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# “Northern Relations”: Collaborating “In a Good Way” to Develop the Inuvialuit Digital Library Metadata Framework (Paper)

## **Abstract**

Digital libraries are online platforms for organizing, sharing, and providing access to resources. Ideally, they are developed by, with, and for specific user communities. Metadata frameworks, as integral components of digital libraries, should also reflect the needs and serve the interests of those communities. In this paper I report on one aspect of my doctoral research which involved working collaboratively, respectfully, and appropriately with members of the Inuvialuit community in the northwestern part of Canada to explore and articulate a culturally responsive metadata framework for their digital library of cultural resources.

## **1. Introduction**

Digital libraries are online platforms for organizing, sharing, and providing access to resources. They are “managed collections of information, with associated services, where the information is stored in digital formats and accessible over a network” (Arms, 2000, 2). Metadata frameworks are schemes for creating and implementing metadata for resources, and are considered to be integral components of digital libraries (NISO, 2007).

Ideally, digital libraries are developed by, with, and for specific user communities. As Borgman (1999) notes, “digital libraries are constructed, collected and organized by (and for) a community of users, and their functional capabilities support the information needs and uses of that community” (234). As key elements of digital libraries, metadata frameworks should also reflect the needs and serve the interests of the communities for and by whom those libraries are designed. This is of particular relevance to Indigenous communities, who have long been negatively affected by the colonial biases and racism inherent in many traditional metadata standards and frameworks (Berman, 2000; Littletree, Belarde-Lewis, Duarte, 2020; Webster & Doyle, 2008). Metadata frameworks for Indigenous digital libraries must “reflect and support context specific Indigenous ways of being and knowing and people’s control over their own knowledge” (Godbold, 2009, 120).

With increasing interest in traditional knowledge, and growing recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples to preserve, safeguard, and protect their knowledge and all its expressions (United Nations, 2007), we are witnessing a trend of Indigenous communities seeking to leverage the capabilities of digital technology to drive sharing of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage on their own terms (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Parent, 2015). Many of these initiatives are carried out in partnership with non-Indigenous organizations, individuals, or research projects. However, this important work must be carried out in true partnership and

collaboration, with the Indigenous community leading the way. What does ethical and intercultural collaborative research look like in the context of a particular Indigenous community? This is a question I sought to explore in my doctoral research with the Inuvialuit community to explore and articulate a culturally responsive metadata framework for their digital library of cultural resources.

## **2. Context**

The Inuvialuit (“the real people”) are the Indigenous people of the Western Arctic region of what is now Canada. The language of the Inuvialuit is collectively known as Inuvialuktun, and includes three languages: Kangiryuarmiutun, Sallirmiutun, and Uummarmiutun. In 1984, the Inuvialuit signed the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) with the Government of Canada, which recognized Inuvialuit ownership of their homeland, now known as the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR), a region covering 91,000 square kilometres and incorporating six communities: Aklavik, Inuvik, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour, Tuktoyaktuk, and Ulukhaktok (Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, 2017).

The “geographic remoteness [of the region] poses challenges for enabling easy access to cultural heritage resources” (Farnel, Shiri, Rathi, Cockney, Campbell, & Stobbs, 2016, 3) for community members. The Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre (ICC) was founded in 1998 with a mandate to promote and preserve the language and culture of the Inuvialuit of northern Canada (Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre, 2017). To better serve the needs of the communities and fulfill its mandate, the ICC made the decision to develop an online digital library of cultural resources. The Inuvialuit Digital Library (<https://inuvialuitdigitallibrary.ca/>) was initially developed as part of the Digital Library North (DLN) Project, a four-year collaboration between researchers at the University of Alberta, staff at the Inuvialuit Cultural Centre (ICC), and communities within the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR), and continues to grow through ongoing collaboration with the Inuvialuit.

## **3. Research Paradigms**

In order to work together with the Inuvialuit community to explore an issue of relevance to the community, and to do so in a respectful and responsive way, I situated my research within two congruent paradigms: Indigenous and participatory. An Indigenous research paradigm is grounded in Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and emphasizes the importance of respectful and reciprocal relationships (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). A participatory paradigm emphasizes the contextual nature of knowledge, and focuses on equal and cooperative exchange of community and researcher knowledge to address a real-world problem or question as determined by that community (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008). The coming together of these two paradigms to inform research can lead to greater social transformation when done in an equitable and respectful manner.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for my research was informed by the overarching research paradigms, my understanding of approaches taken in past similar research, and by my evolving

understanding of the cultural and community context of the ISR. It combined aspects of four bodies of theory: anti-colonial theory, which requires putting the interests and needs of Indigenous communities first, and creating space for and supporting those communities in reclaiming what has been taken from them (Dei, 2008; Porsanger, 2004); fluid ontologies, which are dynamic and emergent representations of knowledge based on community articulated categories and interrelations that are enacted within technical infrastructures (Srinivasan, 2004, 2012); language or sociolinguistic codes, which sees language as socially constructed, influencing and influenced by the context in which it is applied, and best understood holistically (Bernstein, 2000, 2003); and digital storytelling, which is not a theory but rather a method, one in which technology is leveraged for telling stories that often go untold, and upsetting traditional power structures (Couldry, 2008; Lundby, 2008).

## **5. Methodology**

The methodological approach for my research was participatory case study. Case study is an approach that focuses on a single instance or case, examination of that case in its natural environment, and the collection of detailed data (Dick, 2014). Participatory case study builds on that and incorporates participatory elements such as involving participants and the community in all aspects of the research. This approach allows for multiple and varied methods depending on the question or issue at hand, allowing for choices that are driven by the local context, which is particularly important when working with Indigenous communities.

In my research I made use of a variety of methods for information gathering, including formal interviews, extended purposeful conversations, informal discussions and conversations, meetings with study collaborators and partners, presentations and demonstrations of the Digital Library, participant observation, the iterative development of the Digital Library itself, Digital Library North project data and documentation, and daily fieldnotes and trip summaries. The information analysis process was qualitative in nature; themes and categories were allowed to emerge from the data, and were shared back with my community collaborators for feedback and input, which then informed further information gathering and analysis.

## **6. The Metadata Framework**

Although the focus of this paper is on the approaches taken to surface or develop the culturally responsive metadata framework, a brief description of the framework can help illustrate the ways in which the approach impacted its development. While metadata frameworks typically have a rather narrow scope, focusing on the specific set(s) of metadata elements to be used and providing guidance on how to populate those elements, the metadata framework surfaced in my work with the Inuvialuit is much broader in scope and more holistic in character. It consists of three separate facets: General Principles, Knowledge Organization/Information Architecture, and Metadata Elements. General Principles are sustainability, responsiveness, and user-friendliness. Knowledge Organization/Information Architecture incorporates organizational themes and topics, exploration and navigation, and item presentation. Metadata Elements include names of people, places, and resources, language and dialect, dates, subject, audience, relationships, as well as additional elements and general practices.

## 7. Collaborating ‘in a good way’

Scholarly and professional literature in library and information science and related disciplines includes many general descriptions of appropriate and respectful ways of working with Indigenous communities. But it can be hard to understand and appreciate what this might look like “on the ground” for a particular project or in a given context. While there is no formula for effective community-based collaboration in articulating a responsive metadata framework for a digital library, I can describe what was effective and appropriate in the context of my work with the Inuvialuit on their digital library metadata framework.

A critical aspect of collaborating in a good way is being reflective as a researcher and an individual. This requires constant reflection not only on what you are doing, and why, but also on how you are going about it. Fieldnotes, diaries, and team discussions are tools that can aid in this process. Also critical to collaborative and cooperative research is building and sustaining relationships. This happens through ensuring that you take your lead from the community in all aspects of the work, including initiation of the project, how you go about the research in terms of the ‘who, what, and where, and being willing and able to shift priorities based on changing community circumstances. Good collaboration also happens through the use of methods that are driven by, and reflective of, the local community. It also happens through engaging with the community outside of the research project proper, and in how you go about working with your community partners and collaborators. Finally, it happens through honest and sincere efforts to give back to the community in ways that are “relevant, grounded in existing needs, and accessible” (Latulippe, 2015, 11).

In approaching my work with the Inuvialuit with respect and in the spirit of reciprocity, and to carry out the work in a good way, I hope I have a good relation and guest in the community, and demonstrated through action how Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals can work together respectfully and collaboratively to share knowledge and bring about positive change. And I hope that others in our discipline who work with Indigenous communities may take something from this work to enable effective and appropriate collaborations with their partners.

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