer, the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre (ICRC), supported the project because of its cultural and linguistic research. Finally, Ulukhaktok is a unique (and as it turned out, complex) language situation. The community is in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. People from the Western Arctic (Inuvialuit) and as far west as Alaska, were the first to settle in Ulukhaktok. Two other groups of people—Kangiryuararmiut and Kangiryuaqtiarmiut, who are closely related and who both speak Inuinnaqtun—also settled in Ulukhaktok. With the creation of Nunavut in 1999, Ulukhaktok was the only Inuinnaqtun-speaking community to remain in the NWT. Paradoxically, the community has the highest proportion of those fifteen years of age and older able to speak one of the Inuktitut languages in the NWT and the sharpest decline in the number of speakers between 1989 and 1999 (NWT BUREAU OF STATISTICS 1999). The relatively high number of speakers in Ulukhaktok suggested that traditional literacy would be stronger there than in the other Inuvialuit Settlement Region communities. Potentially, therefore, research in that community could provide reliable information on a situated model of literacies that would go beyond (1) English mainstream literacy, and (2) print to include visual, audio and spatial patterns of meaning (COPE & KALANTZIS 2000).



The research team

The research team is a collaboration among two Inuinnaqtun-speaking researchers from Ulukhaktok who are literate in a range of traditional forms of literacy, a university-based researcher with northern experience, and a researcher from a northern-based literacy organization with research capacity. The community researchers have participated in several community-based research projects, as researchers, assistants and /or informants.



Support for the project

The project began in 2003; funding for the initial phase ends in 2007. Recently, the research team received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada for the second stage of the project, extending the research to 2010. The project has enjoyed broad-based support from a variety of organizations that have recognized the value of the research to themselves, as well as to a more global community:

- **Community of Ulukhaktok and Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre** – The desired purpose and value of the project for Ulukhaktok people, as well as the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre, is to document knowledge and ways of learning considered essential to the cultural and linguistic survival of people in Ulukhaktok, and consequently their identity.
- **NWT Literacy Council** – For the NWT Literacy Council, the policy and program implications are important. The Council wants to be able to create more relevant training and resources to support the development of Aboriginal literacy. It also wants to increase awareness of the inherent value of Aboriginal literacy, as well as its importance as a building block for English literacy.

- **University of Lethbridge** – For the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, findings from the study will inform its work on curriculum, in particular indigenous curriculum. This supports the University mandate to prepare teachers—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—to teach in Alberta classrooms. It also links to other similar research in which it is involved.
- **Government of the NWT, Aurora Research Institute, National Literacy Secretariat** (NLS, now known as Office of Literacy and Essential Skills), **SSHRC, Canada** – For the territorial and federal governments, important policy and program implications may emerge from this research. As well, this study provides an opportunity to build northern research capacity, particularly among northern organizations and Aboriginal people, a stated goal for national government and research organizations.

The research plan

a) Indigenous protocols

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) claims that research has colonized indigenous people and communities worldwide. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) concurs. Both agree that research theory and practice must be decolonized. This study is committed to decolonizing research methodologies. To this end the project aims to:

- **Collaborate** with as many constituencies in the community as possible (elders, youth, parents, educators, other researchers, community leaders) at all stages of the project. The community and community researchers have set the direction for the study, designed its approach, are conducting the research, interpreting its findings and deciding on appropriate means to disseminate the results.
- **Co-investigate** research methods embedded in indigenous ways of knowing, learning and communicating.
- **Diversify** the research team by involving two community insiders (with differing levels of English and Inuinnaqtun spoken and written fluency, as well as range and depth of cultural knowledge) and two community outsiders with expertise in mainstream literacy research methods and securing grants. All the researchers have experience with community-based research projects.
- **Attend** to the effects of a collaborative team of ‘mixed’ researchers on the research and the researchers.

In this study, the research team is identifying, using, articulating and documenting research methodologies and protocols indigenous to Ulukhaktok or that resonate with local, culture-based protocols for inquiry including: data collection, knowledge generation, interpretation, display and dissemination, and preservation.

b) Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (TK) research methods

Since the long-term value of this study to the community is in direct relation to the traditional knowledge documented and transferred to youth, the research team is also adapting research methods used in other northern TK projects (e.g. JOHNSON & RUTTAN 1993; LEGAT 1994; RYAN 1994, 1995; THORPE 2001; WEST KITIKMEOT SLAVE STUDY 1997). Adapted TK research tools include:

- Collecting and recording narratives of elders (CONDON 1996; JOHNSON & RUTTAN 1993; LEGAT 1994; RYAN 1995; THORPE 2001; WEST KITIKMEOT SLAVE STUDY 1997), in the indigenous language.
- Validating the knowledge through “gatherings”, large social events that involve food, storytelling and a modification of the workshop approach (THORPE 2001) to explore or present specific material.

c) Ethnographies of situated literacy

In addition, the team is adapting the standard ethnographies of literacy approach used in situated literacies in the 1980s and 1990s (BARTON & HAMILTON 1998, 2000; BOYARIN 1993; BRICE HEATH 1983; COLLINS 1999; COLLINS & BLOT 2003; SCHIEFFELIN & GILMORE 1986; STREET 1993, 2003; TAYLOR 1983). Methods that we have adapted include:

- **Insider accounts**—Oral and written accounts of literacy events and experiences of people from Ulukhaktok, collected both in semi-structured (formal interviews) and unstructured settings (e.g. Anglican Women’s Sewing Group, Moms and Tots, Elder and Youth Games). We are recording all interviews as well as some key events (such as elders’ gatherings, or Moms and Tots Inuinnaqtun Family Literacy Program). Recordings are both analog and digital.
- **Participant observation**—Researchers document their activities, observations, insights and memories in notebooks and through electronic means.
- **Text, document or object analysis**—Collecting and analyzing relevant documents (such as photographs, school texts, hymn books, cultural objects, literature), expanding the notion of text to include media and symbol systems used and understood within Ulukhaktok.

We developed another series of concept maps around the seasonal round and life stages. The revised interview guide basically asked people to tell the story of their lives. During that telling, the two community researchers probed more directly about the specific literacy topics, emphasizing different literacy topics according to the specialized knowledge of the elders, such as astronomy or drum dancing. We hoped these interviews would tell us how literacy occurred in the context of the elders' lived experiences, as well as give us hints about if and how these were present in contemporary society. Before adopting this approach for the whole study, however, we piloted it with one elder. This pilot interview confirmed that the literacy processes and practices are embedded in people's everyday lives, and that the description of those lives in the life histories would give us the context we needed to make sense of literacy in Ulukhaktok.

The research question

In this study, we began by asking: What is literacy in Ulukhaktok? What is text? How are literacy, texts and identity intertwined? To focus the research, we understood literacy to be **communicative practices** by which **cultural meanings** are:

- **Codified** — The way culturally significant meanings are represented visually or auditorially following culturally shared modes of representation. So, for example, we can recognize that a certain kind of applique on a parka is from Ulukhaktok; that if the applique includes a goose with a fox that is standing in for a particular story.
- **Interpreted** — The meanings of the symbols are multi-layered and polysemic, and thus open to interpretation rather than direct translation.
- **Negotiated** — Because much communication, even interpretation of texts, occurs in the context of dialogue or conversation, and because there is no direct translation of meaning from object/text, the meaning is negotiated. This happens continually in the research project when the community researchers are negotiating the meaning of a text; for example, a transcript of an elder's life history.
- **Learned** — Literacy involves complex processes of development, acquisition, instruction and learning. It is the way that cultural knowledge is both transmitted to the young and re-created by the next generation as well. Thus literacy involves living processes.
- **Communicated** — The way in which speakers (or writers or artists or sewers or singers) speak (or write or draw or sew or sing) about something to someone.

As the research progressed, it soon became clear that we had underestimated the complexities of literacy in the community. We were dealing not with “literacy,” but rather with a complex form of situated, multiple literacies. This forced us to change our original question to: What are the “literacies” of Ulukhaktok?

Schrag’s (1986) notion of communicative praxis suggests that the act of speaking, writing or acting cannot be separated from who is speaking (or writing or acting), or what s/he is speaking, writing or acting about. Schrag’s model decentres the subject, so that it is not about the individual speaker but the speaker in relation to the world (the topic, the audience, where they are speaking and when).

- **Who** is the speaker? Who is the actor? And from what perspective are they speaking? What is their relation to the world — hunter, singer, sewer, etc?
- **To whom** are they speaking? In other words, who is the audience?
- **What** are they speaking about?
- **Where and When** is this taking place? In other words, what is the context for this communication?
- **How** are they speaking? What processes are they using and what texts are they using?

What we are learning: The literacy processes

The dominant view of literacy is of a single phenomenon comprised of an “autonomous, neutral and universal set of skills” (STREET 2003: XIII). Simply put, this model of literacy is the ability to decode (read) and create (write) print and numbers. Street (2003) characterizes the model as “narrow” and “decontextualized” (p. XIII). The research in Ulukhaktok has made it very clear that the model of literacies that exists there is neither narrow, nor decontextualized.

Our analysis indicates there are two interdependent components in Ulukhaktok literacies: (1) the **content** (the knowledge domains in which the literacies are embedded as well as the media – or “texts” – that exist (stars) or are created (clothing) and hold the knowledge), and (2) the literacy **processes** (the ways in which people codify, interpret, negotiate, learn and communicate meaning). Through the research it has become clear that the **content** of what is being interpreted or created or understood cannot be separated from the **processes** by which these are happening. So to be literate in Ulukhaktok is to understand the content **and** to be able to engage in the processes

necessary for decoding (i.e. interpreting or understanding) the meaning. In this study, the *knowledge domains* where these processes manifest themselves include Places (and travelling), Names (and naming), Clothing (and sewing), Tools (and hunting and fishing), Stories (and storytelling), Drumming & Songs (dancing & singing), Amulets & Dreams (and curing/healing) and Astronomy. Some media—or texts—are stories, place names, clouds, songs, dreams, clothing, and landforms. It is our intention to do further research on the interrelationships between these knowledge domains, media and the processes. What follows is our initial analysis of the processes themselves.

In reviewing and coding the transcripts of the life histories and the knowledge domains, we have observed that the literacy **processes** are highly complex, with the following patterns occurring in the stories that people tell and the way the researchers ask the questions.

1. **Storied**—Like other indigenous peoples (CRUIKSHANK 1998; GAMLIN 2003), narrative is central to the literacies of people in Ulukhaktok: stories are the primary vehicle for learning about the various knowledge domains. From an English perspective, there are several kinds of stories: personal stories of lived experiences, stories passed on from others, and very old stories for whom the name of the originator is no longer remembered.
2. **Symbolic**—Cultural meanings are stored and recreated in visual representations – not necessarily in print but in symbols that have shared cultural meaning (BATTISTE & BARMAN 1995), such as *inukhuit* (location markers), drawings, drums or clothing. Early research on Inuit clothing centred on the technology of the clothing, but more recent research has turned its interest towards the socio-cultural functionality and aesthetics (DRISCOLL-ENGELSTAD 2005; GRABURN 1988; HALL, OAKES & WEBSTER 1994). Connerton (1989) goes one step further: he considers clothing to be texts of social memory, with particular lexicon and grammar, and argues that only those with specific social competence can interpret (i.e. “read”) and make (i.e. “write”) clothing. In Ulukhaktok people with the necessary clothing literacy can read the clothing, that is they can tell where the person comes from; their gender; their age; which animals they hunt; who the creator of the article is, and so on. Those who create the clothing have an even broader spectrum of competences. They can not only read the clothing, but can also write the clothing.



3. **Relational**—Relationships between the narrator and his or her world (people living and dead, ancestors, the land and specific places, birds, plants, etc.) are paramount in the literacies (see COLLIGNON 2006, for an analysis of relationship to place). This includes how people are situated in relation to the story. For example: Are they an actor, a witness or a listener? The relationship between the narrator and his/his audience and the relationship between the narrator and his/his topic are significant aspects of each literacy event.
4. **Context dependent**—The speaker, singer, hunter, artist, and his or her audience, share a context in which the stories are told and texts interpreted. In this case, the two community researchers share the context with the speakers (some more than others). Thus the stories and the way information is given assumes that shared knowledge. For example, Jimmy Memogana said, “I was grown up before I was born.” He could say that because he was talking about where his name came from (an adult who had passed away) and the audience (the two community researchers) understood him. For people without that shared context, the comment may sound poetic and metaphorical, but may not make rational sense.
5. **Recursive**—The stories and interviews are highly detailed and those details are repeated, sometimes in different forms and ways. For example the time of an event, the place of an event, who attended or witnessed the event are all provided and repeated and returned to in the telling. In one interview an elder’s description of when he was born extends over several pages of the transcript as he situates his birth within weather, seasons, and specific places and events, as well as the network of social relations in which the birth was embedded.
6. **Mnemonic**—All the literacy processes function as memory aids for the knowledge domains. They are like an archive for the knowledge—the ways of knowing, learning and communicating—so that the archive continues. This is particularly true for places and place names which embed stories of people, events, and/or activities of significance for the community (COLLIGNON 2006; NUTTALL 1992).
7. **Experiential**—People learn by observing, listening and doing, with limited intervention and direct instruction. Our first clue to the importance of the experiential process—not only for learning but for the notions of truthfulness and limits of knowledge—was during Rene Taipana’s and Elsie Nilgak’s interview. They explicitly limited what they said to those places they had actually visited. For example, when questioned about walking inland, they would only describe those places where they had walked on the land, and even more specifically, where they had walked on the land when it was bare of snow.
8. **Multi-modal**—This multi-faceted process includes **oral, aural, visual, kinesthetic** and **emotional** modes.

- **Oral/Aural**—Despite the focus on the written word in today’s society, orality continues to play an important role in Inuit lives. It is still the primary means by which Inuit create and transfer knowledge and form their identity.
- **Visual**—The ability to read and understand visual clues (e.g. using the stars to tell time, or the snowdrifts for direction) enables people to place themselves spatially and temporally to the land, their relatives, animals and so on (cf. BLAKEMORE 1981; INGOLD 1993, 2000). So does the ability to visualize time and space (e.g. a mental map of the land). Andy Akoakhion told us, “One could just see where their destination was. The area that you are going to go to, when you are going to cross from here, that area that you have seen before, when you are going to take off, you imagine it in your head.” Visual also includes the use of gesture and facial expressions (see KULCHYSKI 2006 for examples of six important Inuit gestures).
- **Kinesthetic**—People’s physical connection to things is apparent in the way people learn—by observing and listening, then by doing. The tactile sensations associated with doing (e.g. walking, making a parka) enhance people’s knowledge and skills.
- **Emotional**—People’s lived experiences often arouse strong feelings. In this photo Mabel Nigiyok is relating a story about when she married her husband from Banks Island, the long journey (by foot) to her new home, and the deep sense of homesickness she felt, so deep that she cried when retelling the story.



In any given literacy act, one or more of the modes listed above may be enacted. In the example above, Mabel **listened** to the questions, **looked** at the map while she **told** the story and the researchers **listened**; she **drew** with her hands; and she **laughed** and **cried** at different points in the story.

9. **Holistic**—The literacies are integrated and embedded in the knowledge and language of the people (ANTONE 2003; PAULSEN 2003). Finding ways to maintain and reflect the holistic nature of the literacies, yet understand what was happening, created challenges for the two outsider researchers in particular who repeatedly wanted to dissect information to examine discrete elements.

We have temporarily assigned the above English words to describe these processes, which reflect the patterns seen in the interviews, until we ascertain Inuinnaqtun equivalents with the assistance of the elders. The goal of the research team is to have these processes vetted and verified at an elders’ gathering.

It has become clear that the same processes are present, regardless of the content: that is, if the knowledge domain is clothing, for example, and the modality is a drum dance parka, all the processes will be evident.

The past is present

We began this project looking at what literacy was prior to colonial contact and the introduction of print. In Ulukhaktok, people still value and use these traditional literacies within community contexts: for example, to be a good Inuk woman, you still have to be able to sew; people don't carry daytimers, but remember things in their heads; people still hunt and have to find their way on the land. And even though in this study we are discovering the literacies in Inuinnaqtun, they appear to be present even when the "language" being used is English. We see and hear people using English lexicon and syntax when everything else is Inuinnaqtun. We see them switching from one form of literacy to another as the situation changes.

We need to know now how present these literacies are in contemporary Ulukhaktok and what needs to be done to support them and thus ensure the continuation of the social memory. This research shows that the indigenous literacies are inextricably linked to questions of both individual and collective identity. Emily Kudlak said, "What we value most as Kangiryuarmiut are the oral teachings of our ancestors because they tell us where we come from and who we are."

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Author Biographies

Emily Kudlak, the Ulukhaktok language coordinator, resolved to increase her fluency in Inuinnaqtun as an adult, when she wanted to pass on her language and culture to her children. She has been involved in several community-based research projects, including an ethnobotany study, revisions to the Kangiryuarmiut dictionary, development of the Inuinnaqtun language curriculum, and development of Inuinnaqtun resources. She has formal training as a classroom teacher and has worked in the local school. She is fully

literate in the domains of sewing, drumming, drum-making, dancing and printmaking.

Alice Kaodloak, also a resident of Ulukhaktok, belongs to one of the last families to move off the land into the community in the 1960s. She has retained her knowledge of stories as well as her knowledge and use of Inuinnaqtun literacies. She is a fluent Inuinnaqtun speaker and has worked as both an informant and research assistant on several research projects. She is knowledgeable about traditional culture. As well, she is literate in *qiviut* (musk ox wool) knitting, sewing, and textile arts.

Helen Balanoff has lived in the north for over thirty years. As an educator she has taught in grade schools, in adult education and at university and has been a manager in the Department of Education. She has worked on a variety of research projects in the NWT, such as the Legislative Assembly's Special Committee on Education, and the Special Committee on the Review of the NWT Official Languages Act, as well as a number of community-based research projects.

Cynthia Chambers lived and worked in the NWT for many years. She is currently a Professor of Education at the University of Lethbridge. She has experience in community-based research, particularly for the purposes of curriculum that originates from the knowledge base of the community. She is collaborating with the Kainai (Bloods) on a research project on landscape literacies and the curriculum of place — a study that resonates closely with aspects of the Ulukhaktok Literacies Project.

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