

Igalaaq: The Rankin Inlet Community Access Centre

Introduction

'Igalaaq' means 'window' in the Inuktitut language. For the inhabitants of the Arctic community of Rankin Inlet, Igalaaq is also the name for the Community Access Centre – their computerized window on the world.¹ This paper describes how a dedicated teacher, a supportive school and business community, and numerous volunteers created this innovative community computer access centre in the North.

The community

Rankin Inlet is a community of approximately 2,000 people, about 80 percent of whom are Inuit. Located on the west coast of Hudson Bay, about 1,000 kilometres north of Winnipeg, it is accessible only by air.

Like many northern communities, Rankin Inlet suffers from very high unemployment, and suicide and substance abuse are serious problems. Unlike some northern communities, however, Rankin Inlet has a very active business commu-

nity, with more than 100 small and large businesses. Increasingly, these businesses are Inuit-owned. One of the major businesses is Sakku Investments Corporation, a corporation charged with investing money from the Nunavut land claim settlement on behalf of the Inuit in the Kivalliq region.² This active business community was key to opening Rankin Inlet's window on the world.

The school

Another element critical to the success of this initiative was the elementary school, and particularly computer teacher Bill Belsey. Leo Ussak Elementary School in Rankin Inlet offers educational programming in English and Inuktitut to 360 students from kindergarten to Grade 6. Since its inception in 1988, the school has sought to include the community at every opportunity, and it is a common sight to see Inuit elders at the school, passing on traditional knowledge to the children. The founding principal, the late Simon Ford, was committed not only to instilling respect for Inuit culture and the Inuktitut language, but

also to providing access to appropriate information technology.

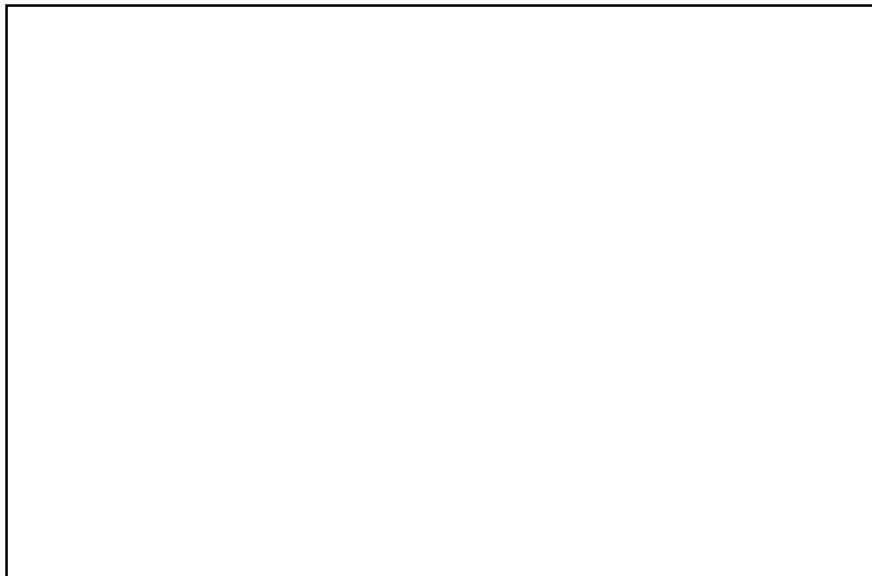
In the spring of 1994, Bill Belsey was asked to become the computer teacher of Leo Ussak Elementary School. Although he had 14 years' experience teaching Grades 2 to junior high, he recalls being "both thrilled and daunted" at the prospect. "The school had few resources for teaching about information technology," he says, "and I had big dreams for our students. What to do? I felt the answer lay in our community."

Opening the window

Bill Belsey was not the only person aware of the exploding growth in information technology and the challenges and opportunities it offered to Rankin Inlet. In 1994, Sakku Investments Corporation announced a plan to create an

Internet Service Provider (ISP) for the community. As part of the planning, Sakku held informal discussions with possible stakeholders about the potential offered by an Internet service.

For Bill, a major concern was how the new technology could be made widely available. "I wanted this technology to be publicly available to provide training and access to those who did not have the technical skills or financial resources to pay for Internet access," he says. He acted on this concern, working with the school staff, administration and the local Community Education Council to develop a plan for a Community Access Centre. The idea was that the Centre, to be located in the computer room of Leo Ussak Elementary School, would provide Internet access to staff and students during school days and to community members during evenings and weekends.



The children of Rankin Inlet are enthusiastic about their computer centre.

In 1995, Bill wrote a grant proposal to the Community Access Program of Industry Canada, and the school received a \$14,000 grant.³ This funding paid for the creation of a Local Area Network in the school which was connected to the Sakku Internet Service Provider so that a number of students could be connected to the Internet at the same time. However, the grant did not provide any funding to upgrade the school's outdated computers, or to pay for the hourly costs of connecting to the service provider.

This problem was resolved by Ron Dewar, Chief Executive Officer of Sakku Investments Corporation. Says Bill: "Ron had the vision to realize that the Internet could be an economic lifeline to this geographically isolated region. He made it clear that Sakku was with us as a Partner in Education."

Sakku provided the school with presentation hardware and software, a colour scanner and, perhaps most importantly, an agreement that Sakku would underwrite the Internet connection costs for the Community Access Centre. Sakku also agreed to provide funds to pay high school students at a minimum wage to work in the centre during the evenings and weekends when it was open to the public.

"Wonder and amazement"

With this commitment from Sakku, Bill Belsey set about finding additional community partners for the centre. His first step was to ask then principal Simone Clark and the Community Education Council whether he could approach other community stakeholders to become Partners in Education in support of the centre. After he took the Council on an Internet 'virtual tour' of the Louvre Museum in Paris, the members

understood the potential that broadly available Internet access offered the community.

"I can vividly recall the look of wonder and amazement on the face of elder Lucien Taparti and other Council members as I demonstrated a virtual tour of the Louvre," says Bill. "Some Council members had been born on the land in skin tents and igloos. As elder Taparti said through a translator: 'We need this for our grandchildren.' They gave their approval without hesitation or condition."

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With the Council on board, Bill went about canvassing local stakeholders, holding a series of 'Internet Cafés' for the general public, leading staff training sessions for government personnel and fellow educators, and running a computer club for preschoolers on Saturday afternoons. Support snowballed as volunteers came on board, new partnerships were established, and computer hardware and software were purchased. Partners' contributions ranged from refreshments provided by an office supply company for the Internet Cafés, to educational software donated by a local toy company, to various types of hardware donated by government departments.

One fine spring weekend in 1996, four electricians – parents of students at the school – upgraded the electrical system of the computer room for no charge, using donated materials. "Our school had tried for years to have this job done," says Bill. "But we were told it would be

too difficult or too costly. This job had previously been priced at \$5,000!”

Despite the community support, other threats loomed, as cutbacks in educational funding put the computer program coordinator’s job at risk. Through the support of the school administration, staff, parents, the media and the Partners in Education (see below), the position was saved. In particular, it was the staff of Leo Ussak Elementary School who made the unselfish choice to take larger class sizes in order to maintain the position and thus keep the program going.

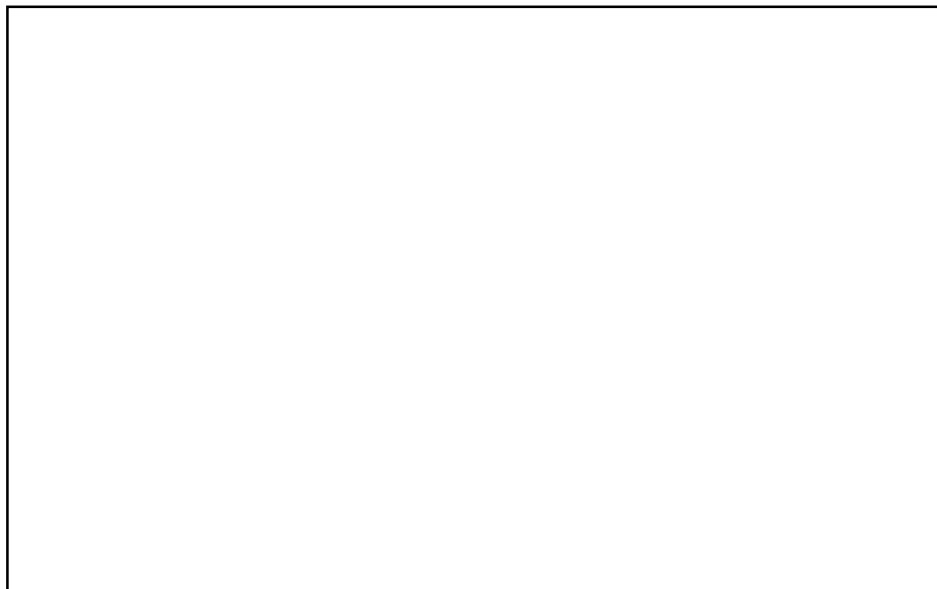
On Saturday, November 2, 1996, after a year and a half of organizing and developing community partnerships, close to 250 people attended the grand opening of the Community Access Centre. Community members cut a giant Iglaaaq cake and unveiled a sign for the centre, and more than 100 people signed up for their own e-mail accounts. According to Iglaaaq volunteers Vinnie Karetak and Maggie Putulik: “The centre was

packed to capacity on its first day of operation and it hasn’t slowed down since!”

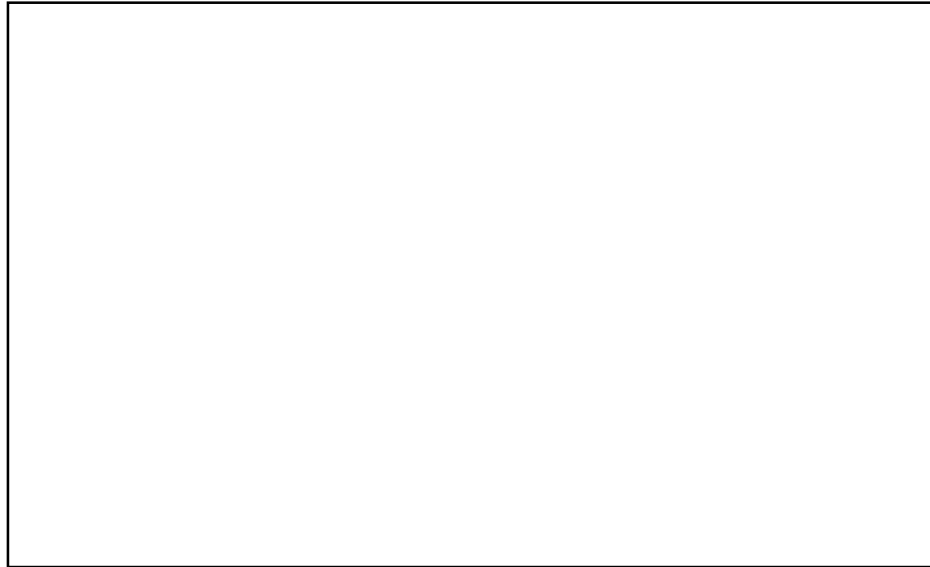
Partners in Education

In total, 52 business and government stakeholders as well as 61 individuals have become Partners in Education with Leo Ussak Elementary School. Contributions of goods, services and cash to date total more than \$100,000. Partners are recognized on the school’s website and their names and corporate logos are displayed on the equipment purchased with their support. The partnership arrangements are informal, with no written contracts or agreements. To date, the work has proceeded very smoothly.

Equipment at Iglaaaq now includes 20 multimedia computers, all with CD-ROM drives, on a high-speed data network, and two workstations with high-quality 17” professional monitors, scanners, ZIP drives and a digital camera.



Iglaaaq has been crowded since the day it opened.



Bill Belsey and translator Bernadette Dean (left) show elders Tulimaq and Aupilardjuk how to use one of the computers at Igalaq.

The high-speed network has been extended to the entire school so that all students and staff can use the laser printer and connect to the Internet. Thanks to the school's partners, students and staff now have access to a total of more than 60 computers.

Igalaq is open to the public on Tuesday and Thursday evenings and Sunday afternoons, and a special computer club for preschoolers is held on Saturday afternoons. Igalaq is run by volunteers. Typically, one adult is paired with a student from Maani Ulujuk High School to help staff the centre.

“Pride and appreciation”

The inhabitants of Rankin Inlet have enthusiastically opened their computerized window on

the world. More than 400 people, or 20 percent of the town's population, now have their own e-mail accounts. At the Saturday afternoon computer club for preschoolers, both parents and children learn new skills. More than 100 students attend a popular after-school program each week. In less than a year, there were more than 3,000 visits to Igalaq, without any theft, vandalism or disturbance to either the computer lab or the school.

Since the centre opened, students have had better attendance records in school and have shown more interest in learning. Using the sophisticated computer equipment, students from Grades 3 to 6 are producing their own web pages, and all students from kindergarten to Grade 6 are learning how to create, edit and produce their own animations and videos. Students from Grades 3 to 6 are introduced to robotics and to program-

ming, and students from Grades 4 to 6 are learning how to create multimedia projects. The children are learning to become creators of content rather than merely passive consumers.

Perhaps most importantly, computers are being used to enhance students' appreciation of their language and culture. All computers in the school have the Inuktitut syllabic font installed and are equipped with Inuktitut syllabic keyboard overlays. Students are helping to preserve Inuit culture and the Inuktitut language, using sophisticated techniques such as digital audio and video to record elders' stories, songs and traditional knowledge.

Says Bill: "Regular access to the Internet has opened a window to the world for our students, and has given the world access to the ideas and lives of our students. Sometimes our students get the message from traditional media that their lives are somehow less than those of others 'in the South' because they don't live in an urban area or hang out at shopping malls. When our students get e-mail from others around the world who are amazed that our kids see caribou and polar bears and go on dog sled trips, our kids feel an increased sense of pride and appreciation for their culture, their language and their special place in the world."

For local high school students, Igalaq is also a source of much-needed employment. Thanks to a youth employment grant from the Municipality of Rankin Inlet and a summer employment grant from Industry Canada, Igalaq successfully created the very first summer computer camp in the Canadian Arctic. Igalaq was able to employ four young people during the summer and throughout the school year. The students also benefit in that they see from the large number of Partners in Education that the community has a real stake in their education. Igalaq is also the base for a new local company called Inukshuk.com,

which employs students to create web pages for local businesses and helps to promote them internationally via the Internet.

A model for others

What began as a school-community initiative has blossomed into a program that has received numerous awards and international attention from the media and educators around the world. Leo Ussak Elementary School and Sakku Investments Corporation received the Royal Bank National Partners in Education Award from the Conference Board of Canada, and Igalaq is being used as a model internationally by organizations such as Industry Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency. Several students from Leo Ussak Elementary School made presentations at the 1997 Global Knowledge Conference in Toronto which was

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attended by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Igalaq and Leo Ussak Elementary School now offer program support and advice to schools and community organizations across Canada and internationally.

Bill Belsey's pioneering role also has been widely recognized. Bill was chosen for the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Technology and was asked to facilitate information technology training for teachers through a program offered by Nunavut Arctic College and McGill University.

He also became a founding member of the 2B1 Foundation, a select group of teachers and community activists who are trying to facilitate Internet access for children in the developing world. The 2B1 Foundation was created by professors Seymour Papert and Nicholas Negroponte of the Media Lab at M.I.T.

“Our experience shows that communities do want a greater part in our schools,” says Bill. “Schools should be able to look to businesses for financial support without fear of ‘selling out,’ and businesses must share the greater vision of life-long learning, not merely the month-end bottom line.” Iglaaq demonstrates the success that can be achieved when a community works together towards a common goal.

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Bill Belsey is Coordinator of Information Technology at Leo Ussak Elementary School in Rankin Inlet. Bill is currently the Facilitating Teacher for the Galileo Professional Development Centre at the Banded Peak School in Bragg Creek, Alberta. He can be contacted via e-mail at belsey@mail.com

Endnotes

1. For more information on the Rankin Inlet Community Access Centre, visit the website of Leo Ussak Elementary School at <http://www.arctic.ca/LUS>
2. Beginning April 1, 1999, the Government of Nunavut will assume responsibilities previously exercised by the Government of the Northwest Territories.
3. Industry Canada’s Community Access Program (CAP) helps rural and remote communities in Canada obtain affordable public access to the Internet and the skills to use it effectively. (See <http://cap.unb.ca/> for more information.)

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