

# Do My Literacies Count as Literacy?

## An Inquiry into Inuinnaqtun Literacies in the Canadian North

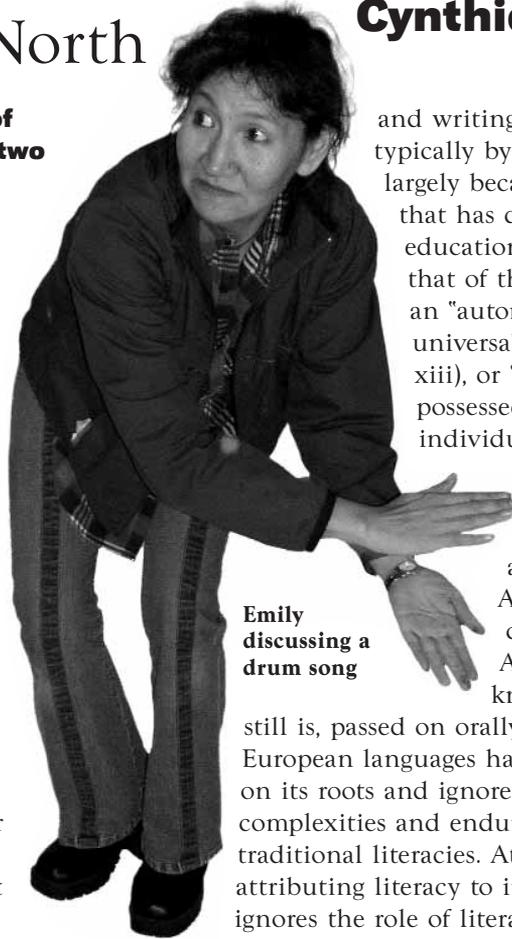
by **Helen Balanoff** and **Cynthia Chambers**

**In a tiny room in the Inuit community of Holman in the North West Territories, two Elders look at maps spread out on a table.**

In *Inuinnaqtun*, the local language, they discuss traditional place names. "Haviktalik? I said I don't know if this is *Haviktalik*," says the first Elder, pointing to a spot on the map. "There's a creek at *Haviktalik*," says the other. "I don't know. I haven't walked that area during the summer," replies the first. The conversation continues. "Where is *Naloalyok*?" asks the first Elder. "That land there, I haven't spent time there when there is no snow, so I don't know it," replies the other.

In 1989, the NWT Literacy Council was established, with a mandate to support literacy development in the eleven official languages of the NWT. At the time, the Literacy Council did not understand how complex this mandate would be. Gradually though, through their work with the different Aboriginal language groups, the staff began to see that their accepted definition of literacy was impoverished and narrow: it did not reflect the richness and multiplicity of literacies they were encountering here. Every day NWT Literacy Council staff met people like the two Elders above, people who can speak more than one language, who have highly developed skills and very sophisticated knowledge. They can read their world, make meaning of it, and engage with it on a daily basis, in at least one language: they can recognize and interpret symbols, decode, understand, imagine, create and pass on knowledge. Doesn't that describe literacy? But they are unable to read and/or write fluently in any language—doesn't that mean they're 'illiterate'? We began to question our assumptions about literacy.

Like many other abstract concepts, literacy does not translate easily into any of the NWT Aboriginal languages: to most people, literacy suggests reading



**Emily discussing a drum song**

and writing, typically in English and typically by an individual. That is largely because the model of literacy that has dominated Canadian education and policy, including that of the NWT, is one comprising an "autonomous, neutral and universal set of skills" (Street p. xiii), or "a set of cognitive skills possessed (or lacked) by individuals" (Hamilton p. 16).

Based on this model, literacy levels in the NWT in both English and the nine official Aboriginal languages continue to be low (Lutra). Among Aboriginal people, knowledge was, and often still is, passed on orally. Mainstream literacy in European languages has largely turned its back on its roots and ignored the importance, complexities and enduring nature of orality and traditional literacies. At the same time, by attributing literacy to individuals, the model ignores the role of literacy as a community resource "realised in social relationships" (Barton & Hamilton p. 13). It also ignores the social and cultural practices that serve as a basis for literacy.

If 'literacy' is viewed as a social practice that takes into account culture and local contexts, and is shaped by history; and if 'text' is interpreted as the complex symbol system people understand and use, including the range of modalities for communication beyond language and print, such as visual, oral and gestural, then these Elders are literate. However, to try to understand literacy better in this context, the NWT Literacy Council, the University of Lethbridge, the community of Holman and the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre are partnering on a three-year research project to examine what counts as literacy and what counts as text in the context of a northern/Inuit community.

The planning group selected Holman, because community members there had expressed an interest in conducting research related to language and literacy. Also, despite the many socio-economic, cultural and political changes that have taken place in the community over the last twenty years, much remains that is truly Inuit. This would allow the research team to trace the archaeology of contemporary local Holman literacies by documenting traditional indigenous literacies; by exploring how these might have changed through contact with non-Aboriginal people; and by identifying what elements of traditional literacies are still visible in contemporary Holman literacies.

The research team consists of four researchers. The two community researchers are local women, Emily Kudlak and Alice Kaodloak, both fluent Inuinnaqtun speakers and both rooted in traditional Inuit lifestyles: Alice's family was the last to come off the land and move into the community in the 1960s. The other two researchers—the authors of this article—are non-Inuit, longtime northerners, Professor Cynthia Chambers from the University of Lethbridge and Helen Balanoff from the NWT Literacy Council.

The project is attempting to look at the issues from an Inuit perspective. This involves identifying research methods that are indigenous to Holman or that resonate with Inuit approaches to gathering and generating knowledge, interpreting it, displaying and sharing it, and preserving it. In other words, when Inuit want or need to learn something new, from someone else or on their own, how did they and how do they go about it?

For us, the non-Inuit researchers, exploring literacies from an Inuit perspective is an interesting journey. We find ourselves working between two parallel universes. From time to time a portal opens that provides us access to the Inuit world of literacy. After a glimpse of that world, the portal closes and we're back on the other side. Our new reality involves letting go of preconceived notions of literacy, relinquishing linear ways of thinking, and learning a new discourse. Now instead of talking about 'pre-contact,' 'contact,' and 'contemporary' eras, we (somewhat haltingly!) use **ingilraaraluq**, 'a long, long time ago,' or 'from the time before the memory of my grandparents,' and **qauyilingnirama**, 'in my lifetime.' Or if someone behaves inappropriately, we can joke like everyone else, "Who's your *haniayik*?"—a reference to the person who cleaned you up at birth, and who subsequently was your teacher.

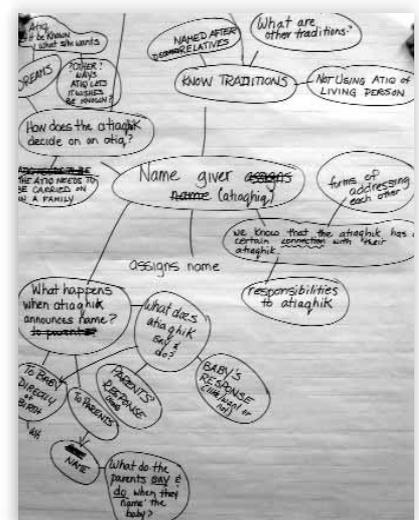
So what constitutes literacy to the Inuit in Holman? The research team started by asking

members of the community what they thought traditional literacies were—a question that we non-Inuit researchers thought would be difficult to answer, given our experiences of trying out the question on other non-Inuit. But Holman people had no difficulty with this concept and quickly came up with an extensive list. This led to a discussion of what constitutes text: again, a comprehensive list. The four researchers then explored whether we could use the texts as organizers, and decided that we could group them according to whether they were pre-existing, pre-existing and/or created, or created.

| Examples of Pre-Existing Text                       | Examples of Pre-Existing and /or Created Text | Examples of Created Text   |
|---|---|--|
| Weather (Snowdrifts/ Snow Conditions, Seasons)      | Dreams  | Inukshuks  |
| Sky and Sky Beings (Constellations, Planets, Birds) | Facial Expressions                            | Tattoos  |
| Land forms and land beings (Plants, Animals)        | Spirits and Mythical Creatures                | Food, Clothing, Drum Dances and Songs, Names and Naming, Amulets |
| Water and Sea Beings(Ice, Fish, Mammals)            | Ocean Currents                                | String and Other Games, Stories Art/Prints/ Tapestries/Writing   |

Emily and Alice then took each topic and developed a concept map based on their own knowledge of, and questions about, the topic, such as this one for Name Giving.

They then identified Elders that the community considered to be the knowledge holders in each topic, and interviewed them in Inuinnaqtun. As



a result, the project now has information on the literacy practices involved in naming people and places, genealogy, tools and astronomy. It soon became clear, however, that focusing on the topics was too abstract and restricted the depth of information the Elders were providing. To understand these literacy practices, the research team then adopted a life history approach and Emily and Alice are now recording the life histories of the Elders. This helps us all understand who, both visible and hidden, are involved in the practice; where the

practice takes place; what resources are involved including "values, understandings, ways of thinking, feeling, skills, knowledge" (Hamilton p.17); and the actions and rules that are part of the practice. It also helps us understand about text: what it is, who produces it, who accesses it, what people do with it, how they use it, and how it fits into their lives.

What has become very clear is that the community members, including the youth, attach great importance to the knowledge that the project is gathering and generating. People constantly drop into the office to look at and discuss the concept maps that Emily has put up on the walls. We have recently added one more person to the research team—a young person with a deep interest in the project who is now assisting us and learning the research 'ropes.' And during NWT Literacy Week,



Alice, Helen and Cynthia eating frozen fish

Emily worked with students in the school on the literacies associated with naming places and naming people, and was amazed at how engaged the students were.

Traces of past literacies are clearly visible in the contemporary literacies of Elders—as we can see from the discussion of the place names. But is that true for younger generations? We all believe it is, although the project is still in its preliminary stages. Informally, we experience many examples on a daily basis, like when Emily met a three-year-old girl and greeted her with "Hello, brother." "Hello, sister," replied the little girl, demonstrating correct use of a genealogical or kinship literacy practice. Formally documenting the contemporary literacies among younger people, however, is a future part of the project. ■

**SOURCES:**

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