

ETEC 540 Video Documentary Transcript
Indelible: History and Significance of Tattoo
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“Show me a man with a tattoo and I'll show you a man with an interesting past.” - Jack London

“The universality of tattooing is a curious subject for speculation.”
- James Cook

Chapter One: Worldwide Tattoos and Wild Theories

Tattooing has existed for thousands of years in a number of different cultures. The impermanency of the flesh makes archeological evidence of tattooing scarce. Ötzi, a Neolithic man recovered from the ice in the Austro-Italian Alps in 1991, was carbon dated at around 5200 years old. He bears numerous markings that could be construed as tattoos. There is more concrete evidence of tattoos from numerous cultures around the world and throughout time. The Nubians, Scythians, Picts, Greeks, Nazca, Cree, Polynesians, and Māori all practiced tattoo for a variety of reasons (Lineberry, 2007).

I imagine early forms writing must have been difficult. Writing mediums were hard to obtain and preserve. Writing systems were often not even invented yet. Cave walls could not follow the tribe as it migrated. But the skin was a canvas which would accompany its owner throughout their journey upon the earth, always ready to be displayed and interpreted. Tattoos are forever.

Almost. The indelibility of the ink in the skin is permanent for the individual but fleeting for the culture or society as it marches through the generations. The wearer of a tattoo took its messages to the grave. Perhaps it was a desire to have intergenerational permanency that drove the ancients to develop more durable forms of writing and recording. Could it be that the practice of writing upon the skin was an inspiration for later writing surfaces? The ancient needles of bone, teeth, bamboo, and shells could be precursors to the quill. One does not have to stretch the imagination to see how ancient tattoo pigments of ash, rust, brick, and dyes led the way for inks used in early writing. The technology of tattoo is easily adapted to writing. All it needs is the right symbols.

Chapter Two: Functions of Tattoos

Blanchard (1991) notes four functions of tattoos throughout history. They are used in rituals, such as rites of passage for adolescent boys. They are protective, warding off evil. They identify a person as belonging to a group or caste. They are also used as decoration. We will see that individuals also use tattoo to commemorate people or events in their life and as a therapeutic practice.

Many cultures use tattoo as a ritual, often as a rite of passage for boys who become men with the addition of ink under their skin. In pre-Christian Samoa, for example, the tattooing event was one of the most significant

experiences that a male would go through in their life and to not bear a tattoo was an unthinkable prospect that could lead to ridicule and ostracism (Va'a, 2006, p.300). Today in western cultures we use written documents to designate graduation. Many ancient cultures would read the same ideas from the tattoo.

Tattoo identifies its wearer. In some Polynesian cultures, tattoos denote high status and are worn by chieftains and great warriors (Untanga and Mongos, 2006). In ancient Greece and Rome only slaves were marked with tattoos as a punishment or as a mark of identification like the branding of cattle. The tattoo served to denote their inferior position (Fisher, 2002, p.92-93). Depending on your own personal biases, tattoo today can identify a person into a variety of different groups.

I suggest that tattoos also served as a form of prehistoric recording. Themes and motifs are repeated upon the generations, creating a narrative that transcends the fragility and transience of the individual. They are perpetuating cultural ideas (Cole, 2006, p.354). In this manner, tattoo motifs served a similar function to the poems and proverbs of oral societies; the fidelity of its message is maintained by imitation and repetition (Ong, 1982, pg.35). Oral language is turned into poems that have rhythmic regularity that enable them to be remembered. Likewise, tattoos are stylized to allow their analogies to be retained (Dyc and Mulligan, 2000, p.165). For example, tattoos in different Polynesian island communities can differ in name and look but still represent

similar ideas and themes of identity, tribal affiliations, belief structures, and status (Untanga and Mongos, 2006).

Chapter Three: Modern Meanings.

The meaning behind tattoo varies between cultures but it also differs quite radically from the individual's perspective. London tattoo artist Alex Binnie says that all tattoo is cultural and therefore is not well suited to personal expression (Cole, 2006, p.354-356). Artists are just perpetuating cultural ideas. Another artist named Leo believes that "[A] genuine tattoo.... tells a story. If they don't tell a story that involves you emotionally, then they're just there for decoration, then they're not a valid tattoo" (DeMello, 2000). At the very least, the tattoo speaks about the pain that one went through in order to get it. One can read a struggle into the tattoo. (Kirkland, 2012, p.382)

The following interviews give the perspectives of tattoo collectors and artists on the significance of their tattoos and craft.

Ollie: The only one that actually means anything is the first tattoo I got which is this one here. My dad's initials. My dad passed away when I was thirteen. I got tattooed by the same guy that tattooed my mom. They all kind of represent a lot of experience, more, and what's going on in my life at the time but these two in particular mean a whole lot to me.

Sharon: *They generally symbolize something that has happened in my life. It's kind of therapeutic for me but maybe memories or something that I want to keep for myself. This one, the crane, traditionally many birds, especially birds in flight, have a lot of meaning for freedom but also the red headed crane is significant in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean culture. It's a symbol of longevity, long life. The flowers are the mugunghwa which is the national flower of Korea. The English name is the Rose of Sharon. I was named after that flower.*

Pat: *I was given a book when I turned nineteen by my brother but I took it all over the world travelling with me so I got this script on my side. It took maybe eight hours with a guy doing bamboo tattoo which is, like, sticky poke and it basically, it was my favorite psalm from the book. It kind of says, like, don't be selfish, but it is also a thought about the connection that me and my brother have.*

Filip Leu: *I think rebellion is a massive part of it. Being able to separate yourself from the group. This is me. And funnily enough, that's what I wanted at first. By the time I had my second tattoo I wanted to belong to the tattoo family so I went from wanting to be totally separate to wanting to be part of the group all in two tattoos. And it does represent some form of change. It's been my experience, you readjust to your own visualization of yourself, how you see yourself, self-perception. Strength. Tattoos are a lot like armor. A visual, you*

know, marking, of I totally enjoy walking topless in a festival and having a fully tattooed torso. It's a wonderful rush, I gotta admit, you know.

Chapter Four: Implications for Literacy and Education.

The definition of literacy is an amorphous one. Today we have emerging descriptions that include the ability to understand and interpret a variety of media. The New London Group's manifesto on multiliteracy addresses questions about appropriate education for women, indigenous peoples, immigrants that do not speak the national language, speakers of nonstandard dialects, and groups that have been underrepresented in the national dialogue about literacy and literacy education (New London Group 1996, p.61). They refer to the basic ability to master sound-letter correspondences as 'mere literacy' (p.64) and go on to argue that effective literacy in the 20th and 21st century must make room for visual, audio, spatial, and behavioural contexts of meaning making.

From this perspective, the concept of visual literacy is an old one, but one I must invoke to highlight the implications that tattoo has for literacy and education. One definition of visual literacy posits that images communicate meaning and those visually literate can read and compose them (Brill, Kim, and Branch, 2007, p.48). Dyk and Milligan (2000), for example, have shown that Native American students have a strength in visual literacy that is culturally derived (p.152). They believe that this visual literacy is undervalued

in education and needs to be addressed. They state that “skills in the production and interpretation of visual imagery suggest sophisticated intellectual operations” (p.153). For Kirkland (2009), literacy is the ability to make meaning and express one’s self through the use of symbols (p.376). He advocates for an expanded English education that views literacy as a human practice that exists “off the page” (p.389).

Perry (2012) seconds this thought when she suggests that we should “conceptualize literacy as something one does, as opposed to a skill or ability one has” (p.62). She believes that this perspective will help to understand how real people actually engage with text in the real world and will ultimately make literacy instruction more relevant for all learners.

Earlier I suggested that tattoo technologies could have had an influence upon the development of later writing technologies. Now I am proposing that tattoo, both the visual aspects and the cultural characteristics, can be relevant, and perhaps even necessary, elements of inclusive literacy programs. With an expanded definition of literacy we can see tattoo as a legitimate form of expression that can be historical, cultural, individualistic, emotional, and educational.

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