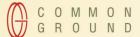
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Teaching Psychology in a Cross-Cultural Setting

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Teaching Psychology in a Cross-Cultural Setting

Making Theory Relevant

Marja Korhonen, National Aboriginal Health Organization, Canada

Abstract: In teaching psychology to Inuit students in Canada's Arctic, it was necessary to be mindful of two factors: psychological theories and research are sometimes said to be 'Western' and therefore inappropriate for or inapplicable to non-Western and aboriginal cultures such as Inuit; and students had limits on English skills, formal education and literacy levels. This paper describes a methodology for teaching educational and developmental psychology that, though utilizing university texts and scientific research, was founded on student experience, discussion, and plain language. The process had important and interesting consequences: it made psychology real and relevant; it provided evidence regarding applicability and appropriateness; it enabled transfer of unfamiliar knowledge and vocabulary; and it developed skills in critical thinking and comprehension.

Keywords: Psychology, Cross-cultural, Multicultural, Inuit, Knowledge Transfer, Pedagogy, Cultural Diversity

Introduction

S A NON-INUIT instructor teaching developmental and educational psychology courses to Inuit students in the Nunavut Teacher Education Program at Nunavut Arctic College, my instructional preparation was informed by awareness of two essential factors relevant to effective knowledge transfer and my students' learning: language and educational background issues; and the concept of cultural differences. The program was affiliated with McGill University, and successful students would receive either a three-year Northern Teaching Diploma or, after a fourth year of study, a McGill University Bachelor of Education degree. It was therefore important that students indeed be provided with courses that met the standards of a university program, and that they themselves be able to assess the relevance and appropriateness of established psychological theory and findings.

Inuit¹ in Canada are a people in transition, having undergone rapid externally-generated political, economic, and social changes. In the part of the eastern Arctic that is now the territory of Nunavut, Inuit have entered the modern world of money, wage employment, technology, formal education, global media, etc. primarily within the last forty to fifty years. Much of the traditional lifestyle continues, with life lived in small geographically isolated communities. In many communities, Inuktitut is the first language

even for today's children, and for many who are older, it is their only language (Government of the Northwest Territories [GNWT], 1996).

School drop-out rates are high even among today's youth, and among adults, the levels of education are relatively low. In my fifteen years of teaching at Nunavut Arctic College, first in the Social Work Program and then in the Nunavut Teacher Education Program, only a very few students had completed secondary school. ² The majority had seven to ten years of formal education, and some in their forties and older had as little as four or five. Even among those who had completed secondary school, there were significant gaps in knowledge, and frequent difficulties in critical thinking skills and English language comprehension. For most, Inuktitut was their first language and also the language of daily life at home and in the community. Although students were basically literate in both English and Inuktitut, verbal and written comprehension levels in both languages varied. These classroom observations coincide with recent research Inuit-relevant findings: the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics (2001) states that up to 47% of Inuit self-report that they do not read or write their mother tongue well; the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (Statistics Canada, 2005) shows that over 80% of Inuit surveyed in Nunavut do not have Level 3 literacy skills, considered the minimum necessary to meet the needs of

² Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the organization mandated to foster the economic, social and cultural well-being of Nunavut Inuit through the implementation of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, notes that although 38% of Nunavut teachers are Inuit, 45% of these teachers have not themselves completed secondary school (Williamson, 2006).



[•] Though known more commonly as *Eskimo* in other parts of the world, *Inuit* is what they call themselves and wish to be called by others. The singular form is *Inuk*.

today's society; the Nunavut Adult Learning Strategy (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., 2005) identifies the need for developing reading, writing, grammar and critical thinking skills.

Given the contemporary emphasis on the importance of culture and cultural differences, I was also aware of the cautions extended by much cross-cultural literature and by colleagues that non-Western and indigenous people's psychology is or may be different from Western-based psychological theories and knowledge. I could not assume that what the texts say would in fact be applicable or relevant.

Because the modern world has come to Inuit regions very recently, new concepts, knowledge, and learning strategies have become available and necessary quite suddenly. Always a pragmatic people who quickly adopted and adapted new technology, ideas and and practices that had the potential to better ensure survival and make life easier, Inuit understand that to survive as a living culture in the modern world requires both the retention of tradition and the ability to meet today's needs. "We respect the accumulated wisdom of our elders, examining and evaluating our actions based on the best of both modern knowledge and traditional ways" (Government of Nunavut, 1999).

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the political organization representing and advocating for all Canada's Inuit states that, "Historically Inuit taught their children largely through modeling, by being with children who watched indirectly and learned through observation. Children learned at their own pace. Modern education is much more structured and utilizes formal and direct educational methods that are distant in approach from the way Inuit teach their children. For Inuit education systems to be successful harmony between traditional teaching and Western teaching methods must be developed" (2004: 10). Regarding those wishing to undertake postsecondary education, "It is not surprising that there are also a low number of Inuit who go on to complete trade certificates, college certificates/diplomas or University degrees given the low number of Inuit high school graduates. The reason for this is twofold: skills are not always at a level acceptable to many post secondary institutions due to early drop out, low literacy skills or the unavailability of certain courses at the high school level; as well as travel outside the community... Incomplete high school combined with low English literacy skills make it difficult to enter and succeed in the system" (2004: 10).

Community education systems, from elementary to post-secondary schools, are still striving to develop the processes and content that meet cultural, language (both Inuktitut and English) and knowledge needs. It has also not yet been possible to develop many

learning materials in Inuktitut: there few Inuit with the in-depth education and expertise that is necessary to write textbooks, nor is there yet a comprehensive or agreed-upon Inuktitut terminology³ that reflects fast-expanding contemporary knowledge.

Students who want to access post-secondary education and training, whether in southern Canadian institutions or at northern colleges, therefore often find themselves struggling with culturally unfamiliar or potentially inappropriate concepts and conclusions, background skills and knowledge gaps, and subject literature written at post-secondary levels of English. I therefore attempted to incorporate teaching and learning strategies that:

- used students' personal and cultural experience as the foundation for learning;
- were compatible with traditional and individual learning styles yet enabled students to become comfortable with the forms and requirements of formal post-secondary education, including the use of standard subject texts, should they wish to continue their schooling in other settings such as southern Canadian universities;
- enabled understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts without requiring that students publicly divulge that they did not understand a term or concept;
- fostered in-depth learning and understanding rather than a 'watered down' basic version of information;
- promoted the development and use of the academic skills and critical thinking skills that are necessary in further learning, whether self-directed or formal, and in their professional careers as teachers.

Strategies

Language and Academic Skills

Most program applicants were enrolled as mature students, and I knew from their application documents that there was much variation in formal educational background and English language skills. It was therefore necessary that knowledge transfer strategies enabled learning whatever the students' levels, as well as promoted esteem and confidence in every learner. These goals also necessitated an environment that reinforced students' pride at being in a university-level course that they expected would provide them with the same knowledge and skills had they been university students in the south.

Students were made aware immediately that although they would be doing many concrete activities (which everyone always enjoys), the purpose and

³ Dialect differences – and an emotional attachment by speakers to their own dialects – complicates the efforts to develop terminology.

emphasis was on thinking and understanding, and that evaluation too would require evidence of thinking and understanding.⁴

Each student received a copy of a standard university developmental psychology text. For each unit of study, however, I summarized main points and all important information in handouts and on flipchart postings in plain English. Demonstration and practice of the use of tables of content and indices was given at the beginning of the course; those who already had these study skills were thus reinforced, and those who didn't, learned. Daily homework readings were assigned from the text or from relevant articles, always accompanied by plain-language notes and questions that guided purpose, comprehension and information extraction. Students were also given access to a variety of optional readings. As the course progressed and students became more comfortable and familiar with the text and the expectations and purpose of the readings, reading assignments became longer and gradually more complex. Each reading assignment was discussed in class the following day and related to learning; students discussed their experiences and examples, raised questions and interests, etc. The underlying purposes of these assignments were to: familiarize students with academic reading (which would be important in inservice continuing education); generate awareness of and appreciation for the wide range of knowledge available in books that could not be acquired solely through oral communication; foster development of vocabulary and literacy comprehension skills; and develop confidence in their ability to read and understand what may initially have seemed print-dense and intimidating.

During many years teaching and living in the North, I had learned to recognize concepts, terminology and idiomatic expressions that might not be understood by all students. In some cases, I automatically explained meaning as words came up in the course of discussion; I did not assume comprehension but neither did I ask students to disclose non-understanding. In other cases it was important that they develop their own comprehension: thus, I first elicited their knowledge or guesses, filled in gaps (if necessary), and facilitated understanding by the use of examples, both mine and theirs. For example, courses began with a discussion on the meaning(s) of 'psychology'. Students' understanding invariably was initially related to 'psychologist' (a word that was always understood to mean a mental health counsellor) = psychology = having to do with mental health. Students were asked to give examples of mental health issues. Discussion moved to questions like "How can we tell if a person has mental health problems?" which led to a discussion and examples of behaviour. This eventually led to an explanation of psychology as the study of how people behave and why they behave in certain ways. Subsequently, students were asked to consider why it is important to understand people's behaviour. Their responses and examples (such as, "...so I'll understand what's normal behaviour at different ages...") then led to the notion of 'prediction' ("...so I'll know what to expect and what to do..."), which was then related to their role as teachers.

All expectations regarding presentations, reports and other written assignments, and evaluation measures were explained in detail orally, supplemented by written guidelines and oral and written examples. Because most students had little or no experience of presentations and essay/report-writing, I provided a full written sample relevant to each assignment, with step-by-step instructions and demonstrations, which we discussed in detail. Students were thus able to refer to the sample and related notes as an aid to organization, structure and content of their own assignment.

It is crucial that teachers have the comprehension and critical thinking skills necessary for appropriate use of learning in their work. Considerable time was therefore spent practicing the skills of recognizing important information, comparing, evaluation, analysis, synthesis, etc. Such practice involved a variety of strategies built into lessons: reading short case studies; observing children's behaviour; roleplaying scenarios; discussing what/why/what if/etc.; comparing theories and concepts; and so on. One strategy was the use of classroom materials that help children learn critical thinking skills in school: in the learning units about cognitive development, I provided students with actual 'thinking skills' activities and workbooks for various grade levels/ages, and we worked through them from simplest to most complex. Students thus learned what kinds of 'thinking skills' teaching materials are available to them, but more importantly, practiced those skills. Some such practice was oral, in group discussion; others were unmarked written homework assignments that were then discussed in class. Although it was evident to me when students had problems, discussion always focused on the skills themselves, their applicability to children's learning, and the kinds of problems people generally might have. Students did not, therefore, feel that their own 'mistakes' were a reflection on their ability, but rather an example of the complexities of thinking skills.

Evaluation assignments generally consisted of case studies and scenarios, which I wrote up based on events they might encounter in their real lives, in which students were expected to demonstrate understanding of learning content and to apply it appropri-

⁴ Invariably, students expressed interest and enthusiasm.

ately. Tests and assignments were always 'open book'; students could refer to notes and text, but had to be able to find, interpret, analyse and apply that information. An understanding of concepts is often best evident when students can provide an illustrative example from their own experience in their own words; many test questions therefore also required that students support their answers with relevant examples of their own.

It was my responsibility as an instructor to ensure I had explained well. If it was clearly evident in a test or assignment, therefore, that a student had not understood a question or process or concept, I would re-explain and then provide the student with a second opportunity to try their answer again.

Knowledge transfer, learning and skills were thus facilitated orally, aurally, concretely and visually, with comprehension and retention reinforced by reading, roleplay, discussion, reflection and writing.

Cultural Relevance

Although learning in Inuit society was traditionally based primarily on observation, practice and concrete activities, and knowledge was passed on orally (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., 2005), there is diversity within Aboriginal groups, as there is in all human groups, in how each individual learns best (George, 1997).

Every lesson therefore involved: oral explanations; group discussions; students' sharing of ideas, examples and experiences; time for individual reflection and activity; concrete and observational activities; appropriate video presentations; and reading and writing.

The cultural appropriateness of the 'Western' knowledge was assessed constantly through the use of concrete real-life observations, experiments and interactions with Inuit children of different ages ranging from infancy to adolescence. These activities included: interviews with and observations of children in the family and community; visits to daycares and schools; and bringing children into our classroom to take part in certain activities. We undertook a wide range of inquiry topics, including: object permanence experiments with infants; art across the ages; Piaget's experiments; interviews about the meaning and content of friendship; stages of moral development; gender differences in play and communication; and much more. I wanted students (and myself) to find out what real children said and did in their own communities and families.

Roleplay was also used as a learning tool when appropriate – for example, when practicing classroom

management strategies – and students scripted their own roleplay content according to their experiences. They could do roleplays in Inuktitut if they wished; class discussion and feedback was then in English.

Students also did interviews with Inuit elders about some aspect of traditional beliefs about children. The areas of inquiry were generated by the group, based on the general categories of physical development, thinking and learning, and behaviour. Each student chose a different topic, and then presented the results of their interviews to the group orally and in a written summary. Examples of typical inquiries include:

- What kind of physical skills and behaviour can we expect from children at [specific ages]?
- What are the best ways to discipline children? Why?
- What causes a person to have a certain kind of personality? How does personality affect behaviour?

Students thus became more informed about traditional beliefs, knowledge and practices, which were then compared to modern concepts.

Such activities always preceded discussion of theory and text findings. For example, I did not teach Piaget first, and then have students try Piaget's experiments with children; instead, students were given guidelines for the experiments – "Try this" – and the results were later related to Piaget's theories. In every observational or interview activity, students would discuss and post their results first; their findings and interpretations would then be related to psychological theory and knowledge. I believed that in doing the activities first, results would be least likely to be uncontaminated by expectations and implications set up by me or the text. Students could themselves have real-life evidence of the applicability/inapplicability of information provided in the text. Cultural relevance, or its lack, was thus clearly demonstrated.

Results

Students' observations and findings about stages of children's physical, cognitive and behavioural development invariably fit with psychological theory and research findings. All the experiments and observations generated much discussion, interest and insight. For example, from children's drawings of people (scribbles progressing to a circle with stick arms and legs protruding, progressing to articulated bodies, etc., and the fact that their own children's art at various ages matched examples in the text) students themselves were able to draw conclusions about

⁵ Whatever interviews, observations and experiments that students did with children, they also did on/with themselves/each other whenever possible; their own results were then compared to what they observed in children of various ages, as part of general understanding of lifespan development.

cognitive and motor skills developmental stages. Students could thus see that the concepts of modern developmental psychology were indeed culturally appropriate to their own lives and their work with Inuit children.

Elders' interview information also generally corresponded to modern knowledge. There were, however, many interesting aspects. Personality, for example, was said to be the result of nature (traits inherited from parents) and nurture, but also included the belief (still strong today) that when one was named after someone, a deceased relative for example, one was in fact that person as well as oneself.⁶ Nurture and nature thus took on a more complex form: others treated the person as though they were the deceased person, thus reinforcing certain behaviours and characteristics; and when a name crossed sex lines (a girl-child named after a man, or boy named after a woman) behavioural and personality expectations also crossed sex lines. Thus, for example, a girl named after a man would be treated like a boy, allowed/expected to learn and behave 'male' until puberty, at which time she would be expected to revert to her physically-determined female life. Another belief, still held strongly by many Inuit, is that a baby's sex can change during the birth process. Many students told of knowing cases where this had happened. These beliefs were an important part of their personal identity as Inuit, but students easily incorporated such traditional beliefs with modern scientific learning: yes, sex was set by chromosomes and hormones during conception and pregnancy – but the sex could nevertheless occasionally change at the last minute. They were also aware - discussed themselves, without prompting from me – what boundaries were necessary in the classroom: for example, that while a child might be named after a grandparent and therefore at home might 'be' the grandparent too, in the classroom the child was a child.

Students became quite comfortable with texts and articles, and in fact most read each chapter completely and used the text as a resource for reflection and self-learning. They developed relevant vocabulary, which they then used appropriately and spontaneously. Such reading also prompted various tangential and interesting discussions.

Finally, students developed academic skills and essential critical thinking skills which would be important in further learning, self-learning, and their work as teachers. Although, as in all groups of students, some accomplished more than others, all im-

proved. Clear and detailed explanation, written guidelines, and oral and written examples seemed the most useful strategies for developing academic skills like report-writing. Group discussion about, and practice in, specific critical thinking skills increased awareness, understanding and facility in the use of those skills.

Course evaluations indicated that students: 1) felt challenged but derived satisfaction from meeting the challenges; 2) believed that course content was relevant and useful to their future work as Inuit teachers with Inuit students.

Discussion

There is some controversy about effective adult education. Knowles (1984), whose concept of andragogy has become a commonly accepted foundation of adult education in North America, believes adult education to be different from pedagogy, which he relates to the teaching of children. He views adults as having matured into self-motivated, self-directed and autonomous learners whose learning needs and process are different from those of children. Teachers are therefore facilitators who simply provide guidance as required by the adult learner. Others (Tennant, 1986; Kidd 1978; Davenport and Davenport, 1985; Burge, 1988) argue that adults are not necessarily mature self-directed learners and that the essential elements of effective teaching and learning are similar for both adults and children,⁸ although developmental stage, context, and physical and psychological factors are different. Other factors such as learners' level of formal education, existing knowledge and learning/thinking skills, the nature of course content and the expected learning outcomes also affect the structure and process of teaching. Regardless of the controversies, models of effective adult education tend to incorporate several factors:

- learners need to understand why something is useful or necessary to learn;
- learners have life experiences and prior learning that contribute to new learning, and on which new knowledge is built;
- motivation to learn arises from personal needs, wants, experience and interests;
- effective learning and teaching involves a variety of strategies and activities – concrete, dialogue and discussion, inquiry, reflection and analysis, etc.;

⁶ Briggs, 2000.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Much of modern classroom learning for children is informed by the concept of constructivism, based on cognitive theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner and others, which emphasizes elements such as learner experience and context, active learning, and inquiry and thinking as the foundations of new learning and understanding.

 learners' life context, beliefs and opinions, values and background must be appropriately and respectfully taken into consideration.

The concept of knowledge transfer (KT), initially a business-based concept referring to the effective acquisition and sharing of essential knowledge within organizations, has now become an important element of health education and promotion – the "active exchange of information between the researchers who create new knowledge and those who use it" utilizing strategies that make the knowledge understandable and useable by practitioners, policymakers, consumers, etc. (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2004). Because of language, educational and cultural factors, Aboriginal communities in Canada and internationally also stress the importance of effective knowledge transfer/translation strategies that ensure a sense of cultural safety, enable understanding, and build capacity in research, education and delivery of services (INIHKD, 2003).

The strategies and learning/teaching processes outlined above incorporated the principles of effective adult education, knowledge transfer and cultural safety. Students' experience, life context, interpretations, ideas and cultural beliefs were built in to the learning experience and overtly recognized as valid contributions to learning. A wide variety of activities took into account both traditional cultural learning processes and individual learning styles. Plain language explanations, discussions and written summaries and guidelines, as well as real-life observations, enabled more effective knowledge transfer and built language and concept knowledge specific to the course content. Activities such as guided reading, instruction in the use of learning and research tools, and specific guidelines for academic activities such as essay writing built individual capacity for future self-directed or academic learning. Practice in and use of critical thinking skills also built capacity for both future learning and effective application of knowledge. Results indicated that all such strategies are indeed useful in creating an environment in which students are comfortable and motivated, and learning of unfamiliar concepts, language and skills is facilitated. However, results also support the literature which argues that process and structure must fit appropriately with student characteristics and content requirements. Students cannot be successful selfdirected learners at all times, especially when background knowledge and language/literacy skills do not coincide with learning outcome requirements. Guided facilitation was appropriate at some times (for example, in interview and observation development and discussion), but other situations required more structured instructor authority and expertise. Overall, results indicated the validity of Burge's (1988) statement that, "The educator has to make deliberate choices about which model/s of teaching may be appropriate for given situations within a course (Joyce and Weil, 1986), but this should be done within an overriding concern to show openly respect, sensitivity and warmth for the learner as an adult person."

Finally, the apparent relevance of psychological theory and research to the lives of Inuit students may be indicative of the increasing body of evidence, especially from the fields of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, that there is a human nature that all humans, regardless of culture, are born with common 'content' and potential, common biologically-determined stages of development both physically and cognitively, and common basic personality traits that are then shaped by environment. (Pinker, 1997, 2002; Buss, 1996; Kennair, 2002).

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⁹ Cultural safety is a concept with origins in nursing and midwifery education for Maori in New Zealand. Cultural safety refers to the creation of an environment that values and incorporates the beliefs, social realities, histories and life experiences of individuals in their culture, thus empowering them to be full participants in their learning and use of knowledge (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2002).

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After 18 years as a social worker, counsellor and alternative educator in southern Canada, I moved to Canada's Arctic. For 15 years I then taught counselling skills, psychology and special education in Nunavut Arctic College's Social Work and Teacher Education programs, to Inuit students. I moved to my present position in Ottawa 3 years ago but continue to have a home and husband in Nunavut. My academic background includes sociology, psychology, education, and a PhD in counselling, with a focus on multicultural counselling and Inuit. I live a multicultural life as a Finnish-born Canadian with a Jamaican husband and a work immersion in Inuit issues. My interests include research that focuses on evidence-based "what works".

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