The depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long habitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for a satisfying and sustainable way to live on this planet.

ANGAYUQAQ OSCAR KAWAGLEY

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FACULTY INTENSIVE

Day Five

Friday was a day for sharing. All week long, the Faculty Fellows had been listening very hard to a lot of very challenging material. This would be their day to speak and share with one another where these new perspectives had taken them.

Again, we began with a period of silence. By now, most of us were actively enjoying this time, being together in respectful community and gathering our thoughts in peace.

Next came the group reports, in which participants shared their ideas for how to use indigenous pedagogies and/or address Native-related difficult dialogues in their own classrooms. One group told a story, illustrated with original artwork by a member's wife. Another performed a simulated on-line talking circle. There was a short dance that got everyone laughing and clapping. Even the ideas for difficult courses seemed do-able. Participants were obviously creatively engaged. It was clear they had enjoyed working together on these ideas.

Sample Agenda

Silence

Group Assignment Reports

Talking Circles

Assessment Meetings

Post-testing

Celebration

As the last speaker from the last group fell silent, Ilarion congratulated them on how much they had grasped in such a short time. "I am blown away," he said. "You obviously see the value of working in groups, and you've got the principle of self-empowerment. Native peoples don't do things by rote and it's not uni-directional. It's a mutual learning experience."

Gathering our chairs closer together, we held a modified talking circle. This was a last chance to check in with everyone, to surface any questions or comments that arose, and to talk about what kinds of support might be useful as we headed into the following academic year. One person—a long-time, tenured faculty member—said she had learned more about Alaska Native peoples and cultures in a single week than in the previous twenty years of living in the state. Another agreed. "This has been a life-changing intensive…the experience will affect not only my teaching, but also my parenting and my citizenship."

"The coolest thing going forward," said a third, "is knowing I'm not alone in this. I feel like we've got each other's backs."

At last, we celebrated. In spite of all its limitations, the intensive had managed to do three critical things. First, it existed. Our program was, in fact, designed and run by Alaska Native educators, thinkers, and Elders. Second, it had had a significant impact. We had introduced Alaska Native teaching and learning methodologies to a receptive group of faculty participants, in many cases changing their way of thinking about the educational process itself. And third, at least for one day, our teaching and learning took place out of doors, on Dena'ina tribal lands, and in the presence of Elders. All three of these accomplishments broke a bit of new ground for higher education in Alaska.

"When I think about what we've learned this week," said Ilarion, "it's amazing how much you all picked up. I give you all credit for your dedication. For me personally, it's been an unusual experience as well. I've never—in my professional career or my life—had the opportunity to spend an entire week with non-Native people who have voluntarily chosen to learn more about Alaska Native ways of knowing and learning. This is a first for me. Thank you."

GROUP REPORTS
An Octopus in Every Lesson

Group presentations and follow-up discussions took up most of the morning. We had asked people to develop ideas for their toughest courses, and a couple of the groups actually did that. Others shared more loosely the range of ideas they had generated for courses or concerns that many of them held in common.

Courtesy of Tania Vincent and David Scheel

Storytelling…and More

"It has long been my contention," said David Scheel (Marine Biology and Environmental Science), "that there ought to be an octopus in every lesson. I believe this is an Aleut story. It's not my story; it belongs to the culture. It was published by an anthropologist in 1910, so I can't vouch for its accuracy. But this is the way it was told when I first encountered it, as close as I can remember. I've had a number of discussions with Elders about whether I'm allowed to tell it, and the answer has been, 'When you put some of yourself in it, you can tell it.' So these images were drawn by my wife, with some inspiration from me, to illustrate the story." He gestured to the illustrations on the screen behind him.

> *So an Aleut, he was a hunter, and he went out to hunt sea otters. And he never got any sea otters. He would go out and he would come back, and he'd go out again and not get any sea otters. Finally one day as he was returning from a hunt without getting any sea otters, a giant octopus swam up alongside his bidarka and pulled him down under the water.*

And the hunter said to the octopus, "'Whenever I go hunting, I never get any sea otters."

And the octopus said to him, "Have you been eating at night before you go out to hunt the next day?"

And the hunter said, "Yes." And the octopus reached down into his stomach and pulled out these grasses and weeds.

Then the octopus said to him, "Have you been walking in the morning before you go out hunting?"

And again the hunter said, "Yes." So the octopus scrubbed the bottom of his feet and reminded him of the rules: that you must fast, and that you must not walk before you go hunting.

And then the octopus said, "Go out now and hunt, and you will have success. But every time you catch an otter with a white head, you must throw the white head back here to me."

So this the hunter did. He went out and he was very successful; he got otter after otter after otter. And whenever he had a white head he threw it down into the sea for the octopus.

And then there came a time when the hunter wanted a white-headed otter for himself. And so he kept it, and he gave the black head to the octopus instead.

And he was back in the village, and the villagers came to him, greatly upset. The waters of the ocean were rising and turning red. And as soon as he saw that they were red the hunter knew that this was because of what he had done. And the octopus came in through the sea to the village and washed it all away.

The story was over so suddenly and with such an abrupt and destructive ending that there was a tangible pause before the applause began. At which point Ann Jache (Sociology) took over.

"The course we focused on is one of mine," she said. "A 300-level Sociology course called Individuals, Groups, and Institutions. This is the beginning of a place-based, nature-paced learning lesson. We will tell the story, remind students that nearly a quarter of all the people they're likely to work with will be Alaska Native, and stress the importance of learning to live in a diverse context. That will be the theme of the course itself."

She described how she would use the Fishbowl technique (page 68) to hold structured discussions of the story. The first time, she would ask the inner circle to discuss the story and the outer circle to time the spaces between one person's comment and the next person's response. The second time, she would explain the norm of Alaska Native discourse, where people are expected to be fully present to each speaker and to pause and reflect before responding. Then she would ask a new group to enter the circle and discuss the story, with the listeners timing the spaces between these responses.

"That will automatically slow down the pace in a very particular way," she said. "There will be norms against giving a quick response because obviously you were thinking about what you were going to say while the other person was speaking. This lesson will communicate a respect for diversity, teach directly about cultural differences, and illuminate themes about the individual and the collective that will run all the way through the class. This story (and others like it) illustrates a culture in which everything an individual thinks or does has consequences for the group. In the octopus story, one person did something wrong, and the whole village was decimated."

She ticked a few of the assigned strategies off on her fingers: "There's story-telling, obviously, and visual and non-verbal language while the stories are being told. There's respect for diversity, a mechanism for thinking about the story afterwards, and a chance to experience two different forms of cultural communication. It will be a structured opportunity to pay close attention, to observe. Timing it is a Western observation method, but they'll also be given some opportunities to observe at a little different pace."

She slowed, stopped, and opened her hands palm up. "Anyway, that's what our group came up with."

Icebreakers with a Sense of Place

The second group included several writing professors who linked icebreaking activities to an awareness of relationship and place. "I ask students to name the strangest food they've ever eaten," said Don Rearden (College Preparatory and Developmental Studies). "It could be a food that's not strange to them but they think might be strange to others. There's usually some fun stuff, because our students are from all over Alaska and from all over the world. They might say something like muskrat, which is delicious to them but which they know other people will react to. A student from Southeast Alaska who eats seal might realize that a person from up north also eats seal, and they might make some connections that way. It gives us a really good opening to talk about how diverse the class is and also what we have in common. And later on, instead of using the classic Circle of Objects exercise (page 126), students can bring in foods from their cultures, and they can talk about the importance of that food in their culture."

"The vast majority of Alaska Pacific University undergraduates are young people who come from out of state," said Mei Mei Evans (English). "They're not only new to APU and to college, but they're also new to Alaska. I like to take them outside, probably in the first week, and have them walk around without talking to each other, just walk in silence. I ask them to make note both of what they observe and of how it makes them feel. Then I have a larger semester-long assignment that was inspired by Sherry Simpson's collection of essays called *The Way Winter Comes*. The title triggered something for me, and I thought it would be interesting to ask the students to notice how the season changes here in Anchorage, to keep track of their observations and reactions over the course of many weeks: the shorter hours of daylight, the increasing cold. At the end of the semester we do the original exercise again and then incorporate all of their experiences into an essay."

On-line Strategies

Dorothy Shepard Dunne (Human Services) showed us the screen her on-line students will see when they sign in for a chat session. "It's pretty good," she said. "Not as good as a classroom, but pretty good. I'll ask them to imagine themselves in a circle, with the person whose name is next to theirs on the class list as the person sitting next to them. I do not wish to disrespect the sacred quality of the talking circle as it's held in other contexts, but I do want to borrow some of the very best aspects of communicating with one another. First I'll ask the students to introduce themselves and describe their surroundings. Later on we'll use the same format to share our reflections and to tell our stories."

Her group had several ideas for required but ungraded reflections to be shared throughout the semester. Students might be asked to go outdoors, sit quietly, observe intently, and reflect deeply on the place where they are. They might be asked to reflect on a place associated with their culture or to tell a story from their culture or to meet with someone they consider to be an Elder in their culture. "I wouldn't tell them what they should learn," Dorothy said, "but leave it up to them to let it happen in the way that it does."

Circle of Objects

An exercise that respectfully acknowledges the varieties of cultural heritage and introduces visual and kinesthetic elements into a discussion.

Preparation: Ask each person to bring into class an object that reflects something about their ancestry, cultural heritage, class background or other feature you wish to illuminate. Explain the purpose of the exercise and how it will work. Give students several days to choose their object and consider their response.

Sharing: Arrange the chairs in a circle around a low table. Invite each person, one at a time, to place an object on the table and to talk about its links to their culture, history, traditions, or other topic under discussion.

Tips: Consider speaking first yourself, to model the act of self-disclosure and to demonstrate a time guideline of two or three minutes. After that, let the students speak in whatever order they wish. Honor the silence between speakers.

Adapted from Landis (*Start Talking)* and Brookfield and Preskill (*Discussion as a Way of Teaching*).

Tough Cases

When it was the fourth group's turn, Deborah Periman (Justice) teased the other three. "Come on" she said. "Are those the most rigid classes you teach? Those sound like fabulous classes! We have a truly tough case. I think we win."

The class they had chosen was Paralegal Studies, a foundational course for the Paralegal Studies program. "It lays the foundation for courses that follow, and I can't jettison a lot of content or everyone will be shortchanged down the road," said Deb. "We are also audited by the American Bar Association which regularly review our syllabi, student records, and the products of our students. So there's not a lot I can play around with, and I thought this course was hopeless for this project. But I have to say, these people are amazing." She gestured to the three colleagues in her group. "We came up with some great stuff. I think this could work."

Taking turns, the group members offered their suggestions, including

- incorporating pauses and alternate discourse rhythms;
- slowing down the pace of homework and assignments, especially during the coldest and darkest times of the year;
- discussing core values in the practice of law such as personal responsibility and respect and translating them into work that the paralegals do (punctuality, efficiency, attention to deadlines);
- having Elders and other guest speakers tell stories of their own experience with respect to the legal system;
- introducing place-based issues such as Native corporations, limited entry permits, and Individual Fishing Quotas; and
- exploring the role of a cultural navigator within the courts system.

"When I thought about it this way," said Deb, "I realized that, without losing much content, I could incorporate the tribal court experience into the portion on contemporary law; it would fit very easily. I could pull in traditional forms of dispute resolution and talk about what some of the tribes in the Lower 48 and Canada are doing with dispute resolution and mediation. That would be a natural place to contrast Western methods with Native views. Also in terms of ethics, I might pull in some of those core values. The students are already doing a semester-long community service project, so collective work is already there, but I could emphasize the relational aspect a little bit more. I might emphasize the process, have the students work in small groups or dyads, and check in a couple of times in a structured way over the course of the semester to see how that group interaction is going."

Pulling back from all the classroom ideas for a minute, she imagined her future students. "For outcomes," she mused, "we hope that students would appreciate their own cultural heritage and the heritages that other students bring to the class a little bit more than they do now, and that they would form really comfortable relationships with this peer group in whose company they'll be completing their studies at UAA. We hope that Native students would feel that their traditions were recognized and valued, and that all students would think a little bit more about their core values and relationships."

TALKING CIRCLE

Giving Thanks

Late in the day we held a talking circle that gave everyone a last chance to reflect together about their experience during the week.

Several people said it had given them a new way to think. "Skepticism and challenging authority are big parts of the traditions I've been part of," said Jackie Cason (English). "I was brought up to see these attitudes positively. People from my background always want to disprove things and find new ways to override what's already been established. And yet when I see this wonderful respect for Elders modeled in the Alaska Native traditions, it points me towards something very different. How do I incorporate this new thing that I'm seeing? I think what's healthy about questioning authority in our culture is that a lot of people *assume* authority: they take it, and they don't necessarily wait until someone ascribes it to them. And I started thinking about the Elder status as it's been defined for us; it's not something that is taken but rather something that is given by the community. And I think at the heart of all that is this notion of reciprocity… not so much being in a taking position but learning how to accept the gift."

"One of the things I'm taking away from this is uncertainty," said David Scheel. "It's very easy in our culture to be sure of yourself. And I think that's what struck me more than anything: what's the best way to give credit to the teachers for the lessons we have received? As I take away these lessons, to the extent that I internalize them and use them in my teaching, that's what I'm going to wonder about for awhile."

Many people simply gave thanks. They thanked Ilarion and Oscar for their generosity, wisdom, and guidance. They thanked each other for their mutual dedication and support. They appreciated the gift of time to dig into these issues, enjoyed the sense of belonging to a community of allies, and looked forward to working together in the years to come

Ilarion closed the circle by saying, "I'm grateful to all of you. It does my heart a lot of good to know that there are potential allies out there. It helps my heart to continue to be optimistic. It's why we do this, because we do have hope. Also in our tradition, it's customary to give gifts and to acknowledge those who've poured their hearts into what they've done."

He stood as a sign of respect, turned to Oscar, and said, "I hope that you live to see the day when people will give you the kind of honor that I believe you deserve. You have changed so many people's lives. I know that because of the position you've held in academia, you had to walk between two worlds. And you get very little acknowledgement for that. But if you had lived in a village, there is no doubt that you would be widely acknowledged as a very good Elder. And I want to say that you are my Elder."

He handed Oscar a gift and said, "And you're a healer. Even though you do not think of yourself as a healer, you heal by creating bridges of understanding. You tried to show the heart of your people to the outside world. Amongst my people is the thunderbird, an ancient race of eagles with the power of death. And this power of death is not physical death; it's all the thousands of death we suffer or need to go through in order to realize ourselves and become real human beings. It's also a symbol of rebirth; but in order to experience rebirth you have to die. This was given to me by an Apache healer. He said 'one day if you find somebody like that, give it to him.' So this is for you."

He turned to Libby with a gift also, handing her a small pouch containing special things from his island, specifically chosen to give to a woman with heart. "You have been a tremendous ally, and advocate, for Native issues," he said. "We could use more like you."

THE ACADEMIC YEAR

Classroom Experiences and Reflections

The group agreed to meet monthly for informal follow-up and support sessions throughout the academic year. The meetings gave them a chance to share their experiences and helped keep the essence of the intensive fresher in their minds and hearts as the demands of academic life and the ascendancy of the academic paradigm reasserted themselves in their day-to-day lives. Ilarion attended most of these meetings, both as a resource and as a reminder to stay attentive to the principles and practices we had introduced in the intensive.

Almost everyone experimented with slowing down the pace in some way, adding conversational pauses and periods of silence and reflection to their usual teaching practices. Several created open or flexible due dates for certain assignments, allowing students to choose their own best time for completing them. Many developed assignments based on one or more of our Alaska-themed Books of the Year: *Yuuyaraq: the Way of the Human Being, Growing up Native in Alaska,* and the locally produced *Do Alaska Native People Get Free Medical Care?*[*] A few took their students outside.

The classroom projects were as varied as you might expect from such an interdisciplinary cohort of faculty members. They included the following examples among others.[**]

Ray Anthony (Philosophy) asked his third-year ethics students to consider the potential for oppressiveness in gift giving and to design projects that would help an Alaska Native community in a non-oppressive, respectful way. With various ethical approaches in hand, the students were asked to look at their project from multiple perspectives, to examine their own motives and the nature of equitable relationships, and to consider how gift giving can be uplifting for persons and communities in need. He also encouraged them to become intimate with the cultures and traditions of the Alaska Native and rural communities they had chosen to help.

"At the core of gift giving," he explains, "is trust and respect for the autonomy of others. Whether for social, cultural, economic, political, or environmental reasons, those in need are in a vulnerable position. In spite of good intentions, the one helping may not always be sensitive to the way in which the gesture or gift is being received. The underlying power dynamic can morally disenfranchise the ones receiving the gift."

Looking back, he reflected. "I was most pleased with my students' individual and collective effort and the seriousness with which they considered these issues. It was a great way to expose

* Now titled *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues.*
** The full range of projects can be found at www.uaa.alaska.edu/cafe/portfolios.

students to different cultures, the diversity of concerns, different ways of thinking, and the plight of others in their state. Among other things, the project promoted mature philosophical discourse, made ethics relevant and alive, and afforded some of the best discussions and presentations I've yet seen. By semester's end, it also facilitated a closer class community."

Trish Jenkins (English) asked her second-year Persuasive Writing class to consider the complicated issue of resource extraction on Native corporation-owned lands. She had students read a selection of essays on the topic. They were to identify themselves in relation to the issue and then narrate in first person chronological order the evolution of their thinking on the issue. She expected to see engagement increase when the classroom ethos strongly supports the students' agency or ownership of the developing ideas and texts.

"Most students were engaged," she concludes, "and the writing was fluent, as indicated by lengthy essays with smooth movement from sentence to sentence. Most wrote with confidence and authority and made an effort to be clear about why they said what they said. Many seemed compelled to indicate sensitivity to those involved in the issue even if they disagreed with them. What I found most satisfying—and surprising—was the degree of engagement. I plan to continue teaching this assignment. I believe that I provided a classroom atmosphere conducive to students growing as writers and thinkers."

Kimberly Pace (Political Science) changed delivery styles for her Comparative Politics class. Instead of delivering her customary lectures on different nation-states, she gave her students a list of countries with indigenous populations struggling with the issue of climate change. Working together in small groups, they were to pick a country and prepare a two-day presentation that included classic material (political systems, branches of government), cultural material (art, education, music, dance, food), specifics about climate change, and how that country's indigenous population is weathering the storm.

"The students appreciated the value of working in groups, of building community and relationship in the classroom," says Pace. "They were enthusiastic over the presentations, their own and others'. I observed great joy on the culture days."

Mei Mei Evans (English) asked her freshmen writing students to consider the entire planet as a unit of place. What does it mean to be a human being on an endangered planet? How could thinking from an Alaska Native perspective enrich our understanding of climate change and species extinction? How do we live meaningful lives while becoming good ancestors for future generations of life? She sent them outside to spend a silent hour of observation and movement, followed by in-class reflection and discussion. She invited them to compare meaningful places in their own lives with real or romanticized ideas of Alaska and to reflect on the importance of indigenous knowledge to a complete understanding of the world and our place in it.

One of her students wrote: "I truly feel that we [Western civilization] went off course…when we strayed from place-based knowledge and individual thinking and reasoning. [In order to change humanity back around again, we must first] change on an individual level, which will slowly spread through the world. Together we can do this."

Don Rearden (College Preparatory and Developmental Studies) is especially considerate of his writing students. He gives open-ended due dates and makes a conscious effort to slow the pace when students need more time. As a result of the intensive, this year he started asking his students to go outside on a regular basis, no matter the weather, and experience the world around them, take note of the changing seasons, and share what they experienced about the outdoors in their writing.

His portfolio about the experiment is full of students' written comments. They are not always grammatically correct, but their writing conveys both personality and passion, along with some deeply felt insight.

"In those five minutes, I learned that winter is coming," wrote one student. "That time taught me some amount of respect for the ageless nature that had been around for endless time and would continue to be there long after we as a species vanish from the earth… Weeks ago I would have never gone outside or watched nature in such a view. But now I have listened, and now I have learned."

Another student, coming to UAA from a rural village, wrote, "I love to take a walk on natures. Mostly walking around the tundra and see about a mile or so to see what animal we encounter with. Everything looked different than the way I go out hunting other than walking through every tree and seeing huge mountains just around the side. I just wish it was a lot more colder and it would feel like home for me because I miss the coldness and the wind that would go from 20 to 55 knots and create a blizzard."

In evaluating the course, his students were enthusiastic. They appreciated the hands-on nature of the learning, and thanked him for not boring them with lectures.

"Experiences stick better than some guy talking," wrote one "Kids today have a very short attention span, me included, and most of the lectures some teachers give just goes in one ear and out the other; there's no experience to put the memory with. I will remember everything we have done in this class because along with writing, we make experiences to put with the memory of what we did."

Don Rearden is an Associate Professor of College Preparatory and Developmental Studies at UAA. He grew up in southwestern Alaska and is both a novelist and a produced screenwriter. His award-winning novel *The Raven's Gift* was published by Penguin Books in 2013. Don was one of the Faculty Fellows who participated in this project.

Oliver Petraitis is a promising young writer, future professor, and at the time of this writing an undergraduate at UAA. His interests include social and environmental science, music, and creative writing. His parents, Dr. John Petraitis and Dr. Claudia Lampman, are both Professors of Psychology at UAA.

Saving the World with Indigenous Pedagogy

Don Rearden and Oliver Petraitis

Don

Oliver and I are going to tell you a simple story to illustrate how indigenous pedagogies really work in a higher education setting. Both of us participated in these events: Oliver as the student and me as the instructor.

For several years I have taught a composition course for the UAA Honors College. The course is called Enduring Books, and it is organized around the directed reading of a single book of enduring significance. Though the topics and books change with each instructor or semester, the idea remains the same: to read a text closely, to grapple with its significance, and to come to grips with what it has to teach you about living your life in the world. The class promises rigorous reading, heavy writing, and seminar-level participation. It is populated with brilliant, high achieving, successful, and often intensely competitive students like Oliver.

Last spring, our primary text was to be Daniel Quinn's award-winning novel *Ishmael*. I've been using this text for many years with students at all levels. The novel is about a man who answers

a classified ad from a rather unusual teacher seeking a “pupil with an earnest desire to save the world.” At its core, the novel reveals how and why our modern culture justifies our destruction of the planet. Quinn suggests that a return to indigenous ways of thinking about our role on the planet could save the earth and ultimately humanity. He theorizes that modern society began justifying our unsustainable lifestyle approximately ten thousand years ago when we moved away from hunter-gatherer cultures and began viewing the world as “made for man,” and that we won’t be able to live sustainably until we think differently about our relationship with other creatures and the planet itself. Based upon my own life experiences within the Yup’ik culture, I agree with him. I believe in it so much I titled my section “Saving the World with Ishmael.”

As I was planning this class, a sudden irony hit me. Here I was proposing to teach a course about saving the world, but I was using the same tired old Western model of education: read, lecture, discuss. It was the education model from the very culture that was destroying the world. How could I demonstrate that indigenous ways of life could save us if I never got out of the pervasive Western paradigm?

I had employed indigenous ways of teaching and learning with my developmental writing students, where a slowed-down hands-on approach makes sense for students who struggle academically. But it had never occurred to me before to use them with Honors students. These were some of the most accomplished students in our state, the cream of the crop, those who excelled in academia. They were going on to become doctors, lawyers, economists, and teachers. They needed a tough teacher, with challenging assignments, and do-or-die deadlines if they were going to be prepared for their upper level courses and graduate school. I couldn’t just change the paradigm on them. Could I?

As soon as I posed the question, the answer became clear. This might be the perfect class for these practices, and these might be the students who could benefit most from them. As the plan began to form, I felt a little nervous. I’d been an honor student myself many years ago, and I knew what it was like. Because honors students are so successful in the dominant educational paradigm, it might be uniquely hard for them to escape its confines. These are students who thrive on challenges, but the system hasn’t challenged them enough. They have learned to rely on natural talents to get by without really applying themselves.

Instead of easing them into the experience with a nice introductory lecture on how different this class was going to be, I decided to just throw them into the new paradigm. We would begin the class not with a blank slate, but with a blank syllabus. On the first day of class I actually handed out blank sheets of paper. *

“This first week we are going to read the book,” I told them, “and then we are going to save the world. We only have fifteen weeks, so we’ll have to stay flexible. Things aren’t just subject to change; they do change. We have to be willing to adapt—all of us, myself included—to the needs of the group.”

* Eventually I did reveal an actual syllabus. I was still awaiting tenure, after all.

We'd be going outside frequently, I told them, even during storms. Visitors might come and go, some to listen, and others to be heard. They would be writing a lot, and I would be grading their essays and giving them feedback and advice. But I asked them to think of me not as their teacher but as their Elder, their guide, their coach. "Together we will be a team," I said. "A tribe. A village with a shared mission."

We abandoned the standard classroom set-up with rows of desks all facing a lectern and arranged our desks in a circle, a circle that I joined. On the second day, I brought an obsidian-bladed knife, a Sioux replica, with me to class. We passed it around the circle, and I asked one simple question: what would you know if you knew how to make this knife? They wrote in silence for five minutes, and when I asked for volunteers, about a quarter of them were willing to share what they'd written. From this opening we established a discussion circle in which I would ask an open-ended question and they would share ideas. The rules were simple:

- only the person holding the object could speak;
- everyone else was to listen without agenda; and
- new speakers begin by complimenting the previous speaker and making note of something thoughtful or meaningful that person said.

Different variations of discussion circles would occur throughout the semester, but the groundwork was in place by the second day.

Oliver

Honors 192 appeared on my class schedule Spring Semester 2012 purely through the recommendation of my never-wrong mother. I knew the principal text was *Ishmael*, and that we'd read the book and "seminar" it like other English classes. But that was the extent of my expectations. I had no idea that the course was formally called "Saving the World with Ishmael" until I walked into the first class in January.

Here's what happens when I (and probably every student, ever) walk into a new class. I pick a seat, either next to the cutest girl in the room, or at least farthest away from everyone else with the potential to make me uncomfortable. Sit down, corner-of-the-eye scan the room, get a feel for all the faces, of which there happened to be like twelve, maybe fifteen. At any rate, there weren't too many of us. Rather, there weren't too many of them and me, because at that syllabus-accepting juncture in the semester nobody really knows anyone. The classroom camaraderie that supposedly just sprouts from seminars had not yet wriggled its way out of the January permafrost.

Here's what doesn't happen when you walk into a new class. The instructor does not say, "Good morning students; today we have no plan." The instructor does not say, "Okay, business time. Here's your syllabus," and then proceed to divvy out blank sheets of paper. Blank! No! This does not happen!

But it did happen. This was the first day of Honors 192, when we handful of total noobs to any applied study of world-saving met Professor Rearden. No, wait, I must amend my typo here: Don. We met Don.

And so it began. With no syllabus, no grading policy, no office hours, Don simply tells us that we are to read *Ishmael* in its entirety by next week, and then we are going to save the world. I don't remember whether he said anything about Alaska Native teaching styles at this point, but it was clear that something was different. This was not going to be our standard lecture-listen-learn type of class.

I think it is safe to say that as we moved through the first few classes of the semester we all seemed to grow increasingly interested in what was going to happen. We came to class. We sat in our creaky desk-chairs. We wrote to the prompts of Sioux blades, Maori war clubs, and other such objects presented to us as idea generators. I'm sure we were all generating great ideas, but at first most of us—myself included—were pretty quiet and reluctant to share. Perhaps there was a natural shyness, or maybe a kind of reverence for the curriculum we were undertaking. But I think we might have stepped lightly because we didn't know what to expect. This was our first experience of a new style of instruction. And as with any novelty, the intrigue is all there.

I've been in a handful of so-called honors courses ever since middle school, largely because I fit the profile so well: high GPA, industrious, relatively clean track record, parents who are academics, blah blah blah, and so forth. In this paradigm, it is personal merit that gets us into the class, personal merit that brings us honor.

Don's was an honors class too, but it turned out to be so in a very different sense. First of all, it was open enrollment. Your background was totally irrelevant; you didn't have to be valedictorian, summa cum laude, or even in the UAA Honors Program to enroll. You just needed permission from the instructor.

Second, as Don explained, the honor in this class was not unto yourself, it was unto others. You make contributions in the circle not to prove any personal truth or triumph, but rather simply to make it known so that others can consider it before making their own contributions. When others contribute, you honor them. When they are holding the Sioux blade or Maori war club or whatever our talisman of talking happens to be, you hold your own judgment and listen without agenda. When they have finished, you thank them for their contribution. In these practices and attitudes lies the honor.

The practice became standard pretty quickly. Naturally there were disagreements about the text, but they were neither disregarded nor dishonored. It may not have been a perfect system, but it came pretty damn close for any classroom I've ever been in.

Inside the classroom we were in our circle, but often we were also cut loose to be on our own in the eerie between-class world of a university campus. We'd take these impromptu field trips

outside, where we'd be encouraged to shut off our internal brain banter and just listen. Or look. Observe. Feel, even without laying fingertips to anything. We were on a hunt like ancestral Alaskans, not for moose or caribou but rather for a community with nature that we've long since given up on. This was certainly new for me, and I think for basically everyone else in the class, as was apparent by all of ambling along in the snow, looking goofy and perplexed.

Don

As Oliver says, the four walls of our classroom fell away. Nature became not just a pretext for the course, but an actual text for the class. We would often start with a short jaunt outside. I suggested students silence their minds (and their phones) and reconnect with the wild world around them. Right there on our own campus, they hunted for animal sign, studied moose tracks and droppings, and listened to the calls of ravens and magpies. They learned to appreciate the power of awareness and to sense their lost connection to the land and animals.

Yes, it cut into the first ten or fifteen minutes of class. But I noticed that when *I* stopped talking, *we* suddenly had more time for exploration. That extra time allowed students to think and talk more themselves and to learn more together. They were in a hurry to master the novel and the other course content so they could contribute to the discussion. The intensity of those discussions revealed the obvious personal interest they took in what we were doing and a deeper understanding of the text than I'd ever seen before. It demonstrated to me the validity of using Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning in the classroom.

As the semester went on, individual students would lead discussions on each chapter of our texts. They would prepare in advance, often stopping by my office for advice or suggestions. Almost always the discussion leader would have students circle up, but they freely experimented with the talking talisman and rules of discourse. One student brought an object to be held by the speaker, another brought one to be thrown to the person you wanted to hear speak. While they used their ingenuity to lead each discussion, the content of the discussion, the questions asked, the heart-felt answers and honesty, trumped the methodology. Slowly we built a genuine sense of community—a village in a classroom, if you will—and it seemed to me they felt a sense of obligation to their fellow villagers to be ready and willing to share their thoughts.

Oliver

I went to biology this morning at 8:30 AM, in a lecture hall where I am probably the 130th person. This is prime time for room-scanning and covert judgments. Save for two or three friends, I know no one in this class. It's week nine of the semester. By week fifteen, when we sit down to take our finals, I will still know no one. When the imminent future rolls around and I see these people around campus, there are basically two options for the neuron-fires when their faces register in my brain: "Oh, there's bio-dude," or "Oh my god, I remember you. You're a fox." But that's it. I will have shared nothing with them but a classroom. Common ground, sure. But community? No.

Don's class roster had about one-tenth the amount of names as my bio lecture, and by the end of the semester I knew everyone. I'm not talking about that superficial "I-know-where-you-went-to-high-school" or "I-know-your-major" level. I knew them well. And they knew me. If I were to run into anyone from that class today, or twelve years from now, I am positive we could pick up exactly where we left off those last weeks of class. That's how it is in a community. I intentionally called it Don's class at the beginning of the semester, because we had yet to undergo that intrapersonal synthesis that spit us out as a collective. But by the spring, when classes were winding down, that class was ours. We didn't come from comparable backgrounds, nor did we aspire to similar futures, but we understood—and still understand—each other in ways that only people of a common culture can, ways that outsiders can't actualize without the same immersion that took place in that room. We may have begun as estranged homesteaders, but soon enough, we were a village.

Don

We had no trouble covering the material in the text. The students not only were mastering the material, but they were beginning to do strange things, like complain that class was too short or ask if they could meet outside of class for discussions. Some afternoons I would see three or four of them sitting at study tables in intense discussions, and more often than not they would wave me over to ask a question or opinion on something topically related to saving the world. I tried to always leave them with three or four new questions to ponder.

I am confident this approach helped us have richer discussions and made the material more relevant. As a writing teacher I can also say unequivocally that it helped the students become better writers as well. The outside exercises helped them pay closer attention to details in nature, and that translated to their writing. Their intense preparation and close textual readings gave them more to think and write about. The writing was thoughtful and possessed a sense of urgency and perspective I hadn't seen when I'd used a more traditionally Western approach to these same materials. And I think they took to heart my role as coach, treating my feedback on their writing assignments not as a judgment but as suggestions for how to make the writing stronger and more successful.

Oliver

Unequivocally. Don dropped the word, and it's a good one, so I'm going to play around with it. Unequivocally I know that the best writing I have ever penned, scratched out, typed, blogged, and/or recited came out of this class. In part this can be attributed to sheer volume: we wrote every day. We also paid close attention to the work of Daniel Quinn, whose style falls somewhere between the simple-sentence brilliance of Hemingway and the absolute profundity of Confucius. But I think the main reason this class elicited my best work was because I really understood and cared about what we were doing.

Most college students are familiar with the "brain-dump" methodology of exams and essays, where you just have to go with everything you got, anything you can scrape from the back of your brain that you were supposed to remember to get the grade. Here's the kicker about what I got to

do for Don's class. Yeah, I came with all the brain power I could muster, but the generator of that power was the act of writing from the soul. I finally got the chance, after many years of writing complete-sentenced, cardboard-construction essays, to write how I saw fit. I could infuse my writing with the most important but least-showcased aspects of me as a human being. As I was writing my first big paper for the class, I remember thinking, "Whoa. This is what it's all about. This is my best. This is human." It was that humanness—not merely tolerated but outright encouraged by Don as my coach—that took my writing to the next level, that convinced me, after years of shaking my head at the idea, to be a writer. Unequivocally convinced.

Don

As faculty we often don't fully know the impact a class has on students until we get the course evaluations or until we run into one of those students several years later and they say as much. My experience with this course was different. I began to sense it immediately, but I wouldn't fully understand the impact until an incredible class period the week before finals.

It was a sunny Alaskan spring day. I was running late due to an important meeting across town. I hate to be late, but this time I just wasn't going to make it. I sent a message to one of the students telling the class to start without me, but I didn't know whether she received it or not. Honestly, I had no idea what would happen. The day was so warm and spectacular that I wouldn't have blamed them if they just waited a few minutes and then dismissed themselves out into the sunshine.

I hit campus about fifteen minutes late, and then spent another ten looking for a parking spot. As I trotted down the sidewalk and rounded the corner to the quad, there they sat. The whole class. Seated in a tight circle on top of a small grassy hill, sun shining down on them, obviously in some sort of deep discussion. I slowed my pace to a walk, grinning hard enough that my cheeks burned and my eyes might have even gotten a little watery. I approached, a spot opened for me in the circle, and without saying anything I simply sat down on the grass and listened.

How might you encourage **your** students to save the world?