

Identity and Needs in the Modern World: Roles of Orality and Literacy

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Abstract

Inuit traditional society was an oral one. Today, the maintenance of language and tradition is essential for prideful identity; and the oral transmission of values, history and knowledge plays an important role in identity, socialization and learning. However, Inuit have high rates of personal, health and social problems and low rates of education and employment opportunities. High-level literacy skills – the ability to access, comprehend and use a variety of complex written information – are critical in the development of the skills and knowledge that will enable Inuit to participate fully in today's world, and thus maintain a positive identity in the 21st century.

Keywords: Literacy, Identity, Education, Nunavut, Canadian Inuit, Language

An overarching goal in Inuit communities is to maintain Inuit culture as a dynamic entity, and to retain a positive sense of identity as Inuit. To that end, politics, policies, programs and public aspirations focus on the retention and inclusion of Inuit languages, values and practices in all elements of life. Orality continues to have the same importance in the 21st century as it has had throughout human history. In Inuit culture, as in all societies, oral transmission of knowledge, expectations, perceptions and values continues to be a foundation of socialization, learning and social interaction.

Parents tell their children stories and family history, talk about right and wrong, teach their children vocabulary, explain how to show respect, and countless other values, attitudes and skills. As adults, much of our daily communication and learning in the world is through talking and listening. We emphasize the need to talk to each other in order to understand, to build relationships, to solve problems, and to maintain a sense of belonging. Oral communication also continues to be a significant component of both informal and formal education. Inside the classroom, teachers and students discuss, explain, and co-operate on learning projects. Inside and outside the classroom, we ask questions and share knowledge.

We develop a sense of self, identity and esteem – positive or negative – primarily through such oral interactions with others, and through our own and others' assessments of our worth. People tell us what they like or dislike about us. They admire or criticize something we've done. They tell us and others about our strengths or weaknesses. We also talk to ourselves, if only in our minds. We compare ourselves to others, and form opinions about ourselves. "I can do that better than she," we say to ourselves. Or, "I'm so stupid..." Or, "They do things very differently." Thus we form both personal and group identities. We do not, of course, develop a sense of cultural identity – the notion of Inuitness, for example – until we meet others who are obviously different. And when those others become a part of our everyday life – especially when those others come to be dominant in ways that affect our lives – we inevitably are assessed and assess ourselves, and new factors come into play in the development of identity and worth.

In traditional Inuit life, an individual's sense of identity and worth arose from competence in the skills and behaviours that were necessary for daily survival, and others' assessments of that competence – good hunter, skilled seamstress, effective shaman, and so on. With the arrival of Qallunaat, and especially in the last 50 years, new expectations and competencies were introduced. Inuit understand that in order to survive as a dynamic culture in today's world, they must retain the best of the past but also acquire what is needed for the present and the future. A positive identity is dependent on the ability to participate fully and on equal terms in all aspects of life.

When people are not able to participate fully and independently in the world, they may develop what has been termed a poverty identity. Although we generally think of poverty in terms of income, the concept has been expanded (PREECE 2005). One form of poverty is capability poverty – the inability to take care of our own needs for food, housing and other basic needs of life. In this context, people are deprived of the knowledge and skills to be productive or acquire what they want and need. The other form of poverty relevant to this discussion is participatory poverty. This is defined as restrictions on the

things that people can be... their role in life. This includes restrictions on their ability to participate in community life and to be involved in decision-making. In other words, people are not able to be what they would like to be, nor do they have meaningful opportunities to influence community life. When we are at the lower levels of the skills and knowledge needed to provide for ourselves, when we are not able to be what we want to be, when we do not have a valued role and voice in the community... we may see ourselves as incapable, lesser, and dependent. Others may see us that way too, reinforcing the poverty identity.

A crucial element of independence and full participation in today's world is literacy. Literacy empowers. It is thus a critical factor in personal and group identity formation. Inuit have always adapted, survived and indeed flourished. However, a major change in the last century has been the need for literacy, and that need is especially crucial in the knowledge-based world of the 21st century. In Inuit communities there are high rates of personal, health and social problems, and low rates of education and employment. National and international research shows clearly that "Literacy is a major factor underlying most other determinants of health."

The Nunavut Literacy Council (2006) cites the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey published in 2005, which shows that "more than half of Nunavut's working-age population struggles with serious literacy challenges. Many...do not have the literacy skills needed to thrive in today's society." On the internationally accepted scale of literacy levels, ranging from level 1 to level 5, 3 is the minimum level necessary to function in the contemporary world. Half of Canadians generally are below that level. But in Nunavut, half of those surveyed were at level 1 in literacy and numeracy. 88% of Inuit overall and 80% of youth scored below level 3. The Council also notes that one third to one half of Inuit also do not read Inuktitut well. Level of education is the general measure of literacy level, but Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (2004) points out that 59 per cent of Inuit have not finished high school. My years as a college educator in Nunavut provided anecdotal evidence that too often many of those who **do** graduate from secondary school in fact have serious deficits in literacy, numeracy and knowledge.

Remedial strategies such as basic literacy programs, upgrading courses and plain language materials are not enough. They do not provide the density of knowledge nor the opportunities to develop critical comprehension skills. For the most important aspect of literacy is comprehension. Comprehension skills are thinking skills. Thinking skills are the ability to understand and use information in a variety of ways and situations.

Comprehension skills include such important abilities as

- identifying main ideas,
- making inferences and ‘reading between the lines’;
- analysing and evaluating what has been read;
- making predictions;
- generalizing knowledge from a specific situation to other situations;
- and synthesizing knowledge.

In my teaching experience, it is these kinds of literacy comprehension skills that have presented the most problems for students. Yet these are the skills necessary to succeed in post-secondary education, in professional, technical and paraprofessional jobs, and in good decision-making.

Research shows that there is a definite connection between low literacy level and lower levels of thinking skills. It was once thought that just learning to read developed higher-level thinking skills such as abstract thought and the ability to analyse and synthesize information. However, people who do not know how to read also have these mental skills. Inuit, for example, traditionally emphasized the importance of just such higher-level thinking. But because there is so much new knowledge which is available only in writing, our brains must learn to process a greater variety of knowledge in different forms.

Research now suggests that the important factor between literacy and thinking may be the amount and nature of our literacy experiences. The basic cognitive abilities exist already, but it seems that when we read more, when we read a greater variety of information, when we read more complex information, and when we use more knowledge from written information, our minds are forced to use complex thinking skills more often, more deeply, and in new ways, leading to improved capacity.

Learning changes the brain physically. Our brain is required to make and use more connections between its different parts as it receives and analyses new information. This helps improve the brain’s processing ability and seems to make nerve cells more powerful and efficient. When we read, our memory is exercised continuously and in new ways. We increase our ability to identify what must be remembered and what can be ignored. We develop strategies for storing information in both short-term and long-term memory. We establish methods for making sure we can retrieve the information when we need it. Reading and writing allow us to remember more. Our working memory can store only a little bit of information at a time. When we hear things, we are only able to hold on to part

of what we hear; there is no time to store everything in permanent memory even if it is important, and then we have no way of retrieving knowledge.

When information is written down, we are able to lay out a large amount of information at one time, think about it, put it together in different ways, and decide which parts are most important. For example, at a meeting of community members who are developing a plan to solve a community problem, it is necessary to write down ideas. When all opinions and ideas are visible, they can be reorganized, reworded and evaluated. These are activities that cannot be done effectively when information is only oral. And they are activities that are necessary in decision-making about complex issues. We must also be able to use the knowledge to guide behaviour in a great variety of situations. Well-developed thinking skills help each bit of new information become hooked onto our previous knowledge and integrated in our minds. When knowledge is holistic in our minds, it is most useful, for it can be used in and adapted to many different situations, and can become an almost automatic part of our problem-solving capability.

High-level literacy skills have direct and indirect positive effects. The immediate direct effect is that good literacy allows us access to much more knowledge, and makes it easier to understand that information. Indirect consequences are especially important in a broader, more holistic sense. Being able to acquire, understand and use information in depth, without needing the help of others, contributes to better self-esteem, a greater range of choices, increased self-determination, and more control over one's own life. Higher-level literacy enables people to be successful at higher levels of education. Education and literacy skills are factors in the choices that a person has for employment. Modern jobs are increasingly complex in skills, training and on-the-job requirements. A stable and more highly skilled job is more likely to provide better income for providing adequate housing, food and care for oneself and families.

The increased knowledge and skills that come with higher literacy also have positive effects on our community involvement, ability to use resources and our mental wellness. We are better able to contribute to improvements in our communities and to find, use or develop resources. Through reading about other people's experiences and problems, we learn new coping and problem-solving skills for ourselves. The ability to contribute to our communities, make choices, reach goals, and solve problems leads to increased confidence and self-esteem. Research suggests that children who read poorly see themselves as less capable and more helpless, and are at higher risk of continuing to feel that way throughout life.

High-level literacy skills free us from dependence on others to a large extent. There will be fewer occasions when we need someone to explain something to us, or to tell us what to do. We can be interdependent as well – forming relationships, supporting each other, giving knowledge to each other – in positive ways that lead to better personal, family and community health and identity.

Language is an essential part of cultural identity, and Inuit want to keep Inuktitut as a living language. However, as Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami points out, Inuit live in a bilingual society of Inuit home culture and community in a broader Canadian context. The goal, therefore, is to be fully bilingual in Inuktitut and in English.

The nature of human beings is that we talk to each other about every kind of situation. We tell each other stories about ourselves, our pasts, our future hopes. We argue and solve problems. We explain to our children how to live successfully with others. We express love and dislike. We express opinions about each others behaviours, skills, looks, and attitudes. We are talkers. And this talking and listening is one of primary ways identity forms. Orality will therefore continue to take care of itself.

The goal in Inuit communities is that Inuktitut will be the basis of that orality. But orality in any language is not enough to ensure positive identity. What is needed is access to the complex information and knowledge and skills that are necessary to participate at all levels in today's world. That access comes through high level literacy skills.

In Canada, these literacy levels must first be in English (or French). These are the languages of higher education and of modern knowledge in countless complex areas, and which Inuit will have to comprehend in universities, and in any employment that is not at the lowest levels of manual and service labour. This knowledge is not yet available in Inuktitut. That goal cannot be reached until Inuit first develop a wide range of terminology, and obtain the in-depth content expertise that is necessary, for example, to write textbooks and teach secondary and post-secondary subjects. At an international Inuit youth conference on Inuit languages, it was noted that standards and content of the few learning materials that are available in Inuit languages are often not as high as in English texts.

Having attained the levels of English literacy necessary for learning what is needed, they can then translate such knowledge into Inuktitut, ensuring the continuity of language and culture not only in functional levels of day-to-day life but in the ways that are essential for full participation in the 21st century. Literacy ensures that Inuit have choices. Choices and opportunities to develop competency forestall the development of a poverty identity.

Tiffany Muckpah (2006) states in a letter to the editor of Nunatsiaq News,

“As an educator, I strongly believe that literacy plays a vital role in our culture today. Literacy in today’s society is very important, as it educates people at different levels...[Also] our elders are able to pass on their traditional knowledge...As the number of our elders decreases every year...the language and culture of our past generations is lost.”

Ms. Muckpah’s belief is echoed by many other Inuit. Orality provides a sense of cultural identity through language, values, worldview and human connections. But literacy both preserves the past and enables the knowledge and opportunities for a positive future. Both are needed in order to maintain a positive identity in the 21st century.

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