



Indigenizing Education

People understand that culture is this window on the world. But what they tend to forget is that culture is also the walls on the world.

PAUL ONGTOOGUK

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FACULTY INTENSIVE

Day Two

We began the second day with another period of quiet time, followed by a short debriefing session. How was everyone doing? Was there anything from the previous day that needed to be addressed?

Libby summarized the responses to the CIQs from the day before. Participants noted many moments of deep engagement, particularly during the storytelling and the times of silence and reflection, and expressed an appreciation for the emphasis on process instead of outcomes. They also asked some really good questions:

- How do you bring materials about Alaska Natives into the classroom without offending anyone?
- How do you apply the idea of place-based learning and the natural world into social science classes?
- Can hopelessly linear, phonetic, abstract thinkers transform or shape-shift into more embodied storytellers?
- What about people like me with bad memories who take notes to help me remember?
- Is there a conflict between stating that we are all equal and giving deference to the knowledge and status of Elders?

Sample Agenda

Silence

Alaska Native Issues in Higher
Education

Culturally Responsive Teaching
and Curricula

Visual Learning Exercise

Conversation on Storytelling,
Direct and Indirect Learning

Small Group Reflection

Group Work

Critical Incident Questionnaire

We talked about these concerns for a short while, and Ilarion offered a few responses. “Get in touch with your feelings when you tell a story,” he suggested. “Develop your memory by exercising it more and more. And regarding Elders, we are all equal, but there are those with more life experience deserving of special attention. Eventually—hopefully—we too will become Elders.”

And then we had to move on. The goal for the second day was to consider our specific educational environments and what it might mean to *indigenize* them. By this we mean infusing indigenous values and perspectives into every aspect of higher education, including our teaching practices, research and assessment methodologies, scholarly theories, modes of discourse, conflict resolution strategies, architectural and budgetary choices, hiring practices, and more. We don’t mean incorporating small features of them into the status quo, nor do we necessarily mean replacing traditional Western approaches with indigenous

ones. We mean giving equal credence to and having the flexibility to draw from indigenous approaches as appropriate. Indigenizing education means that indigenous approaches are seen as normal, central, and useful, rather than archaic, exotic, alternative, or otherwise marginal.

In a single day we could only brush the surface of this deeply transformative goal. To help us introduce it, we were joined by three special guests:

- Paul Ongtooguk, assistant professor in UAA's College of Education, an advocate for Alaska Native education and students;
- Martha Gould-Lehe, founding member of the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School, who creates K-6 curricula around Alaska Native worldviews and lifeways; and
- Elsie Mather, Yup'ik Elder, leader of bi-lingual educational initiatives in Alaska, and well known for a seminal speech that describes what is lost when an oral culture is replaced by a culture based on the written word.

Throughout these first few days we also tried to model some of the indigenous ways of teaching and learning on our list of pedagogies. One day, for example, we showed a short film of Yup'ik women preparing salmon for the drying racks: a film without voice-over or narration, just the women, their knives, and the fish. We asked our participants what they could see, and predictably few picked up on the nuances of spacing and depth and angle that a Native learner would be expected to master. Watch again, we encouraged them. Pay closer attention. What else can you see and learn?

We had conversations about the various teaching strategies, and we worked together in our groups to discuss class applications. Libby guided us from one guest or activity to another. Ilarion translated Native ways into Western words. Oscar told a few stories and was a consistent presence in the room.

BACKGROUND

The Higher Education Context

For higher education options, Alaska has

- a statewide public university system (including the University of Alaska Anchorage, the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and the University of Alaska Southeast, each with extended campuses in many smaller communities throughout the state);
- a private liberal arts university (Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage);
- a tribal college (Ilisagvik College in Barrow);
- a number of faith-based, for profit, and/or career and technical colleges (Alaska Bible College, Wayland Baptist University, and Charter College among others); and
- branch campuses of universities from other states (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University).

There are examples of culturally sensitive and academically successful programs for Alaska Native students at many of these institutions and scattered throughout the state. UAA has a Native Student Services resource center, an Alaska Native Studies minor, and specific programs in science, engineering, nursing, and psychology that work especially hard to achieve high retention and graduation rates with their students. There is an entire building devoted to the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP), whose nationally recognized strategies include hands-on middle and high school outreach initiatives; rigorous summer bridging programs; networks of peer and professional mentors; and organized student cohorts that learn, study, and live with one other on campus.

Nevertheless, in spite of these and other fine examples, in general Alaska Native and American Indian peoples are both underrepresented and underserved by Alaska's higher education institutions. Alaska Native/American Indian people comprise almost 15% of the state's population and 25% of the K-12 population; however, in recent UAA tallies they were

- 12% of university students;
- 7% of university employees;
- 4% of university faculty; and
- 0% of university executives. *

Retention rates for UAA's Alaska Native students routinely run ten to fifteen percentage points below the university average. In spite of many recent efforts to improve the situation, roughly half of our Alaska Native students drop out within the first year. **

* 2011-12 Fact Book, University of Alaska Anchorage.

** Performance '12. University of Alaska Anchorage.

Challenges Experienced by Alaska's Native students

Culture shock. While increasing numbers of Alaska Native students are growing up in urban settings, many others have lived their whole lives in rural villages and communities in which they were embedded in an extended family. In the villages, everyone knows each other. People eat together, hunt and fish together, take steam baths together, attend church or engage in ceremony together, teach and learn together, dance and drum together, and drop in and hang out at each others' homes on a regular if not daily basis. The pace is more attuned to earth systems, there is a lot less talking and more listening and observing, and there are few, if any, roads to cross and little traffic to navigate. Students are surrounded by seasonal and weather cycles that dictate daily activities.

The university is a very different environment, and these students can be overwhelmed by the sheer number of strangers, the rapid pace, the urban environment, and the expectation that here they must work alone. Some will spend the first weeks vomiting up the unfamiliar campus foods and longing for foods they grew up on: fish, wild meat, seal oil, seaweed, and berries. Others will shed tears over having to complete every assignment in writing, a huge struggle for those raised in oral cultures. They are often lonely and homesick, isolated and overwhelmed. Tragically, some even commit suicide. Many choose to return home to a friendlier, more familiar community, where hunting, fishing, gathering, doing chores, and connecting with friends and family are the heart of the experience.

Academic preparation. As determined by the university's placement testing system, nearly three quarters of Alaska Native freshmen enter the university with a need for preparatory courses in reading, writing, mathematics, or some combination of the three. Contributing factors include the low incidence of Native teachers in rural schools, high turnover rates for non-Native teachers, and curricula that does not speak to issues of daily concern in the communities. Many students find it difficult to establish a sense of comfort in learning from outsiders who change from year to year. When they come to the university, based on a single test for which they may not have been prepared, even those who were top performers at home may be told to take up to two years of developmental and preparatory course work. That alone can make it hard to persist.

Internalized oppression. Social groups that are marginalized and subject to discrimination often come to internalize the oppressive attitudes and stereotypes held about them by more dominant groups. They can come to believe the stereotypes about themselves and/or other members of their group; hold oppressive opinions or act out oppressive behaviors toward members of their own or other oppressed groups; and/or act out on the basis of these negative beliefs through low academic performance, diminished aspirations, violence towards self or others, and other behaviors.

* According to Center for Alaska Education Policy data (Alexandra Hill), about 5% of teachers statewide are Alaska Native/American Indian. They are not, however, distributed equally across the state. There are some districts with fairly high percentages of Alaska Native/American Indian teachers (the highest percentages are 46% and 75% in two very small districts), while in other districts there are few to none. Anchorage School District, the state's largest, reports 2.7% of its teachers are Alaska Native or American Indian.

Like students from many other non-dominant cultural groups, Native students face negative stereotypes and prejudices about their peoples every day. They do not see themselves in their teachers' faces. They do not hear positive stories about themselves in classroom examples or find positive portrayals in many publications. They are often painfully aware of the negative perceptions about Native people in the culture at large, and all too often they internalize those perceptions, believing the things said about them must somehow be true. The effects range from anger (inner-directed, outer-directed, or both) to despair. Internalized oppression causes some to think they cannot do what white people can do and leads others to lifetimes of substance abuse and even suicide. These oppressive forces must be combatted if we want to see high levels of Native student success in our educational systems.

The Conflict of Success. Even academic success—i.e. graduating with a degree—can have enormous tradeoffs for some Alaska Native students and their families. When young people come from rural villages to attend university, they leave a huge hole at home. Able-bodied people are big assets in small communities with challenging natural environments and a year-round need to prepare wild foods for sustenance. When a student leaves for four years of college, the village Elders may have to get by without as much help chopping wood, gathering berries, harvesting fish, and clearing snow. Other community members may have to take up the slack. College attendance means that there is less contact between Elders and the younger generation and fewer opportunities to pass on language, customs, subsistence practices, important ceremonies, stories, and more. Some village young people are said to even “walk differently” when they return home, one of a multitude of changes that can impact the relationship between university students and the communities from which they come.

For many Alaska Native young people, success at the university level may mean never really going home again at all. Academic success, as currently defined within our institutions and economy, usually means earning a degree to get a job that only exists far from the home village. While Native communities and families often work hard to ensure that their young people succeed in the dominant culture by means of a good education, that success can further erode communities and cultures already struggling to survive. Clearly, these tensions can result in internal conflicts for both students and community members.

Successful UAA Programs

Native Student Services

UAA's Native Student Services provides a safe affirming space on campus in which Native and rural students can feel a sense of belonging and find support for academic excellence, career development, leadership skills, personal growth, transitioning into college, financial questions, and the attainment of scholastic and life goals. Here, students can meet new friends, study with their classmates, and interact with people who share similar experiences as indigenous peoples. The center offers student computers, tutors, workshops, guest speakers, cultural activities and events, peer mentors, Native student clubs, celebrations of student success and achievement, residence hall outreach, and more.

Alaska Native Studies minor

UAA's Alaska Native Studies department offers a minor that emphasizes the dynamic nature of Alaska Native cultures and the conflict between traditional Native values and those of the dominant Euro-American society. Core courses include classes in Alaska Native Perspectives and Cultural Knowledge of Alaska Native Elders. Students choose from additional courses on topics ranging from rural justice to Alaska Native politics, languages, music, history, and education.

Recruitment and Retention of Alaska Natives into Nursing (RRANN)/ Nursing Workforce Diversity Program

These programs recruit and mentor Alaska Native, American Indian, and other economically and educationally disadvantaged minority students in the nursing field. Support services include tutoring, peer group meetings, and student success facilitators. The two programs have helped more than a hundred Alaska Natives and scores of other disadvantaged students to graduate from the UAA School of Nursing. In 2006, UAA ranked seventh in the nation for Native American students earning bachelor degrees in health-related sciences.

Alaska Natives into Psychology (ANPsych)

A collaborative program between UAA and the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), ANPsych is designed to increase the number of Alaska Native and American Indian psychologists and behavioral health professionals. The program offers potlucks, tutoring/ study hours, and other activities.

Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP™)

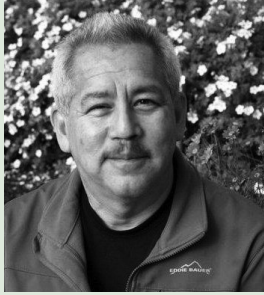
The award-winning ANSEP program features hands-on middle and high school outreach initiatives, rigorous summer bridging programs, focused academic learning communities, organized student cohorts, networks of peer and professional mentors, community-based learning, professional internships, and undergraduate and graduate research projects. Each component is based on the fundamental Native value of working together in a community, with collaboration at every level. At this writing, ANSEP boasts over one thousand Alaska Native students and alumni from ninety-five rural communities and more than one hundred partnerships with private corporations, philanthropic organizations, state and federal agencies, universities, high schools, and middle schools.

Clinical Community Doctoral Program in Psychology

UAA and UAF offer a collaborative Ph.D. program in Clinical Community Psychology that integrates clinical, community, and cultural psychology with a focus on rural indigenous issues. The program combines the spirit of clinical and community psychology with a solid grounding in the cultural context of affected stakeholders and promotes contextually-grounded and culturally appropriate research, evaluation, preventions, clinical services, community work, and social action.

Alaska Native Oratory Society

The Alaska Native Oratory Society is both a learning community and a series of speaking events that help high school and university students develop their oratory skills in the style of specific Alaska Native or American Indian cultural groups. Students develop and deliver speeches on issues related to Alaska Native concerns; reenact important speeches in the words and manner of historical Native orators and leaders; tell traditional stories; and/or give talks in their traditional Native languages. The experience brings students back to their communities as they ask family members and Elders for assistance, guidance, and teaching to learn how to speak in the styles important in their communities and regions. Many participants have gone on to become leaders themselves, furthering their involvement with such Native issues as promoting cultural awareness, encouraging language acquisition and competency, leading healthy lives, and surviving the death of a loved one by suicide.



Paul Ongtooguk is one of Tommy Ongtooguk's sons, an Inupiaq from Northwest Alaska, and an Assistant Professor of Education at UAA. With degrees in religion and philosophy, history and education, he has worked as a middle and high school teacher, curriculum developer, researcher, and professor. He has also been involved in tribal government, co-founded an online resource for Alaska Native educational materials (Alaskool.org), and is a long-term advocate for Alaska Native education.

Remarks on Alaska Native Education

Paul Ongtooguk

I'm Paul Ongtooguk, I'm Inupiaq, and I graduated from high school in Nome, in Northwestern Alaska.

My father was Tommy Ongtooguk; he was born in the Inupiaq village of Teller and grew up in Nome and Wales. His father was from Little Diomed Island, in the middle of the Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia. His mother was also from Wales.

My mother was Irish. I must have been just a child when she told me about how she came to Alaska. In my mom's generation, she said, women basically had four choices. They could become a wife, a secretary, an elementary teacher, or a nurse. She went with a nurse. In her version of joining the French Foreign Legion, she joined the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1940s and became a contract nurse in White Mountain, Alaska. She met my dad at the White Mountain Industrial Store, where he was working as a maintenance person.

Nome was racially segregated at that time, both socially and legally. There were areas where the Eskimos could rent property and other areas where they couldn't. They had a curfew and segregated sections in restaurants and the movie house. We even had our own Rosa Parks in the person of Alberta Schenk, who got herself arrested for sitting in the white section of the movie house.

The difference between segregation south of the Mason-Dixon line and segregation in the Territory of Alaska was in how they treated women. A lot of white men had come to Alaska, but not nearly as many white women. So the rules of racial segregation were set up to benefit the white men. A Native woman could be escorted into the white section of the community as long as she was of "civilized conduct" and in the company of a white male. By civilized they meant that Native women had to wear Western style clothing, eat Western style foods, and practice the Christian religion. They could not speak a Native language, participate in public Native events (potlatches, community dances, traditional dances and so on), or associate more than "necessary" with the Native community. There was actually a court case involving "mixed-breed" children in Sitka in which these criteria were explicitly expressed. It's no wonder that the overwhelming majority of cross-cultural marriages in those years were between white men and Native women. The rules favored it that way.

But, according to Joe Upicksoun*, when my father and mother got together it was the first time a Native man and a white woman tried to buck the segregation rules in Nome. They tried to do it like a sponsorship, with my dad all dressed up in Western clothes. But the town marshal threatened to arrest him, saying it would insult the white civilization if he allowed them to be together there. They were married in California because that's the only place it could happen.

So he joined the Alaska Territorial Guard, but that didn't make any difference. He joined the Army, became a buck sergeant, came back in uniform; that made no difference either. It didn't help that the commanding officer for Alaska, General Simon Bolivar Buckner, was an overt southern racist. In order to reduce racial mixing, Buckner relocated black soldiers to isolated areas working on the Alaska highway and for a time banned Native women from participating in USO activities, a rule later overturned by advocacy from the Alaska Native Sisterhood and other Alaska Native people.

My dad was very proud of his physical fitness. He did his entire training with a Browning Automatic Rifle because it was the heaviest rifle they had: twenty-three pounds, empty. He won the physical award from his battalion at the Non-Commissioned Officers school, and he took

special pride in coming in first while carrying that additional weight. But as he stood in line with all the others to receive their awards, he had to watch Bruckner give awards to the white soldiers and walk past the Native contingency without even a glance.

I didn't just wander into my role as an advocate for Alaska Native issues in education; I was essentially drafted into it.

When I went through my dad's things after he died, I found his laborer's slip from the Alaska Gold Company. It said "Eskimo, half pay." That's how it worked: whatever the white man earned, the Native got half pay. If you think

about that in terms of social choices, you can probably see how it might affect the Native man's desirability as a prospective life partner. He's going to be doing the same work for half the pay.

Also, you may notice there were very few Alaska Natives involved in business during the territorial era. There were some, but far fewer than you might imagine. The story I got when I was growing up is that "Natives don't run businesses because they're too lazy." And that made no sense to me, because my uncle, who was old, ancient (in his 50's maybe!), he could work me into the ground when we were out at fish camp. He wasn't lazy: far from it. It was only many years later, after studying history, economics, and politics, that I came to see what was really going on. Half pay, a lack of surplus capital, and social ostracism by the white community are not ideal conditions under which to start or build a business.

I didn't just wander into my role as an advocate for Alaska Native issues in education; I was essentially drafted into it. I always wondered how things came about, and I never seemed to get satisfactory answers. Like the question about Alaska Natives in business, I couldn't even ask it in school because people were just uncomfortable with it. Nome was majority Alaska Native; at school we were about half to two-thirds Alaska Native; but there was basically nothing about Alaska Native people or ways in the curriculum.

The one exception was a wonderful ivory carver who taught a carving class. He wasn't a "real" teacher, but an artist whose work was in demand all over Europe, whose pieces were spoken for before he ever finished carving them, and who was booked for the rest of his life in

* A leader in the Alaska Native land claims movement

terms of ivory carving. So why did he do it? He just wanted to help create a safe, positive place for Alaska Native students. Obviously, if he took me into his ivory carving class, it wasn't talent he was looking for. I spent a whole semester doing this one little owl.

When I graduated in 1975, a lot of things were happening. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) had been signed in 1971, and Alaska Native corporations were starting to wrestle with their new assets, roles, and responsibilities. The Marine Mammals Protection Act allowed Alaska Natives to continue to use and have marine mammals as a part of our lives. Native non-profit corporations were contracting to take over Native health care delivery. There was a great deal of separatism about it, but it was amazing. All these transformations were happening. And yet nothing in the schools I was going to helped us to figure out any of it. We weren't getting anything to help us try to understand these challenges. And we kept thinking, "Well, next year. We'll get the Alaska Native stuff next year." But eventually you graduate, and it never happened.

One of the reasons they gave us for not learning about Alaska Native people and ways of life is there aren't any books about them. I remember one teacher saying to me, "Well, we might teach about you if there was anything written about you." When I eventually went to the University of Washington, I remember asking a librarian to show me the Alaska Native books. I thought, "Well, I'll read those, whatever they are." I imagined there'd be a few of them, maybe half a shelf or something.

The librarian looked at me the way she probably looked at all undergraduate idiots. She gave me a pencil with no eraser and those gloves you were supposed to wear when handling old books, and she took me into the graduate library under this neo-gothic dome and pointed. We were in a room of about 800 square feet, and she said, "You can start here." And I said, "Where?" And she said, "Oh, pretty much all of this." And it was overwhelming. It was stunning. Shocking.

They had these steps for getting up on the racks, and I remember sitting on one and staring at these things for the longest time. It took my breath away. At first I felt numb, and then I felt anger. That argument that the reason they didn't teach about us was we weren't in the books? Well, it turned out there were probably more anthropologists per capita for Alaska Natives than for any other people on the planet. We've got explorers, missionaries, teachers...and even a few Alaska Natives had been writing.

That experience shaped the rest of my life, as I went on to try and figure out the disengagement between this enormous amount of literature about us and our complete invisibility in Alaska's school systems, even now.

Some Alaska Natives are third generation college graduates. Honesty forces me to concede that most of them seem to be Tlingits. And a lot of them are Stanford grads. So we have some amazingly successful Alaska Native students. But overall, we're not doing very well. And given that we've essentially used the same structure for the last hundred years, we might say this particular model is not as successful as we need it to be.

It seems like the ones who are least concerned with Alaska Native student success tend to be social conservatives. So I like to use the conservative argument for why you'd want to pay more attention to Alaska Native education: self-interest. Alaska Native people are likely to stay in Alaska their whole lives. If, for example, we stay twice as long other people, then the educational investment matters twice as much to the economy of Alaska, right? We are going to be part of the workforce longer—or not part of the workforce—and part of the citizenry in any case. So

wouldn't it be to everyone's benefit if we were part of it in a more constructive way than we are now?

With forty four million acres, Alaska Native people are also the largest private land-owners in Alaska. Wouldn't it be nice if we were well informed about this? It is in Alaska's interest that we have well-informed Alaska Natives about these important issues for the next generation.

These are some of the things I think about regarding Alaska Native education. And I try to help my students see and ask these questions themselves. I will often be the first person to introduce Alaska Native students to an Alaska Native author. You can tell how surprised they are. They didn't know the book existed, never thought about it, didn't know enough to raise the question of Native authors, didn't even have the idea of it. It's breathtaking. They usually go through an initial reaction of embarrassment, a sense that they should have known about this before. But no, I tell them, the embarrassment isn't yours. If you're eighteen years old and you show up on the university's doorstep without having learned about Alaska Native histories and cultures and values, it's not your fault. If you do know something about this, you probably learned it in spite of your education.

Seeing indigenous issues and cultures as serious scholarly areas that should be integrated fully into all disciplines at the university is only going to really happen when there's a core of cooperative enterprise between Natives and non-Natives that enriches all of us. And we should be able to go to the university for this broadening of perspective.

You can graduate from this university with a bachelor's degree in business and never take a course about Alaska Native corporations, profit or non-profit. You can get a degree in public policy without taking a single class that has anything to do with Alaska Native people or issues. People think of these topics as distractions from their disciplines rather than areas of interest or research that could help them create their careers, enhance their professions, make a unique contribution. Seeing indigenous issues and cultures as serious scholarly areas that should be integrated fully into all disciplines at the university is only going to really happen when there's a core of cooperative enterprise between Natives and non-Natives that enriches all of us. And we should be able to go to the university for this broadening of perspective.

I think it is in our self interest as a university to integrate Alaska Native issues across the curriculum in a natural way. I was fielding questions after giving a presentation recently. The audience, which included a state senator and a couple of House representatives, was questioning the value of taxpayer dollars going into the university, wanting to know, "What are we getting out of it?" My answer is that, if all we're doing is what they're doing in Iowa, then I don't know. Why spend all this money to call our institution the University of Alaska if Alaska is just a place name rather than an intellectual statement of purpose?

I don't mean that we should get rid of Shakespeare or Adam Smith, but wouldn't it be nice if University of Alaska graduates were particularly well-informed about how their professions and workplaces relate to Alaska, the place where most of them will live and work? Some students might say they aren't particularly interested in Alaska; they are just taking classes on the way to their own promised land of Austin, Texas or St. Paul, Minnesota or wherever. My response is that about 80% of the funds that are underwriting this class are coming from the state of Alaska.

We're more than happy to do our part for the fate of humanity and educate people from Austin, Texas—obviously, people in Texas need further education.* So we'll do our part. But our primary focus should be preparing people who will live and work here, getting them excited about this unique place, people, heritage, culture, organization, traditions.

I was a visiting professor at Dartmouth recently, and one of the things that struck me was the Native American students who come from places where they're not part of the cycle of life. That connection to the cycle was shattered in their great-grandparents' time, when they were pushed onto these little remnants of their original homelands. The cycle of life is mostly a memory now, although a powerful one. There are aspects of it that continue still, whatever they can hold onto. But most of it is just...gone.

For Alaska's Native peoples, we still have societies, we're still here, and we're trying to make it work, sometimes in spite of this place rather than in cooperation with it. Once we get this right, we're going to look back and wonder why it took us so long.

* Texas jokes have long been a staple of Alaskan humor.



Martha Gould-Lehe is Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan of the Caribou People Clan and Upper Mountain People. She was born in a cabin in Medfra, a small rural trading post on the banks of the Kuskokwim River. Her father ran a trap line in the winter months and worked as a miner during the summers. Martha and her siblings spent their early childhoods hunting, trapping, and living a rural Alaska lifestyle. She earned a B.Ed. from UAA in 1988 and a M.Ed. from the University of Kansas in 1993, focusing her studies on developing math and science curriculum for Native American students. She has over twenty-five years of experience teaching in the Alaskan school systems and is a founding member of the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School.

Teaching Native Culture and Values in the K-6 Curriculum

Martha Gould-Lehe

Through eighteen years of teaching in the Anchorage School District, my concerns for the Alaska Native students sitting in those classrooms had become a heavy weight. I saw bright young people doubting their own worth. I saw teachers passing them over, not because they didn't care but because they couldn't relate to the students' ways of being in the classroom. Because of the disconnect, I saw many Alaska Native students sitting in silence rather than responding to classmates or teachers.

Many of the Native students were "Anchorage-ites" or urban Natives. They had never been to their ancestral village(s), and they were not being taught traditional beliefs, values, stories, or ways of seeing the world. In all likelihood, their parents were also urban Natives. This saddened me as I still have memories of Elders and of living in the Bush. These students needed the grounding that comes only from a secure sense of their own identities – knowing who they are down deep inside. They needed to stand on two legs: one in their own culture and the other in the world.

I knew I would retire in a few years and I was afraid I'd be leaving the District a worse place for Native students than it was when I came in. When I first started teaching, there was room in the curriculum for creativity and infusions of culture. However, in the era of high stakes testing and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), I was afraid that culture would be neglected all together. It bothered me so much that I spearheaded the effort to create a whole new kind of school, one in which Alaska Native students would be honored and taught their cultures, where they could display their intellectual and spiritual prowess, where they could shine.

Perhaps ironically, in the effort to equalize educational opportunities NCLB was actually more ally than foe. For the first time, many educators were being forced to address problems in the education of minority students and indigenous students in particular. Suddenly, we counted.

We carried some weight with the school board and district administrators when we argued for a Native charter school. They weren't sure how to respond, and they had a myriad of concerns about letting a Native charter school become an actuality. But they also held the trump card of revoking the charter if the school failed to perform. All we wanted was a chance to show what Native students were capable of doing. We got that chance.

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School is now in its fifth year. Each school year is organized around four quarterly themes:

- Living in Place (geography, local resources, climate);
- Language and Communication (base 20 number systems, spoken indigenous languages, emphasis on non-verbal communication styles);
- Culture and Expression (art, dance, song, celebrations, creativity); and
- Tribe and Community (values, what it means to be a contributing member of a community).

We start each day in a community setting: an all-school assembly in which we greet the day together. We say the pledge of allegiance in English and in Yup'ik. On Mondays, we have a morning message delivered by an Elder. On other days, sixth and seventh grade students lead us into the day.

Listening to an Elder every week gives students a real sense of what it means to be Native. The Elders share examples from their lives of challenges, successes, dreams, and faith. They exhort the children to reach for the stars. It is a great honor to have an Elder present, and for students living in town these Mondays may be their only chance. Experiences like that cannot be quantified by numerical data, but they are profound nonetheless.

Students are taught and expected to practice certain Guiding Native Values. We teach these guiding values through curriculum modules such as "Building a Smoke House," which is part of the Math in a Cultural Context curriculum.*

Smoke houses are small buildings in which fish or meats are cured by smoke, a central activity in traditional life. The students don't build an actual smoke house, but they go through learning activities that simulate the traditional considerations and techniques of building one. In one activity, students were asked to make a square without using a ruler. They worked in groups, brainstorming. Eventually, a student constructed a right angle using a page from a book. This caught on quickly, and squares began to appear in all groups. In another activity, students used a piece of string to construct a rectangle on the floor. They discover the diagonals need to be equal, so if they divide their length in half, they have the center of the rectangle.

"The People were ingenious in their quest for survival," I told them; "they determined length by using things like strips of hide, woven grass, etc. We are using string because we have it, just as they would do."

I reminded them that Inupiaq and Aleut cultures do not have trees. In thinking about how to build a smokehouse in this situation, suddenly they see how incredibly valuable driftwood can be. "Each spring, as the ice goes out of the Kuskokwim River," I told them, "large trees would be floating down. The people would go out and bring many of these trees to shore. But others they let pass by, so their relatives on the coast could have some too."

We envisioned it as a whole new kind of school, one in which Alaska Native students would be honored and taught their cultures, where could display their intellectual and spiritual prowess, where they could shine.

* Available from the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Guiding Native Values

Respect for Elders

Honor for ancestors

Respect for family, self, and others

Preservation and sharing of traditional
ways of knowing

Responsibility, hard work, and endurance

Compassion, dignity, and humility

Humor, cooperation, and caring

Knowledge of and respect for nature

Knowledge of language

Wisdom

Self-sufficiency

The discussions grow excited as students realize their Alaska Native ancestors have always made measurements, using what was available and adapting it to their particular needs. They also realize their ancestors harvested, hunted, and trapped based upon individual family needs. One family might have a huge smoke house as they put up fish for grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. Another family might be attending to a smaller circle of relations. Each family had its own unique situation to consider, and things like smoke houses were constructed accordingly.

Through a series of activities like these, students learn basic math principles and to value their heritage at the same time. Although there were considerable difficulties and several early failures, eventually they wrestled their way through the exercise. In the process, they discovered and grew to

appreciate many traditional values and came away with a deep sense of gratitude for those who came before them. They also gained new insight into and appreciation for what many, especially in urban Alaska, take for granted: the dry and smoked salmon we love so much.

Higher education institutions—particularly those in teacher preparation courses and programs—need to understand and address the learning styles of Alaska Native populations. As a few short examples, Alaska Native students

- tend to think holistically and in pictures (effective lessons have a heavy emphasis on visual input and movement);
- may need to slow down and even interrupt the dissemination of information to clarify their thinking (actually a good sign, because they only interrupt when they are comfortable and engaged);
- like collaborating with each other and with the teacher;
- need to feel valued;
- and will respond only to relationships (most will not work to please a teacher if they feel the teacher does not value them).

As the teacher, you are the single most important factor in creating an atmosphere in which Native students can and will thrive. If I could give you some advice, I'd tell you to organize more lessons around stories. Develop incisive questions that invite students to think deeply about the issues presented in the stories and how they apply to their lives and relationships. Make stories out of every kind of lesson you wish to convey.

Alaska Native students and their families will deeply appreciate the chance to learn about or maintain a connection with their cultures. You have to do much more than pick up your dry teaching manuals if you expect to actively engage minority students, including Alaska Native learners. And don't be afraid to ask parents and relatives in to share the culture. When pride is shown, respect is given, and understanding emerges.

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Reflection

What values do your classroom environments reflect? How might you change your practice to reflect indigenous values of humility, cooperation, deep learning, and respect for the natural world?



Elsie Mather is a Yup'ik Elder who has worked to promote bilingual education and literacy in the Yup'ik region for over thirty years. She was born and raised in Kwigillingok, a tiny village in Southwestern Alaska. She co-authored the first standardized Yup'ik Eskimo Orthography, and her transcriptions and translations of Yup'ik oral narratives have appeared in numerous journals and books, including *Coming to Light*, *When our Words Return*, and *Native American Oral Traditions*. Her extensive interviews with contemporary Elders and documentation of Yup'ik ceremonial traditions culminated in the publication of *Cauyarnariug (It's Time for Drumming)*, the first full-length original book in the Yup'ik language. She speaks knowledgeably and eloquently of her ambivalence about the ascendancy of written over oral cultures.

The Elders Say

Elsie Mather, Oscar Kawagley, and Ilarion Merculieff

To our surprise and delight, Yup'ik Elder Elsie Mather joined the group on Tuesday. Although she had been invited much earlier, we had not heard back from her and had assumed that meant she was unavailable. But she found us and joined us on an informal basis for two days, chatting about storytelling, the role of language in Native education, and the “necessary monster of literacy.” Although she made no formal presentations to the group, we wanted to share a few of her thoughts as expressed in her essay “With a Vision Beyond Our Immediate Needs: Oral Traditions in an Age of Literacy.” Her words appear in plain text below. Our paraphrases appear in italics.

Elsie

Today we are all aware that learning was different in the past. Our classrooms were our homes, our community houses, and the land around us. Our Elders guided us from the time we were little and throughout the rest of our lives. Now, for many of us, those tight, close-knit families are no more, and much of our education takes place in the world of books.

Learning through oral traditions requires close contact with Elders. Learning through books puts distance between teachers and learners. There is no eye contact, no tone of voice to infuse a particular meaning, no raised eyebrows or mischievous glances, no giggles or gasps, no shared environment.

We are living in an age of literacy. We write everything down, and we expect everyone to be able to read. Our message is, “If you can't read, your chance of succeeding (however we

interpret success) is zilch.” In a way, it’s sad that we are becoming so dependent on reading for information. You and a book—you can closet yourself anywhere and learn (or not learn), depending on the quality of your reading material. You can be thousands of miles away from your source of information. When you have that book, it doesn’t matter where your learning takes places. We now have village libraries and we expect our students to use these facilities. So we have to come to terms with this monster that is upon us—this dependency on books. I call it a monster because of the distance it puts between us and our sources. Nevertheless, it is a necessary monster, and we have to deal with it. In the past, we learned by word of mouth as we interacted with each other.

Books can be wrong, especially if they are written about Native peoples by outsiders. Instead of learning from Elders, Native youth pick up inaccuracies about their cultures from books written by outsiders. They absorb this inaccurate information as truth and then pass it along.

We can be influenced by what we read. A good part of our education now comes through reading. It scares me to think of the consequences of learning through reading because, for one thing, we can be misinformed. We can be misled about our own culture also. Or people outside our culture can receive the wrong information about us. We are well aware of literature that has been written by outsiders who portray us in very unflattering ways. ... Let us be aware that we are writing down our history not only for our children but also for the world.... We can never really erase all that has been written about us, but we can do something about it now.

Learning through storytelling and oral traditions serves an important purpose in maintaining Yup’ik cultural identity.

The gap that has developed between our Elders and our young people may be why it is so hard to teach this next generation about our values. They are often not around their grandparents enough.

Both kinds of learning—through oral traditions and books—are important for Native people today. It is important to hold the Elders close and to listen carefully to their stories because the lessons they impart must be learned and experienced over a lifetime. Relational learning (the kind done within the context of one’s human and natural communities) teaches different lessons than book learning. We need them both to survive.

Oscar

My grandfather was a shaman. I used to ask him some questions now and then, and once in a while he’d give me a direct answer. But there were other times when I almost forgot what the question was! He’d be sitting on the riverbank, sitting there on a log, and I didn’t realize he was giving me an answer!

I experienced this also in Akiak. I was sitting with a group of people, of Elders, and I got some questions. Younger people would try to get me to give an answer real quick, whereas the Elders

would stay very quiet. If I happened to be at their home and they offered me a cup of coffee or tea, and again without realizing I was getting an answer, I'd all of a sudden find, after I left, that he'd answered my question.

We don't ask direct questions. I learned that. You kind of try to sneak in whatever you want to know. I learned more out on the riverbank or sitting in the post office where they have little benches where people gather. I learned more listening to them, directing an innocuous question now and then and trying to guide them to an area that I wanted to know something about. That's kind of manipulating, eh? But when you ask a direct question, sometimes you get an answer and sometimes you don't. And you get the answer in the most indirect way and when you least expect it.

Elsie

I remember asking an Elder something like where do the dead people go when they die? And they would never answer directly. They would tell a story.

Ilarion

When you ask someone a direct question, it puts the person on the spot. It's disrespectful, and sometimes it's like a challenge. It also shows that the person is strictly in their head, because they have a singular kind of question, narrowly focused.

The nature of the question directs the response you get. In Western society we are taught to ask questions about anything and everything: How do you do this? How do you do that? What does this mean? When and where do these fish spawn? Specific questions demand specific answers: these fish spawn in this river in this month. The narrower the focus of the question, the narrower the response is going to be.

Alaska Native knowledge is contextualized. Fish spawn when the river temperature and water volume are just right. They don't spawn when there is a lot of silt in the water. The water is not flowing well right now because the snow pack melted early this year and brought a lot of silt with it. There are a lot more beaver dams along this river than we used to see. Beaver dams slow the flow further, causing the water to drop even more silt in some spawning areas. We see more lesions on the fish, and the fish flesh is discolored and has a funny texture.

Indirectness contextualizes the questions and creates teaching and storytelling opportunities that directness doesn't allow. It also gives the Elders, gatherers, hunters, and fishers wider latitude in how they respond.

Imagine I'm watching an adult preparing fish for the drying rack. I might notice that some cuts are different from other cuts, and I might intuitively understand that the cuts have something to do with relationships. How do I ask an Elder about that? I'll say something like, "Yeah, those are

good cuts. I always think about how I'd make a story about those cuts" And leave it at that. The Elder will choose to answer or not. The answer may not come immediately, but when it comes, it's usually in a story.

Stories allow the teller to express whatever is most important and give listeners the latitude to take away whatever they are able to see or learn. Each person sees and learns different things from the same story. The story does not dictate the lesson to be learned; rather it creates the opportunity to learn whatever the individual is capable of learning. If I give you a direct answer, there's no freedom. I am acting as the authority, the expert. But in the relationship between real human beings there is no one-upmanship. I am not the answer. I don't know any more than you do. The only difference between us is our experience and how we use our inherent intelligence as real human beings.

When I talk here with some of the professors or a patriarchal authority figure, I get disempowered. The Elders don't do that. They practice a system of self-empowerment that lets me figure it out on my own.

Here's a true story. In a village in Kodiak there were these two women who hated each other. Tired of the impact of them avoiding each other in such a small community, the Elder called in a couple of young people and said, "I want you to spread the rumor that Sarah is saying that Martha is the best cook in town." And the young people spread the rumor around.

And then the Elder called the young people back in and said, "I also want you to spread the rumor that Martha says Sarah is the better basket weaver." So the rumors spread around the whole village. And gradually Martha and Sarah were able to interact and then mend the rift.

What a beautiful and indirect way of resolving a conflict!

Affirmation and Respect

Ilarion Merculieff

It is the way of the real human being to do nothing that would harm a child's spirit, will, or sense of self. From the time I was about six years old, I was given more freedom than most children get today, including the freedom to walk anywhere I wanted to on the island. Whenever I passed an adult, I would hear "*aang laakaiyaax, exumnaakotxtxin*. Hello young boy. You are good." I was never rejected, never judged, never criticized, always and only positively affirmed by everyone in my village nearly every day of my entire childhood.

Can you imagine what that's like, how beautiful that is? To be affirmed every day by every adult in the whole village? I could walk into anybody's house, day or night, and always be welcomed. "Come inside," they would tell me. "Sit down. Eat." Always. Always.

I was never scolded, not even when I did something that was not correct.

In my village on St. Paul Island, there was a small canteen owned by the Aleut traditional government. In that canteen was a plastic model airplane. I was seven years old, and I wanted that airplane very much, so one day I stole twenty dollars from my grandfather and went off to buy it.

As I stood at the counter to pay for the plane, my aunt Sophie stood behind me, watching. Aunt Sophie was a wise and humble woman who loved everyone and had one of the biggest hearts I knew. But twenty dollars was a lot of money at that time, and she knew no little boy would legitimately have so much to spend. As I turned around, I saw her. We greeted each other politely. We stepped outside, together. And then she asked me, in a very kind and gentle voice, where I got the money to buy the plane.

I told her the truth. "I stole it from my Papa," I said.

She made no comment, no judgment, no chastisement. She was silent for a few moments. She understood that this was a teachable moment. She would let me make the decision.

"What do you think you should do about it?" she asked.

"I should take the money back and tell my Papa that I stole it," I said, feeling ashamed. It was not right what I had done, and I knew it.

"*Maaxoon*," she responded. Let it be, or let it be so.

I found my grandfather in his bedroom at home, and I stood there in the doorway, red-faced and squirming. "I stole \$20 from you, Papa," I said timidly. "And here it is."

He took a few eternal seconds to ponder. Finally, he said, "*Exumnaakoxtxin Laakaiyaax*. You did good, boy." He got up from his tiny card table and took out three candied orange slices and gave them to me. And that was all that was ever said.

In this way, I learned to believe in myself and to take responsibility for myself and for my actions. I never stole anything again.

A white woman of my acquaintance recently asked me, "In a culture where you always affirm everybody, never criticize, and rarely give direct instruction, how do you correct bad or dangerous behaviors? How do you teach or enforce morality? How do you harmonize human relationships so everyone can get along?"

The answers are many and varied, but most of them involve Elders and indirect styles of communication. For example, Elders in Southwest Alaska would gather at the men's house to steam and tell stories. If a young man was causing disruption to the harmony of the village or group, they would invite the young man to join them and listen to Elder stories. Knowing that no individual likes to be singled out, the Elders would tell a story about something similar that had been done by someone else. When that person acted in this way it brought on these consequences. The story would be aimed at the individual causing the disruption, but no one would say that directly. Having listened to the story, the individual would take it in and act accordingly.

Another time, the Elders did something unprecedented: they took over an election for prime chief in the region. There were seven candidates, but the two most popular ones were at each other's throats (figuratively speaking). Council and board meetings were disrupted, and people were afraid of being identified with one side or the other. At the appointed time and place for the election, the Elders explained that there would be two rules. The first was that each candidate would get to speak about one other candidate, with the Elders deciding who spoke about whom. The second rule was that the candidates would speak only about the true good things they noted in each other. The candidate with the most good to tell about another would be the winner. Of course, the Elders paired the two most contentious candidates to speak about each other. The first one got up and said that he knew the other one was a good hunter, that he taught his kids properly, and that he shared his catch with others. The second one made similar observations about the first. As the two men hugged each other afterward, there was not a dry eye in the place. The regional disharmony evaporated that afternoon.

Alaska is extremely fortunate to still have people acknowledged as true Elders, people who have life wisdom and who are also tradition-bearers. Yup'ik Elders are one such group. Because their villages were so remote, many of them can still remember when the first outsiders came into their world.

These Yup'ik Elders tell us that today we are living in an "inside-out" society in which we have reversed all the laws for living. We teach our children how to make a living; we don't teach them how to live. Today the mind tells the heart what to do, whereas in our traditional cultures the heart leads and guides the mind. And, before, we had one foot in life and one foot in death; we contemplated the mystery of death in order to learn how to live. Today we contemplate the mystery of life; that's all. We try to avoid even thinking about death, let alone letting it teach us how to live.

Consider most of today's science and philosophy. We're taking apart DNA strands in order to understand what life is all about. But the Elders tell us it's actually reversed. You can't discover what life is all about by contemplating life. You have to contemplate death. Ultimately, it's not about knowledge alone, but knowledge and wisdom together. Elders say that knowledge without wisdom is useless.

These teachings seem to be very hard for people in Western cultures to understand. Western culture teaches that the core of human intelligence is located in the brain. Traditional cultures tell us it's located in the entire being, including the brain, the body, and the heart. We act more authentically and fully when we utilize all our gifts and senses. Combined, these gifts and senses "see" more than if we just used our brains. We need them all in order to become real human beings with a deep sense of connectedness to All That Is.



Reflection

Some people criticize the phrase “indigenizing education” because it implies adding something to the status quo. They prefer the term “decolonizing” as a more accurate reflection of the task: displacing Western paradigms from the reified position they hold in our minds and institutions and replacing them with a perspective that reflects the multiplicity of worldviews and ways of the human community.

What practical implications arise from these word choices?