

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA LIBRARY



0 1620 0566 5359



GETTING STARTED IN ORAL TRADITIONS RESEARCH

OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 4



POLAR
P
95.4
N7
H37
1995
c.2

2. THE ORAL TRADITION

2.1 What is an Oral Tradition?

Knowledge can be passed from one generation to another in a number of ways. It is passed by speaking and also through writing. It can also be taught without words by showing people how to do things.

An oral tradition is the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next orally (by speaking). Until recently, all of the Aboriginal peoples who lived in the area that is now the Northwest Territories, lived by knowledge that was passed to them through their oral tradition. The skills for survival such as hunting, building houses, making clothes, tools, medicine and religious practices were taught by telling and showing one another how to do these things. Singing, telling stories, and plays are also ways of passing knowledge through the oral tradition.

Elders are very important in cultures that teach through the oral tradition. The elders are the people with the most knowledge. They have gained it over their lifetime and they are needed to teach the younger generations. They are the educators.

2.2 The Written Tradition

A written tradition is the passing of knowledge through the written word. Examples of this are children learning history from text books, or, adults reading a manual to learn to use a VCR.

With the arrival of non-Aboriginal cultures in the Northwest Territories, many Aboriginal people have learned to write. However, little of the knowledge within their oral tradition has been recorded and used to create a written tradition that is meaningful in their own culture. Over time Aboriginal people have realized the importance of having a written tradition as well as an oral one. This means that many of their traditions can be preserved and passed along to future generations in writing.

2.3. Traditional Knowledge

The term traditional knowledge has come to mean the knowledge that has been passed from one generation to the next through the oral or written traditions. All cultures have traditional knowledge. For example, Aboriginal traditional knowledge refers to aspects of traditional Aboriginal life, such as knowledge of the land and its resources, or traditional spirituality and medicine. However, all cultures change, and as they do new knowledge is added and some knowledge is lost. This means that traditional knowledge changes over time.

2.4 The Crisis of Losing Traditional Knowledge

More and more of Aboriginal children's education comes from books rather than from elders. Children need to go to school because there are new skills to learn for survival. They need to learn skills such as reading, writing and using computers, because these will help them get a job or earn the money they need to do other things.

Over time, less of their knowledge will come from the oral tradition of their own culture. The elders do not have as important a role as they used to in passing along their knowledge to younger people. In some communities the children do not speak the language of their elders, which makes it difficult for elders to teach them. These changes mean that much important traditional knowledge is being lost.

This is a crisis for many reasons. The knowledge that is being lost can provide people with a sense of identity. Knowing who you are can give you pride in your culture. Elders have knowledge that is needed for survival. They know a lot about the land they live in. They know where to find animals to hunt or trap because they know of places where animals will go to find food. They know how to find their way around the land because they know the landmarks. Traditional knowledge has many uses in our world today.

2.5 Helping to Maintain Traditional Knowledge

We need to continue to use traditional knowledge so that it will continue to be part of our lives. One way that you can help is to do a project where you record this information so that it can become part of school programs. There are a number of ways to do this. You can record it with a tape recorder and still camera, or a video camera. This manual is meant for those using a tape recorder, but many of the ideas may be useful for other types of recording equipment as well.

2.6 Oral Traditions and Oral History Research

Some people use the terms "oral traditions research" and "oral history research" to mean the same thing. You will see this if you look at the list of book titles on page 95. These terms are used to refer to a method of doing research that involves interviewing people to learn about their life, their culture or history. Some people also use the term oral history to mean the information they collected through interviews that can be used to learn about a person's or a peoples' history. That type of research can be very important.

When we think of history, we often think of books that are full of names, dates and events. There is a lot of history that is important to us that cannot be found in books. Many people, especially elders, may know a lot of history but have never had it recorded. They can tell you about their life experiences, such as where they grew up and how they made a living. This information can be important to the history of your people. It can show how the culture has changed over the years. For example, think about how cultures changed when people began working for wages rather than making a living only from the land.

In this manual we will only use the term oral traditions research when we talk about recording knowledge or information on traditions or history that is passed on orally.

2.7 Getting Trained in Oral Traditions Research

There is a lot to learn before a person becomes a skilled oral traditions researcher. It is best to learn from someone who already has these skills. There are a number of ways to get this help. You can arrange to have someone train you who would make sure you learn the skills needed to do the various parts of the project. Are there people in town who have done this kind of research and can help you? If you need help using a computer ask the adult educator, teacher, or someone in one of the offices in town if they could assist you. If you need help keeping track of your finances see if there is an accountant or treasurer of an organization who could help.

Projects that are funded by the GNWT's Oral Traditions Contribution Program and the Geographic Names Program (see pages 90 and 91) are given some training along with financial support. If you aren't supported by a funding agency think about getting someone to give you a workshop on oral traditions research at the beginning of your project. To find a trainer call your social or cultural institute or the Heritage Advisor at the Heritage Centre in Yellowknife (page 90).

2.8 Using Video Recorders

Some researchers like to record interviews with a video recorder (camera). In this manual we cannot discuss the many skills a person needs to learn to do a good job with them. Organizations like the Native Communications Society (NCS-TV) in Yellowknife, the Inuvialuit Communications Society (ICS) in Inuvik, and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) in Iqaluit, are willing to give you advice. They can give you the names of people you can hire to teach workshops on the use of video equipment, or they may be holding workshops themselves. The addresses and phone numbers for these organizations are listed on page 94. The IBC has a community training manual that they are willing to send to people, so give them a call if you want one. There are many good books on using video equipment, so check with your library or book store.

2.9 Ethical Behaviour

Ethical behaviour means behaving in a way that shows you respect the people you will be interviewing, and you have their best interests in mind. An example of ethical behaviour is telling people before you interview them what you are going to do with their information. Will you use it in educational programs for schools? Will you use it to write a book that you hope to sell? It is ethical to let people know how you will use their information so they can decide whether they want to be interviewed or not (see section 4.5 on informed consent).

What if you interviewed someone, and when you finished the interview they said they did not want you to use something they had said? Acting ethically means you would respect their wishes and not use that information.

Various organizations in the country have written ethical guidelines for doing research. In the future, guidelines for community based research in the NWT will likely be written by various cultural organizations. As none are available now, an example of ethical guidelines written by the Association of Universities for Northern Studies is provided on page 82. Although they were written for people in universities who do research in the north, the guidelines apply to anyone doing research.

2.10 Who's Who?

Throughout this manual the person who is doing the interviews will be called the **interviewer**. The person being interviewed is called the **interviewee**.