

Button, David. Inuit Ways of Knowing – a Commentary. *CNST Student Research Newsletter*, Feb 2007, Issue 5.

Cultural background appears to influence Ways of Knowing and this is no different for the Inuit. However, Inuit and non-Inuit employers and educators, workers and students have observed, as I have, that Inuit adult learners are capable of thinking differently or apart from the cultural norm.

For generations, learning on-the-land was their schooling (Cournoyea, 1998), and their traditional Ways of Knowing, as the elders say, ran so deep that it was ‘in the blood’. Some features of the traditional Inuit Ways of Knowing are that it is; non-verbal; intuitive; present time; spatial memory; observing and doing; reflective and spiritual; oral histories through teaching stories; place-based knowledge. It is a holistic Way of Knowing wherein knowing was communal and where knowing is braided along with the strands of Inuit beliefs and values. Through a toughness and discipline developed over centuries, Inuit moved forward. Consistent and connected to all things, humbled by survival, they thrived in good weather and in bad. For the difficult weather, their coping explanation was *Ayorama* - “It can’t be helped.” (Okpik, 1960)

Today, increasingly, Inuit live unsettled in settlements. People of all generations are experiencing adaptive and maladaptive responses to new Ways of Knowing acquired through a new way of living. Schooling is available for all generations, but it is an individualistic journey, focusing on future achievement rather than communal and cultural connections. In those school places around the settlement, the Western or scientific Way of Knowing is now braided into strands of work skill development (capacity building) and future cash earnings (consumerism).

However, in their customary adaptive way in facing down the difficulties and hardships encountered in their environment, Inuit are taking control of adult learning and higher education initiatives (Barnhardt, 1999; Kanatami, 2004, 2005). In particular, the acquisition of new Ways of Knowing has been encouraged and modeled by the Inuit leadership as a result of their participation in co-management regimes (with representatives of Federal and Territorial Governments) as part of their Land Claims overseeing their traditional landuse areas. (Binder & Hanbidge, 1993; Fehr & Hurst, 1996). Adding to their traditional methods, they are acquiring skill and expertise with the new or Western Ways of Knowing that have the following features; verbal; linear logic; measured time; verbal memory; listening and talking; practical and abstract; written histories; general-based knowledge.

With the move to settlements and townships, and the arrival of mass media and organization cultures of western governments and multi-national resource companies, the Inuit’s traditional centuries old present time cosmology, with its ontology of *place* and a lifestyle focus on “food, family and social connections”, is being encroached by modern, scientific or Western cosmology. The Western cosmology in North America possesses an ontology of *time*, the management of which, in my opinion, forces a lifestyle focus of “fast food, work family and consumer connections”. Whatever the Inuit response, it arises as a coping mechanism in order to have the skills to live in the common ground intersection where the Traditional and the Western worldviews meet. Whatever their response, increasingly Inuit leaders and academics point out that acquisition of new Ways

of Knowing by their people must be free of exploitation (Flaherty, 1995) and will not be at the expense of what they already know (Kawagley, 2005).

Inuit Adult Learning theory, not yet fully understood by non-Inuit, is in alignment with the Social Learning and Constructivist orientations of Adult Learning theory. What can be known is that just as they were guided by the sun and the moon since the world was young, Inuit Ways of Knowing for the future will continue to be guided by two other constants; their values of sharing and cooperation. It was like that long ago. It is so today. It will be that way for tomorrow. In good times and in bad, supported by their *ayorama* walking stick, Inuit continue to move forward across the knowledge landscapes.

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