

# **Recovering the Traditional Art of Sanikiluaq Basket-Making: A Case Study of the Development of a Community-based College Curriculum, with Inuit Women of the Belcher Islands**

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Historically and currently in Canada, as in most other parts of the world, indigenous people are not well served by the type of adult education typically envisioned and offered by the institutional mainstream, including the community college system. Even in northern Canada, where the population is primarily made up of people of aboriginal descent, college adult education continues to reproduce the values, beliefs, and biases of the dominant southern Canada culture, as they have done since the college system was established in the 1960s.

My work in the field of adult education is situated in the community college system in Nunavut. Within this context I am enmeshed in the problems and possibilities of adult education as it relates to the situation of indigenous peoples. An important development influencing the provision of college programs in the Arctic was the creation of the territory of Nunavut in 1999 through a land claims process with the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic. With a population of 85% Inuit, the new territory was created to reflect more clearly and to respond to the unique social, cultural, and political goals of the Inuit. Specifically, the legislated provision through the claims process to “increase Inuit participation in government employment in the Nunavut Settlement Area to a representative level” (IAND and the Tungavik 1993:191) has fostered a demand for expertise across diverse fields of knowledge. This has invigorated Inuit desire for advanced educational qualifications and put pressure on the community college to incorporate indigenous knowledge in terms of both content and language of instruction, inclusion of Elders, and more culturally sensitive educational processes.

## **Focus of Inquiry**

The focus of this paper is to present how my community college responded to the challenge to include indigenous-oriented curricula, including links to local resources and the strengthening of indigenous knowledge, skills, and identities. In the following presentation I discuss a case study of an adult-learning project to research and revitalize the traditional art of Inuit grass basketry. The result was an innovative curriculum built upon traditional knowledge and pedagogy. The fifteen women involved in the project, largely on their own initiative, undertook the arduous process of successfully relearning the traditional art of grass basket-making, which has almost faded from living memory in their community.

## **Findings**

Sanikiluaq is located more than 1,100 kilometers south of the Arctic Circle, yet the islands are

distinctly arctic. Lyme grass, called *ivigak* by the Inuit, is large, coarse grass not more than 50 centimeters tall that grows on sand dunes along the shores of Belcher Island. Traditionally, Inuit women used *ivigak* to line the soles of sealskin boots (*kamiks*) and to weave baskets to store, among other things, their sewing needles. According to Elders, the basket is a highly symbolic item to Sanikiluaqmiut (residents of Sanikiluaq) because of the unique technique of basketry and the fact that the basket is “a woman’s possession used to hold berries [and] a woman’s sewing” (interview, May 2001, Elisapee Cookie).

Due to the complexity of the patterning and the closeness of the stitching, Sanikiluaq baskets differ from the construction of baskets throughout the neighboring region of Nunavik. The Sanikiluaq method requires patience, because it can take weeks to make just one grapefruit-sized basket: “It is a stitching method where you start on the bottom, in the centre, and you start going round and round, row after row. Stitches are made around a dried beach grass core with individual pieces of grass that have been split and threaded through a sewing needle.” The uniqueness of the Sanikiluaq basket construction and the fact that there was no contemporary basket-maker meant that there were no outside experts the college could hire to come to the community to teach the women. The solution was for the women to engage in what is referred to as “community-based research” (Smith 1999; Irwin and Farrell 1996) in order to discover how traditional Sanikiluaq baskets were created. The women sought out Elders in the community for their knowledge and advice. They also relied on their collective cultural memory, natural aptitude for textile art, photographs and descriptions from the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, and a learning process that involved trial and error until, as one artist described it, “my fingers started to remember” (Coordinator Community Programs, 2, supervisory report 1998).

### **Community-based Research as the Basis of Curriculum Construction**

The essence of the learning process for the women is suggested by a basket made by the eldest basket maker. On the lid of her basket, serving as a handle, is a delicate stone carving. Carvings on the lids of baskets are an innovation introduced by the women artists in the project, as most of them are established carvers. This carving depicts a woman making a pair of *kamiks* with a small child in the hood of her *amuatiq* watching over the mother’s shoulder. The basket’s superb craftsmanship is augmented by a highly symbolic aspect, which expresses the informal learning that occurs naturally within the daily process of living. For the artist, the carving on the basket represents a learning process that involved a “re-awakening” of her memories as a child in her mother’s parka looking over her shoulder and watching her sew.

The artists believe that knowledge of basket-making existed in the community in the form of shared cultural memory (Group interview, June 2001). This idea of learning and teaching contradicts modern Euro-American epistemology that views learning as a transfer of predetermined knowledge from the expert teacher to the empty students. The women describe their process of piecing together the knowledge:

*There were little bits of knowledge...bleeding fingers...frustration...everyone said to try different things...then we’d figure it out together. Elisapee remembered making a basket in Great Whale when she was a young girl...she sold it for eight dollars. A lot of times we’d stop and think...oh, yes, that’s the way it is done. With patience and practice, over time, our fingers started to remember”* (Group interview, June 2001).

## **Community-based versus Discipline-based Approaches in Education: A Central Tension in Creating an Alternative Curriculum**

An unexpected outcome of the Sanikiluaq basket-making project was the opportunity for the community college to learn more about the dynamics and development of community-based or culture-based curricula. The term “community-based curriculum” is a definition used by indigenous peoples who attempt to make culture the foundation of educational practice (see May, 1999, for a very comprehensive edition of essays discussing community-based education). This differentiates it from cultural inclusion—which is often referred to as an “icing-on-the-cake” curriculum, whereby traditional knowledge is an adjunct to the standardized Western curriculum. The term community-based curriculum reflects the underlying tradition in indigenous societies of community involvement in education, and the community’s role as principal educator. In the Sanikiluaq basket-making program, college instructors and the artists were able to work collaboratively with members of the community to learn the traditional art form and to develop the course content. As an unplanned side feature, they modeled and tested the effectiveness of community-based programming and development of adult education programs.

The adult education program began with a six-month exploration of the potential of relearning how to make traditional Sanikiluaq grass baskets (January to June 1996). After deciding that the project was feasible and of interest to both the community and the college, a first-year non-credit program (called Small Business Fundamentals/Introduction to Basket/Dollmaking) was developed and presented to the board of governors for approval. Technically this is the program that ran for two semesters from September 1996 to June 1997. Officially entered into the college system, the curriculum is comprised of separate courses on prescribed topics. However, in reality, the first-year courses were not designed in advance but were the product of a very fluid process that evolved and changed as the artists conducted their research. The instructor recalls how she felt torn between what the women wanted to research and learn and what the college fine arts department identified as necessary. “We were always balancing what are the skills that are identified as academic versus the hands-on skills” (Interview, February 2002). The dilemma for college administrators was to find a way to register students in a college program where the course content would not be known until the women began their research. The solution was to produce four main, general “umbrella” courses, which enabled the artists to produce new knowledge as an outcome of the program. In the second year of the program, the curriculum was developed in advance over the summer and based upon the first year of research.

The development of the Sanikiluaq basket-making curriculum created problems beyond simply the entering of data correctly into the college’s student records system. College documents and instructional reports indicate that a struggle ensued over who held the power to determine what knowledge (courses) was of worth and therefore to be included in the curriculum. Briefly, discipline-based approaches focus on the content that must be covered in order to meet the external, societal perceptions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge production and consumption. Community-based curricula seek to integrate education with the life world of the learner’s community and culture (Irwin and Farrell, 1996).

In addition to the pedagogical and epistemological struggles that ensued between the two stakeholder departments—Community Programs and Fine Arts—there developed

philosophical disagreements within the Department of Fine Arts. In interviews, the two fine arts educators discussed with great passion and commitment two contradictory perspectives on the most effective design and delivery of the arts curriculum. One instructor advocated for a community-based approach, with intense study of a specific skill over an extended period of time, because, as she explained:

*Inuit learn by watching closely over a long period of time. When you learn how to tie a harness on a dog it's done the same way every time...forever. If you carve a polar bear, you do the same one over and over again. The artistic challenge is not the same as I know the artistic challenge (Fine Arts coordinator interview, June 2002).*

In comparison, her colleague believed that a singular focus on researching traditional basketry limited individual artistic expression. She supports a discipline-based approach to arts education, whereby the curriculum exposes the learners to new ideas in an effort to create a strong arts foundation:

*I think the role up here for educators is to expose learners to other art...then they'll make the choices.... It allows the artist "within" to express him or herself without being confined to a stereotype. I remember being somewhat frustrated that we didn't have a basket-maker in that [first] year...working with the artists (Fine Arts coordinator 1, interview June 2001).*

This educator sees discipline-based study as a means to empower the artists to “come from a point of strength, from a foundation so no matter whom they have teaching them after that...they feel...secure” (Interview, June 2001). She values indigenous knowledge and education and supports its integration into formal education structures as a means to impart more effectively a standard, discipline-based curriculum. Analyses of patterns arising from the case study of the program in Sanikiluaq indicates the opposite: the standard curriculum was not privileged but augmented the situated knowledge of the artists in the community.

### **Analysis of Patterns Arising from the Case Study**

Although this case study explores a very context-specific project, the patterns and themes I extracted provide insights into the features that contribute to the successful development of curriculum, and that better reflect the epistemology, pedagogy, and traditional knowledge of indigenous people. These include the principles of community participation, privileging situated knowledge, use of dialogue, an ethic of reciprocity and caring, and the nurturing role of the adult educator.

**Participation:** In the Sanikiluaq basket-making program, the role of participation, as an aspect of adult education, is a multifaceted phenomenon. Individual learners participated in the development of the program, as did community members. Initially, the basket makers participated in the project by determining the focus of the inquiry. Next they contributed through their research to what courses would be taught. Within the classroom the adult learners participated as experts in the construction of knowledge, As the women developed their skills as artists, they shared their knowledge with others in the community, especially the young girls. The community adult educator records in a monthly report, “Elisapee is still teaching the schoolgirls doll-making and the ladies are working hard on their baskets. Emily is

coming in the afternoons to pass on her basket-making techniques. There is an atmosphere of cooperation in the college.” In addition to providing the knowledge that was critical to the women’s research, community members provided the basket makers with emotional support through encouragement and visible pride in their accomplishments. Businesses also participated in the project by providing the very necessary adjunct of a market for sales and sustainability.

***Situated knowledge:*** The rich and diverse levels of participation from members of the community in the basket-making project reinforces the view that all individuals produce useful knowledge that is relevant to their culture and community—women, Elders, and a wide variety of marginalized social groups. The type of knowledge that originates from within a marginalized culture has been described as “situated knowledge” by cultural workers such as Parajuli (1990) and as “indigenous knowledge” by educators such as Semali and Kencheloe (199). Both orientations share a concern that indigenous, local, or traditional knowledge becomes the basis of formal education as a means to rectify the colonizing practices of standard North American education within aboriginal communities.

The case study reveals that the introduction of basket-making techniques by content experts from outside the community was a source of tension and frustration for the learners, which, in turn, became a source of frustration for educators unwilling to relinquish their authority. In a monthly report, a visiting instructor commented on the basket makers response to the introduction of new techniques: “I introduced new embellishment techniques: embriication, bead application, embroidery, feather application. Older women were interested, but have no intention of varying their work” (Visiting Instructor 2, monthly report). In discussing the impact upon community dynamics, Franklin (1998:12) warns that external experts can “atrophy the nature of community.” The community-based research of the traditional art form contributed to the strengthening of Inuit identity and the dissemination of local knowledge as the women engaged in the process of relearning “well-laid down and agreed upon practices [that] define the practitioners as a group of people who have something in common” (p. 12). As such, the curriculum contributed to the self-definition of both the learners and the community as a unique group.

***Community-based indigenous research as the basis for curriculum development:*** The case study provides new knowledge concerning the characteristics of adult education in indigenous societies. The Sanikiluaq basket-making program is an example of what Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999:142) describes as indigenous research that contributes to the “reclaiming, reformulating and reconstituting [of] indigenous culture and language.” As such it provides an innovative and alternative model of curriculum development.

According to Smith (1999:17), indigenous people become researchers through informal learning activities in the community. “They are referred to as project workers, community activities or consultants, anything but ‘researchers.’ They search and record, they select and interpret, they organize and re-present, they make claims on the basis of what they assemble. This is research.” Evidence that the basket makers were engaged in this type of research is located in numerous monthly reports, interviews, and in the final group manuscript created by the artists. In an excerpt from monthly reports, the adult educator/instructor describes the

basket makers' activities:

*[Community member] has begun translation of basket-making process portion of rough draft text for the basket book. Community interviews almost completed by student [the women]—20 out of 30 plus are done. Student autobiographical writing about the baskets also will be translated along with interviews (Adult educator/instructor report, March 1998).*

The program to revitalize the traditional art of Sanikiluaq basket making is an example of a community-based research project that respected Inuit values and practices and privileged traditional knowledge, and as a result contributed to the empowerment of artists, community members, instructors, coordinators, and the community college.

***Learning through dialogue, reciprocity, and an ethic of caring:*** In the program, the instructors and the learners used dialogue with Elders and with each other as the key means of learning how to make traditional Sanikiluaq baskets. Once the student obtained new information, a process of trial and error would occur. This method of instruction, through observation, oral storytelling, and repeated practice is consistent with traditional Inuit teaching and learning (Stiffarm 1998). Dialogue also enabled the learners to challenge the knowledge constructed by visiting instructors, gallery owners, and scholarly texts; to explore alternative perspectives; and to voice their situated knowledge.

Dialogue can be understood as a pedagogical tool that occurs within the teaching-learning environment, whereas reciprocity can be defined as something much broader than communication among equals. In its relationship to education, the term “reciprocity” suggests a dynamic concept that encompasses the relations between the educational program and the situational context—in this case, the community of Sanikiluaq and the Inuit culture. The instructor for the basket-making course believed that reciprocity is the heart of all adult learning and teaching, especially in indigenous societies:

*The blend of [old and young] students contributes to the success of the program. The more experienced students apply an intrinsic aesthetic to their work, meaning they seem to know how to compose materials and design into a beautiful form. The respect for materials and craftsmanship is highly developed in this group. These students pass these skills on to younger students in a seamless fashion (Adult educator/instructor, report January 1998).*

In return, the high school students provided contemporary skills to support the women's learning:

*Two mornings a week the grade 6/7 girls come to the class to make dolls. Each afternoon some of the grade 11/12 art students come in to make grass baskets. The grade 11/12 photojournalism students are taking photos of the ladies with their baskets and dolls for the portfolios and biographies they will do next month. These biographies will be in English and Inuktitut, including syllabics, and will be produced with the help of the word processing students from the school. Students are also assisting with business cards (Community adult educator, October 1996 monthly report).*

***The role of educator:*** Employing a process that was intimate, interconnected, and interactive, the adult educator worked on issues of trust and consensus building, in order to help the women articulate in their art their cultural knowledge and skills. When I asked the instructor

of the Sanikiluaq program to describe an event that summarized her personal experience of the program, she recalled the friendship. “My best memories are we laughed a lot. We ate a lot. Drank tea” (Interview, February 2002).

Moreover, the typical authority of the educator in formal learning contexts was deconstructed as the educator also became a co-learner along with the women, because she was learning with the artists how to make Sanikiluaq baskets for the first time. As a result of her experience in the program, the adult educator/instructor now believes that “people don’t learn privately, internally, competitively, individually. It is affirmed communally. We all generated the knowledge and helped each other; this is true to human learning” (Interview, February 2002). The epistemology reflected in this understanding resembles Freire’s (1987) understanding of the educator as someone who engages with the learners in a process of mutual construction of knowledge, in order to address the problems in the community. It also strongly resembles the research findings of Belenky et al. (1986), which demonstrates that women learn most effectively when the educator functions as a “cognitive mid-wife” to the learners’ latent knowledge. Such mid-wife educators “help students to deliver their words to the world, and they use their own knowledge to put the student into conversation with other voices—past and present—in the culture” (p. 219). This accurately describes the process used by the educator in developing the curriculum for the course and the teaching style used in the delivery of the program of study.

The education program described in this paper used a collaborative educational research process to relearn and revitalize the traditional art of Sanikiluaq coil grass basket making. The identified characteristics of this program—participation, situated knowledge, dialogical learning, reciprocity, an ethic of care, and the critical role of the educator—resulted in learning that achieved many important outcomes for the women, the community, and the college. One of the most important outcomes, from the perspective of the community college, was that adult education moved from the margin of Inuit life and became embedded in the lifeworld of the community. As members of the community flowed in and out of the building as active participants and observers, the basket-making program revitalized college education in Sanikiluaq. Midway through the first semester, the adult educator describes a very different atmosphere in the community learning center:

*Many community members, young, old, men, women, children are coming by for a visit and to see how the ladies are progressing. All are welcome!—The ladies have a chance to show the people what they are doing...the atmosphere in the college is warm and inviting—everyone is learning and looks to be enjoying themselves (October report, 1996).*

**Education and social justice:** As the basket makers conducted research with community members they become increasingly engaged with learning, interested in the course content of the program, and developed skills visibly useful to the community. Their understanding of the environment, the materials, and the tactile skills used in sewing and design, irrelevant in proper college courses, took on vital importance to the success of the project. The curriculum, therefore, validated indigenous knowledge; promoted cooperative problem solving between the community and the academic institution; enhanced locally appropriate development; and encouraged interaction between indigenous and Western epistemologies in a process of producing knowledge. As a result, there was an overall expansion of knowledge, not only to the

small community but also to the world.

How did the college plan for such extraordinary results? The truth is the project was an unintended outcome of a problem created by a blizzard. The fundamental reason it proceeded was the community college and the sponsoring agencies were *intentionally* flexible and responsive to the women participants' request to do something of greater interest to their learning.

The intentional flexibility on the part of a formal institution has been described as a "reciprocal response, [which] alters initial assumptions [and] can lead to negotiations, to give and take, to adjustment, and [which] may result in new and unforeseen developments" (Franklin 1998:49). The response of college administrators and educators reflects not only a spirit of reciprocity, but also a deep respect for indigenous knowledge as a valuable basis for curriculum content.

**Challenges for practice:** It is a challenge to incorporate the ideas of participation, situated knowledge, dialogue, reciprocity, and an ethic of care into the institutional structures and policies of a community college. At the very least, it requires more time than is normally allowed for a standard 45-hour course. In addition, there is a limited amount of funding available for curriculum development, let alone the development of new programs of study that focus on the restoration of language and culture. The standard approach to language and culture in college programs is to incorporate indigenous knowledge into curricula through guest speakers and field trips. This approach does not permit the learner to engage in a deep exploration of traditional knowledge and skills.

In addition, questions as to what knowledge is privileged in the curriculum can create tensions between the requirements of a formal college system and the development of alternative education projects. This is a problem that is more political than logistical in nature. Efforts to include other ways of knowing and knowledge production in the curriculum can lead to power struggles over who is allowed to "proclaim truth and to establish the procedures by which truth is to be established" (Semali and Kencheloe 1999:31). Discipline-based curricula, with the teacher acting in the role of the expert, often define the activity (teaching-learning) very specifically in terms of a positivist-empiricist framework, and in doing so preclude the emergence of other ways of doing it. Education that is prescriptive in terms of planning, organization, and control leaves little latitude for the development of situated knowledge. What is "right" in terms of curriculum is laid down beforehand. Colleges can avoid educational projects that downgrade experience and glorify expert abstract knowledge by developing community-based curricula.

Based upon the research presented in this paper, I suggest that a community-based curriculum is defined as those courses, programs, and projects that are designed with community input in response to community development goals, and is accountable to the people and organizations of the community (May 1999; Sawyer 1993). Within the learning environment of a community-based approach to education, learners are given opportunities to participate in the community and the community to participate in the learning program. Community-based education values community members as experts and uses them as resource people to strengthen positive cultural content in the curriculum and to enhance learning.

Hamilton and Cunningham (1989) discuss the relationship between communities, community colleges, and formal education programs. They assist us in understanding the difference between **community education** and **community-based education**. Community-based adult education functions as a form of community development and “operates on the assumption that a given community, whether urban or rural, has the potential to solve many of its own problems by relying on its own resources and by mobilizing community action for problem resolution” (p. 43). In comparison, community education is usually associated with a college’s goal of increasing access by delivering programs and courses on-site, close to the targeted group of learners. The issue is logistical and geographical rather than socio-political. For indigenous educational practitioners, community-based education is even more sharply defined within a political context, making it fundamentally different from the more widely known community education. In the introduction to a collection of essays discussing post-colonial education, May (1999:1) argues, “indigenous community-based education has developed in recent years as a response to the long historical colonization, subjugation and marginalization of indigenous peoples. It is predicated on and framed with the wider principle of self-determination.” To create a curriculum that responds to this goal requires, in Nunavut at least, (a) cooperation with the college between the academic and the community development departments; (b) the hiring and educating of progressive education administrators and educators; and (c) administrators identifying partners who are interested in supporting the development of curricula—such as the Sanikiluaq basket-making program—that mutually engages educators and learners in themes and projects enriching traditional knowledge, language, and culture.

## **Conclusions**

For more than three decades governments have provided Inuit with college programs. The primary purpose in providing education, especially post-secondary education, has been to enable Inuit to be assimilated within the broader cultural and socioeconomic structures of the rest of Canada. When and if indigenous knowledge and pedagogy is included within formal college courses and programs, it is viewed as a way to transmit the standard curriculum more successfully. Historically, education activities related to indigenous knowledge and culture were not formally integrated into the college system and were perceived to be less important than the discipline-based curricula. The case study of the revitalization of the traditional art of Inuit basketry demonstrates that colleges can develop a curriculum that is both grounded in indigenous knowledge and practice, formally accredited, and a rich source of knowledge construction.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

I conclude with five suggestions that may foster the development of more innovative curricula that not only respect but include indigenous knowledge in the college curriculum in a meaningful manner and, thereby, contribute to greater social justice within post-secondary education for indigenous peoples in Canada.

(1) Community colleges that have a mandate to provide education for indigenous communities must inculcate within the institution a reflective practice. This begins with an understanding of the historical and social context of colonial relations. This necessitates that

college administrators share the power to determine what knowledge is of most worth. Flexibility and negotiation on everyone's part is essential.

(2) The role of the educator is critical to the creation of a curriculum that includes community-based research and indigenous knowledge. The case study of the basket-making program indicates that the educator encouraged the women as active producers of knowledge as well as consumers of indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge. The community learning center became an interactive learning environment that engaged learners, instructors, and members of the community. The example of the community as the primary educator is consistent with indigenous knowledge and practice.

(3) Education and curriculum privileges teaching and learning relations that enhance participation, reciprocity, and an ethic of caring. Participatory and reciprocal practice contributes to the structuring of new relations between formal community college and informal community processes; strengthens community relations between youth and Elders; and develops relations between the learners and the broader world. Participatory practice that affirms community involvement in formulating and delivering curricula is one way to ensure the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, practice, customs, and social norms.

(4) The curriculum should be built upon community-based research models. The use of indigenous knowledge is most often discussed in terms of formal schooling and in conjunction with the transfer of Euro-American knowledge for indigenous people. In comparison, in the North, community-based research can become the foundation for a culture-based curriculum. Through the exploration of research topics that are of interest to a community of learners, and that address concerns within the larger community, education contributes to community and cultural self-determination goals.

(5) In conclusion, formal educational systems and educators must establish a more vital connection to indigenous struggles. The first step is to accept that this connection and the educational challenge are not neutral but are political in nature. At the same time, the work need not be radical; in fact, it can be quite ordinary, because it entails strengthening of the lifeworld (see Welton, 1995, for a comprehensive discussion of the application of this concept to adult education and learning)—the culture, language, values, beliefs, economy, history—of the indigenous participants and their communities. In following the principles outlined above, educators may increase their understanding of how education has in the past and continues today to contribute to social injustices, unintentionally or otherwise. And what we as educators can do to rectify the wrong and contribute from now on to greater social justice for indigenous peoples.

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