



# stop talking

Indigenous Ways of  
Teaching and Learning  
and Difficult Dialogues  
in Higher Education

**Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff and Libby Roderick**

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE



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UNIVERSITY *of* ALASKA  
ANCHORAGE

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Dedicated to the memory of  
**Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley**

whose wisdom, dedication, and courage  
inspired him to forge some of the first and most important  
connections between indigenous ways of teaching and  
learning and western higher education

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## In the Beginning

*It was the end of spring semester here in Anchorage, Alaska. The snow was gone in all but the shadiest of places, but the trees were not yet in leaf, and a brown dust blew lightly over the still winter-flattened earth. It was a season of endings and beginnings. Finals were over, grades turned in, robes donned, commencement hats flung. Summer was on its way.*

*Just before the faculty went off contract and scattered to the mid-May winds, we held the last meeting of our Ford Foundation-sponsored Difficult Dialogues project. We'd been working together for the past two years on strategies for engaging controversial topics in the classroom, including those especially difficult ones involving race, culture, and ethnicity.*

*Everyone was exhausted: the sixteen faculty members around the table, the organizers and facilitators, the Ford Foundation representatives who had flown through the night to get here. Even the coffee pot was only half awake. We had this one last thing to do, and then we could all go home.*

*We went around the room, each faculty member making a final report on what he or she had tried in the classroom and how it had gone. Some of the stories were exciting; others less so. But still the voices continued. Around two in the afternoon, we took a break, and the Ford Foundation evaluators asked to see our leadership team alone for a few final comments and questions. They told us they had seen enough. It was clear we had done what we said we'd done, had the effects on faculty that we had claimed. They were satisfied. Our project was one of the successful ones. We passed.*

*It would have made a nice ending. But then, as everyone was just starting to relax, the Ford Foundation's assessment expert leaned forward and said, "OK, off the record, what do you think you really accomplished here?"*

*There was a moment of silence. The Vice Provost looked at the Psychology professor, the faculty development leader exchanged glances with both of them. Who would say what they all were thinking?*

*It was Libby who broke the silence. Taking a deep breath, she said "I think, for the first time ever, we're ready to begin."*



# Introduction

Early in 2006, the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) and Alaska Pacific University (APU) formed a partnership to improve the learning climates at our institutions. Our stated goal was to make our campuses more inclusive of minority voices and ways of knowing and safer places for the free exchange of ideas. Supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation's national Difficult Dialogues initiative, we created faculty development, classroom practice, and Books of the Year models to support our faculty members to reach different kinds of learners, promote deeper kinds of learning, and lead more productive discussions of controversial issues they may have been avoiding in their classrooms. That work is described in *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*, published in 2008 and available online through the UAA Difficult Dialogues website ([www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org](http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org)).

In May of 2009, we launched a second Difficult Dialogues partnership initiative, again with Ford Foundation support. This work was designed to break some difficult silences and begin to engage in some tough but necessary conversations between the academic and Alaska Native communities in our state. We introduced Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning as both a common interest and a vehicle for exploring cross-cultural differences and commonalities. We wanted to equip some of our most innovative faculty members to respectfully explore the tensions between these two communities, with hopes that we might begin to seek solutions satisfying to all.

But there was a problem. Our urban campuses stand on the traditional lands of the Dena'ina Athabascan people. Although we have many individually successful initiatives and programs for Alaska Native students and many remarkable faculty, staff, and administrators committed to equity, our two universities do not have a deep awareness of Alaska Native cultures, histories, and issues. Neither do we have many Alaska Native faculty members or administrators. In this arena (as in many others), the imbalance in power and prestige between the two communities is so great that we first had to do something to try and even things out a little. Before we could meet in a place of mutual respect and understanding, the privileged voices of academia would have to yield some ground to indigenous voices that have long been silenced or ignored.

This time we would turn the tables. This time Alaska Native people would be the teachers, and non-Native faculty members would be the learners. We would introduce our faculty members to difficult dialogues about science and racism, help them experience profoundly different ways of teaching and learning, and encourage them to explore these different strategies and issues in their classrooms. We hoped the experience would raise their awareness and appreciation of Alaska Native cultures, create a more balanced starting point for engaging difficult dialogues on issues concerning Alaska's Native peoples, help prevent painful racism-related conflicts and situations on our campuses and in our classrooms, and transfer to other situations and relationships involving "difference."

Using models developed in our first project, we recruited participants from among those who had completed our first Difficult Dialogues training. We selected an interdisciplinary cohort of Faculty Fellows with an expressed interest in learning more about Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning. We developed and presented a week-long intensive experience in which they could explore indigenous pedagogies and issues together. The program was designed and presented by Alaska Native teachers, Elders, and community members in collaboration with a non-Native faculty developer. Our faculty participants experienced cultural differences, practiced pedagogies that teach to those differences, and worked together adapting strategies for their individual courses. For a year afterward, they experimented and conducted scholarly inquiries in their own classrooms, coming together for one last formal gathering in April 2010 to share posters of their individual projects and celebrate their experiences together.

This book tells the story of our project: what we practiced, what we learned, what effect it had on our thinking and our classroom practices and—in some cases—our lives. We created it hoping that other universities could look over our shoulders, see what we have experienced, and take from it inspiration for their own dreams of transforming higher education. Although our experience is specific to our participants and peoples here in Alaska, the lessons we learned may be helpful to other colleges and universities and to other groups of indigenous or oppressed peoples, wherever in the world they may be.

## **How to use this material**

The book's structure roughly mimics the experience of our faculty intensive. Each of the first five chapters represents a day of programming, complete with conversations, pedagogies, guest speakers, and opportunities for reflection. Chapter 5 carries the project forward into following academic year. Chapter 6 describes the results of our formal assessment, while Chapter 7 contains a few summary reflections and suggested strategies for indigenizing higher education one university at a time.

All told, this book contains roughly 75,000 words, which might seem like a lot for something that calls itself *Stop Talking*. We appreciate the irony and laughed about it ourselves several times along the way. On one level, the title refers to the fundamental orientation of Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning with their emphasis on observation and experience over direct verbal instruction. The only way to authentically experience these teachings would be to spend months or even years immersed in Native life, and we can't offer that, nor would we expect many of you to accept it if we could. As a compromise solution, words will have to do.

But the title has another meaning as well. It is a plea to the privileged people of the dominant Western culture to still their own voices for a change, and to listen to other voices they may never have heard before. Western perspectives already get plenty of airtime. In this project and in this book, we tried to reverse that order, to give prominence to perspectives that are usually ignored and airtime to voices that are usually silenced.

We ask you the reader to quiet your own voice and your own thoughts in order to make room for these indigenous voices. For some, this may take a little effort or a conscious application of will, at least at first. These voices may challenge you, and you may find yourself resisting or even dismissing them before fully considering what they might have to teach you. If that happens, we ask you to silence the skeptical or defensive voice inside your head, at least for a short while. Listen deeply. Pause for reflection. In those silences are many opportunities for learning.

This material invites you to go beyond your ordinary way of thinking and reconsider what you may have taken to be the way things are. You might think freshly about the purpose of education and reconsider the meaning of academic freedom in a world so culturally constrained. You might reconnect with the relationships that sustain our mutual lives: relationships with other human beings, creatures, and growing things, with the air we breathe, and with the natural world around and beneath us. Perhaps that sense of connection will inform your teaching practices in fresh and meaningful ways. Maybe you'll share at least one of the things you learn here with at least one other person, either formally or informally. We hope that you do, that you will both learn and teach something that expands our shared sense of aliveness in, and responsibility for, our world.

You might wonder who is this “we” talking here. In the narrowest sense, we are the people who created this book and the experience it is based on. In a broader sense we are all the beneficiaries of this partnership project, the ones who imagined it, designed it, presented it, supported it, attended it, and learned from the faculty members who were changed by it.

We are people from widely different backgrounds and cultures who have met across a great divide. In order to do this work, some of us had to put aside habits of mind so deeply engrained that we can only barely imagine any other way. We had to draw ever more deeply from the wells of awareness and respect, and find new ways to see ourselves and our places in the world. Along the way, we pried open a few windows that had been painted shut, let in some fresh and natural air, and stepped outside to feel the wind and notice the sky for ourselves. We stopped talking, learned to still the voices in our heads. We listened, observed, reflected, engaged, learned, and became better educators.

We invite you to join us.

*This material is best experienced at an earth-based pace and understood within a context that operates largely without words. We know that's hard for many Western-trained minds to imagine, much less practice, but there it is. You will get the most out of this book if you stop reading now and then, take a break, go outside, do something physical, and reflect in silence on one or more of the issues presented or questions raised. Periodically we will provide you with prompts like this one. Don't ignore them; use them. Stop. Listen. Breathe. Experience. Be.*

## **Stop Talking**

Set down your electronic devices.  
Set down your books and your pens.

Go outside if possible; otherwise, find a window.

And then for a minute or two, let go of your thoughts and listen to the wind. Pay attention to the land you are standing on and to the living things that share your space. Breathe intentionally from the common air. Notice how you feel.

Stay with it as long as possible.  
Return to it as often as necessary.

# Foreword

by Libby Roderick

Picture a small group of non-Native university faculty members. They meet out of doors, in the chilly spring sunshine, in a wide open field embraced by a curve of breathtaking snow-capped peaks. They sweep their arms and stamp their feet to a round skin drum that rhythmically pounds out a heartbeat while Native voices call out in a chant-like song. Two young women in beaded necklaces, fur-lined headdresses, and long blue kuspuks lead the dance, gracefully waving their fur-spiked hand-fans.

If this doesn't sound like any faculty development workshop you're ever heard of, then you are in good company. We were trying something completely new here, seizing an opportunity none of us had ever had before.

“What would you do if you had a week with a small group of dedicated, open-minded non-Native faculty? Imagine you didn't have to deal with the constraints imposed by a Western university. What would you like to teach them? What would you hope they might learn? What difficult dialogues would you most like to see us engage in?”

I put these questions to a group of distinguished Alaska Native leaders, educators, and Elders, asking them to imagine a Native-designed and Native-presented program that might nudge participants toward a deeper appreciation of Native ways of teaching, learning, and knowing. Over many conversations and in the course of a full year of planning and design, a great many people volunteered the ideas, concerns, and suggestions that brought this project to life. I am deeply grateful—as are all our faculty participants—for the continuing generosity, patience, tolerance, persistence, courage, brilliance, and fortitude demonstrated by these and others of our Alaska Native colleagues.

The intensive we created was not perfect. It was an introduction only, by no means exhaustive or a true immersion program. We did have to operate under university constraints, and so virtually everything ended up being a compromise in some way. Nevertheless, we are proud of this work. It was a deliberate, crazily compressed effort to build a bridge between two radically different approaches to education. Could we do this well? Well enough? We were about to find out.

In a more perfect world, an Alaska Native person with ties to the university would have directed the entire project. That I, a white person, actually did so is a direct reflection of the numbers. There are simply too few Alaska Native people in positions of leadership in our universities. Those who might have run with this kind of project were overextended in other areas. In the short timeframe we had to move, with the people available at the university, it was me or no one.

I was not, however, just a random choice. I am an ally who has devoted considerable time and energy towards building university-level partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous communities. I was born and raised here in Alaska, and my life has been informed—and often transformed—by the genius of Alaska Native cultures. I believe fervently in creating mutually respectful connections between Native and non-Native peoples, in higher education and beyond, so we can all benefit from the best of both worlds.

We have not even begun to address the far-reaching, positive implications of truly honoring the gifts indigenous cultures have to offer not only higher education and the educational process in general, but the world at large.

Some of my non-Native colleagues have wondered aloud why I devote so much attention to Native peoples and issues. “We addressed the Native issue last year,” as one of them put it. “Isn’t it time to move on to more pressing concerns?”

I believe “the Native issue” is, in fact, one of our most pressing concerns. It matters deeply, profoundly, and continuously. For many reasons to be discussed further throughout this book, it is central to our mission.

For starters, there’s the simple shared humanity of it. We care about Alaska Native and other indigenous students. We want them to feel comfortable on university campuses, to be engaged in their classes, and to graduate in numbers commensurate with their potential. We want them to have the knowledge and skills they need to survive and thrive in the dominant culture. We also want them to maintain deep and meaningful connections to their communities and cultures. We want their individual investments of time, money, and effort to be well-spent and the sacrifices made by their families and communities to have been worth the cost. We hope to enrich, rather than drain, their individual and collective lives.

**We are part of a higher education system—in Alaska and beyond—that has for centuries marginalized Native cultures and peoples.**

Then there’s our responsibility. We are part of a higher education system—in Alaska and beyond—that has for centuries marginalized Native cultures and peoples. Despite significant and laudable initiatives to the contrary, the vast majority of us still are impoverished by a worldview that reflexively considers indigenous cultures and ways of knowing as other or alternative or exotic or primitive. Too few see them as what they are: living bodies of knowledge and wisdom that can enrich teaching and learning and inform humanity’s attempts to grapple

with the most pressing problems of the modern world, a key mission of universities.

And finally, there’s the opportunity. In the pages of this book you will find teaching practices that have served humans sustainably for over ten thousand years. Learning from the land rather than from books alone, building skills through emulation and independent thinking rather than from following verbal instructions, making time for silence and reflection...these approaches and other indigenous practices can inspire, excite, and engage today’s students in fresh, new ways. And they can inspire, excite, and engage faculty as well because indigenous perspectives, pedagogies, and practices have the potential to transform academic cultures, making them far more relevant to 21st century issues and challenges. We want you to become aware of them and all that they can do.

At the same time, we do not want this book to contribute to or in any way extend the oppressive history suffered by Alaska Native and Native American peoples at the hands of colonists. For centuries, scientists, researchers, authors, businesses, corporations, military representatives, government agents, spiritual seekers, hunters, fishers, and others have come to Indian country to “mine” for data, knowledge, stories, experiences, adventure, recreation,



plants, animals, natural resources, and more. Most of them have shown little concern for the local inhabitants, the suffering and dislocation caused by colonialism, and the fractured relationships left in their wake. Many have profited from or built careers on the basis of what they have taken from Native communities while failing to share the profits, attention, credit, or even results with those communities.

The knowledge and wisdom contained in this book—the teaching practices, stories, insights, and more—cannot be separated from the people who shared them. Those who benefit from these teachings should also make every effort to ensure that the indigenous students and peoples in our regions and our world enjoy the health, prosperity, dignity, freedom, self-determination, support, opportunities, and recognition that they deserve. Let's not allow our efforts to benefit from these teachings draw energy and resources away from the necessary work to sustain traditional wisdom and practices for and within Native communities. Let us instead work to ensure that indigenous people occupy leadership positions throughout society. Let us recognize the nature of the historical burden indigenous peoples carry—the legacy of trauma inflicted by several centuries of genocidal policies enacted by the U.S. government—and do everything within our power to share that burden or to eliminate it altogether.

If we can do these two things—learn from these ancient cultures fresh ways of approaching the tasks of teaching and learning while simultaneously working to overthrow the ongoing legacy of colonization that still plagues modern indigenous peoples—we will have accomplished a great deal. It's time—past time—to build a genuinely equitable educational (not to mention social, political, and economic) system in which Native and non-Native communities function as true partners. I am convinced that phenomenal benefits could flow for all of us—Native and non-Native, students and faculty, our institutions as a whole—if we can make this happen.

## PROJECT DETAILS

# Alaska Native Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues

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**Goals.** This project was designed to open faculty minds to a deeper understanding of and respect for traditional indigenous worldviews, issues, and pedagogies. We wanted faculty participants to discover how much they had to learn from the Alaska Native peoples with whom they share this state. We expected this deep experience of an “other” way of knowing would open them up to learning from and interacting respectfully with other forms of difference as well. We believe this kind of learning offers transformational possibilities for higher education—possibilities that are critical for our times.

**Recruitment and selection.** We recruited a cohort of sixteen faculty members from among those who had been part of our original Difficult Dialogues project and its subsequent iterations. As we had done three times before, we put out an announcement about the opportunity that included the dates of the intensive and the requirements for participation. We asked applicants to write short essays describing their interest.

**Requirements.** Selected faculty would receive stipends for their participation. In return, they were required to attend a week-long faculty intensive workshop, to apply what they had learned in at least one of their courses during the following academic year, and to assess the outcomes in a structured way. To meet this requirement, they could experiment with Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning, introduce a key difficult dialogue around an Alaska Native issue, or—ideally—both.

**Assessment.** Participants agreed to apply backward design principles from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) to their own classroom experiments. These practices include identifying desired outcomes and assessment measures up front, collecting artifacts from the classroom, and sharing the process of inquiry with others in the academic community. We held two SOTL workshops before the intensive began so that our participants could begin planning how they would integrate, document, and assess the new strategies right from the beginning.

**Community of Inquiry.** Participants agreed to attend follow-up support sessions throughout the following academic year. Through a different source of funding, we provided technical assistance for them to create electronic portfolios of their work. These were presented in a poster session in April 2010 and are now available online at [www.uaa.alaska.edu/cafe/portfolios/difficultdialogues](http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/cafe/portfolios/difficultdialogues).

# Who We Are

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## Faculty Intensive

### Designers and Facilitators

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Co-designer, facilitator, and guide  
*Alaska Native Community Leader and Consultant*

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### Elders, Consultants, and Presenters

Elaine Abraham, Tlingit  
Elder and honored guest at Eklutna  
*Yakutat and Anchorage*

Leonard Apangalook Sr., Yup'ik  
Elder and honored guest at Eklutna  
*St. Lawrence Island*

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Presenter  
*Storyteller, musician, playwright, performer*

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Martha Gould-Lehe, Athabascan  
Presenter  
*Alaska Native Cultural Charter School*

Jim LaBelle, Inupiaq  
Consultant and presenter  
*Adjunct Instructor, Alaska Native Studies  
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Howard Luke, Athabascan  
Elder and honored guest at Eklutna  
*Linder Lake*

Randi Madison, Inupiaq  
Presenter  
*Student Success Facilitator, Recruitment and  
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Elsie Mather, Yup'ik  
Elder and honored guest in Anchorage  
*Author, Orthographer, Bi-Lingual Educator*

Alberta Stephan, Dena'ina Athabascan  
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*Native Village of Eklutna*

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## **Kicaput Singers and Dancers**

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Eben Olrun, Cup'ik  
Ben Snowball, Yup'ik  
Angela Young, Yup'ik

## **Special Thanks to the Native Village of Eklutna**

Dorothy Cook  
*Former Eklutna Native Village President*

Marc Lamoureux  
*Land and Environment Director*

Maria Coleman  
*Cultural Manager*

Angeleen Waskey  
*Cultural Coordinator*

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Luke Weld  
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*University of Alaska Anchorage*





# Ground Rules

**Our educational mission is to  
produce human beings who are  
at home in their place, their  
environment, their world.**

OSCAR KAWAGLEY

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# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Day One

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On that first morning we met in our shared campus library, a space we were all familiar with and where we had met many times before. Most of us knew each other at least a little bit, and everyone knew Libby. Over coffee and yoghurt and fruit, the sixteen participants stashed their jackets, arranged their bookbags and computers, filled out the pre-test surveys, and chatted comfortably amongst themselves. So far this was all pretty standard for an academic gathering.

Then Libby introduced Aleut educator Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff and Yup'ik Elder Angayuqaq (Oscar) Kawagley, who would serve as our guides and teachers for the week. From this point forward, very little would be standard. We were going off the grid, following our Native teachers down trails unfamiliar to most of us.

The very first thing we did was stop talking. We opened that first day, as we would each day thereafter, with a period of silence, a time when we would all be together in the same space in an unstructured way without speaking to each other. "Use this time for inner reflection," we suggested. "Connect with the natural world outside our windows. Center yourself. Do whatever you want; just do it in silence."

There was a little nervous laughter at first, but everyone quickly settled in. People refilled their coffee cups, strolled around the room, looked out the windows towards the Science building, the

Administration building, and Mosquito Lake off in the distance. Some stretched, others sat quietly, a few closed their eyes. After about ten minutes, Ilarion called the silence to a close, and we gathered our chairs into a large circle to begin.

### Sample Agenda

Pre-testing

Opening Ceremonies

Code of Conduct

Place-based Learning

Way of the Real Human Being

Visual Language and Learning

Story-telling

Reflection

Group Work

Critical Incident Questionnaire

Ilarion introduced the week ahead. "For months, we've been trying to figure out how to create as authentic an experience as possible, to immerse you in some of these traditional Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning. Well, this," he gestured to our circle, "is one of them. In Alaska Native cultures, everything is viewed in a cyclical nature, and everything is created with the circle in mind. I'm generalizing here because each culture might have a little bit different symbology, but they hold many things in common. And one is as we sit here, together, in this circle, we are sitting here as equals. No one is more or less than any other person."

Here he paused and, establishing a discourse rhythm that would become common throughout the week, repeated himself with renewed emphasis. “There’s no one more or less. We are all completely equal.”

He paused again before continuing. “You may notice throughout this week that Oscar and I will be speaking without notes. I learned this lesson from Howard Luke, a respected Elder of the Interior. He said anybody who has to get up in front of a group of people and speak from a piece of paper has no business being up there! Well, I took that to heart. Up until then I was trying to function within the Western educational tradition. I had graduated from the University of Washington, and they always taught you to write it down, all the time. But when I listened to Howard and dropped that piece of paper, I felt a dramatic shift actually occur inside of me. I slipped from the mind into the heart.”

He looked around at all the academic faces in the circle and issued the first ground rule for the week. “Throughout this whole experience, as part of the immersion, no one is to use any pen or paper or write anything down at any time. No computers, no cell phones. *You* are going to learn the way *we* learned growing up.”

The intent here was that participants would take away from the experience only what they had internalized and could remember from the inside, not what they could capture on their screens or note to themselves on their legal pads. In the embodied, direct, oral and visual style of learning common to most indigenous cultures, there is no writing it down. Instead, you pay keen attention, listen closely and deeply, emulate the wisest and most experienced among you, learn by doing, and take what you learn so deeply into yourself that it becomes part of your identity.

“We will also move at a slower pace,” he promised. “One that is more at one with the rhythms of nature. This is a route to connectedness, which will be a central theme throughout the week.”

## BACKGROUND

# Alaska's Native Peoples

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Even though our faculty members all live in Alaska, we can't take it for granted that they share a common knowledge about Alaska's Native peoples or a common understanding of the cultural context in which we live and work. These topics are not widely known, even within the state. Readers from outside Alaska are likely to know even less about the peoples and cultures we are trying to represent. For these reasons, a little background may be helpful.

In 2007 and 2008, a group of faculty and community members created a book to provide a foundation for these conversations. Originally titled *Do Alaska Native People Get Free Medical Care?*, the book is now available from the University of Alaska Press as *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues*. It provides brief answers to frequently asked questions about culture, identity, subsistence, the effects of colonialism, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and other issues and events of importance to understanding Alaska's Native peoples. Each chapter ends with a list of recommended readings and resources for further investigation of these complicated and sometimes contentious topics. We posted it on our website and gave free copies to both faculty members and students as part our shared Books of the Year program in 2008 and 2009.

It is beyond the scope of this handbook to provide the detailed histories and cultural analyses that are the true context for most of this work. But as a brief introduction, we have adapted the following from *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues*.

### **Who are Alaska's Native peoples?**

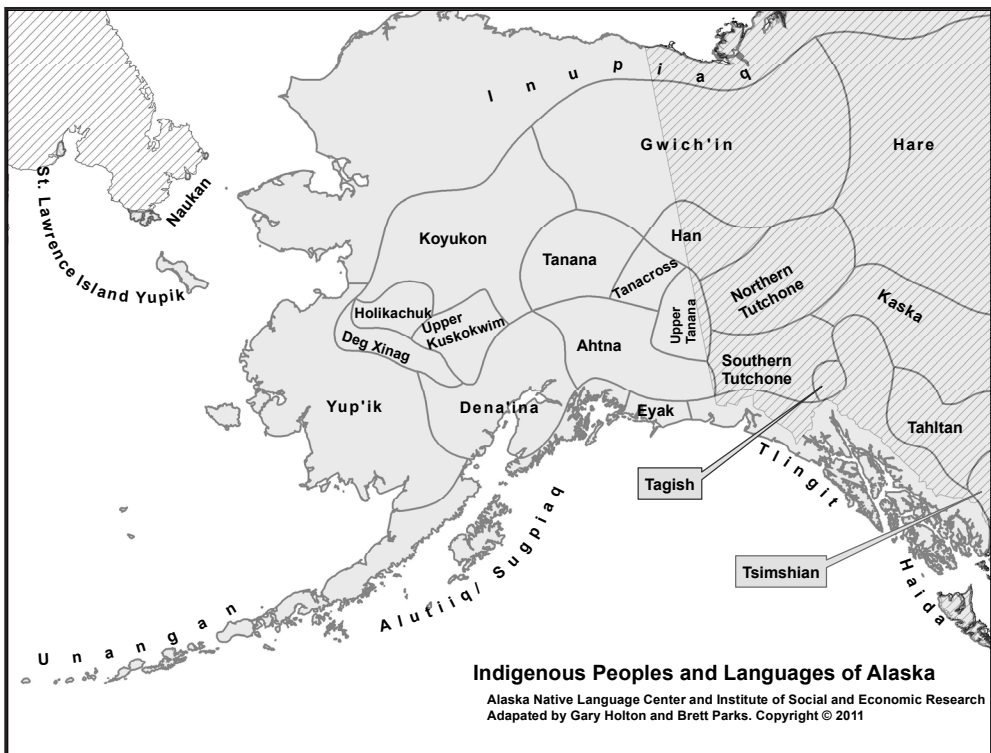
We use the term Alaska Native to refer to peoples that are indigenous to the lands and waters encompassed by the state of Alaska. They are not, as the term implies, a single entity; rather they belong to several major cultural groups, each inhabiting lands and waters their ancestors have occupied for thousands of years:

- Inupiaq in the Arctic;
- Yupiaq in Southwestern Alaska;
- Unangan/Aleut in the Aleutian Chain and the Pribilof Islands;
- Athabascan in the interior and southcentral regions of the state;
- Sugpiaq and Eyak in the lower southcentral region, Kenai Peninsula, and Kodiak Island; and
- Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian in Southeastern Alaska.

Each culture is distinct, with complex kinship structures, highly developed subsistence hunting and gathering practices and technologies, and unique and varied languages, belief systems, art, music, storytelling, spirituality, and dance traditions, among many other attributes. What they have in common are deeply ingrained values such as respecting Elders, valuing community over individuality, and showing reverence and respect for fish, wildlife, and the land and waters upon which life depends.

Alaska Native people once used and occupied virtually all inhabitable land in the 586,412 square mile terrain we now call Alaska. After passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, they can legally claim only forty-four million acres. Economic pressures have caused many to move to urban areas such as Anchorage or Fairbanks where opportunities for jobs and education are greater. Many others still live in small rural communities, off the road system and accessible only by air or boat. In the villages, most people combine some form of cash economy with subsistence harvesting of fish, wildlife, and wild plants. Many live in poverty, with poor access to health and dental care and high prices for fuel and processed foods.

The 2010 Census counted 104,871 Alaska Native and American Indian people living in Alaska, 14.8% of the total population of the state (710,231). An additional 33,441 Alaskans identified themselves as multi-racial with at least one part being Alaska Native or American Indian. As recently as 1930, Alaska Native people are estimated to have accounted for more than half of Alaska's population. Today, the percentage is less than twenty. Influxes of non-Native people after World War II, during the oilfield boom of the 1970s, and in recent years have turned Alaska's Native peoples into a minority on their traditional homelands.



## CODE OF CONDUCT

# Alaska Native Discourse Values

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On a whiteboard, we posted some discourse values that most Alaska Native cultures hold in common. With the group's agreement, they would form our code of conduct for the week.

- Treat each other with respect.
- Keep in mind that everyone has their own truth.
- Listen without agenda.
- Be polite, courteous, and thoughtful.
- Refrain from interruptions.
- Affirm other speakers.
- Do not voice disagreement or use violent words; instead, say something positive about the previous speaker and then simply add your own thoughts.
- Respect privacy: everything shared in confidence needs to be kept in confidence.
- Be supportive of each other.

These traditional values and rules, grounded in common sense and respect, nurture a safe and comfortable discourse environment in which individuals may speak confidently, knowing they will be respected rather than criticized, attacked, or demeaned. Listeners get the benefit of full access to each other's intelligence. Group knowledge grows, yielding greater wisdom and strength to deal with whatever issues or challenges are before the community.

"I am part of a generation that had a fully intact traditional upbringing," said Ilarion. "When we share, we listen without interruption. It has been my experience that in Western discourse no one really listens to anyone else; everyone is too busy planning their own response. Here, we hope that won't happen. There will be no talking over someone at any time. We're simply going to listen without agenda. It's a different way of listening. Then when you respond, it can be authentic. It can come spontaneously, not from the head but from the heart."



**Ilarion Merculieff** was born on the Pribilof Island of St. Paul, raised in a traditional Aleut community, and given the traditional name *Kuuyux* by an Elder. At the age of four, he was chosen by the Elders to serve as a bridge between traditional Aleut culture and the outside world. He graduated from the University of Washington, having established the first indigenous student education program there. Ilarion has served Aleut and other indigenous peoples over a thirty-five year career devoted to the environment, human rights, community wellness, economic development, and cultural enhancement. He has held leadership positions with a wide range of organizations, including the Aleut Corporation,

the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, the Alaska Native Science Commission, and the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development. Organizations he co-founded and/or co-directed include the Indigenous Peoples' Council for Marine Mammals, the Alaska Oceans Network, the International Bering Sea Forum, the Bering Sea Council of Elders, and the Science Working Group for Snowchange.

## The Way of the Real Human Being

Ilarion Merculieff

One day when I was about five years old, I went out with my grandfather before sunrise to pray near the shore of the Bering Sea. It was an incredibly beautiful day, magical, with sunshine and no wind. As we walked home along the beach, our feet fell into a slow rhythmic pace along the dark-colored sands. Small waves crested in rapid succession. We could hear the seagulls calling and the seals bellowing in a distant rookery. The sea air smelled fresh, and everything was alive and intense. The sky and sea were expansive and a myriad of blue hues. I could see the horizon for a hundred and eighty degrees.

“Oh I love this day!” I proclaimed. “It is really good!”

“*Anaan eestahnaan Laikaiyax,*” my grandfather said softly. “*Tututhaax.*”

Even as a five-year-old child I understood what he was saying. He was teaching me how to be a real human being through one of the age-old ways that Unungan (Aleut) people have used to survive and thrive along the Bering Sea for ten thousand years. He was saying that words are unnecessary, that they diminish the fullness of meaningful human experience. He was telling me to stop talking and to experience the world around me without words.

St. Paul Island, where I was born and raised, is one of five islands in the archipelago known as the Pribilofs. It is a magical and mystical place, a windswept outpost of volcanic rock twelve miles long and five miles wide, in the middle of the Bering Sea, about 300 air miles west of the mainland of Alaska and 800 miles from Anchorage. My people—the Aleut people—have lived in and along the Bering Sea for ten thousand years, and we live there still. In my childhood, St. Paul was home to some 1.4 million fur seals, 2.5 million seabirds, a thousand reindeer, an untold number of arctic foxes, and six hundred Aleut people, including those in our sister village of St. George, about forty miles away by boat.

I was blessed to have a fully traditional upbringing, by which I mean I was raised by my entire village in the ways of the real human being. I was always welcomed into everyone's home and treated as if I were a member of the family. I was never scolded for anything and had the freedom to roam the island anytime day or night without restriction. Basically, I was free to explore my world inside and out without interference by adults. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the agreement of my parents. Most children in the village were raised this way.

Between the ages of four and six, I lived with Papa (my grandfather, Paul Mercurieff) twenty-four hours a day, as was the custom at that time. I went to work with him, hunted with him, prayed with him, slept with him. This is a tradition that goes a long ways back. It was a way for my grandfather to get to know me and for me to get to know my grandfather.

At the same age, I was invited into many circles within the village. The Elders would invite me to go camping with them, and I would hear their stories. The men would take me out hunting and fishing. The women would take me berry-picking and later invite me to be with them while they prepared and cooked our wild foods. The villagers were my teachers. They taught me what they did, and they shared what they knew.

I found my *Aachaa*\* at the age of five. An *Aachaa* relationship develops between an older person and a child based on energetic and spiritual connections rather than family ties. *Aachaa* relationships are not proscribed or planned; they just happen. When that feeling of special connection occurs, the two become *aachaas* and call each other "*Aachaa*."

The word can't begin to encapsulate the relationship. Attempts to define it only diminish it. But for the next eight years of my childhood, my *Aachaa* took me under his wing. He took me out hunting and fishing with him. We hunted Steller sea lions, eider ducks, and whatever other migratory ducks came through. We fished for halibut. The men in my village were consummate hunters and fishers.

From him, through our experiences together, I learned much of what I know about relationship and reciprocity, the Aleut ethics and values of sharing, my relationship to myself and the natural world, and what it means to be an Aleut and a man.

The whole time he had me under his wing, my *Aachaa* spoke no more than about two hundred words to me. He gave no verbal instructions or explanations; he did not encourage me to ask questions. We were together in silence most of the time. He expected me to watch, listen, and learn on my own, using my inherent intelligence.

This is typical of our people. Words are not only superfluous, but they also constrain our intelligence. Adults never presumed any limitation to my intelligence or ability to learn, nor tried to tell me what I should learn. Instead, they provided learning opportunities. The adult's responsibility was simply to create a big open space in which the young one can learn.

\* A traditional mentor, pronounced "ah-cha"

The beauty and deep wisdom of that kind of learning is that it allowed me to reach my maximum potential. What I learned depended totally upon my own interests, initiative, experiences, interpretations, discernment, and intelligence. Western-cultured adults often begin with fixed ideas about what children should and should not know. They teach to that presumed and predetermined standard of knowledge, sometimes at the expense of the child's creativity, sense of self, and natural ability to learn on his or her own.

By contrast, nothing was held back from me. Anything I wanted to do, learn, or know, I could, without concern about my age. The only times adults intervened were for reasons of safety. The elders would gauge their responses by the questions I asked. They would answer at a level I could understand.

In Western culture, we are taught to give the "right" answers, or at least try to. And the "right" answers, conveniently, are what they told you they are, things you have to learn by rote. That's a reverse from the way I was raised. None of the things I learned about being Aleut came from books, and there were no wrong answers, only better or different ones. The Aleut learning process helped me to think creatively and critically, without judgment...something that has helped me immensely in my life and career.

Aleut people know that human intelligence exists and operates not simply in the mind but in the body and spirit as well. We learn with all of our senses: hearing, feeling, smelling, intuition, gut responses, thinking, emotions, "heart sense," and body signals. Intelligence is a system, synthesizing information from both sensory and non-sensory inputs. Underneath is a knowing which is profoundly connected to All That Is. Ultimately, this is the basis for our spirituality. The way of a real human being is to understand and feel this connection.

Pribilof Aleuts are People of the Sea Lion. Steller sea lions are as central to our way of life as bowheads are to the Inupiat and bison were to the Plains Indians. They have provided for us through good and hard times. In return, we preserve their habitat from disruption and protect them from wanton killing. We honor each one we kill by eating or using every possible part of the body and sharing the animal with as many families as possible.

As young hunters, we would sit on volcanic basalt boulders next to the sea for six, seven, even ten hours at a stretch, waiting for a sea lion to come by. We learned to be quiet inside and out and to pay attention to everything going on around us. Conversation was a distraction we could not afford. It might prevent us from sensing the sea lion out in the water, five or even ten miles away.

I sat in silence with my *Aachaa* and the other hunters for hours. I watched the sea, listening to the waves and feeling the rhythm of the ocean. Sheww, sheww, sheww. Our island is called the Birthplace of the Winds. I listened to the rhythm of the winds. I listened to the seals barking along the beach. I breathed deeply in the fresh sea air. The sun might shine through the clouds. Everything around me would be moving. Everything would be alive.

Sometimes, I let the rhythm of the wind and the waves and sounds of boisterous seals lull me into a serene stupor. The background of sound in a wild environment is full of rhythm and redundancy; it can easily carry you away into a dreamlike state. Once in a while I might even doze off, having been up since three in the morning to be at the shore by six for a full day of hunting that typically lasted late into the afternoon. After all I was only five years old.

But I noticed that the men never once dozed off or fell into daydreaming. Their awareness never slipped for a second. And then suddenly, a hunter would proclaim, "*Cowax ukukohx!*" A sea lion is coming!



Instantly, without anyone pointing, all the men would look to the same spot out in the open Bering Sea. Uncannily, the hunters would know a sea lion was coming even before anyone could physically see it. To a child my age, this seemed truly magical.

I came to understand it through an experience that at first might seem unrelated. About six miles from my village is a place called Tolstoi where tens of thousands of sea birds nest on cliff ledges of rugged volcanic rock and raise their young on outcrops overlooking the sea. There are many different kinds of birds filling many different niches. Puffins have burrows near the top of the cliff. Kittiwakes make nests of tundra grass on the main body. Murres lay their eggs on the bare rock. Cormorants prefer the promontories sticking out from edges of the cliff face. Auklets nest in crevices underneath basalt boulders at the base.

Beginning at age six, I made regular trips to Tolstoi, leaving the village in the late night darkness so that I could be at the cliff side before sunrise when the seabirds stirred. I would later learn names for their forage: sand lance, tiny sea creatures called *copepods*, and oil-rich fish such as herring, capelin, and pollock. But at this age, I just loved the experience of them.

Near sunrise, birds began to slip off the cliff ledges and circle around in front of the dark volcanic basalt cliffs. Soon, thousands of birds would be flying in every direction in loops around the face of the cliff, passing just inches over my head as I sat below. The murres flew quickly; kittiwakes were slower. The air was filled with the sound of thousands of fluttering wings and bird calls. They were rich and happy sounds, and I loved them.

I watched the birds maneuver around each other, repeatedly landing and taking off from the tiniest of ledges. With my child's mind, I marveled at how thousands of birds could fly up-down, right-left, down-up, left-right, and diagonally, all at the same time without any bird hitting another or even clipping a wing. How did they do this? I wondered. It looks like chaos, but they never even clip a wing.

From this expanse of deep observation, I asked myself a question. What made them different from me? I could think of several things right away. They don't use words or thoughts. They don't worry about tomorrow. They don't think about yesterday. They are full of life and intensely present in the moment. And somehow they know where all the others are too.

I thought about the hunters, who were never lulled as I was. Like the birds, a good hunter has to be fully present at all times, experiencing the rhythms without being lulled to sleep by them. This quality of awareness makes the hunter more successful. With it, there is a better chance he will get the sea lion, and a better chance he will not cause undue suffering when he kills it.

In my child's mind I decided to be like the birds. I had been doing it all along as I watched them, taking in their movements without interference of thought, just like they did. And now my grandfather's teaching about experiencing the world without words came suddenly and clearly to life for me.

It is logically impossible to put into words an experience that goes beyond words; such are the limits of language. In the wordless state, one becomes nothing but pure awareness, not attached to anything, not even thought. As soon as I go into my head I get lulled again, in much the same way as I was once lulled into a stupor after hours on the rocks. But whenever I can be without thought and in awareness, my experience is enhanced and new dimensions of human capability are opened to me.

As my awareness deepened I, too, learned to stay fully alert out on the rocks, to feel the sea lion before I could see it. More consistently, I could feel a halibut before it hit my jig fishing line. I could tell how the fish was hooked (by the lip, jaw, or torso); I could determine size and

weight; frequently, I would be able to tell if it was male or female. That kind of inner knowing is inexplicable by empirical standards, but it is nevertheless quite real. It is a mark of manhood to me and my people.

Inupiat, Yup'ik, Sugpiaq, Dene, Unungan...these are all different code names for the real people, real human beings, or people. Virtually every indigenous culture in Alaska refers to itself as *the people*, or *the human beings* or *the real human beings*. Real human beings are those who are profoundly connected, in spirit and with themselves. They are individuals who feel they are part of a whole and not separated.

You can recognize real human beings by how they inhabit their bodies. Real human qualities include patience, gentleness, soft-spokenness, observation, consideration for people and wildlife, cooperation, non-aggression, the ability to be present in the moment, and a deep reverence and respect for all living things. In Western-dominated cultures, these qualities are often associated with the feminine and dismissed as somehow of lesser or even negative worth in the fight for survival. In the Aleut worldview, however, they are the mark of a true person and a complete human being.

The way of the real human being is a proven pathway to living in long-term sustainable ways on our shared land. It can—and should—help us all deal more successfully with the daunting issues facing humankind.

### **Ways of a Real Human Being**

Listen

Experience the world without words

Revere all life

Respect all others

Affirm all others

Observe closely

Feel the connection to All That Is



**Dr. Angayuqaq “Oscar” Kawagley** was born in the southwestern coastal town of Mamterilleq (today called Bethel) in 1934 and raised in traditional tribal ways by his Yup'iaq-speaking grandmother. He was the first Yup'ik person to graduate from high school in Bethel, and he went on to earn a B.A. in Education from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) and a Ph.D. in Social and Educational Studies from the University of British Columbia. He served as an Associate Professor of Education at UAF, project director of the Indian Education Act Program for the Anchorage School District, and

executive director of a number of nonprofit corporations. Recognized as one of Alaska's most influential thinkers and teachers, he developed ground-breaking courses in Alaska Native psychology and traditional ecological knowledge. He published extensively, including *A Yup'iaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit*, and was an occasional actor, appearing in the animated film *Brother Bear*, the dramatic film *Salmonberries*, and the television show *Northern Exposure*. He devoted his life to preserving and communicating Yup'ik worldviews and values and to building bridges between Western and Alaska Native educational systems and scientific methodologies. He died in 2011, one year after this project was complete.

## On Silence

### Dr. Angayuqaq (Oscar) Kawagley

*On that Monday morning, Oscar Kawagley was 75 years old. He sat in his wheelchair, a gentle presence with a round face, alert eyes sharpened by wire-rim glasses, smiling. He didn't speak often, and when he did it was in a gentle and humor-filled voice.*

One of the things I learned at a very early age, especially going across the tundra with my grandmother, was silence and the art of listening carefully. Sometimes a matter of survival, eh?

*This was a characteristic rhythm of his speech, the lesson posed as a question, with a distinctly Canadian-sounding “eh?” at the end of it. He used it often, and almost always with a smile and a twinkle of the eye.*

And boy, that woman taught me a lot! Every time I speak, I include her, all the time. She gave me all the fundamentals for living a life.

*His face changed a little, and suddenly the intensity was different.*

That's not to say that I didn't go astray. But the educational system is very oppressive and very suppressive of the Native language and the Native culture. And that happened to me. Assimilative education was so effective that it caused me to suppress my own Native-ness for many years. Those were the saddest times of my life. I think I did more drinking during those times than any other time in my life because I was trying to be other than what I am.

*Another of Oscar's speech characteristics was his tendency to change the subject and then circle back around.*

Silence. I learned that a lot. Ice fishing: what are you gonna do, eh? And you begin to notice all the sounds you've been missing, you know? A bird singing, a dog barking, the wind blowing through the brush. And after a while you begin to think inwardly about your own self.

I remember going out muskrat hunting in the evenings, going by a big lake, starting a little bonfire, filling up a coffee can with water and coffee and letting it boil. The muskrats are attracted by the flickering flames, and you see them coming up...

*He leaned forward, alert to the night sounds.*

And of course you want to use your .22 to shoot them!

*He chuckled.*

And those were the best times because, boy, it required that you sit and notice everything about you. And very often you begin to look inside yourself and that's the time for introspection. Boy, that was the best thing I ever did.

*He spoke often in these terms, of the best times, when he was living his traditional Yup'ik life, and the worst times, when he was stripped of his Native-ness and forced to live a Western life that dishonored his traditional ways and values.*

But later on in life I forgot about those things, eh? I tried to suppress everything I had learned. I thought that my Native language was useless, my culture was out of tune with everything in the modern world. My first wife and I had three children. Both of us were fluent Yup'ik speakers, but I convinced her not to teach our Native language to our three kids. I said that will be a barrier to their learning English and whatever other disciplines that are being taught to them.

And, boy, that's the worst mistake I ever made. Now they ask me, "Why didn't you teach us?" But the situation has changed, eh? They can't understand completely the pressures that I went through to not speak my language or convey my culture to anyone else.

*He circled back around.*

But silence... Boy. When I think of my troubled times in Bethel...thank goodness I had a canoe! I could jump into my canoe and go to the sloughs and to the lakes and set up my little pup tent, and I'd be there in nature. And I'd think, "What the heck was I worried about? A lot of things that I can't do a darn thing about." And yet twice in my life I almost had ulcers: in the tenth grade, and again in my junior year at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. There was so much pressure, so much testing and judgment and grading. It was very different from the education I received as a Native person.

*And again, back around.*

But, silence... In the Native courses I teach today, I expect students to set aside a quiet time. It takes about twenty minutes or so to quiet down your brain...all your worries, the papers you have to write, the bills you have to pay. But after a while they get out of the way and you can really begin to experience the sounds around you. And after another while you begin to take a look inside of you.

I had a student once who had traveled throughout the world, including several months in Tibet. After the course I got an email from her from New York City, telling me what I had required them to do was the best experience that she had, even better than her meditations in Tibet. All I had asked them to do was write three or four sentences about the experiences that

were most important to them and then write a paper at the end of the semester saying what this quiet time—this meditation—had done for them.

You don't have to be sitting with your legs crossed and chanting "Om" to do your meditation. You can be walking along the bike trail. You can be in a noisy place downtown. With a lot of practice, those noises can become secondary, eh? Your silence becomes primary. And you can do all these things at the same time.

Even dog-sledding. I grew up from the fifth grade until about the tenth grade having my own little dog team, going out there hunting ptarmigans and rabbits. All you hear is the noise of the runners going over the ice and the snow, and you have a lot of time to think. Boy, that's probably the best thing I ever did!

You know what? I almost forgot. Last summer my son was dragging his heels about getting his bachelor degree. All he needs is one semester, but he won't do it! Last summer he was required to take a course that I teach that has that quiet time. And I was astounded to discover that this was a new experience for him. Quiet times. Here he is living out in Hooper Bay,\* but he's listening to his iPod and zooming across the tundra on his four-wheeler or his Skidoo.

Sitting in silence, you begin to realize that your spirituality goes with your deep connections to Mother Earth. The Bible says something about listening to the still small voice. The person of the universe, the spirit of the universe, the great consciousness is in nature. We expect Nature to teach us, to give us guidance, and to be our mentor. We as Native people realized a long time ago that Mother Earth has a culture and it's a Native culture. Embedded in our Native languages are our ways and tools for dealing with the changes that take place in our lives. Therefore we as Native people, as indigenous people, have to emulate Nature. It's the g-o-d effect: guidance, organization, and design. This is something that we as Native people need to learn again, especially in this time of great change, global change, climate change.

We don't have shamans today, but we do have a prophecy that when our shamans reappear they will be more powerful than before. We suspect there may be a few already out there that we don't know how to deal with, eh? There may be some in the villages, even some in Alaska Psychiatric Institute right now. We don't know what to do with them today, with their strange visitations and visions and things like that. But in times past, they were the shock absorbers. When calamities happened (starvation, maybe something that happened in the environment, things like that), they were the ones who brought back balance to the community.

*As Oscar came to the end of his musings, the room filled once again with silence. It was easier this time, a little more comfortable. We had some experience, and we had some context.*

*"Mmmm....silence," said Ilarion, very softly. "I always listen to Oscar and I always learn something. Every time."*

\* Hooper Bay (*Naparyarmiut* in Central Yup'ik) is a community on the Southwestern coast of Alaska.



## **Practice Silence**

Try Oscar's assignment. Set aside at least 20 minutes a day for silence.

Quiet your mind, letting go of your projects and worries, the papers you have to write, the bills you have to pay.

Listen to the sounds around you. What do you notice? What do you hear?

What might silence do for you?  
For your students?

## PEDAGOGIES

# Alaska Native Ways of Teaching and Learning

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That afternoon we introduced the central group assignment for the week. We would set aside time each day to work in small groups generating ideas for how to include Alaska Native issues and pedagogies in our courses. We asked the groups to identify courses they would be teaching in the fall semester and then to choose the most challenging one in the group to work on together. They would report out to the larger group on Friday and show us what they'd come up with.

### **Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning**

Earth-based Pace

Attending to Relationship

Place-based Knowledge/Learning  
from the Earth

Learning/Thinking/Working as  
a Group

Learning from Elders

Close Observation and Emulation

Indirect Teaching

Silence, Pausing and Reflection

All Senses Experiential Learning

Visual/Non-verbal Learning

Storytelling

Dance and Games

Good Instructions

Humor

Libby handed out a list of fourteen teaching practices that are common to many if not most traditional Alaska Native cultures. “Focus on these,” she told them. “We’ll be talking about them and trying to model them all week.”

Our list is not definitive, nor does it attempt to speak for all Alaska Native cultures, which are highly diverse. While sharing many basic values and bases of knowledge, each group has its own unique ways of expressing them and passing them on to new generations. In addition, Alaska Native ways of teaching are holistic, not discrete or easily bounded; they flow into each other like movements in a dance. If we occasionally repeat ourselves in describing them, it is because translation requires us to draw lines that do not exist in actual practice.

All of that can make these practices hard to describe, but it doesn’t make them any less real or effective. We approached them in many different ways throughout the intensive—directly in conversations and exercises and indirectly via stories and experiences. We asked Ilarion to summarize them briefly for this book, to create points of focus and attention for readers.

## Earth-based Pace

Living in sustained and intimate connection with the natural world for thousands of years, Alaska’s Native peoples have developed an earth-based or nature-based pacing in their physical movements, community activities, and patterns of thought and speech. Traditional life is organized around the seasons rather than a specified number of days in a year. There are times for fish camp, for gathering berries, for mending nets and repairing tools, and many others. Thoughts, speech, and movements are synchronized with the natural cycles and environments in which you live. To be a successful hunter, fisher, gatherer—and therefore human being—you must connect deeply with and adapt your own ways to natural systems and creatures. You need the patience and timing and experience to understand natural processes at the deepest levels. The more engaged in thought or speaking you are—particularly rapid thought and speech—the more you may miss things in nature. And that, of course, can be fatal.

“Alaska Native people think and speak slowly as a direct result of learning earth-based pacing from their parents and other hunters, gatherers, and Elders who practice their traditional ways,” says Ilarion. “That doesn’t mean they aren’t smart or that they aren’t quick when they need to be, just more deliberate. They hold an open space between voices. They make time for silence and reflection between overture and response. Even young people who have picked up their pace to match the dominant Western community tend to speak more slowly than those around them, to be more comfortable with silence, and to refrain from interrupting others before they have finished speaking.”



### Learning From the Land

*A few ideas you might try in order to connect classroom learning to the land in your region.*

Send your students outdoors now and then. Find ways to connect your content to the world outside your walls.

As examples:

- Journalism students could report on the weather or the activities of non-human species.
- Psychology and nursing students might consider how being connected to the natural world affects a person’s overall health and well-being.
- Justice and sociology students might analyze behaviors as expressions of disconnection from the natural world.
- Business students might consider the impacts of financial decisions on the lands and waters in your region or the real cost of doing business when environmental



## **Attending to Relationship**

As in other oral cultures, virtually all traditional Alaska Native teaching and learning occurs within a relational matrix. The teacher and learner know each other, and they know each other's family, village, tribe, clan, home ground, and history as well. They descend from the same ancestors, learn from the same Elders, depend upon the same land and waters for fish, animals, and plants. They experience a sense of self in complex and intricate relationship to all these communities simultaneously.

A real human being is always aware of being in continuous relationship to everything and everyone else and of needing to ensure the health of those ties. Attending to relationships, therefore, is both the means and the end of much traditional Native education. Teaching and learning always occur in relationship to others, modeling how to maintain harmonious, balanced relationships with all of creation.

## **Place-based Knowledge and Learning from the Earth**

Indigenous knowledge is place-based knowledge. It springs from a deep and detailed experience of a place and manifests as a sense of belonging to, identification with, and awareness of everything that goes on in that place. In traditional cultures, you need to know as much as possible about the land and waters on which you live; the plants and animals you depend on for your survival; and the people with whom you live your life. All significant learning comes from the place and is responsive to the place.

Place-based knowledge has an obvious survival advantage. The better you can read the weather, terrain, water, vegetation, and behavior patterns of fish and wildlife, the more safe and successful you are likely to be. Elders' stories and knowledge offer another kind of advantage, as does community knowledge about subsistence life. Add in your own experiences of the place, and you have an inter-generational continuity of knowledge and a deep understanding of the natural cycles and ways of life in that place.

"In the Pribilof Islands," says Ilarion, "the men fish for halibut to feed the villages of St. Paul and St. George. They spend long hours in small boats, with storms that can sweep in on a moment's notice. They know the sea bottom for at least ten miles around their islands. Through close observation and experience over many years, they know where to find the rocky bottoms, the sandy bottoms, and the boundary zones. They know where the large rocks are and the dangerous waters, where the halibut like to feed, when they feed, changes in tides, and their effects on halibut feeding patterns. They know all these things and how to get safely home as well. As a testament to their at-sea skills, there has only been one drowning in the last hundred years."

## Learning, Thinking, Working as a Group

From early childhood, Alaska's Native peoples are oriented towards the group. The basic unit is an extended family that includes cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends. Hunting, fishing, gathering, and food preparation and storage are group activities in which all share in the work. Group knowledge is considered superior to individual knowledge, particularly as it applies to wildlife and the environment. It is engrained in individuals to think of the group's welfare ahead of their own.

Virtually everything in traditional Native life involves group interaction and cooperation. In subsistence fish camps, extended families gather to work side by side. The men and young ones lay out the fish nets and deliver the fish to shore. The women and girls cut and hang the fish to dry on racks. Similarly, hunters and whaling crews work in cooperative groups, both for safety reasons and to increase everyone's chance of getting food. The animals they kill and the foods they gather are first shared with those back in the village who are not able to hunt (such as Elders, widows, and the disabled) and only then divided up amongst those who participated.

"Group cohesion, cooperation, and sharing have critical survival benefits," says Ilarion. "The success of the hunt depends on them. Hunters tune into each other so deeply that when the lead hunter fires a shot, the others follow within micro-seconds. This phenomenal timing minimizes the chance that the animal will be merely wounded or will get away."

## Learning from Elders

In traditional Alaska Native cultures, wisdom and skills are taught largely by Elders. Elders are not just old people, but those who have learned well the lessons of the earth and of living closely with others. They are tradition-bearers who know the stories that have been passed along for generations. They are leaders who concern themselves with sustaining culture, guiding younger generations, encouraging community cohesion and harmony, and guarding the health of fish, wildlife, and ecosystems.

Real Elders don't call themselves Elders; it is a status granted by the community. Elders are recognized for their wisdom and integrity, their knowledge of traditional values and practices, and their deep spiritual connections to all of creation. They are sought out for the knowledge and wisdom they have gained through life experience, attentive listening, and a deep understanding of the value and purposes of traditional ways. They are respected for their life wisdom and understanding of human relationships. They are consulted for their insights and ideas about a myriad of issues affecting the individual, the family, and the community.

"Compared to other places in the world," says Ilarion, "Alaska is fortunate to still have many Elders with intact connections to traditional sources of knowledge. Unfortunately, they are not often respected or understood by Western society. Yup'ik Elders, for example, are experts in predicting the health and timing of salmon runs for the year ahead. They observe the weather every day, taking note of wind directions, the frequency of storms, the types and frequency of precipitation, and the types and conditions of vegetation. Scientists cannot explain how all these

factors influence a salmon run and are typically skeptical of the Elders’ assertions. Yet each year’s salmon run demonstrates the Elders’ accuracy once again.”

## Close Observation and Emulation

In traditional learning environments, Alaska Native young people are expected to attend very closely to what is being demonstrated and to learn by observation, emulation, experimentation, and independent reasoning. Adults discourage direct questioning, use very little direct instruction, and make very few detailed explanations. Instead, they invite the learners along—usually from a very early age—to watch, listen, and learn. Corrections are accomplished subtly and non-verbally; for example, if an Elder is teaching beading and notices a younger person struggling with her beadwork, the Elder may simply come and sit next to the pupil and allow the learner to look over her shoulder if she chooses.

## Indirect Teaching

Most indigenous Elders and teachers offer little, if any, direct verbal feedback to correct performance errors. According to traditional understanding, you risk diminishing a human being by giving specific instructions. By leaving the impression that the learner is doing something wrong, you could harm his self confidence and slow down the learning process. Instead, the teacher might make a joke. For example, one might tease, “Somebody’s going to have a big piece here when they chew it.” Or, “Somebody’s going to be lucky to have a big piece like this.” The comment will be something innocuous but light that makes the point. Or they might



### Keen Observation and Non-verbal Learning

*A few ideas for converting at least part of your teaching to non-verbal modalities.*

Consider using film or video or still images rather than books and words to convey important content. Ask students to pay close attention and report what they observe.

Invite a guest expert to demonstrate rather than lecture about a particular skill. Follow up with a class discussion of what the students observed.

Notice the range of responses and discuss how multiple viewpoints might increase group knowledge and affect the outcome of what is learned.

tell a story that points the learner in a more productive direction or conveys important lessons. Part of the psychology is that by making learning fun and keeping it light, people will learn more quickly.

Indirect approaches are considered deeply respectful of every individual in the learning environment. Adults are respected for their experience, but they do not impose particular answers or preconceived ideas on to the young people. Learners are expected to use their inherent intelligence to figure things out on their own. Inherent intelligence includes the physical senses (hearing, touch, taste, smell, and sight) and the senses of the mind and heart (intuition, gut feeling, emotion). When these senses are all active, the answers can come from within. The learner is then empowered to function independently and at a high level in future situations, which will require customized responses to unique situations.

“At its best,” says Ilarion, “this type of learning gives people confidence in their abilities and helps them develop into self-aware, self-motivated, empowered human beings. You know about your own gifts, strengths, and limitations through a deep experience of them. You honor and appreciate the gifts, experiences, guidance, and wisdom of those who came before you. You understand your place in the world. The Elders say that all living things know their place, but humans are the only ones who ever forget it. This way of teaching and learning helps you remember.”

## **Silence and Reflection**

There is a distinctive rhythm to indigenous discourse. The pace is deliberately slow, and there are lots of pauses and silences. No one interrupts or talks over another. Traditional listening is an active process of consciousness, awareness, and attention that begins with mutual respect for and from each individual in the exchange. Listeners quiet their minds, give the speaker their full attention, listen without agenda, and take in as fully as possible each speaker’s unique truth. As each speaker finishes, there is a pause for silence and reflection. The pauses give listeners important time to make meaning out of their observations and experiences. Reflection time helps each individual to be a positive force within the small, interdependent group and also able to think independently when circumstances require it. Competition and domination are minimized.

Indigenous cultures value silence. Too much talking interferes with observing, listening, sensing, experiencing, deciding wisely, and acting effectively. You have to be still in order to observe clearly and sense the connections between yourself, others, and the natural world. Silence creates the space for deepening that understanding and connection and for getting a more accurate picture of the whole.

“Silence is the place for introspection, peace of mind and heart, and knowing who you truly are,” says Ilarion. “It is a sign of respect to listen in silence without thinking of one’s own response. The real human being listens without agenda and then speaks from his or her own truth.”

## All-senses Experiential Learning

Experiential learning in the Alaska Native way uses all the senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, plus intuition and gut feelings), usually without the interference of thought. Thought is activated when action is required, but not before. Young people learn by engaging in the physical activities that support the survival of the community (fishing, hunting, harvesting, sewing, preparing food, mending nets, and so on). These activities require cooperation, collaboration, attentiveness to detail, and memory and skill development.

In traditional subsistence settings, Alaska Native learners absolutely have to master the skills and wisdom of the adults and Elders; their very lives depend upon it. Failure to learn the lessons passed on by the Elders could lead to hunger, accidents, and even death—for the individual or



### Silence and Reflection

*A technique that encourages reflection and allows discussion participants to plan their responses. Educational research on the related strategies of “wait time” and “think time” demonstrates dramatic achievement gains when students are given time to think before they speak.*

Experiment with slowing down your classroom delivery, giving students more time to process information. Slow your rate of speech; build pauses and silences into your lectures and discussions.

Introduce a minute of silence now and then during lectures or discussions to allow everyone to mull things over and plan their next response. Allow silence to exist without panicking or filling it yourself.

Create listening pairs, in which each student gets a few minutes of uninterrupted time to reflect aloud with respectful attention from another student.

Have students write down their reflections before engaging in a discussion. Give them extra days to respond to particularly tough questions.

#### Don't

- answer your own questions too quickly.
- mistake silence for “dead air” or disengagement. Discussions are not performances, and the most talkative are not the only ones with ideas.
- assume that those who speak more are learning more.

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

for the whole community. “Mastering the knowledge, stories, and ways of knowing of one’s people is essential for hunting and gathering, for getting along in the community, and for our very survival,” says Ilarion. “It also deepens one’s understanding of one’s place in existence and spiritually.”

## Visual and Non-verbal Learning

Indigenous people in village communities must take daily notice of a staggering amount of detail. They read the weather, noticing cloud formation, precipitation levels, and ice conditions. They read the plants and animals, noticing changes in migratory patterns, population size, distribution. Hunters and fishers pay attention to the health of the animals they’ve just taken; they will apply that knowledge to future hunts. As they prepare the food, women pay attention to the color and texture of the creatures under their knives, making sure they are safe to eat. Each individual notices an abundance of very specific details about this fish, this duck, this place. He or she learns the necessary skills for fishing, hunting, harvesting, food preparation, and other important activities by watching closely and emulating. And they connect those observations to the long-term memories of their own parents and Elders, all the way back to the deepest of human times.

“Visual acuity is central to an Alaska Native person,” says Ilarion. “It is the first thing we learn. It is essential to our safety, our success in hunting and gathering, and our ability to sustain harmonious human relationships.”

## Storytelling

Instead of direct instruction, indigenous peoples use storytelling to teach younger generations much of what they need to know:

- information about the lands and waters;
- the safety of various hunting, fishing, and gathering practices;
- ethics and values;
- self and group responsibilities;
- the consequences of one’s actions;
- spirituality;
- traditional ways of knowing;
- how to be and become a real human being;
- a human being’s relationship to fish, wildlife and habitat; and
- a human being’s place within creation.

Stories convey survival information about lands, waters, weather patterns, animal behaviors, dangers within the environment, and hunting success. They convey cultural information about historical events, kinship ties, and appropriate social skills and attitudes. If someone is creating disharmony in the community, Elders will sometimes tell a corrective story to a whole group. They do not criticize or discipline or even single out the individual in any way, but simply tell the

story, knowing that a person who is not defensive, who does not feel hurt or put down, is more likely to hear what is being said and to understand the consequences of the incorrect behavior.

Storytellers know that lessons will be remembered better if they are conveyed in an entertaining, relaxing, humorous, emotional, and animated style. Elders will frequently tell the same story over and over again as the years go by, knowing that as the listeners gain more life experiences, they will hear and understand different things. In oral cultures, stories are always told in intimate social settings where a great deal can be conveyed through non-verbal body language and tone of voice: a raised eyebrow, a well-placed gesture, the musical movements of tone of voice. When we tell those stories out of context—as we do in a written text—we sacrifice many layers of human connection and meaning.

## Dance and Games

Activities that involve physical movement such as dancing, drumming, and game-playing serve a variety of cultural, community wellness, and pedagogical roles, including

- passing on stories and histories;
- memorializing events;
- conveying appropriate hunting and gathering practices and protocols;
- demonstrating how individual expression and group cooperation can be balanced;
- developing physical health, strength, confidence, and skills to balance with intellectual competencies; and
- connecting the dancer with other community members.



### Storytelling

*A few ideas for using more stories in your teaching.*

Whenever possible, illustrate your most important points through stories.

Consider how you might use fiction, oral history, case studies, fables, examples from the lives of historical people, and examples from your own life to convey important conflicts and issues.

Encourage your students to share stories from their own cultures, experiences, or personal journeys that are related to the topic at hand.

Repetition and the engagement of the whole body embed the teachings in the mind of the learner. The cooperative nature of dancing encourages harmony in human relationships. Individuals often improvise within the larger form of the group dance, frequently in humorous ways. In this way, much traditional dancing balances stillness and seriousness with movement and lightness of being, and group activity with individual expression.

“Balancing intellectual learning with other forms of learning, including kinetic, can ensure that students don’t cut off the life and activities of the mind from a more integrated, holistic experience of being human,” says Ilarion.

## Good Instructions

“Good instructions” are like rules for life and living. They are usually told in the form of stories from distant times, and they include both actions and their consequences. They are delivered in an open manner, without limiting, judging, or disempowering the listener in any way. There’s no element of chastisement. Providing good instructions is considered a demonstration of love for a child.

“Good instructions sharpen our awareness of the potential consequences of human actions,” says Ilarion. “They teach us how to conduct ourselves with other human beings or when hunting, fishing, and gathering; how to avoid conflict; the importance of humor; and the importance of respect—for ourselves, for others, and for all life. “

## Humor

Alaska’s Native peoples use humor in every facet of life: to ease tensions, to rebalance energies, and to bond with each other in shared experience and purpose. Humor helps people think better, act in healthier ways, and live more creatively. It diffuses conflicts and keeps spirits afloat. People heal faster when they laugh. Humor helps correct behaviors that are problematic in the community by allowing people to learn without becoming defensive. It teaches people not to take themselves or their challenges too seriously and helps them remember important lessons well.

Native humor tends to be self-deprecating rather than aimed at other people, thereby helping to ensure that humility remains the prevailing ethic within the community. For example, some Aleut villages have an annual gathering around the Russian Orthodox New Year, where skits are created and played out for the community. Usually a small group of men will dress as women and a small group of women will dress as men. They exaggerate the features and aspects of the gender they are depicting in hilarious ways. Each gender gets to make fun of the other, reflecting some aspects of reality that might have bearing on the well-being of the group. In this way, each group can learn while laughing.



“The Elders teach that we must strive for balance in all things,” says Ilarion. “Right now, things are out of balance in most Western workplaces, educational systems, and classrooms. Humor is in short supply; an overwhelming aura of seriousness prevails. This is not to say that seriousness is inappropriate, but Alaska Native ways teach that it must be balanced with equal amounts of fun, play, and lightness of being. To Alaska Native peoples, an appropriate sense of humor is a sign of true intelligence.”



## Reflection

How many of these  
strategies might be practiced  
in your classrooms?



**Jack Dalton** is an acclaimed Yup'ik storyteller, actor, writer, and teacher who has performed throughout North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Rooted in Naparyarmiut (Hooper Bay), born in Bethel, raised in Anchorage, and graduated from the University of Alaska Anchorage, Jack is an ambassador between the two worlds of his Yup'ik and European heritages. His theatrical productions of epic storytelling include *Raven's Radio Hour*, *Time Immemorial*, and *Assimilation*, and he plans to create an opera based on the life of Ada Blackjack, an Inupiaq woman who survived two years alone on an uninhabited Russian island. His work has been recognized by the Rasmuson Foundation, the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education, and the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian. In 2012, he served as the Artistic Director in Residence at Out North Contemporary Art House in Anchorage.

Courtesy of Jamie Lang Photography

## The Creation Legend of the Yup'ik People

Jack Dalton (ꜥꜥꜥ 2002)

*Special guest Jack Dalton treated us to a private performance that demonstrated both the role and the fine art of storytelling in Alaska Native cultures. In storytelling mode, Jack uses his whole body, acting out all the major characters, changing voice, tone, and body language to make each one come alive. As Raven, he crosses his arms behind his back, leans forward, and rocks gently from foot to foot. As the human being, he picks berries, paddles his boat, flirts with a woman. He is by turns fearsome, coy, saddened, contemplative, graceful and funny and wise. He embodies the story with a full range of life.*

One day, Raven was flying around, thinking about what he was going to eat next and who he was going to steal it from. That's right: Raven likes to steal the other animals' food. And oh, this gets Raven in a great deal of trouble indeed. But that is OK. Do you know why? Then I will tell you. It is OK that Raven gets in so much trouble because it is from this trouble that you and I can learn a great many things.

Now, on this particular day, he was flying over the beach, when he looked down and saw something rather strange. A pod of some sort seemed to have washed ashore, and since Raven hadn't seen anything like this before, he thought he had better go down and take a closer look.

As he got closer the pod opened up, and out rolled the strangest creature Raven had ever seen. Now this creature, it had absolutely no hair upon its body. Then it stood up on its hind legs

and stretched, and when it finished stretching, it did not return to all fours.

The creature looked around, saw Raven, and asked Raven the question that all new creatures ask, “What am I doing here?”

To which Raven replied what he replied to all new creatures, “You are here to be.”

“To be?” thought the creature. “But how can I be something when I’m not sure what that something is?” So it was then that the creature asked Raven a very interesting question. “Well, then, who am I?”

“Who am I?” thought Raven to himself. “Now that’s a very interesting question. None of the other creatures has asked a question like that before. There must be something special about this creature, something more on the inside, causing it to ask interesting questions and creating that little twinkle in its eye. This creature deserves a very special name indeed.”

And so Raven thought for quite some time before saying at last, “You are a Human Being. Human is your form, the physical part of you. But there is something more on the inside, something special, causing you to ask interesting questions and perhaps even creating that little twinkle in your eye. This we will call the being, the something more.”

Human Being stood for a time and thought about what it meant to be a Human Being. And, after a great deal of consideration, Human Being proceeded to say one thing. And believe it or not, this one thing—four little words—that human being uttered on that first day ended up setting the entire course of human history in motion. These four little words were these I shall speak to you right now. They were “I . . . am . . . really hungry!”

Raven looked around and said, “There are many berries here. You can eat those!”

And so Human Being went around, picking and eating berries, picking and eating berries, picking and eating berries until, oooh, the first human stomach ache was felt.

Raven could see that a creature like Human Being would need more variety in its diet. So he flew to a nearby stream where there was mud along the shore, and he made little lumps in the mud. Using his magic he waved his wings over these lumps, and they came to life and scurried off onto the tundra. “Get those!” said Raven. “You can eat those!”

So Human Being went running after these little creatures and soon had the first meal of mice and shrew. But it did not last very long.

Raven could see a creature like Human Being needed something more substantial in its diet. So once again he flew back to the stream and this time made larger lumps in the mud. Once again he used his magic and waved his wings over, and the lumps came to life and swam off into the water. “Get those!” said Raven. “You can eat those.”

So Human Being went sloshing through the water. “What are you doing!?” cried Raven. “How do you expect to catch these fish, as we shall call them, like that? They are creatures of the water, and you are a creature of the land. How do you expect to be as fast as they are in their own environment? But you can stand very, very still next to the water and, if you are patient, the fish will soon forget you are there. When this happens, that will be your chance—if you are quick enough—to catch one.”

**“Here are a few things I’ve learned on my travels. A storyteller is not a storyteller if there is no one there to hear. A story is not a story if those who hear it do not tell it to someone else. A culture is not a culture if there are no stories passed from generation to generation. And a human being cannot be a human being without a culture and its stories.”**

And so Human Being did this and was soon full and very, very happy. But the happiness did not last very long. Soon, Human Being had another important thing to say, and this time it was, "I am cold."

Raven thought this was rather self-evident, seeing as how Human Being had no fur on its body. He flew back to the stream and made another lump in the mud. Next he went and found strong flexible willow branches which he stuck in as legs. Then, feeling somewhat artistic on this day, he took some frilly branches and stuck those into the head. He waved his wings over, and this lump came to life and went running off onto the tundra. "Get that!" said Raven. "Not only can you eat the meat from its bones, but you can also use its fur to keep you warm. But, this caribou, as we shall call it, is much too fast and strong for you alone. You must also use your intelligence, your brains, your smarts. You can sit and watch this caribou, learn about its way of life and its habits and soon you will understand when the weakest moment is. Then you can make tools for yourself and use them to go out and get that caribou."

So Human Being did this and sat for many cold and hungry days, watching the caribou, learning about its ways of life, and imagining the tools that would be needed to get it. Finally, one day Human Being picked up the tools, went out after the caribou...and missed! Later, with new tools, Human Being went back out and then . . . there was enough meat to last the whole winter and furs to keep warm. And Human Being was very, very happy indeed.

But this happiness did not last very long, and soon Human Being had yet another important thing to say. This time it was, "I am lonely."

At first, Raven was somewhat offended by this. "Lonely!? What do you mean lonely? What, am I not good enough company for you? Am I not the one who found you and taught you to survive in this place? Do we not sit around and talk about many interesting and important things? I mean, I'm not a bird brain, you know!"

But soon Raven and his bird brain realized that Human Being had no other human beings to keep it company. So of course Human Being was lonely. And with that, Raven flew back to the stream and this time, after looking very closely at Human Being, Raven began to make another one that would look exactly the same.

He was about to wave his wings over it when he realized, "If I do this, it will only be a human in form. It will have no being, no twinkle in the eye."

Then Raven had an idea. He flew up into the sky, found a star, brought that star back, and placed it into the new human's forehead. Then he waved his wings over, and the new human being came to life and began walking towards the first human being.

Now Raven could see that the first human being and the new human being...well, they didn't look at all alike. And Raven went to apologize to the human beings for this most egregious mistake. But the human beings said, "Well. These differences between us . . . they really aren't that bad. . . . In fact, they'll probably work out pretty well after all."

And so the one Human Being walked over toward the other Human Being and said, "*Waqaa*. Hi there."

And the other Human Being replied, "*Cengacit?* Who are you?"

Raven could see that as the human beings got closer together the twinkle in their eyes brightened. "This," said Raven, "we will call love. And if you come together in this love, then the twinkles in your eyes may grow so bright they just might create a third being. This can grow in the female until it gets a human form of its own and can survive in the world."

So the human beings did this, and soon there was a family. And soon after that there was an entire village. And everybody was very, very happy indeed.

But soon there came a time when the human beings began to take more than they needed. Raven could see this was not good and went to talk to the human beings about this. But they would not listen, claiming they had nothing to be afraid of. With this in mind, Raven flew back to the stream, and in the mud this time made a very large lump. He went and found clam shells, and breaking these into long sharp pieces, placed them where the feet and mouth would be. Then with a heavy heart he used his magic, waving his wings over, and the lump came to life. And this creature, this Bear, went out and killed the first human being it encountered.

Now the human beings had never seen one of their own kind dead before. And they gathered around in silent awe. Soon Raven arrived and took the star and returned that star to the sky.

When he came back to the human beings he said, "I have not done this because I am mad at you or because I do not like you, because I like you very much. I have done this because I was worried that you were beginning to forget to live by the way, worried because you were beginning to take more than you needed. And this is very dangerous, for it upsets the balance of all things. It is so very dangerous, it's like . . . well, it's like eating your own self up. And you can imagine, one cannot survive very long at all if all they have to eat is themselves. So you must remember: live by the way, take only what you need, and use as much of it as you can. Try not to waste. I know you have become used to your luxuries and that living by the way seems, well, rather primitive to you now. But I can assure you that living by the way you can lead very happy and fulfilling lives indeed. And when you are ready to leave, I can take your stars and return them to the sky. And there you can watch over all that you love for as long as you like. But remember. Live by the way, and take only what you need."

The human beings were very ashamed of themselves, and they promised Raven they would do as he said. And they did so for a time, because now there was bear to be afraid of on the land. But soon, the human beings learned how to use driftwood and bones and the skins of animals to make boats, and with these boats they were able to go out onto the sea.

Now there was bear to be afraid of on the land, but there was nothing to be afraid of on the sea. And so much to take: fish and birds and seals and whales. Soon, once again, the humans were taking more than they needed.

Raven knew this was not good and knew that speaking to the human beings would be of no use. So he returned once again to the stream, and made another very large lump in the mud. Then he went and found the two biggest willow trees, took their trunks and peeled off their bark to expose the ivory white flesh. Using his beak he carved two great tusks, which he placed where the mouth would be. And again with a heavy heart, this one last time, use his magic and waved his wings over. And the lump came to life and the creature lumbered out into the water.

Soon, a young man went hunting out in his qayaq and encountered this walrus, as it would one day be called. And you can imagine, it did not take very long at all for the tusks of this great walrus to tear the tiny qayaq to shreds. It did take some time, however, for the body of the young hunter to wash ashore. And once again the human beings gathered around in silent awe.

Raven soon arrived, took the star, and returned it to the sky. When he came back to the human beings, he said to them only one thing: "Never forget the way." And with that he turned and waddled silently down the beach.

The human beings were so very ashamed of themselves. They were ashamed because they realized that they had been given a chance and failed. They were then given a second chance, and they failed once again. And now they were being given a third chance. What would happen if they failed this time?

The human beings realized they must come up with some way to let all the human beings of the future know about the way, to know that they must not take more than they needed. So the Elders convened for a time of great discussion, and after this great discussion they let the other human beings know what must occur. And what they said was this:

“We must take the story of what has happened here, and we must give this story to the next generation. And then that generation can give the story to the generation after that. And so on, and so forth, to the end time.”

This is how the art of storytelling was begun. It is in this way that we—as Human Beings, as Yup’ik—know who we are, where we come from, and why we live the way we live. And there are those who believe that within these stories are the answers to our questions about the future.



**Libby Roderick** serves as Associate Director for UAA's Center for Advancing Faculty Excellence, where she oversees faculty programs on diversity and pedagogy, sustainability, and 21st century trends in higher education. A life-long Alaskan, she has degrees from Yale University and Alaska Pacific University. She is the editor of *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues: Responses to Frequently Asked Questions*; associate editor of *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*;

author of an article on the value of cross-cultural faculty development in *To Improve the Academy*; and contributor to other national publications. As Project Director for UAA's Difficult Dialogues initiatives, she co-designed and facilitated faculty development intensives for both projects and serves on the Executive Board of the National Difficult Dialogues Resource Center. Libby is also an internationally recognized singer/songwriter and recording artist.

## A Question of Survival

### Libby Roderick

As a result of our Difficult Dialogues work, I am sometimes asked to speak about this project at other universities and conferences. In those settings I like to share a chart that suggests, in a somewhat reductionist way, some of the major differences between academic and indigenous cultures. "One is cyclical," I say. "Holistic, organic, and experiential. The other tends to be linear, analytic, mechanistic, and committed to objectivity. Out of these differences the two cultures construct, experience, and use knowledge in completely different ways. As a result, there are vast differences in what they know and how they know it."

The graphic is always very well received. Audiences may be surprised at the range and depth of the differences, but they understand them almost immediately. And once they acknowledge and start thinking about them, they begin to realize the implications both for indigenous students and for Western institutions.

It's useful to elaborate on our differences because of how deeply these characteristics are engrained in us. When they are *our* reality, it's easy to assume they are *the* reality. Those of us in the dominant culture are rarely, if ever, called to seriously question our experience of reality. Without an effort of will or an out-of-the box experience, we often can't even see things any other way. People outside the dominant culture, however, easily recognize the existence of multiple realities; they walk in two (or more) worlds every day.

I've found that it never hurts to remind Westerners that there are other ways of thinking and being as legitimate and filled with potential as those that currently predominate in the U.S. In an increasingly global society, Westerners raised with heavily individualistic values are coming

## Western cultures

## Alaska Native cultures

### Basic Question

How to succeed

How to be a real human being

### Foundation

2,500 years of Western academic/scientific tradition

10,000 years of survival in a harsh and challenging ecosystem

### Characteristics

Assertive

Individualistic

Fast, machine-based pace

Written

Competitive

Productivity/efficiency

Ask questions

Quick response

Goal-oriented

Don't stand out

Group concerns first

Slow, earth-based pace

Visual/oral

Cooperative

Relationships

Listen and observe

Pause/reflect

Process-oriented

### Concept of Knowledge

Western cultures tend to treat knowledge like a rational, discrete artifact, a portable commodity that can be moved from one place to another. Western knowledge-makers seek to develop systems and theories that can apply to all places and all communities. The knowledge is horizontal, and it runs far and wide.

Indigenous cultures tend to treat knowledge as a deep awareness of the world around them and their place within that world. Indigenous knowledge derives from long-term, intimate knowledge and experience of a particular place and a particular community. It is vertical, and it runs deep.

### Transfer of Knowledge

Western knowledge is transferred through written texts or between individuals who are largely strangers to one another, connecting people through ideas.

Indigenous knowledge is transferred verbally, experientially, kinesthetically and/or visually between close-knit individuals sharing the same community and place (e.g. young people learning from their Elders through storytelling, or girls learning from their mothers and Aunties while bathing together in the steam bath).

### Educational Practices

Western educational systems are based largely on written communication. They prioritize reading, writing, and the rapid exchange of vast quantities of information (scientific, literary, theoretical, anthropological, etc.) drawn from research, writing, and creative activity around the globe and throughout recorded history.

Indigenous teaching and learning practices are relational. They prioritize observation, awareness, intelligent action, and the passing on of cultural values and practices from Elders and other community members. All learning occurs within a matrix of relationships between people, place, the natural world, and past and future generations.

### Economies

Western economies depend on the mass production of goods and information.

Indigenous economies depend on small-scale hunting, fishing, and harvesting in interdependent relationship with other people and the land.



into contact more and more with collectivist cultures throughout the world. We need to develop a deeper respect for these ways of thinking.

Chances are that with a quick glance at the chart (opposite page), you'd be nodding your head too. You might not understand or agree with every particular, but you'll get the gist. Differences as sweeping as these are bound to have enormous effects on the way we live our lives in the world.

But herein lies a danger. It's the same danger we faced every day as we tried to translate the highly experiential, non-verbal work of our intensive into a book of words. Charts and books and words appeal to the Western mind. When we get *them*, we may think we've gotten *it*.

But it's likely we haven't, at least not on a very deep level. We have not learned the most important lessons until we've experienced them for ourselves. And Native cultures are all about experience over concept. The danger in trying to describe this work is that participants and readers may content themselves with learning about indigenous pedagogies without ever feeling their wisdom, laughing at their jokes, or experiencing traditional learning from the inside. All too often, Western learners content themselves with information rather than experience, confusing the map (the lines on the page) with the experience of the place itself. We don't feel the breeze, taste the berries, smell the grasses and the sea, hear the music and the stories.

Why does this matter? Because the world beyond our campus boundaries matters. It matters a lot. We are dedicated to the success of future generations, and we play a key role in preparing future leaders, employees, and citizens. For these and other reasons, higher education should be (and in some cases already is) dedicating itself to helping create and support a sustainable society, one that allows future generations to survive and thrive at least as well as previous generations. Many of the world's problems are exacerbated, if not created, by university-educated professionals. If we want our students to live in a more just, healthy, and sustainable world, we need to take a close look at what needs to change within our own system so that higher education stops creating problems and starts working toward solutions.

It's the ultimate challenge: how to establish economic security for the world's people while ensuring environmental integrity so that all may survive. Efforts to protect the environment at the expense of its human inhabitants are unworkable and oppressive. Efforts to ensure economic prosperity while ignoring the health of the biosphere are suicidal and homicidal. There can't be just two sides in this struggle, or we're all going to lose. I stand with University of Vermont professor David Orr who says it is incumbent upon educators of all disciplines to prioritize and teach the principles of environmental sustainability "so that all the other struggles may go on."

Indigenous knowledge and wisdom could deeply inform our efforts to educate for sustainability. Indigenous cultures include some of the world's poorest people (in terms of material wealth) as well as some of the richest (in terms of understanding the interdependence between humans and the natural environment). Learning more about indigenous people begins to address both of these interrelated issues simultaneously.

In my opinion, and as Western scientists have increasingly come to recognize, indigenous Elders hold the equivalent of multiple Ph.D.s in their deep understanding of the earth's ecosystems. They also have the systems thinking necessary to recognize and respond appropriately to the requirements of sustaining a healthy biosphere.

Indeed, given that the survival of indigenous communities has depended entirely on precise understandings of natural environments, one way of looking at indigenous cultures

\* From an article of the same name that first appeared in the Oberlin College *Observer* in 1998.

is as highly applied scientific endeavors. Their experiences are the most recent data points in a longitudinal study that extends over ten thousand years. The database is filled with extraordinarily detailed information about fish cycles, wind patterns, weather indices, tides, waves, plants, mammals, birds, rocks, interactions between species, interactions between species and the elements, and more. Peer review occurs continuously in the form of comparisons of information and observations with other individuals whose lives also depend on getting things right. The difference between accurate and sloppy research is the life or death of your family.

Ten thousand years of life-and-death pressures have honed indigenous teaching practices to a supreme level of effectiveness. We need to keep that history in mind as we approach them ourselves. We must respect the practices of speaking precisely, listening and observing intently, passing on accumulated knowledge and wisdom in the form of stories and engaged, physical lessons.

I've heard it said that "when an Elder dies, a library burns." When it comes to millennia of knowledge and wisdom about ecosystems and intelligent human adaptation to them, indigenous cultures are bursting with libraries that the rest of the world, including institutions of higher learning, have largely failed to even visit, let alone plumb. These riches are available to anyone who is open to new ways of thinking and learning. The global ecological challenges facing us require no less than all the knowledge and wisdom in the world. Learning from indigenous experts may become increasingly necessary for global survival. As acclaimed Native American writer, poet, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie told a UAA audience some years ago: "You're gonna need us."

**"Higher education has a unique role in America. It has been granted tax-free status, the ability to receive public and private funds, and academic freedom, in exchange for educating students and producing the knowledge that will result in a thriving civil society. For these reasons, higher education has a moral and social responsibility to rise to this challenge."**

American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment

# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Critical Incident Questionnaire

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We concluded each day by asking participants to fill out an anonymous Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) containing the following questions:

- At what moment today were you most engaged as a learner?
- At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
- What activities did you find most affirming or helpful?
- What activities did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What surprised you most about today?

The purpose of the CIQ was to provide formative assessment data to the facilitators throughout the week so we could respond to any questions or confusions arising in the group, try to resolve any problems identified by participants, and adjust our plans to suit the needs of the group as we went along. A summary of the previous day's responses would be presented every morning, and the facilitators would address whatever issues had been raised.

Try it yourself right now. Pause for reflection and ask yourself these questions or a version of them.



### **Critical Incident Questionnaire**

*A simple evaluation tool to find out what and how students are learning.*

At the end of the day (or week, or unit, or other appropriate time period), set aside ten minutes for the group to respond in writing to a few specific questions. Tailor the questions to your specific interests and needs, but structure them to be open-ended and to elicit individual reactions to the material.

Keep all responses anonymous. Collect them at the end of the period.

Read and analyze the responses; group them according to similar themes or concerns.

Report back to the group at the next meeting. Allow time for comments and discussion.

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



## Reflection

“The Elders at the last of the generation,” says Illarion,” would come together and deliberate for months, asking themselves what wisdom they had learned in their generation and how it could be reflected in a story. Imagine doing that. If we could only impart some of our wisdom, what would we choose? How could we embody it in a story?

Can you imagine if our world leaders did that today?”



# 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

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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

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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™)**

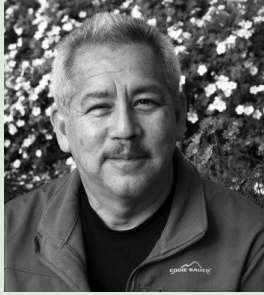
The award-winning ANSEP program features hands-on middle and high school outreach initiatives, rigorous summer bridging programs, focused academic learning communities, organized student cohorts, networks of peer and professional mentors, community-based learning, professional internships, and undergraduate 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](http://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.

**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.**



## 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 Mercurieff

*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 Mercurieff

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?

# Difficult Dialogues

Some years ago, I was at a party at a private home in Anchorage. All the folks at the gathering were Alaska Native people: everyone except me. As I mingled through the crowd, I spotted Tlingit Elder Walter Austin sitting on the couch. We'd connected briefly once or twice before, but I wasn't sure he would remember me. So I approached him with a helpful "Hi. I'm Libby Roderick. We've met before."

"Yes," he said. "In 1492."

LIBBY RODERICK

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# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Day Three

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When we asked our Native consultants what difficult dialogues they would most like to see us address, two surfaced again and again: institutional racism and the way research and science are practiced in their communities. These are both enormous topics with spiraling layers of complexity, and we knew we couldn't get very far with either of them, let alone both, in a single day. But we decided to honor them by giving it a try.

In this project, when we talk about institutional racism we mean the tendency of institutions to advantage certain people, ideas, and ways of thinking at the expense of others. That this happens is pretty obvious when you stop and think about it. The trouble is that most of academia doesn't stop and think about it very often. For just one day then, we wanted our non-Native Faculty Fellows to get a taste of institutional racism from an indigenous perspective; recognize some of the ways our university cultures and systems disregard and disadvantage Alaska Native peoples, ideas, and ways of knowing while advantaging those of the dominant culture; and notice how often we unintentionally collude with these practices as we go about our daily lives. We had introduced these concepts in our first Difficult Dialogues intensive with exercises related to the concept of white privilege. Today, we would bring it a bit closer to home.

The day's activities included a Fishbowl exercise in which Alaska Native colleagues shared their experiences of institutional racism at UAA, an interactive theatre activity in which we explored a scenario of conflict between two competing value systems, and a lengthy discussion of how Western science and research practices affect many Alaska Native communities. Oscar had written extensively in the latter arena, and Ilarion had devoted much of his career to promoting partnerships between Alaska Native communities and Western science practitioners. So we had two highly experienced and respected leaders to guide us through the discussion.

### Sample Agenda

Silence

Fishbowl Exercise

Interactive Theatre Activity

Walk Outside

Western Science and Research and  
Alaska Native Communities

Small Group Reflection

Group Work

Critical Incident Questionnaire

We anticipated the possibility of resistance to this material. Academics are privileged people within their cultures, and privileged people tend to see their own experience as reality and their advantages as both natural and right. "The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity," says Beverly Daniel Tatum in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*. For people who are members of a dominant or

advantaged social group, the outside world reflects their “normalcy.” Inner experience and outer circumstances are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. “In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention.”

Members of a dominant group may not notice their own unearned advantages or the disadvantages of others, and they often feel criticized and defensive when those inequities are pointed out to them. “Dominant groups generally do not like to be reminded of the existence of inequality,” notes psychologist Jean Baker Miller in *Towards a New Psychology of Women*. The realization can produce uncomfortable feelings of guilt and/or a sense of responsibility to act.

We had great faith in the character and heart of our participants, but we still took measures to protect the confidentiality of the people who shared their stories. We planned a walk outside that could serve as a breather as well as an exercise.

We also began the day with our customary period of silence and ended it with time for reflection, group work, and the now familiar CIQs. By the end of the day, although we only scratched the surface of some very deep experiences, we could tell by the responses that our participants had been moved.

“I didn’t know,” they said. “How can we change this?”



## DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

# Institutional Racism in the Academy

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It's not too surprising that institutional racism was one of the difficult dialogues our Alaska Native colleagues wanted us to address. Alaska Native people see it and experience it almost every day. People in the dominant ethnic groups tend not to see it at all because the status quo tends to reflect their realities but few others.

Institutional racism occurs when the prevailing system of assumptions, practices, policies, biases, values, and patterns have the net effect of imposing negative and/or oppressive conditions on people of any ancestry other than the dominant ethnic group. Because the decision-making, economic, and political power in the U.S. lies largely in the hands of white people, institutional racism affects not only universities and colleges, but also the media, the banking system, religious institutions, and more. Eliminating it is a challenge for all citizens, not just those of us within academic communities.

We had introduced this topic in our first Difficult Dialogues intensive through the concept of white privilege as described by Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist and Associate Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. In her well-known piece *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, McIntosh lists dozens of things she as a white woman can take for granted on a daily basis that African-American colleagues at her workplace cannot. Here are a few:

- *I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.*
- *I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.*
- *I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.*
- *I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.*
- *I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.*
- *I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.*

“One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions,” says McIntosh. “They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.”

Knowing that our participants had previously wrestled with this material and still come back for more, we decided they were ready to go deeper. This time we would show them some of the actual effects these invisible systems were having on their Alaska Native colleagues.

We were joined by six Alaska Native faculty and staff members who were willing to speak of their own experiences and their perception of Native students' experiences of institutional racism at UAA. We promised them confidentiality, with the understanding that their words would never be used without their permission. We didn't want their frankness to boomerang on them and result in hostility from any colleagues or supervisors who resented the implication that their own behaviors might be construed as racist. Our guests were painfully aware that their voices were in the minority and that their perspectives—particularly those involving inequity or bias—were usually suspect within the larger system. They were also aware of the tendency of their non-Native colleagues to become defensive at any suggestion of racism, in the system or in themselves.

For some Alaska Native people (and for many other people of color), academic life can be a struggle, a sometimes daily experience of being a stranger in a strange land. We emphasized this reality by setting up a Fishbowl format (also known as an Encircled Circle) with a small circle of chairs in the middle of the room and a much larger circle of chairs around it. Our guests occupied the center circle, sharing amongst themselves in response to questions posed by Ilarion. The rest of us encircled them, serving as respectful listeners and witnesses.



## Fishbowl

*A discussion configuration in which a small group of stakeholders discusses a topic in the center of a larger group of listeners. Especially useful for discussions of culture, heritage, and diversity.*

Arrange the room with a small group of people in the center and a larger group of listeners in a circle around them.

Prompt the inner circle with questions and allow them to freely discuss the topic or questions amongst themselves, while the people in the outer circle maintain a respectful silence, listen deeply, and observe non-verbal cues that carry meaning.

Bring the two groups into the same larger circle and allow them to discuss and ask each other questions.

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

For more than an hour, our colleagues and guests talked openly about their professional lives, their struggles with promotion and tenure, and how little support they get from academic institutions if they try to honor both worlds in which they live. They also spoke passionately about their Alaska Native students, and about communication strategies that make a difference for their success. A few issues and themes surfaced again and again.

**Lack of support.** Alaska Native faculty and staff often keenly feel their position on the outside of the university's inner circle of power and decision-making. "We have programs that are like diamonds in the rough," said one, "and we can't get enough institutional support or funding to polish them. We could be doing incredible, amazing things, and yet we're not allowed to. We can't grow. We can't develop. We're extremely limited, and that gets extremely frustrating"

**Tokenism.** "It's difficult being the only Alaska Native voice on most institutional boards and committees."

**Professional loneliness.** "There's always this awareness that if I get too angry or upset or vocal, then I'm perceived as the wild—bad—Indian. But if I don't say anything, then I'm the quiet passive Indian. Day by day you live under this constant pressure or fear."

**Priorities.** Their own priorities for how to do the best job frequently come into conflict with the priorities demanded by the university. They consider it valuable and necessary to spend time building relationships and trust—even just hanging out—with Alaska Native students. That, of course, takes considerable time away from work that the institution values more highly, such as writing and research. These faculty members also value research and writing, but they know it is the personal relationships that might keep Alaska Native students in school and lead to their success. Individual career ambitions often take second place to the wider concerns of their students and peoples. These priorities are often penalized by department chairs, deans, and promotion and tenure committees.

**Language.** The academy regards Alaska Native languages as interesting subjects for anthropological or linguistic studies, but does not recognize them as second languages for degree-seeking or promotion and tenure purposes. Several faculty members expressed their dismay when their ability to speak both English and a currently spoken indigenous language was considered insufficient to meet academic requirements; they were required to learn a third more "legitimate" language, such as French, German or Spanish. Colleagues for whom these languages were mother tongues faced no such requirement to acquire yet another language.

**Pacing and communication.** Most of the sharing at least touched on cultural differences in pacing and communication between Alaska Native peoples and academic culture. "My own personal bias is to go slow," said one faculty member. "I have to mull a lot before I speak. Yet even though it's not my natural cultural bent, I know I have to change that part of myself and learn to speak up more. I have to force myself to be more vocal, and that's difficult."

“Because [Alaska Native students’] speech patterns are slow and filled with important pauses,” said another, “they may have difficulty being heard. They may not jump in there. The relentlessly fast pace makes them feel like they don’t belong.”

“When something’s not quite right,” said a third, “they’ll find an indirect way of telling you. There will be a little pause, and they might say something neutral like, ‘That’s interesting.’ But that pause is telling the real story. If you don’t pick up on it, you’ll never find out what is on their minds.”

A fourth said, “In university settings, the clock and the content are all-important. When they become more important than student learning, then I think we have a problem. Institutional racism forces students out of learning.”

Several offered strategies that work in their own classrooms. “I like to give students time for thought and reflection,” said one. “If it’s something important that I really want them to think about, I don’t make them respond immediately. They might have until the next class period or over the weekend to think about it. This helps them learn in a culturally appropriate way. And the students love it. They say things like, ‘Ahhh...someplace I can be myself!’ and ‘Why aren’t more university classes like this?’”

**Promotion and tenure.** “I’m always aware that I’m not tenured. In fact, thinking over what I’ve said today, if it got to the wrong ears I know I could be in trouble. I could be let go. In my experience, Alaska Native faculty do not get tenure at the same rate as others. And that’s scary, you know? You go through the whole process, do everything, and you get to that point, and you don’t make it. How do you get to be one of the ones who does make it?”

**Healing.** Finally, they talked about the need to acknowledge the tensions and traumas related to our mutual history and the possibilities of beginning to build genuinely equitable, respectful relationships between academic and indigenous communities.

“Really,” said one, “in order for our people—us—to succeed, a whole lot of healing has to happen. If the universities would just acknowledge the traumas that have been inflicted on our people, admit to the holes in their base of information, and maybe turn a little research or funding to the problems, our Native students could collectively breathe a sigh of relief. Instead, we are constantly expected to assimilate. What if instead of losing ourselves we could be [respected for what we bring to the educational environment?] We might see more Native student success.”

Around the outer circle, many of the listeners were visibly moved. They had not understood how difficult it is for their Native colleagues to enter and survive, much less prosper in, the academic world. Briefly, they were shocked into silence.

Later in the day, they reflected via Critical Incident Questionnaires.

- *I loved the inner circle because it gave human shape to the experience of structural violence and internalized oppression that happens to real people each day in both subtle and overt ways. I needed to witness that.*
- *I appreciated the Fishbowl group explaining their experiences and feelings. What an incredible opportunity and privilege.*
- *Native faculty are feeling the effects of institutionalized racism much more than I had perceived.*
- *It hurts to witness even a small piece of the effects of oppression and ethnocentrism on the courageous, generous people who spoke of their experiences.*
- *Having the Alaska Native faculty (and staff) here today reminded me of those who are no longer here. I've only been here eight years, but I have personally known several Alaska Native faculty and staff who are not here anymore. They are gone for different reasons, sort of. But what it really comes down to is this institution's lack of commitment to Alaska Native issues.*

In a summary discussion later in the day, one non-Native participant put her reaction this way: "Sometimes I feel like I'm walking around with a sign on my back that says I'm an idiot. I don't know I have it, but everybody else can see it when I walk down the hall. I want to be able to get rid of that sign, but I don't know if I can. And I don't know how to ask you to help. Do we need more meetings like this one, or do you need to stop me in the hall and say, 'Hey, I gotta talk to you?' How do we make this stuff happen, outside of the circle today?"

Another non-Native answered. "It's not their responsibility," she said. "It's ours."

# On Anger

Libby Roderick

Like our faculty participants, most of the readers of this book will be familiar with oppression from a variety of standpoints, both theoretical and personal. But I'd like to pause for a moment and consider one of the things that was said in our discussion. One of the reasons we don't like to have difficult dialogues about racism is that so many people are sitting on so much anger. One of our Alaska Native guests articulated a Catch-22 of being in an oppressed group: "If I show my anger and frustration, I'm the wild, bad Indian. And if I don't, I'm the passive one."

I can't tell you how many times I've seen this in the work that I do. The minute an Alaska Native person reveals the slightest bit of frustration or anger, non-Native people will come up to me and say, "Gee. So-and-so doesn't like white people." Often, when Native or non-Native people express a Native perspective that is very different from a Western one (not necessarily better, just different), non-Native people feel attacked or criticized. It's very common for folks in the dominant culture to resist criticism and to feel attacked upon encountering a perspective that challenges the centrality of their own.

No one likes to feel assaulted, whether they are actually under attack or not. But the truth is that many people outside the dominant culture feel under siege in various ways every day. In the face of constant oppression, they learn not to show their anger because it doesn't help; it can just get you labeled a "wild, bad Indian." Many people take that incredible stress of being marginalized directly into their bodies, resulting in health issues. I've seen this during every workshop I've ever done, including this one. The back stories are vast indeed.

One of the great appeals of Alaska Native cultures for non-Native folks can be the teachings of compassion, gentleness, and humility. I hear the Elders all the time saying, "Meet hatred with love. Meet evil with good." This is obviously incredibly wise. At the same time, the African- American civil rights movement achieved the civil rights gains it did in part because people did not shut up. They let their anger show, even explode on occasion, and they pushed and pushed and pushed for equity. From what I've seen of most Alaska Native cultures, that would not be their way. I know people who have had appalling misdiagnoses or under-treatment within the Native medical system, yet they will not sue the system that failed them because that antagonistic approach is not the way. I've known people who've died from cancer that could have been prevented by cleaning up toxins left in a village, and I've heard their families say, "Don't turn this into a fight."

It's easy to appreciate the gentle qualities of Alaska Native cultures; those qualities are among their extraordinary gifts to the world. But I also encourage us to embrace and support and encourage the anger and the outrage that people should be expressing about what's going on. Let's be allies they can turn to, safe places for the expression of what is really going on, rather than people who turn away from the truth.

## EXERCISE

# Interactive Theatre

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As we had affirmed during our earlier Difficult Dialogues intensives, one of the best ways to help people “get” issues related to power and privilege is through interactive theater. We drew upon this approach again in an effort to help participants better understand the lived experience of unintentional institutional racism at our universities. As always, we had just a tiny bit of time, so our intention was simply to give faculty a taste of what our students might experience and an opportunity to discover how structural biases in our institutions can defeat even our best individual efforts.

After a reminder of the features of institutional racism and white privilege, we headed into the hands-on work. The exercise was led by Lauren Bruce, at that time Director of UAA’s faculty development center, who had considerable experience using interactive theatre to explore issues of power and privilege in higher education. She directed the participants into small groups of about five people each and asked them to share stories of institutional racism and white privilege within a university context. The stories could be based upon their own experiences or incidents they had witnessed or heard about. She encouraged the participants to focus on the heart of the stories, rather than going into extensive detail. She then asked them to zero in on a single story that held the most resonance for the group.



### **Interactive Theatre**

*Exercises in which participants act out the roles and points of view of various stakeholders in a conflict. Useful for exploring complex arguments between multiple stakeholders and potential outcomes of a variety of interventions.*

Identify a situation or scenario that participants might experience in their own classrooms or on their own campuses.

Assign roles, and ask participants to represent those views rather than their own.

Give audience members an option to interrupt the proceedings by saying “Freeze!” or a similar command.

Open up several of these moments for closer attention and alternate interventions.

Adapted from Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed

“Talk about one of the experiences you just heard,” she said. “Go right to the difficult dialogue, stripping out the things that lead up to it. Retell it as a story, but go straight to the crux of it. You can color it with what you’ve heard in other instances and add a little bit of your own knowledge. The important thing is to try and get to a point where some form of institutional oppression occurs. It could be to a student or to a faculty member; it could be in an on-campus or off-campus incident. Brainstorm and come up with one significant story for each group.”

After about ten minutes, the larger group reconvened to share these stories and to choose a single story that they would depict in a role play. The group picked a scenario in which two Alaska Native nursing students have asked to speak to their professor just hours before they are scheduled to take a final exam that plays a crucial role in the state licensing process. They have brought along a staff member to support them in the discussion.

Diane, playing one of the students, explains that the students do not feel they can take the test and still maintain a sense of cultural integrity. They know the answers they will be expected to give on the test, and some of them violate deeply held cultural beliefs. They are particularly upset about a question that asks for the proper protocol when treating cases of substance abuse. The “correct” answer requires them to state that they would administer a particular drug. From their perspective, based on their traditional cultural values, doing so would be unethical. Since they don’t believe that they can answer that question (and several others) honestly, they do not want to take the test.

Kimberly, playing the part of the faculty member, takes a calm but firm stance. The students were responsible for mastering certain practices, procedures, and rules, she explained, and they must demonstrate their competency in those requirements or they will fail. Granting an exception would do them no favors. It would only be kicking the can down the road. If they wish to obtain their licenses to work as nurses within the current system, she says, they were going to have to get used to these kinds of requirements as there will be many similar tests to follow. If their cultural beliefs interfere with their acceptance of standard Western medical practices, perhaps it was best to discover that now and consider choosing a different profession.

As the scenario reached this impasse, Lauren invited the participants to experiment with different possibilities for moving the interaction in other, possibly more productive or creative, directions. She indicated that people could adopt whatever roles they thought might bring fresh possibilities to the scenario: other faculty members, staff, administrators, students; even outside parties. With everyone looking on, several participants took turns inserting themselves into the discussion to see if they could shift the tone, defuse the tension, or broaden anyone’s perspective.

Jackie was first up, playing a colleague from the Nursing department. She took a seat, saying she was just passing down the hall and couldn’t help but overhear the exchange. Perhaps she might be helpful in reframing the discussion? As she launched into a suggestion about examining our own curriculum, Kimberly cut her off with a mock faint. Time was running out, she explained. These students needed to take the test right now. Long term curricular discussions weren’t going to change a thing.



“Was that working?” asked Lauren, and the room filled with head-shaking and murmurs of, “No”. “OK, does someone want to try something else?”

Trish came in next. Sitting down, she addressed Kimberly directly. “I understand the situation,” she said. “But what I want to know is, in your own words, what’s the consequence if they don’t take this test?”

Kimberly replied, “Well, if they don’t take the test, they won’t pass the course, and if they don’t pass the course they won’t advance to get their licensing or their degree. They have to do this. It’s not an option. I think it’s great if they want to bring their cultural perspective into the discussion, but we live in a Western world, and these are the rules.”

Trish said next, “OK, I want to hear from the students. What outcome would you two like to see here?”

Keeping her head down to avoid direct eye contact (a gesture of respect in many Native cultures), Diane said, “I know what the government wants, but I don’t think it’s right to give people these drugs.”

Kimberly, doing a fine job of playing a faculty member deeply invested in the dominant culture, interrupted. “You don’t get to decide that. That’s the doctor’s call.”

“Is there another way you could show that you have mastered the knowledge from the course?” asked Trish, trying to draw a solution from the students.

“I could do a blood draw and show that I can administer antibiotics. But not that other drug. I think it’s not good practice, and I just can’t do it,” Diane replied.

As Kimberly started to respond again, Lauren intervened. “OK,” she said. “I think we can see where this is going. This is another way to approach it, but Kimberly is making it very hard to reach agreement!” There was general laughter as Kimberly took a bow. She had been prepped by Lauren to stay firm in her defense of the academic rules.

Bettina was the next one to try. She acknowledged the students, the staff member, and the faculty member individually, but before she could get very far, Kimberly erupted again. “Look, this issue is not going to go away. It’s going to come up again and again and again...” Bettina got to her feet and crossed the room, trying to steer Kimberly out of the room, to physically break the dynamic that was consuming the discussion.

“Freeze,” several people called out, which was their mechanism for stopping the action and allowing another person to experiment with a new response. Bettina bowed out. All the while, Diane, Ann (the other student) and Randi (the staff member, who is herself Alaska Native) sat quietly.

“This is a really good example of a common Native way of dealing with confrontation,” said Randi, in her role as the accompanying staff member. “I was here to advocate for the students, but I didn’t say very much, because I can’t think in these situations. A lot of times we miss our opportunities to be really effective because we can’t think that fast. That’s part of why we feel that we’re on the front lines all the times, that we have to get armored up just to go to work.”

Ilarion raised his hand, indicating he’d like to try another approach. Stepping forward, he paused behind the guest chair. “Hello,” he said. He waited until each person in the circle acknowledged him. “I thought I might help. Would you mind if I sat down?” He was the first person who asked permission and waited to receive it before joining the group. The pause had a noticeable effect in slowing down the pace of the scenario.

“Well I was just thinking,” he said, “since I’m a senior faculty member...” There was laughter as everyone realized he was asserting rank over his faculty “colleague.” “I was thinking it might be possible to arrange to speak to the Dean,” he said, kicking it up another notch. “That might take some time to arrange, but in the meantime,” he turned to the students, “would you consider taking the test, since you won’t have to actually administer the meds but just answer a few questions about them? Would that work for you?”

Ilarion’s approach was the first to slow down the momentum of Kimberly’s objections, and Lauren pointed out how that might be due to an unequal power dynamic, which was the only way in which the faculty member felt she could legitimately yield. Undercurrents of power run beneath all confrontational situations, of course; this approach only made them overt. “Of course it might have worked differently if Kimberly was the senior faculty member,” said Lauren. “We might have explored that dynamic as well.”

Claudia was the last to join the scenario. She tried a compassionate plea spoken directly to the students. Leaning forward, folding her hands, she looked them in the eye and said “I just want to say that there have been many times in my life, as a student, as a practicing psychologist, and as a faculty member, when I have had to learn something that violated what I had understood before, something I didn’t want to believe, that I didn’t even trust. But learning those things has made me a better person. It can actually be a positive thing. It can make you be a stronger, more educated person.”

“You see what she’s doing?” said Lauren. “She’s attempting to be a bridge between the faculty member and the faculty member’s role in trying to educate the students, and the students who don’t see that bridge at all.”

“So you can see,” Lauren concluded, “that there are lots of ways to explore this. Bettina tried to take the faculty member out of the situation, which I thought was a very valid response. We could have explored that separately—what goes on outside the presence of the students and the staff member. How do you speak to somebody like the person Kimberly was playing? How do you reach a person taking that stance? If we had more time, we could have explored that question over and over again. There are other things you can do as well. You could be the

inner voice of, say, Kimberly.” She stood behind Kimberly, arranged her face in an exaggerated expression of disgust, and said “Oh my gawd! Another faculty member is trying to tell me what to do!” We laughed.

“Or you might be the inner voice of the other student, the one who said nothing.” She stepped behind Ann, and made her voice very small. “I just feel so bad...” She took another step sideways. “Or the inner voice of Randi, the staff member, thinking ‘where is my director?’”

We batted around possibilities and ideas for a while longer, until nearly everyone had contributed in some way. Finally, Lauren called for last comments, and several attempted to summarize their thoughts.

“The whole time we were going through these scenarios,” said Claudia, “the only thing I was thinking about was how to get the students to take the exam. Not any of the other stuff, but that they actually went and took the exam. Because what I’ve seen too often is that you two” she spoke directly to Ann and Diane in their roles as students, “would get up, leave, and not come back. That’s the biggest thing. That’s the thing that’s the most dangerous here. Sometimes students learn that the only way out is...out. And that’s what I kept thinking about. What could I do or say to get them to stay?”

There are many concerns and issues embedded in this simple storyline, and the multitude of similar stories that occur each day on our campuses. In this example, two students felt at odds with the test requirements, and the instructor was insistent that they comply with the dominant system’s demands. The stakes were fairly high on both a material and a personal level. If they chose the “correct” answer, they would be violating their cultural beliefs and affirming what their cultural intuition told them is an unethical practice; if they didn’t, they might sacrifice graduation and a lifelong career.

Native students report facing these kinds of conflicts in many different classes and disciplines, from business to anthropology, history to political science. Similar Catch-22 situations occur over and over again for Alaska’s Native peoples off campus as well. Fishermen may be forced to choose between following Western fishing regulations or feeding their hungry families. Village leaders may be forced to follow Western resource extraction regulations even when that compliance threatens the safety of subsistence harvesting within their region. Native people are required to conform to Western research processes even though such practices violate cultural protocols and leave a wake of negative feelings and compromised relationships.

Through this one small example, then, our faculty participants grappled with a situation that repeats itself many times over in interactions between Western institutions and indigenous peoples. However unwittingly, our institutions do in fact bias one set of values and practices over another, and we teach our students these systems every day.

Is there something we can or should be doing about this?

## EXERCISE

# Honoring Different Perceptions of Reality

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One of the biggest challenges our Native consultants mentioned was the tendency for those in the dominant culture to think they have a lock on “reality” and that other views of reality are at best “alternative” and at worst inferior or just plain wrong. Most of us can easily see the problems with other views; we just don’t tend to see the problems with our own.

A Mi’kway educator from Nova Scotia, cited in Marie Battiste’s book *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, observes that “the most serious problem with the current system of education lies not in its failure to liberate the human potential among Aboriginal peoples but in its quest to limit thought to cognitive imperialistic policies and practices... Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference.”

To introduce this idea, Ilarion often uses a short exercise that demonstrates how differently a group of people can experience the same reality. He displays a simple sentence and asks participants to count the “f’s” in it. The sentence reads, “Finished files are the result of years of scientific study combined with the experience of many years of experts.”

He’s used this same example in many different groups including at the White House Conference on the Oceans. The answers typically range from one to nine. “The range of responses shows us that we can be looking at the same thing, but seeing something quite different,” he says. “We see what we expect to see and ignore things that our brains tell us don’t matter, such as the word “of.” This is confirmed in every setting in which this exercise is tried. It happens because of the brain’s ability to screen out information it considers extraneous in order to focus on a central point.”

In this instance, there is in fact a correct answer. There are seven “f’s” in the sentence, and all of us can see them when their location is brought to our conscious attention. This is how it works when there are verifiable facts on the ground upon which we can eventually, if not immediately, agree.

But what happens when there are disputes about the facts or the data, when we cannot agree on what is actually true? In these cases, Native wisdom counsels that it is better to proceed with respect for all viewpoints.

“In the long term,” says Ilarion, “respecting each other is more effective than battling over who is right or trying to prove others wrong. Relationships are central and all perceptions of a situation can be valuable. The Elders say we get the best decisions and outcomes when we honor the

different perceptions amongst us, protect people's sense of importance within the group, and preserve the integrity of our relationships with one another. Native peoples teach that being impeccable in our process with one another will lead to an outcome that far surpasses that which could be accomplished by an individual alone. Competition over who is right will stop us in our tracks. Working together with dignity and respect will lead us to a better result."

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### **Count the F's**

*A short exercise that demonstrates how differently people may experience the same reality.*

Display the following sentence and ask people to count the number of "f's" it contains:

Finished files are the result of years of scientific study combined with the experience of many years of experts.

Ask for a show of hands: How many see three? Four? Five? Six? Seven? Eight? Nine?

Use this as a springboard for discussion. What's going on here?

Adapted from Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff.

## DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

# Balancing Science with Traditional Knowledge and Wisdom

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In the afternoon we introduced the second difficult dialogue of the day. This one involves conflicts between the worldviews and practices of Western science and those of traditional indigenous cultures. What makes it so difficult to engage is how lop-sided the two sides are with regard to power, prestige, and privilege.

Science and research are dominant forces in the modern world, and the institutions that practice them enjoy a privileged position in terms of funding, influence, and public perception. Although this is slowly changing, many scientist and researchers show little interest in, understanding of, or respect for the ways of learning about and living within the natural world practiced by indigenous cultures. When Western forms of science and research are insensitively practiced in and imposed upon Native communities, they can harm the inhabitants of those communities.

### **The Differences: Goals, Methods, Outcomes**

This is a complex subject with many important nuances and threads, and this discussion will of necessity be abridged. But, as previously noted, there are several fundamental differences between the educational practices of traditional Alaska Native cultures and today's higher education culture. Central to Western educational systems is the quantitative scientific research paradigm. Central to traditional Alaska Native educational systems is the qualitative experiential observation system that centers around a non-quantifiable experience of connectedness to the web of life. This is often referred to by Native educators as "spirituality." Native traditions view the experience of being connected to and a student of all creation as central to the educational process. Higher education doesn't even have a good word for this.

These two ways of attempting to understand the world have different goals. Scientists seek to understand, explain, and predict the natural world. They want to understand how things work and to create technologies to better human lives. Practitioners of traditional knowledge and wisdom seek to understand, adapt to, and live in balance within the natural world so that all human and more-than-human worlds can flourish in perpetuity.

Although Ilarion has spoken about this issue on many occasions, we decided to share an outside voice for this book as a way of linking our local Alaska Native experience with that of other indigenous peoples in North America. Dennis Martinez is Co-Chair of the Indigenous Peoples'

Restoration Network, an organization dedicated to supporting Native and tribal communities in environmental restoration, cultural rehabilitation, and the application of traditional ecological knowledge. He has advocated for indigenous perspectives through forty years of work in resource and knowledge protection, climate change, forest restoration, and projects bridging Western science with traditional ecological knowledge. He spoke at a national conference in 2008, organized by a society for the advancement of Chicano and Native American scientists.\*

“Just as traditional knowledge and culture is the context for traditional ecological knowledge,” says Martinez, “so Western culture is the context for Western science. Western science developed historically within an increasingly secular and materialistic culture without spiritual, reciprocal obligations to the natural world, [one] that views nature as without spirit. It is reductionist, not holistic. It is linear, not circular. It is product more than process. Nature is divided into its component parts in order to gain a large measure of control for technological innovations and development as well as for the verification or falsification of hypotheses through replicable empirical experiments for predictions of natural phenomena in short intervals of time and space.”

In other words, according to Martinez, Western science seeks to understand nature at least in part in order to control it. It is a powerful tool, he acknowledges, but “the kinds of questions Western science asks or doesn’t ask of nature are culturally determined to a large degree, and it is a quantitative tool that operates in a spiritual and non-Western cultural and historical vacuum. Tools can be used for the benefit or the detriment of the world. Science has done both. The same scientific toolkit can be used to benefit Indigenous peoples as well. But its technology has also led to the poisoning of our waters and lands and has had, more often than not, a devastating effect on our health.”

Western science strives for objectivity, to “reduce or eliminate biases, prejudices, or subjective evaluations by relying on verifiable data.”\*\* Much of its practice maintains a strict separation between observer and observed that is intended to ensure the resulting data won’t be limited by human senses or contaminated by personal or political agendas or biases.

Traditional knowledge and wisdom relies on the centrality of the observer’s intimate relationship to and experiential knowledge of a particular place and ecosystem. Traditional knowledge systems use keen observation and direct personal experience by a community of data-gatherers to gain critical information from the environment, through sustained intimate relationship with a particular place over a long period of time.

In some important ways, the two are not so very different. “A competent Indigenous hunter, fisher, farmer, or pastoralist,” says Martinez, “like a competent Western field researcher, uses the same human powers of observation, inductive and deductive logic, pattern recognition, skepticism of second- and third-hand information, nuanced judgment, imagination, open mindedness, inference and prediction, inquisitiveness, creativity, intuition, and honesty, as well as a willingness to experiment and a sense of wonder. All humans adapt to their world by remembering and learning. Indigenous peoples have the advantage of a much longer collective memory and a longer time frame for learning.”

\* Transcribed in *Changes We Have Seen*

\*\* <http://www.businessdictionary.com>

However, because traditional knowledge and wisdom is not derived from quantitative methodologies or written up in peer-reviewed journals, most Western researcher and policy-makers consider it to be subjective, merely anecdotal, and therefore highly suspect. Although more and more individuals have become open to traditional knowledge in recent years, most governmental policy is required by law to be based in the “best available science.” Because the scientific culture largely dismisses traditional knowledge, thousands of years of data and local expertise is often ignored or marginalized.

“Local people,” says Martinez, “directly dependent on their environment for subsistence livelihoods and possessing long term environmental knowledge—in other words, local environmental baselines with which to track change—know their places far better than the scientist whose research schedule is set by the academic calendar, bound by the vagaries of boom-and-bust foundation and institutional funding, and vulnerable to the phenomenon of shifting baselines.”

By and large, indigenous communities appreciate the benefits of the Western scientific objective approach. They appreciate its technological and methodological gifts and are grateful for many of the advances it has produced, especially within the medical realm. As long as its limitations are recognized and its applications are both equitable and used to preserve rather than destroy the web of life, most indigenous people value what Western science brings to the table. They are particularly intrigued with the creativity and new thinking that might emerge if Western scientists and Native thinkers truly worked together to address some of the challenges facing humanity and the natural world at this point in time.

What they object to is the disrespect many (but by no means all) practitioners of Western science show towards indigenous communities and traditional ways of knowing. They resent the marginalization and dismissal by scientists and others who consider their knowledge and wisdom to be merely anecdotal. They object to efforts to integrate, merge, or incorporate indigenous ways of knowing into the dominant approach, as these verbs reinforce the hegemony of the dominant paradigm. Instead, they argue for balancing the two approaches—one with a global focus, the other with a local orientation—and partnering between two complementary rather than competitive systems. “Collaboration between Western and Indigenous experts is about balancing knowledge that is locally contextualized with generalized scientific knowledge, not in the abstract or in literature, but sitting down together as equal partners in integrated discussion scenarios and hashing things out,” says Martinez.

This effort to create partnerships and to view the two systems as complementary has been an uphill battle in educational and scientific institutions. Although traditional knowledge and wisdom has been gaining ground over the past two decades, Martinez points out that “when traditional knowledge is taught... it happens in spite of the dominant education convention that, while traditional knowledge is a cultural treasure, it is not relevant to a science education in the modern world... For non-tribal schools, traditional knowledge is an optional anthropological oddity... Western science is the only universally valid epistemology... While the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous knowledge is beginning to happen on a global scale, it is still not



represented in Western science curricula. It is not yet recognized as an epistemology in its own right or as complementary and empowering to a student's science education and career."

## **The Opportunities: Towards Cooperation and Collaboration**

This short discussion only scratches the surface of all the things to be explored, honored, wrestled with, and worked out between representatives of these two vast and varied communities. Ilarion has addressed many audiences over the years, and he speaks often of the need for dialogue between indigenous leaders and Western scholars, scientists, and researchers. "I challenge educational institutions to join this conversation," he says. "For the good of us all."



### **Reflection**

How can indigenous ways of knowing and deep local indigenous knowledge of place be represented in the science classroom?

# Nature is our Textbook

Angayuqaaq “Oscar” Kawagley

*Late in the afternoon, Ilarion invited Oscar to muse with us about science, Alaska Native ways of knowing, and the tension between them. Oscar brought a lifetime of experience to these topics, including a Ph.D. in Education. He coined the term “ecosophy” to describe the process of searching for wisdom from nature.*

Many years ago, when I was teaching, I found out a lot of Native students were failing my classes. I liked teaching science and math because they were so easy to grade, eh? But I really wanted to change the way I was teaching, and what I teach now is mainly ecosophical. I haven't given a test for twenty or twenty-five years. I'd rather do it in some other way, try to make it a little more palpable and be more accommodating to the students.

But that really started me thinking about teaching science. And what is science? I dwelt on that for quite a long time. And so I got away from the science kits and everything else that I used to use, and I'd get the students to go out into the community and collect wires and things like that, whatever we would find along the way, and then we'd make up our own little science experiments, maybe in electricity or something like that. And going out in the springtime, out on the creeks and marshes and picking up frog eggs and bringing them into the classroom and watching them. We had a lot of fun doing that.

The idea of science really bothered me a lot. I have a background in biological science, and finally I came to the determination that the subsistence way of life is a form of science too, as well as a constant reminder of the principles of living in harmony with nature. We Alaska Native people have science. We had to have it in order to live successfully for many thousands of years in spite of all the changes going on around us.

And, boy, was it harsh where I grew up! We had nine months of winter, and very short summers. In fact, we had six seasons, because we considered the time going from winter into the spring as one of those seasons, where terrific changes take place. And then spring happens, the melting of the snow, the flora and the fauna coming back, and so on. And then we have another one, from summer changing into fall. So we had six seasons, fifteen moons.

And so I surmised that we had a science, which is nothing more than a curiosity to know why things happen the way they do. The subsistence way of life is close to an embodiment of spiritual values...a constant reminder that you give the utmost respect to everything in the natural world. Knowing their habits and habitats, that required a lot of keen observation.

I've heard some of our Elders say that nature is our textbook. And it very much is. It's a living textbook. And that's why our Native sciencing is a very gentle sciencing, because it's very visual. You don't put anything into the sod house to study it; you study it right where it's at.

*Here he made a cupping shape with his right hand and patted it on the imaginary ground.*

And that really makes for a good deep knowledge. Now, our knowledge is not perfect. Not perfect. And that's why I say we have to pay attention to the new theories and discoveries of the modern scientific world. Because our knowledge is not perfect. There is still room for more...

We also think that intelligence, knowledge, and skills have a spirit. Can you imagine that? They have a spirit, and therefore they are living. When I was teaching science and mathematics the way I was taught [in Western schools], I was contributing to the oppression of the Native-ness of the Native students. Because in assimilative education, in order to be successful, the spirit of the intelligence, the spirit of the knowledge, the spirit of the skill has been removed. And you become like anybody else. You don't give a darn about the world and its condition.

And that's not a good state to be in. I was in that state for a long time, for at least twenty years, where I never gave credit to my people, nor myself, for knowledge from my own perspective that could be worthwhile in the modern world.

[We used] very keen observation over a long period of time. I love to tell about Matthew Bean, who died about seven years ago. He was a high school graduate from Mt. Edgecumbe' who studied the Hudson Bay over a twenty year period. He didn't photograph, he didn't take samples, didn't catalogue things or anything like that.

*He paused, leaned forward, tapped his forehead.*

"Boy, all committed to memory. Very subtle changes over a twenty year period. And then he began to talk about it and he said, "You know, it's gotta be acid snow. Because look at these changes that have taken place."

And finally a couple of Fish and Wildlife people noted what he was saying, and a couple of people from the Association of Village Council Presidents started talking with a couple of scientists from the University of Alaska. And finally one winter they sent the scientists out to Bethel to sample some of our snow, and sure enough, there was acid snow. But you can see that this was very keen observation over a very long period of time. Twenty years is a long time to be observing something like that and the very subtle changes that take place.

That's what ecosophy means, searching for wisdom from nature. As I mentioned before, Mother Earth has a culture and it's a Native culture. And therefore we have to emulate Mother Earth. Ways to teach us, problem-solving, generation of new knowledge, and things like that are all in nature. All we have to do is pay attention to nature. I've heard some of our Elders say that nature is our textbook. And it very much is. It's a living textbook.

You [Western scientists] have the guidance, you have the organization, and you have the design for making your own study. And we have our own way of doing research, looking at things. And what does the scientist do? He asks the questions, eh? And so do we.

And I keep saying that our knowledge is not perfect. Neither is scientific knowledge perfect. And boy, we have a lot to share between the two ways of knowing. And we've got to find ways to make them meld, work with each other. Because my knowledge is imperfect, and theirs is imperfect...boy, how much more powerful can it get when you meld the two ways of knowing together.

*He spread his fingers wide, palms facing each other, and then slowly intertwined the fingers, letting them form an X. Breaking his hands back apart, he formed two open fists and shook them gently.*

Oh, but the ideas behind them are different, eh? Boy, they sure are... You know sometimes you make a model of it, but then Mother Earth doesn't fit perfectly; no it does not. Well after all, how can they include all the parameters to make it a perfect model, eh? They can only take so many little characteristics and include them in the model. And so, because it doesn't have all the information, it's imperfect. We have to work toward reducing the tension between our ways of knowing and the Euro-American ways of knowing.

Last month I was at Rankin Inlet for a meeting on wildlife management. Boy, talk about tension between the Inuit people and the Euro-American scientists. And you'd see some of those Inuit people getting fundamentalistic in their own thinking: "Our way is the only way." And of course the other side [was saying], "Well, we know so much more than you do." And one of the points of contention for the Inuit was going out into the "wild" and shooting at the caribou and other animals to put them to sleep, so they can weigh them, take blood samples, and other samples. And the Inuit were saying, "What effect does that chemical you are shooting into that animal have upon us who consume the moose and the caribou? Now cancer (and other diseases, but especially cancer) is so prevalent amongst our Native people. What kind of effect does that have?"

And there was no answer. But I was glad to see one young Inuit with a master's degree in microbiology. There was this young Native guy who knew all the use of the very sophisticated technological tools to study the various animals. We don't have those. That is a weakness of ours; we don't have these technological tools to be able to give us detailed knowledge about, for instance, contaminants. And we know there are contaminants out there. All you have to do is read a few magazines and read about disposing of your TV, into your back yard or into the dump. Just in the screen there are chemicals, often carcinogenic. And what happens when the screen breaks in the dump? Well, it trickles down into the ground. Boy, it's really a big problem, especially in the lowlands, seeping into our lakes and into our streams and into our rivers.

Right now, the biggest worry that we have is climate change. Because already the landscape is beginning to confuse and in some ways obfuscate our own identity. Because the landscape forms the mindscape. And that's worrisome. Because we have to deal with it as Native people, eh? And we know there will be invasive plants and animals, and a lot of them will take root very readily, because the ecological system has already been weakened. And when that happens and they replace some of the native plants and animals, whatever new plant comes, whatever new animals come, we're going to have to set up a new relationship with those new things. New rituals, new ceremonies. Oohhh. That kind of blows my mind.

And I often think because I live close to the coast...the seal. Boy, if that disappears a lot of our people are going to be really, really hurt...what is going to happen if those seals disappear?... Wow. It's always been with us. Seal meat, dried seal meat, seal oil, always has been with us. And all of a sudden, it's gone. Boy, what does that do to us psychologically?

*He pointed to his head.*

All these changes. And it behooves us as a Native people to really pay attention. Although the modern sciences are slowly coming about and beginning to recognize and to work with us. There's still a long way to go.

Many hundreds of years ago you had sciences that recognized that everything was living. But along came Copernicus, Descartes...the separation of mind and body, eh? Because there needed to be a change in the mindset to accommodate the political as well as the economic world. And so all of a sudden the universe became clockwork. Mother Earth and the solar system became clockwork. Then you can do anything that you want to, with the natural resources of Mother Earth. But we have a people that are very close to the land and never changed. Oh, there are a few of us that have become confused and had lost the spirit of intelligence to knowledge and skills and have become just like anybody else, don't give a darn about what happens to the world.

There has to be a consciousness change. Remember what I said? That the totality of the universe is consciousness. And so there has to be a consciousness change in order to accommodate physical change.

*He gestured to Libby, and asked "Am I going over time?" It had been 45 minutes, and his mouth was getting dry. "Pepsi would be good," he said. We took a short break while someone fetched him a glass. We sat in silence while he drank. "Boy that emptied my mind!" He laughed.*

But I think [what matters is] the sharing between the two. Our greatest gift is going to be living in harmony with nature. And I think I mentioned the fact that the subsistence way of life encourages one to become altruistic. Giving the utmost respect to every living thing, including the amoeba and everything else, because they do their job equally well, that's the egalitarian system. And that is the most important thing.

But the white people went off on a tangent away from living in harmony with nature about three hundred years ago for political and economic reasons. But it looks like they're starting to bend, eh?

We can contribute a lot to the Euro-American science, and we need to borrow a lot, a lot of detailed information which we have rudimentary knowledge of. You can tell us what to do with that cadmium that we find on the dump, what the source is, and what we might be able to do to try to do away with it. So we have a lot of ways to help each other. But boy, if they became one? Look how much more powerful our sciences are going to be.

## DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

# Spirituality and Education

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A third difficult dialogue that we hinted at but did not directly address revolves around the role of spirituality in education. As we mentioned earlier, many Native people use this word to convey the experientially-based sense of connection to the world that is at the heart of Native life and learning. At one point or another, most of the Alaska Native thinkers involved in shaping and guiding this project talked about spirituality as a centerpiece of traditional Alaska Native education.

The mere mention of spirituality tends to raise hackles in most U. S. academic settings. Many academics conflate the term with Western-style religion or associate it with New Age practices and other ill-defined, eclectic self-exploration and self-improvement systems. The long, complicated, and challenging relationship between the academy and religion is an extremely interesting area, but far beyond the scope of this book.

For our purposes, suffice it to say that when Alaska Native people speak of traditional spirituality they are referring to something that involves neither religion nor Western self-exploration philosophies or practices. They understand spirituality to be the embodied personal and collective experience of a living, reciprocal relationship between the natural and human worlds. It is a deep sense of being actively connected to, informed by, and participating in life along with rivers, winds, trees, creatures, other people, sounds, smells, fish, plants, and so on. It is an embodied process and experience rather than a belief. Perhaps most foreign to a Western-educated mind, human beings are not considered the center of creation or the peak of the life form pyramid, but simply one species among many.

It is the ultimate goal of traditional Alaska Native education to produce human beings who move within and operate from this profound, humble, and ever-changing relationship to life's human and more-than-human communities. The educational goal is to improve the intellectual skills of the next generation and to create whole human beings capable of engaging in self-regulating processes of right relationship with the natural and social worlds that support their existence so that all may flourish. This requires well-developed intellectual and physical skills; it also requires the ability to quiet the mind and access other, deeper, more holistic capacities and sources of information and wisdom.

The indigenous spiritual orientation involves the individual on all levels (mental, emotional, physical, kinesthetic, aural, environmental, etc.) as an integrated system that goes beyond the sum of its parts and extends beyond the Western boundaries of the self. Most especially, as many Native speakers have tried to convey, it involves dropping out of the relentless thought process that defines much of modern Western life and accessing more global capacities for awareness.

“Alaska Native people had to have a profound, intimate connection to all of creation,” says Ilarion, “in order to survive and thrive in often harsh conditions for ten thousand years.”

Traditional ways of knowing are not thought-centered. In fact, a prerequisite for this way of knowing is to fall completely out of thought. “I can sit for hours waiting for a sea lion to come without a single thought coming through my mind,” says Ilarion. “Modern Western society centers intelligence in one place only: in the brain. But our Elders tell us that the brain is all about the past or the future, never the now. We need to slip out of our thoughts in order to be present in the now. This is one reason we learn from the animals, because the animals are profoundly present. We watch them closely and see how they use their innate intelligence to live and survive and thrive. This is how we begin to feel spirit in all things. But as soon as I slip into my brain, I disconnect from everything else: my body, my being, my relationship to animals and other people and the earth. The Elders say that when we separate from our bodies, we separate from All That Is. That’s why we separate from each other as well.”

This methodology is impossible to measure in a quantitative way (although aspects of it can be monitored or approximated); indeed, it is not even easily communicated. This is a way of being in and knowing the world, an intimate relationship between a group of human beings and a specific place over a long period of time, a learned practice of keenly attending to, learning from and adapting to the world outside of the “self” through the senses rather than through measurement, and using awareness rather than narrowly defined thoughts and words.

Western science, with its primarily intellectual orientation, prioritization of eliminating emotional and other biases, and focus on explaining natural processes from the outside, is naturally skeptical of the data that comes from this qualitative approach. Science is based on an understanding that human beings cannot rely on our limited senses alone for accurate data; many realities of the universe are counterintuitive and ungraspable by the limited human senses. Perceiving and understanding such realities often requires highly abstract mathematical calculations, universal theories, technologies that vastly expand the reach of the human sensory capacities, and a detachment from the results (as opposed to an intimate, life-or-death, relationship to them). From this perspective human subjectivity only threatens to distort otherwise objective data. Any suggestion of spirituality at the center of education can appear anathema to those who respect only phenomena that can be tested, measured, analyzed, and used as a basis for prediction.

The two approaches are not necessarily destined for eternal conflict; they can also function in important complementary ways. A growing number of scientists argue that our understanding of any particular place or species can best be served by a blending of the data derived from intimate contact with the complex workings of that place or species over thousands of years and the data derived from the more detached Western scientific investigation into aspects of the place or species over shorter periods of time.

On an Alaska public radio program devoted to the relationship between traditional knowledge and Western science,\* Craig George, Senior Wildlife Biologist for the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management, spoke of the many similarities between local/traditional knowledge and science, citing as an example a question about bowhead whales.

*One of the more interesting things we stumbled on is this question of whether bowheads are capable of smelling in air. That came up with respect to offshore oil and gas rigs. The local knowledge was clearly that whales were capable of smell, but you pick up any textbook on cetaceans and it will say that they are incapable. We worked with a really good whale anatomist and got permission to take apart a whale skull and, sure enough, found olfactory bulbs are present. In fact, they're fairly large. Genetic techniques showed that the olfactory genes are active. It was pretty clear that they are capable of smelling.*

He expressed his respect for traditional knowledge and went on to celebrate the possibilities of partnership.

*Both are the collection of empirical data over time, tested through time and updated. In that sense, the observations made here by the whaling community are clearly science. We've really benefited from that, and we are light years ahead doing our whale population abundance work by sitting on hundreds of years of local knowledge. It's so exhilarating when the scientific convergences occur, when you get some deep knowledge such as the whale's sense of smell and you confirm it with anatomy and physiology work. It's really exciting.*

Given that a “spirituality” based on intimate connection with the natural world is absent from Western science and education and central to Native ways of knowing, there is clearly much to be gained from a reciprocal relationship between the two ways of knowing. At the very least, scientists and educators might learn more about the Native regard for all of life, and Native people might see more benefits from Western scientific and educational efforts. At the most, who can say how this might change the way things are done to the benefit of all?

Indigenous ways have held up for millennia. Maybe, just maybe, Western education and science and this kind of spirituality can co-exist.

\*"Talk of Alaska," KSKA, Alaska Public Radio, April 9, 2013



# We Are One

Ilarion Mercurieff

I learned the Aleut way of hunting as a meditation and a spiritual practice. The Aleut hunter suspends ego for group cohesion and hunting success. He defers to the most experienced hunter in the group. Even if we all fired a killing shot at the sea lion, we all knew whose bullet struck the animal first. This hunter gets first pick of the meat. I watched as the hunters all worked to retrieve the sea lion, taking turns cutting the carcass, then dividing up the parts in roughly equal portions, no matter how many hunters were present. And I knew that each hunter gave meat to others before his own family, especially the elderly and widows.

As I connected more deeply with other hunters, I also learned to connect more deeply with all of life. Aleut hunters know that when we take an animal we are killing another conscious being. We are taught to revere all life and all life forms. All life has the same spirit we do. It comes from the same place, the same source: *Agox* (the Maker or Creator).

It is one thing to understand the concept of sacredness (with your head) and another thing entirely to experience it with your whole being. I was eleven years old the first time I experienced the true sacredness of life. One day I was alone hunting when a sea lion came by, and I shot it. I knew the instant of its death, not because I was so sure of my shot, but because of what happened next. In an instant, an extremely subtle electrical impulse rushed through my body. I experienced the spirit of this animal. In the instant that the life-force came through my body, this sea lion told me it had consciousness and intelligence, and it was surrendering itself to me. That changed the way I looked at all life on this planet. In an instant, my reverence and regard for all life expanded exponentially.

Later, I told my *Aachaa* what I had experienced. He smiled, looked me deep in the eyes, and said, "*Exumnuxkoh.*" Good. That was all he said. In that single word, he affirmed my experience, told me it was shared, and rejoiced with me in the knowing of it.

For the first deep time, I knew the reverence my people had for any animal they took. In experiencing the profoundness of this sea lion's death, I came into connection with the Divine and experienced the oneness of all Creation. When I killed that sea lion, I experienced our connection at the deepest level. We are not separate beings, he and I. We are one.

This is what we mean by a sacred experience. It's not religion; it's a way of being that is connected to self, others, and all of existence in a deep, profound, and spiritual way. It is connection that guides, directs, and informs us of our proper relationship with self, others, and the earth. This is what we call the way of the real human being.



## **Reflection**

How do you experience the interconnectedness of the world?

The background features abstract, overlapping shapes in shades of green and red. A large, semi-transparent number '4' is positioned on the right side of the page. The text is centered in the upper half of the page.

# One Day with Elders on the Land

We must devise a system of education that respects the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of Indigenous as well as Western traditions.

ANGAYUQAQ OSCAR KAWAGLEY

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# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Day Four

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In the best of all possible worlds we would have held the entire learning experience outdoors, on the land and on the waters. We would have caught and cooked some fish together, or else filleted it and hung it up to dry. We would have gathered berries or seaweed or medicinal herbs, all the while observing and learning from the Elders about the proper protocols for harvesting, preparation, and use. We would have learned ceremonies for giving thanks and for ensuring that the animals and plants we harvested would be sustained and continue to thrive. We would have danced and told stories and laughed.

In this world, the best we could manage was a single day on tribal lands with modified versions of dancing, storytelling, feasting, and listening to Elders. And even that was a close call. Because this was to be a university-sponsored event, we had to meet one set of rules. As guests on tribal lands, we had to observe a different set of rules. We'd need an invitation from tribal officials, a waiver from university catering in order to serve Native foods, and permission from Wells Fargo

### Sample Agenda

Protocols for Interacting with Elders

Transportation to Eklutna

Learning from Elders

Lunch: Alaska Native Foods

Stories Without Words

Drumming and Dancing

Bank to access the picnic grounds (it's a long story). Throw in Anchorage weather in early May (cold, with a muddy remnant of winter snow still on the ground), a couple of people who needed help in moving around, and the protocols of a United Nations summit meeting, and you are starting to get the picture.

It had been especially tricky to invite the Elders. We wanted to include Elders from a diversity of cultures with strong ties to traditional subsistence practices and pedagogies who were comfortable walking in both traditional Native and academic worlds. Many we might have included either live far from Anchorage, speak little or no English, or both. We needed Elders who were healthy enough

to spend a whole day with us, available within our timeframe, and close enough to Anchorage that we wouldn't have to fly them in. It wasn't always easy to track them down, and we continued to feel a certain amount of anxiety about who would actually be there right up to the last minute.

"I was at fish camp and seal camp out near Yakutat," laughed Elaine Abraham. "My son got us seven huge seals, and it's a job to do that, so we had school kids there to help us with it. I went from there to halibut and king salmon camp. I'm always happy when the phones are out. I just got back two days ago, and I thank Larry and Libby for their patience with me."

We wanted to offer traditional foods in recognition of the central role that harvesting, preparation, storage, and consumption of wild foods plays in traditional Alaska Native cultures. An enormous amount of their teaching—including their philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and more—takes place as part of hunting, fishing, gathering, cooking, skinning, filleting, smoking, and drying foods or preparing to do these things. We were honored when Tina Woods, adjunct faculty member and gifted chef of Aleut ancestry, agreed to provide and prepare an array of salmon, halibut, fry bread, and berries for our lunch. We ate out of doors, on the big sweep of mountain-ringed lands that constitute the Eklutna picnic grounds.

Eklutna is the tribal center for the Dena'ina nation that once exercised traditional and customary use of the lands now occupied by the Municipality of Anchorage. We met in the tiny community center, a rustic log-cabin-style structure whose walls are ornamented with drawings and maps. We sat packed together in about three hundred square feet of floor space: sixteen faculty members, five Elders, two facilitators, a tribal staff member, an administrative assistant, and a video cameraman. The faculty group sat in folding chairs along one side of the darkened room; the Elders gathered around a small table along the other side. The staff member had set up a slide show along one wall. The cameraman was stuffed into a back corner, in a space barely big enough to turn around. It was quite a difference from the well-lit and OSHA-approved campus classrooms most of us were used to.

The Elders held forth for the rest of the morning, while the rest of us watched and listened in silence and respect.



## Learning from Elders

*A few ideas for bringing the wisdom of Elders into your classroom.*

Identify indigenous Elders in your region who might offer different views of your topic from those offered by experts from the dominant culture. Respectfully offer them the opportunity to share their perspectives. Compensate them appropriately.

Consider what role Elders (indigenous or not) might play in helping your students achieve greater perspective in your discipline. Would it make sense to invite people with fifty or more years of experience in your field to tell stories or offer guidance to younger people? Might your students be asked to interview people like that and report their findings to the class?

## PROTOCOLS

# Interacting with Elders

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We met in the library that morning for some last protocol reminders. Everyone was dressed warmly in anticipation of spending part of the day outdoors.

Ilarion reviewed certain key protocols for interacting with and learning from our guest Elders, concepts deep within Native-style communication:

- Always treat Elders with deference and respect.
- Pay attention to their needs. For example, get water for them to prevent dehydration. If it looks like they need your help, provide it without being asked. (Native peoples usually have a younger escort assigned to an Elder to attend to those needs).
- If you ask a direct question, make sure it is a thoughtful one. Elders are very tolerant, but they gauge the level of maturity of the listener by the quality of the question, and meet you at that level. So if you ask a question that you could have figured out for yourself by listening and observing, they will note that.
- Instead of asking a direct question, try engaging in a conversation about the topic. That way, you might get to know more about the context of the subject or issue. You might hear a story about it and get a sense of the deeper meaning of it.
- Listen and observe more than you talk. Small talk is less important to most Alaska Native Elders (and peoples) than relationship. Connecting with someone just by being with them and listening to a story together feeds people more than talking with one another.
- Be aware that seemingly unrelated stories often have multiple layers of meaning about relationships. “I was with Sadie yesterday. We had caribou stew. It was really good. She told us a story.” This kind of sharing may seem to have no direct connection to the topic at hand; it is offered as a way of enriching relationships.
- Native conversation is nuanced and indirect. If an Elder wants to invite you to do something, they will not ask you directly. They might say, “I’m having salmon today.” This could be an invitation to join them for dinner.
- Much communication occurs non-verbally. For example, many Native peoples (including students in classes), will answer “Yes” to a question simply by raising their eyebrows. Similarly, when people meet each other, they may not say a word, but raised eyebrows or looking each other directly in the eyes will signal acknowledgement of one another and the fact that everything is OK. An Elder looking sideways at you, however, indicates that something needs to be corrected!



From left; Leonard Apangalook, Howard Luke, Ben Snowball (drummer), Oscar Kawagley, and Elaine Abraham.

**Elaine Abraham** is Tlingit from the Raven moiety clan of the Copper River in Yakutat. Her father was a traditional Tlingit chief, and she was raised in the traditional Tlingit manner. She attended the first accredited nursing program for Native American women and returned to Alaska as the first Tlingit registered nurse. She served as Yakutat School Board President during the desegregation of the village school; organized the Southeast Native Board of Health; held several administrative positions at Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka; developed the Tlingit and Haida Language Teachers Training program; and helped create the Alaska Native Language Center. At UAA she served as Vice President for Rural Education Affairs, Coordinator of Native Student Services, and Associate Professor. She holds a Master of Arts in Teaching from Alaska Pacific University and is Chair of the Board for the Alaska Native Science Commission.

**Leonard Piitqaak Apangalook, Sr.** was a Siberian Yup'ik leader, master boat-builder, and whaling captain from the village of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. He served as a magistrate for the region and in many other positions of leadership with his people and elsewhere. His observations of changes in Arctic sea ice are included in "Sea Ice Knowledge and Use," part of an International Polar Year project. He died in 2012.

**Howard Luke** is an Athabascan Elder who was born at Linder Lake, Alaska, in 1923. His mother would teach him at night with stories and *gaalee'ya* which means "how to take care of your luck." Howard's family moved to Fairbanks in 1937. Howard established the Gaalee'ya Spirit Camp, which offers Alaska Native youth a chance to learn subsistence and other Native cultural practices and skills. He published an autobiography, *Howard Luke: My Own Trail*, edited by Jan Steinbright Jackson. As a culture bearer, he is respected for his wisdom and knowledge of Athabascan culture, language, and lands.

**Alberta Stephan**, an Upper Inlet Dena'ina Elder, was born on the outskirts of the tent city of Anchorage. Her grandfather was Chief Ezi from the Matanuska/Eklutna area. She grew up with her family along upper Cook Inlet, following a subsistence way of life. She is the acknowledged matriarch of the Eklutna Village and author of *Traditional Athabascan Fish Recipes*, *The First Athabascans of Alaska*, and *Cheda*.



# A Gathering of Elders

*We were honored to be in the presence of five distinguished Elders for the day. The following is based on a transcription of their actual words as they addressed the faculty participants and each other during the morning's gathering.*

## Welcome: Alberta Stephan

*As a representative of the Eklutna tribe, Alberta Stephan welcomed her fellow Elders and saluted the historic nature of the gathering. Eklutna Village was honored, she told them, to be hosting a gathering of four Alaska Native nations on their lands. Then, with classic self-deprecating Native humor, she got right down to business.*

I didn't know when they invited me that I was going to be talking to all teachers, people affiliated with the school. So I wrote down a bunch of gripes, because I thought we were going to talk to a bunch of politicians...

*There was loud laughter all around. Alberta then spoke for quite some time, starting with a history of the Eklutna people and her own family, and moving on to comment on the education of Alaska Native children based upon that history.*

I was born at Whitney, Alaska. That's a little section outside of Anchorage. I was born in a tent. My father worked on the railroad. He and my mom had their first home here in Eklutna Village. My mom was born in Knik Village, and she was in the orphanage when it was moved to Eklutna from Tyonek. The orphanage then became Eklutna Vocational School where they taught gardening, building, cooking, clerical work, and first aid. The school was there until 1925.

I started school when I was seven, and my mom and her half-brother helped me with the first and second year of school. My mom taught her in-laws ABC's and some reading, the ones that were too old for school. The Natives in my dad's generation did not get a chance to go to school, so they lived their own ways, until the hunting and the fishing laws came out and they could no longer hunt and fish or trap like they used to. My dad was deaf and there were no doctors around in those days. He did labor work on the railroad for a while until it became too dangerous for him to work. That generation, my dad's generation, took to alcohol and could no longer teach their children how to make their living off the lands. The young people that were lucky enough to go to school had a hard time with book learning. Now about four generations of children later, those same children are considered mentally retarded. No one to teach them anything they needed to know.

Children must start learning from the time they start noticing things; it doesn't matter how young. Their brains need to be developed. I know some people that couldn't even grasp ABC's. And the parents were no longer able to teach them how to live in Native ways, so they had a hard time. And when children are in boarding schools and children's homes, the only thing they learn is what they do right there: washing dishes, keep their clothes clean and their rooms clean. No

money management, no freedom to use their own brains, nobody to tell them if they're doing a good job or not, and there you have children that are having a hard time all the way through.

One time when I was about nine years old, my dad was a commercial fisherman, and he took me into the office at the cannery. And there was this lady sitting there, typing away like mad. And he asked me, "Do you think you can do that someday?"

No way.

*She waved her hands in front of her body, back and forth.*

I'm a Native, you know, and I didn't know the difference, I just couldn't... I knew there were white people, they were doing their thing. I couldn't grasp the idea that I would someday learn how to do that, you know? "No," I said. "No."

But later on my brother had polio, and he was in and out of orthopedic hospitals where he got his education. He took business courses in there, and he told me it's not all that hard to learn to type. He had an old typewriter that my mom got from a Sears catalog, and so he gave it to me, and he showed me how. Much later, President Johnson had this anti-poverty plan, and I went to this program and learned to type, learned office procedures and stuff like that.

But what I'm saying is that when the children think they can't do it, they have to be told they can do it. And they have to be confident in it. Children need encouragement.

Native people had a hard time adjusting to a new way of life. Some of them made it real fine; some of them did not. And the ones that did not are usually the ones out on the street. And they can't go back home and do what they used to do because there's too many laws now. So that in a nutshell is how I will explain the Native people and their lack of education. They haven't had a chance to do all that, you know...

I have watched the children growing up around our village. I also study our people and our progress. There is a chain reaction of not teaching what the children should know. The parents' grandparents were raised the Native way and most of them don't have the knowledge to pass on. I have given many talks on our historical Native ways. Schools won't teach the children everything.

## Apology: Ilarion Merculieff

*After the initial welcome and introduction, an important item was added to the morning's agenda: an apology to the Eklutna people. It turns out we had made two significant errors in protocol in setting up the gathering, and Ilarion moved to repair any relational damage that might have resulted. He stood up and faced Alberta with two feathers in his hand, the darker one nestled into a small leather pouch. He held up the white one first.*

Before we begin I wanted to offer this to you, Alberta, as a gift to thank and honor the people of Eklutna on this land.

*He held up the second, a dark brown.*

The other one is an apology. This is a learning moment for everybody. These feathers came from the island where the Aleut people made their last stand against the Russians. The Russians decided in the 1700's they were going to wipe out all the people on the three largest islands in the Aleutians. After that attack, the three thousand survivors—mostly elderly people, babies, and children—went to this one island. And the Russians found out about it and decided to kill all of them. They killed 3,000 people in four hours. I was the first Aleut to go back to that island since that happened. It was quite an experience, as you can imagine.

When I was on the island, I was praying and asking for any messages from the ancestors. The message that came back was, "We are still here on this island waiting for the time when people will heal. When our people heal, then we are ready to go." And I looked over to one side and there were these feathers. So this white one is symbolic of the healing that we are going through and the hope that we have.

This other one..., well, I teach about protocol to outside people all the time, so I should know these things. But there are some things I am trying to correct in terms of the protocol of coming here. We invited the Kicaput Singers and Dancers, but they are from another tribe, and we failed to ask specific permission for them to dance on this land. The other omission was forgetting to invite the head of the tribe to join us and say something if she wished. Those are big omissions on my part. I called the tribal leader and apologized, and she graciously accepted the apology. But I felt like more was needed.

And so I offer this feather and the fur seal teeth in this pouch to the people of Eklutna with my deepest apologies for missing that point.

*He crossed the small room in two slow steps and reached across the table to hand the feathers to Alberta, who stood to receive them. Alberta said, "This is a great moment where we have all cultures together, and we're doing something with a common goal. And I think this is really a historic day for the Native Village of Eklutna. Thank you all for coming."*

## **Introductions: Ilarion Merculieff**

*As Alberta sat down, Ilarion spoke again. He welcomed the Elders and confirmed the fact that this gathering was a first of its kind on these lands. Then, one by one, he introduced the Elders at the table.*

Over here we have Elaine Abraham. I've known her for a few years. Such a beautiful heart. Every time I hear your voice my heart warms up.

*His voice lifted, and he raised open hands in front of his heart.*

She is from Yakutat and Anchorage; she used to work at the University of Alaska, and we have depended on her to give us guidance on a lot of things, one of which was the Alaska Native Science Commission, where she served on the Advisory Board.

And then of course you've all met Dr. Oscar Kawagley, Angayuqaq... He's been the go-between to connect up the outside world ...to try to help them understand the Yup'ik worldview and has been invaluable in that. And everywhere I go they say, "Oh yeah, yeah, I've read Dr. Kawagley's book." It makes my job a lot easier.

And here is Leonard Apangalook. He's from St. Lawrence Island and is a former whaling captain. Now it's no easy thing to be a whaling captain. You have to know so much, and you have to be really on the top of your game, as they say today. He was good enough to agree to be with us, and I'm very glad to have you.

*He reached across the table and picked up the ball cap sitting in front of Howard Luke. The word SAVVY was spelled out in big bold letters across its front. Laughing, he picked it up and showed it around the room.*

And then Howard Luke. He and I have talked a lot about how people don't have common sense.

*Nearly everybody burst out laughing. He turned to the faculty participants.*

And I think I told you one time Howard and I were exchanging audio tapes, and in one of the tapes he said anybody who speaks in front of a group of people and has to read from a piece of paper has no business being up there! And I took that to heart.

*He turned back to Howard, gesturing to the faculty sitting against the wall.*

And I want you to know that we told them, nobody's going to write anything all week. No papers. Not even notes, just observe.

*Back to the faculty audience again.*

Howard has been a very honored Elder from the Interior. He has a spirit camp across the Yukon River, and he has been my guide in so many ways, as have all the Elders here... Howard's got an honorary doctorate, and his camp has helped a lot of young people up there.

*And back to Howard one last time.*

We are very glad to have you here.

## **Maria Coleman: A Brief History of Eklutna**

*Tribal Council and staff member Maria Coleman gave a presentation that provided some historical and cultural context for our time on Eklutna lands.*

Anthropologists like to call us Athabascan or Tenaina; we call ourselves Dena'ina and more specifically Upper Inlet Dena'ina.

*She showed a picture of the Eklutna Village logo, a drawing of the valley with its two distinctive mounds.*

Eklutna means two hills or two knobs...It's the anglicized version of *Id'loi'nu* or *Idlughet*, which means the river that flows between two knobs. I love to hear the Elders tell the stories. They say that essentially the mounds were created by a giant whale that left the big lake because her offspring had been teased. Our storytellers estimate that this event occurred at the time of glacier melt.

*She showed maps of Cook Inlet and Knik Arm dotted with traditional fishing and camping sites. The map of abandoned settlements had more than twenty markers; the map of presently occupied sites had only four.*

The people used to rest here at Eklutna as they moved between their summer fish camps along Knik Arm and their winter homes in the Copper Center area. Our families had tent frames and cabins in regularly used places. Alberta's ancestors had a fish camp on what is now called Point Woronzof. \* They used to dig pits and cover food with birch bark to keep it cool. Our Elders say birch bark is a natural preservative.

*The next slide was titled "Exodus;" it listed ten events cascading from the arrival of Russians in the 1700s. Among them were a smallpox epidemic that wiped out half the Dena'ina population in 1838 and the founding of the Alaska Railroad in 1915, at which time Dena'ina land was "basically sold out from under us" as lots to form the city of Anchorage.*

That brought a whole lot of outsiders to Alaska. Everybody left again during World War I, but then there were lots of jobs for Dena'ina people. So we were very successful for a short time. But then in 1918 we lost half our population for a second time to another outbreak of influenza.

• Today a public recreational site within the Municipality of Anchorage.

*Then came the boarding school era, a mixed period when some Native individuals got a useful education while others had extremely negative experiences. Alberta joined her voice to this discussion. "The Eklutna school was formerly the Tyonek orphanage," she said. "It was moved over here in 1922 or '23. The men in the village helped put the dormitories up, and then they were encouraged to marry the girls as soon as they were sixteen. And so a lot of the girls didn't finish their education. They went as far as maybe eighth grade. And most of the men in the village didn't go to the school at all; they just learned what they could from their wives."*

*Alberta also called out the school superintendent of the time for listing people as Aleuts instead of Dena'ina, encouraging students to marry young, and transferring tribal lands to non-Native interests. "They had a fishing site down by the river, they had farmland, they had chickens, they had a little infirmary where they taught the girls nursing and taking care of sick people. So it was an OK school where kids got a start."*

*Turning back to the Exodus slide, Maria pointed to the last four points on the list.*

*In 1939, they closed down commercial fishing in Cook Inlet, at which our people were very successful. So we lost that. There was a cannery at Ship Creek. A lot of our Elders talk about that; they were treated very well there, and most of their business was from the Dena'ina people. There was World War II. Next the 1959 Statehood Act affected us, because in order for non-Natives to achieve statehood, they had to basically promise to fix their relationships with Alaska Natives. And then the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, where we got ten percent of Alaska back as owners and shareholders where we'd had a hundred percent of the land before.*

*The penultimate slide presented a list of views and values that by now were becoming familiar to nearly all of us in the room. It will be time when it is time. All we really have is today. No one is above or below. Ties are never severed. Listen to your Elders. Talk from your heart. Be thankful. Be quiet. Share.*

*The last slide featured a photo of Maria and her mother, Elizabeth (Ezi) Mills, under the heading "Chin'an. There are no goodbyes."*

## Elaine Abraham

*Ilarion then invited the other Elders to share whatever they might want to share, beginning with Elaine.*

Talking about protocol, I have to go through a protocol first because this is the way of life of our Native people. I want to thank Alberta and the spirits and the ancestors who are on this land. I want to honor the spirits that were the ancestors of Alberta and Maria, that we are welcomed to this land. And I want to thank Libby and Larry for trying to keep up with me where I was two days ago... I'm especially happy to have my niece with me here.

*She continued around the room, acknowledging the faculty participants, the other Elders, and the Eklutna tribal members who were present. By the time she made it around the room, everyone present had been seen, acknowledged, and honored.*

I especially wanted to honor Alberta... because she's written so many books. Developing books is really good for our young people because now they read and that's what they relate to.

My people have so many ways in common with the ways they have here [at Eklutna]. We are trying to get our young people away from TVs and radios and iPods long enough to get them to fish camp and to seal camp for two weeks every year, so they can learn how to start from scratch: where to get the boat ready, get the oars ready, boys' jobs, girls' jobs. We're trying to get back to the way it used to be when we grew up, when Alberta and Oscar grew up, the way it was.

When we get up in the morning we pray that that day is a special day. We don't know what the night will bring, and we don't know what tomorrow will bring, so every day is a sacred day. It's a sacred life; it's a sacred way of life.

The Tlingits believe that every word you speak has a spirit to it. My father used to say because I was so active, I had to be quiet. I had to listen and not speak words just as they came to me. Because every word had a spirit, and it would fly like a butterfly, and it landed on a person in either a negative way or a positive way or in a blessing.

So I really am glad to be here. I've learned a lot from Alberta, and from the slide show and the commonality of the way our life was and the way it is today. Where we're still fighting for each of our lands, the sacred land of our ancestors. This common bond is so important. I'm glad we are together today, from St. Lawrence Island to up north where Howard comes from, to the Kuskokwim where Oscar comes from, and we are grateful for the land of your ancestors, Alberta.

*Gunalchéesh.* Thank you.

## Alberta Stephan

*Alberta held up a copy of one of her books, The First Athabascans of Alaska.*

I wrote about the people and how they lived before contact. They never thought they were having a hard time because this was their way of life. I lived some of it myself. Every year we had to go to fish camp and then up to the mountains for hunting. My dad was trapping a lot after he couldn't work anymore, and I always missed about two months of school, the first month and the last month, because we would have to go someplace where he would do some trapping.

I grew up in a time when there was no Salvation Army, no garage sales or anything like that. My mother would take an old man's trousers to make me clothes to wear. It was good that she had been in the schools. She learned how to use a sewing machine and a little bit about medicine, so she was able to take care of everybody real good that way.

I know a little bit about the culture before contact, so that's why I wrote that book. My grandmother and I were very close. Any time my mom had to go out wood cutting or taking showers or something, I was home with her. And I learned a lot from her, and I learned her determination. There was a thing she always said: "Who said it was hard?"

She was from the Copper Center area, born in 1875. Her father's the one that had the fish camp out by Point Woronzof. They used to walk from Copper Center down by the Matanuska River every spring after their fish. They had to know exactly how much to take to last them all winter. And they could count by ten, and that many fish made a bundle, and they knew how many bundles they needed. So they got enough fish, and then they walked all the way back up [to the Copper Center area] again.<sup>5</sup>

She met my grandfather when she was eighteen and he was riding one of those little steam engine boats, delivering supplies from the larger ships that couldn't come up to the beaches. He delivered supplies to the trading posts at Sunrise and Tyonek. After they got married, they took over the fish camp at Point Woronzof. Later on my dad and his two brothers inherited it, so that's a very old historical place for us. There's a graveyard back there that's in the historical records out at Point Woronzof where some of my relatives are buried.

I wrote her story because she had such a hard time. She had to go through the changes, to the point where they couldn't go out and get any kind of game or anything just to eat. They lived on rabbits; rabbits were always plentiful. If you want to know more about my grandmother, you have to read the book!

*She held up two other books she had written.*

I also wrote a book about the way we dry our fish. Even my own kids didn't know that. And this is a Dena'ina language book. Marc helped me put it together, and it has a CD in the back where you can hear my voice."

<sup>5</sup> According to Google Maps, a distance of 201 miles using today's road system.



*Marc Lamoreaux, Director of the Land and Environment Department of the Native Village of Eklutna, joined Alberta for the discussion. He gave a brief explanation of efforts to get Eklutna lands back from non-Native interests who acquired them without Dena'ina permission during the early twentieth century. Although several groups have offered to help, the money involved is prohibitive. "The price the bank wants for the land we're going to be on? Three million dollars. It's land that used to be completely owned, used, and occupied by the people who live in this area. It was taken totally without our permission and now we're put into the position of having to buy back what was stolen from us."*

*There were audible exhalations and a couple of groans at this point as audience members expressed their sympathy. There was a grim silence before Alberta spoke again. She told us about something that happened during World War II when a tribal leader gave the railroad or the Corps of Engineers permission to extract rock from a knob of mountain considered sacred by the Eklutna people. The rock was used for highways and bridges. The fallout from the dynamite used to blast the rock free, she believes, may have been responsible for a rash of respiratory illnesses, a few cases of lupus, and even the epidemic of early deaths suffered by men from the village.*

When the war broke out...there was no army here, no highways, no nothin'. Alaska was the first one the Japanese invaded. And everyone was in a great big hurry. My dad died when he was 64. What I would like to know really is [what was in] the dynamite that they were using?

*She also mentioned the possible fallout from military target practice and how it may have affected subsistence foods eaten by villagers.*

In target practicing, the powder flies all over the place. That's what the birds were eating...this doesn't happen only around here in Eklutna Village, I think it's probably happened all over.

*There was silence. Ilarion cleared his throat and said "Even the modern day history is still affected by the oppressive things that were done in the past and that are still being continued. Thank you Alberta for sharing that."*

## Howard Luke

*He turned to Howard on his right. "Maybe I could ask you Howard if you want to share anything?"*

*Howard spoke slowly, his voice raspy and ragged. He spoke first to the history of miscommunication between Alaska Native and non-Native people, and how those miscommunications can sometimes result in significant conflicts with respect to the use of resources in an area. Because of the lack of understanding, Native peoples sometimes "say yes to what we don't even understand."*

Yeah. I learned quite a bit from working with older people. And our chief, you know, he's the one that I learned a lot from. You know the first president who came to Alaska? You know who that was? President Harding. So he came to Nenana, and everybody from all over came to Nenana to listen to the president talk. They all sat on the ground, and our chief, Chief Thomas, sat up there on back of the rail car. So [the President would] talk and talk and talk. Nobody couldn't understand him, you know? Finally he said to the chief, "Well you talk, talk to the people." So Chief Thomas got up there and started talking, talking, talking in our Native tongue. Finally he quit talking, and he turned around, and he told the president, "Did you understand what I was saying?" And the president said, "Not a word." He said, "Neither did I; when you were talking I couldn't understand you."

The chief said, "When you said mineral, why didn't you say sand and gravel?" That's the reason right now that we're not getting along. And right now young people could explain to us what non-Native leaders might be saying because I do not understand them. I don't understand what they're talking about. It'll take me a little while to find out what they're talking about. So the president, he went over there and he thanked the chief for saying that. And right now, that's the reason we're falling back because we say yes to what we don't even understand.

But today I know what they're talking about... They're using our land so fast right now it's terrible, and that's what I'm doing right now, I'm trying to share, I don't do that for money. I just volunteer, and I go to the schools and I just volunteer to let the young people know what's ahead. We've got to look for the future. See what's happening right now? See the price of the groceries...

*He grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and spoke about its cost.*

Seventy dollars. In my young days, we'd pay six dollars for better quality. And that's what I mean, you know? Depression is coming. And they said that years ago, our leaders said that depression's going to come, and it's going to affect the whole world. And I seen depression when I was a kid, and... we have to let our young people know about these things. And pass these things on, you know? And if it gets too far, you know, we probably can't get out of it.

*Howard turned his attention to the effects of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). As parties to this landmark 1971 legislation, Alaska's Native peoples relinquished aboriginal claims to virtually all inhabitable lands in Alaska in exchange for forty four million acres to be divided among Native villages and regions throughout the state. Twelve regional and over 200 village corporations—entirely new structures in Native life—were established to select the lands, hold the*

*titles, and administer the settlement payments on behalf of their shareholders (also a completely new concept). ANCSA was—and for many still remains—contentious.*

Some leaders at the time said we gotta vote for the land claim. But my mother said that if the land claim went through that families would end up fighting over the land, and they are doing that now. Before he passed, Chief Thomas knew something like the land claim was coming. The Elders back then, they knew what was coming up, and they warned us not to go for it. “Otherwise,” they said, “you are going to lose your livelihood.”

And see what is happening right now? Like my mother was saying, they stole our land. They stole our land. Not only here; it’s all over. The corporation leaders are doing that today. There’s nothing left for the younger generation in Doyon.\*\* They’re not thinking about the younger generation. My heart goes out for the young people. I don’t care about myself, me, but I want the young people to know these things.

*And then to the loss of self-sufficiency brought about by adopting Western ways.*

I don’t think much about that computer. It’s taking our livelihood away. If you want to figure out something, you do it yourself. The computer is doing it for you, and you are uncomfortable, you are in conflict, but if you do it yourself, by our [way], you will feel good about yourself, proud of yourself. You did it.

It’s terribly hard for the young people right now. They can’t even do something if the light goes out. What are you gonna do? Can’t get your money out of the bank, nothin’. And that’s what I’m saying right now. We have to step forward and think about these things before it gets too far. But I write a letter all the time, to the editors and stuff. I wrote a letter to the governor. I wrote a letter to the president. I got a call from the governor a couple of weeks ago, and they’re going to come down to my camp and explain to them what I’m talking about. Like I say, you know, depression comes. It’s going to be hard on the young people who wouldn’t know what to do, how to survive, what are they going to do..

Trees are our livelihood. The pitch, if you get infected...”

*He drew a line across his chin with a finger.*

I got a sore when I was really young, they cut it wide open, and my mother got pitch and put the pitch on there, and right now there’s not even a mark. See all those things? All those things on the ground, it’s all the life. That’s what I mean. We gotta respect it. And we’re not doing it. We’re not respecting. No conscious, no nothing. And that’s what I’m trying to do right now is to bring that back. I think about that when I’m home alone. There used to be a bigger village where my camp is, and all the people passed away, moved out of there. Now I’m the only one that’s there now.

\* See *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues* for more information.

\*\*The Native regional corporation for Interior Alaska.

*He shared some of the lessons he learned from his mother about survival and self-sufficiency in hard times.*

Be on time. When you say you're going to be there, be there. That's life and death. My mother was my coach for everything. We lost my dad when I was really young, so my mother was the one that taught me these things. Be on time, because that's life and death, you know. Maybe if you don't show up and it's 50 below weather.... And that's what I mean, tell the young people always be on time. How to survive. ...You only drink water. You eat that top snow, it's just like a little baby, it will go through your body, and you'll just get weak. You take that top one off, you take the bottom part that has all the nourishment. All those things, I want to leave behind. If you get stuck out in the country out there...dig a hole and use the moss for your bedding, I teach them. They come out every winter when it's 30 below, they come out and spend the night. I showed them how to do it, in case they get stuck, you know.

*He expressed his deep concern that modern humans "got no conscious" and are disrespecting the earth and its gifts.*

Like all our earth, we don't take care of it. When we're drinking water, we just drink half of it and we throw it out, throw it out, and that's no respect. And that's a problem we're having right now, all the problem people having outside? All that fire and tornado and all that stuff, we never used to have that. And look at them guys going out to the moon. And the creator right now is mad because we're not listening. That's what's happening right now. I don't go to church or nothing, but I strongly revere in my heart. I have a church right here in my home, right here in my home. Every night and every morning I pray for the young people to have faith in our Elders and for more Elders to share with the young people. It's getting down right now that we have to look for their future...

Look at our game. They open the season on cows. Back home, when the cows are just going to have calves, they killed three moose at one shot. And you know, that's murder. That's murder. That's no respect. They got no conscious, nothing. I bet if you cut their hand, they wouldn't even know. That's what I mean, conscious. And I'm not going to give up, I'm going to continue doing this because I...my mother always told me, no matter who they are, black or white or yellow, you sit down and share with them. When you are sharing with them, you're bringing yourself up, you're making yourself more stronger.

And I tell you, if it wasn't for white man right now I wouldn't be walking. Sometimes the white man comes in handy, you know?

*We laughed.*

I never got no schooling. I quit school when I was in the second grade because there was depression then, and my mother was all alone and raised me. So I quit school. And right today I feel good about it because I learn as I go, as I go on my journey. I learn how to read and write and stuff like that cause I taught myself. You can do anything you want to do if you put your

heart to it. Because time is getting short. Like I say, you know, sometimes I say, white man comes in handy sometimes.

*He chuckled, leaned forward, and made eye contact across the table.*

Is that right?

*We laughed again, and then Ilarion spoke movingly of his friend, collaborator, and Elder. "Howard has been in such a strong connection to the land where he comes from. I remember he used to make these beautiful dog sleds, and one time I asked, 'How you get the runners to curve like that? Do you steam it?' He said, 'No. I talk to the trees, and they tell me.' That's not a romanticized notion. We are lucky to still have Elders who understand this way of communication. And these Elders around the world, they talk about the big changes that are happening now, and they're mostly concerned, just like Howard is, about the young people not being ready. They've lost the understanding of how to connect in this way, how to learn what it is we need to learn, to listen to the Elders that are passing along this wisdom we are going to need to survive the times that are coming and which are going to be soon."*

*Howard responded.*

That's the reason I say, no matter who they are, you share with them, you're helping yourself... And, like I say, you can do anything you want to do if you put your heart to it. You want to do something? You do it now. Because maybe tomorrow won't be there. So that's what I want to leave with the young people. I want the young people to take that step because there ain't going to be nothing left later on.

And to share with one another...if you don't know how to do it, maybe your friend will know how to do these things. Like I say, there's always a way. Never get excited. Take your time at doing this. Heal yourself. One time I was out muskrat hunting and my finger got infected and a mark went up my arm. And I was alone. So I thought about it, I thought about it, and I got that pitch out there and I put that thing on there, and next morning the stitch just came right out, just pulled it right out. If I didn't have that thing right out I probably wouldn't be here right today.

But those are the things that I wanted to leave with the young people. If I wait until tomorrow to tell you, maybe tomorrow won't come. So I thank you very much for your beautiful paying attention. Carry on, and share with one another. You share with one another, and you bring yourself up. Be proud of yourself, that you did it. So I thank you.

## Leonard Apangalook

*Next it was Leonard's turn to speak.*

I'm very pleased to be here; it's not very often that I get to address such a prestigious group of people, not to mention the honorable Elders here who preceded me with their statements, and I very much appreciated what they presented.

I think I should begin by briefly stating my background, so you have a better perspective of where I came from. I come from Gambell, Alaska, on St. Lawrence Island. That's the big island in the Bering Straits between Russia and Alaska. We sit right there in the middle of the Bering Straits. That's where I was born and raised. My location might differ a little bit from some of the regions represented here primarily because we were away from the mainland of Alaska. We were isolated on the island. But our contact with the whalers back in the mid-1800s or a little after that was when we started trading with the whalers, Boston whalers. So our contact was somewhat early with the outside world. But prior to that we were in contact with the Siberians. Gambell, by the way, is 38 miles from Siberia, almost 200 miles from the mainland of Alaska. And Gambell is the only place besides Little Diomedede where a person could look out the living room window...

*There was a lot of laughter at this. We knew where he was going.\**

...and see, uh, Russia. It's only thirty eight miles away. And that has some significance to it because our early contact was with the Siberians, the Russians. The anthropologists claim that we originated in Mongolia. You know, we bear the Mongolian spot, when our infants are born, there is a blue spot on the buttocks, which noted that we started from the Mongolians, and the immigration up across Siberia across the land bridge, into Alaska, eventually North America. But supposedly we're the same stock as the Chinese, Japanese, you know, the Asians.

Our recent ancestors in Alaska were so busy surviving the harsh elements that they really never had the time to develop the Toyotas and the Sonys. But we had the harpoon. We developed that, the early Eskimos did, and that's what we survived on. I always considered myself a hunter. Also, as Larry mentioned, I was a whaling captain. Before I was a magistrate, business manager, detachment commander, and special forces man, I was a hunter first.

I retained my traditional life style...very important...as I worked in my lifetime. Today it is necessary to live two lifestyles: the cash economy, which is a must today, and then the traditional lifestyle, our subsistence way of life. Up there in our region, where delivery costs are so high, you have to combine these two lifestyles to survive successfully. If you go subsistence lifestyle, that will be pretty tough at this time. And where we are, if you went total cash economy lifestyle, that takes away your tradition, your subsistence lifestyle. When we came here (my wife and I moved to Anchorage in October), we missed our food. It's something that is, uh, very hard. We do get

\* The line "I can see Russia from my house" still draws laughs from many Alaskans who remember the 2008 Vice Presidential campaign of Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin.

chicken, pork, and beef here in Anchorage, but we get hungry for our Native foods too. Because where we were, we would eat subsistence-gathered foods and then switch to pork, chicken, and beef for the following week, you know, things like that.

But I want to follow up a little bit on her remark earlier about education. I think I'm supposed to remark on Native ways of teaching or learning for our young people. I think teaching is very, very important. I wonder how many of you have read the book *The Kids from Nowhere*?<sup>\*</sup> These kids from nowhere are from my home town. I think there was only about five or six kids that were written about in that book. If you're an educator, I would recommend that you read this book because it's very interesting. To me, it denotes how a teacher can take these kids and succeed with them in their program, to where they went and took the international championship down there in Nebraska somewhere. These kids were in a problem-solving team in high school, and they had many topics that they studied. They competed in the district, and they took the district championship. They came to state, and they took the state championship. They ended up at the international meet where the best kids from New York to California, Puerto Rico, and Japan came and competed. And they took that too. And that was very significant because, as the book says, these kids were from nowhere. But a good teacher who was devoted took them all the way to the highest level. And we were very proud of that. These were our kids.

So that was something I wanted to mention also because we're concerned about the education of our young people. Right now, in our village we need people with degrees and things like that because under the Land Claims Settlement Act we need to develop our corporations and businesses. And we have found that without educated young people, local people, it's very hard to be successful in today's world.

So I guess I can say that we were victims of transition from the old lifestyle to the corporate world of today. And it's confusing. I've been through the process of trying to make it in the outside world. I succeeded to some extent without a degree. I went through Officer's Candidate School down in Fort Benning, Georgia, where I was a commissioned officer. I tried to go to college, but the money was not there, which made it very tough.

So like I said, we are victims of transition, and we're trying to cope with that situation. Part of us in the Native community are succeeding, but it's taken elements like the oil industry, you know, people bringing it in, coming in from the outside world. But that has to be controlled also because we still retain our traditional lifestyles. We still eat our Native foods [and practice] the old lifestyle of subsistence activity which is essential still today, despite the Congress. These two ways can conflict, but we have to make things work better.

I was a commissioner with the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission at one time, and we negotiated many provisions with the oil industry. We now have a conflict avoidance agreement with the industry and the whalers. These things, as far as I know, are working good for both sides, so we understand each other.

<sup>\*</sup> By George Guthridge, the true story of ten students from a 41-pupil high school in Gambell who, without access to computers or many books and with most speaking English as a second language, won two national team championships in academics in 1984, an achievement that's been called "one of the most stunning feats in the history of American education."

It gets pretty harsh out there at Gambell in the wintertime, and you have to haul your heating fuel and stuff like that. It gets pretty hard. [My wife Mildred and I] thought we'd move into Anchorage where most of our children live. We would move down here to Anchorage in the winter and then go back in the summer. We did come down finally, after I retired, also coupled with medical reasons. I'm undergoing dialysis right now.

## Oscar Kawagley

*Oscar was the last Elder to speak that morning.*

Since I've been in education for a great part of my life, I've always maintained to our Native young people that if they want to enter into the social sciences or into the physical sciences, they don't have to give up their Native-ness at all. They don't have to give up their language. They don't have to give up their culture. They become "experts" in their own particular world, because the white man and the white woman, eh, become expert at anything, we just get to know a lot. We never become experts.

*There was laughter around the table.*

Anyway, I always tell them that they can temper the Western sciences, because some [Western scientists] can be quite harsh and very disrespectful of whatever they study. I don't think they mean to be, but it's just the process of studying, all these things they have to do to animals.

I just mentioned to a class yesterday that I was in Rankin Inlet, and boy there was a very strong tension between the Western scientists and the Inuit. And one of the things that they were really questioning was these Fish and Game people going out and anesthetizing the animals, shooting chemicals into them to knock them out so they can take blood samples and other samples to take back to their laboratories. And the Inuit are saying, "What does that do to us, [who] consume those animals that have been given these chemicals whose effects we don't really know?"

That's the recent thing, eh? To anesthetize the animals to get all kind of samples. But those are the kinds of things that I think we as Native scientists would be able to approach in a very different way, in a way that is kinder to the animal and won't do any harm to the animals. Because our sciencing as a Native people is very gentle, and it's mainly observation. Not doing some of these harsh things that the scientists think they have to do.

And I always encourage people to teach their youngsters the Native language. This is of utmost importance, because spirituality, land, and the Native language, and climate change are very much related. And it's been shown by scientists (I'm thinking of several physicists who have worked with American Indians) that the Native languages were best able to describe and define the processes that were happening in the unseen world. English is very limited. And so it



behooves us as Native people to really spend our time studying our own Native languages. And I've told the class I'm so thankful my grandmother didn't permit me to go to boarding school because I grew up truly bilingual. When I got home, I spoke only my Native language; when I went to school, I spoke only in English. And that's probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

And before she even allowed me to go to school, into higher education, she finally consented. She had objected because her parents had not allowed her to go to school. The school opened in 1886 in Bethel. Her parents had said, "We are not allowing our daughter to go to school; she will become confused and stupid." And so I think she was doing the same thing to me, eh?

And she told me two things you have to remember: Never forget where you came from, and never forget your Native language. And I tried to keep those in mind no matter how rebellious I got and got to thinking that my Native language and my Native culture had no place in the world. You see, I suffered the trauma of trying to reject my own Native-ness. And now, like I said yesterday, I'm becoming more Native all the time."

*We laughed again, and then Alberta had the final word. "In our Athabaskan culture, and I'm pretty sure in every other culture, we're taught to respect the Elders very early. The children were either in another room or sitting still when the Elders ate or when they were sleeping. If a young boy killed a moose, or even a fish, the first parts, best parts are to go to the Elders. The Elders, we were told, had the experience, they had been there and they know what to do. If you have a problem, go to the Elders. They will help you solve it. In our lifestyle, the Elders always came first."*

*With these words, our time in the Community Center drew to a close. Libby stood, turned to the Elders and thanked them for sharing their wisdom. It was time now for lunch, time to get out on the land.*

## FACULTY INTENSIVE

# On the Land

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At last we went outside, onto the land, together. The picnic grounds were set into a spectacular open field encircled by stunning, snow-capped mountains. It was sunny and warm for a day in early May: over fifty degrees at least. We ate Tina's fish, mingled with the Elders, danced and told stories and laughed.

The Kicaput Singers and Dancers set up near a little stand of trees, performing traditional Yup'ik dances and inviting us to join in. A few of us did so, standing behind them and imitating their moves to the sounds of the drumbeat and singing. We were pretty bad, and that made us laugh.

Earlier in the week, as an optional activity, we had invited people to prepare a personal story from their own lives that they could share without using any words. This afternoon, the bravest among us gave it a try. One flapped her wings to show how she came to Alaska. Another danced to show how she'd met her husband in Polynesia. A third used his daughter's stuffed lions and tigers to demonstrate field research in Africa. They were all pretty funny, and we laughed some more.

There isn't really a lot more to say about this part of the day. For several hours, we just hung out together, moving, mingling, connecting with one another and with the natural world around us. This is hardly a typical faculty development experience, but it was probably the most important few hours of the whole week. We answered our own call to stop talking and went outside to just be together.

As Ilarion's grandfather might have said, the afternoon tasted good.



## REFLECTION

# On the Elders' Words

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As we put this book together, we wondered what some readers would make of this gathering of Elders. For a book called *Stop Talking*, the Elders talked for a really long time. They paid a lot of attention to protocol, and they referred to things in their personal histories that many readers won't understand. Opportunities to speak like this are rare, and they knew the occasion would be remembered, so they wanted to make the most of it. With deep respect to the Elders, we wanted to share their words. With respect to readers, we wanted to point out a few things worth noting.

First, you might notice the traditional way in which the Elders introduced themselves, explaining who they were by telling you where they came from. They gave you their names, the places they come from, and the places where they currently live. They spoke of their parents, their grandparents, and the traditional lives of their people.

Next, a little background. We had asked them to share their thoughts on Alaska Natives and education, and many of them spoke of their boarding school experiences. The boarding school era could be its own difficult dialogue.\* Stretching from the 1900's through about the 1970's, it was a time when most Alaska Native children were required to leave their homes and villages to attend Western-style boarding schools. The Elders grew up with this system, and they found it limiting at best and damaging at worst. The schools prepared them to live in the Western world but also took from them the opportunity to learn their traditional ways. There were abuses of many kinds, ranging from negative stereotyping to punishments for speaking Native languages to physical and sexual abuse. Even in the best of times at the best of the schools, they were not learning how to be a real human being.

A few of them referred indirectly to the many scourges that have ravaged their communities. Region-wide outbreaks of influenza, tuberculosis, polio, and other diseases brought by outsiders have devastated Alaska Native communities many times over the past few centuries, causing them to lose half or more of their populations in very short periods of time, destroying families, and disrupting traditional life. For this reason among others, girls of the Elders' generation were encouraged to marry young, and many of them dropped out of school with no more than an eighth grade education—if they even got that far. These events are not over. Their legacies are with us still, today.

Iarion is still moved when he thinks of the Elders that day. “They spoke of understanding, endurance, courage, and their great responsibility and strong desire to teach traditional ways to the younger people. Western educational paradigms teach little about how to live. Traditional ways respect the life support systems of our planet, show us how to live sustainably, and teach us to use what we call common sense, by which we mean how to live. We need these skills more than ever today.”

\* See Hirshberg among others.



## Reflection

Elders teach ways of living that respect the earth and all its life forms. Should our educational systems do the same? How might we change our own teaching to reflect this value?



# Into Our Classrooms

**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

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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.”

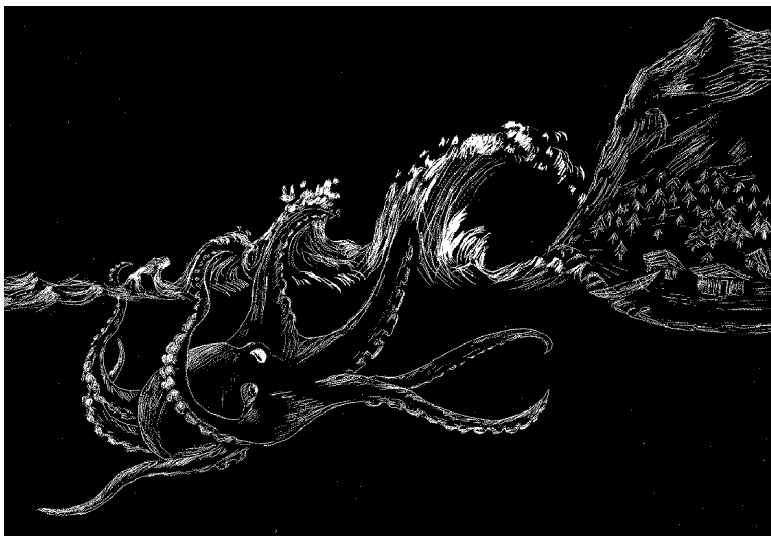


## GROUP REPORTS

# An Octopus in Every Lesson

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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

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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

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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](http://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.



## Reflection

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

**However beautiful  
the strategy, you  
should occasionally  
look at the results.**

WINSTON CHURCHILL

# Assessment

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# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Outcomes

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We were fortunate to draw on the experience and talent of our colleague Dr. Claudia Lampman who served as our Assessment and Evaluation Coordinator. Claudia designed original assessment materials for this project, administered pre- and post-test surveys, worked with each participant to develop individualized classroom assessment strategies, and conducted follow-up interviews to gather qualitative feedback on the experience. Her findings and analysis are presented in this chapter.\*

### Highlights

**Greater understanding** of the relationship between institutional racism and student success.

**Stronger skills** for addressing Alaska Native issues in their classrooms.

**New ideas** for connecting their course material to personal experience and their outcomes to the sustainability of the planet.

Claudia's results reveal significant shifts in faculty attitudes about Alaska Native issues and their own teaching strategies. After the intensive, many agreed more strongly that institutional racism is an important explanation for why some Alaska Native students have a hard time completing college. They felt that their classrooms were now more likely to be places where students would feel comfortable talking about Alaska Native issues. They would go forward with new practices, new pacing, and new ideas about connecting course material to personal stories and to the sustainability of the planet.

Qualitative data confirmed the transformative impact the experience had on participants, both personally and professionally. "This was a perspective-shifting, life-altering experience," said one participant. "It will help me do my part in helping all students, and particularly Alaska Native students."

\* As this book goes to print, we have become aware of efforts outside Alaska to articulate indigenous assessment practices. We were not aware of them at the time of our project and so proceeded to design our own.



**Dr. Claudia Lampman** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Alaska Anchorage. She served as Assessment and Evaluation Coordinator for Alaska's two Difficult Dialogues projects, the first of which was inspired in large part by her 2005 study on contra-power harassment. As a social psychologist, Claudia teaches about pluralism, civility, and respect for viewpoints and ways of life that differ from one's own. As a social scientist, she documents innovative ways of teaching and learning. As an Alaskan, she is committed to preservation of the land, Native peoples, and wisdom of the place where she lives.

## Assessment Summary

### Claudia Lampman

In essence, this project was designed as an intervention. The goal was to increase participants' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills, and comfort levels with Alaska Native ways of teaching, learning, and knowing. As Assessment and Evaluation Coordinator, it was my job to measure and chart this growth, to show how much and where participants were changed by this experience.

This is familiar ground for me. As a social scientist, I approach the world as one big dataset waiting to happen. But when I was asked to evaluate this particular program, initially I felt some trepidation. Libby and Ilarion were planning something I didn't quite understand. There was no written curriculum, no documentation of what was expected to happen, not even any note-taking. The intensive would be experiential and based on oral history, talking circles, and mindful listening. At first I wasn't sure my traditional methods would work here.

But when I sat down to write the questions, I found they flowed quite easily. They were interesting questions about things I'd never asked before: incorporating nature into one's classes, developing place-based learning experiences, using storytelling as a teaching strategy. I decided I needed to participate myself, to share the experience, to be a part of it in order to interpret the data I would gather.

It is clear to me as both an evaluator and a participant that the intensive delivered on the project's major goals and objectives. As a group, our participants gained new perspectives on the challenges facing Alaska Native students and faculty, including and especially institutional racism. They developed greater respect for Alaskan Native ways of learning and knowing, especially with regard to pacing, storytelling, place-based knowledge, and the wisdom of Elders. Each of us identified specific ways we could change our teaching styles to give more students a greater chance of success.

In summary, the assessment found that faculty who participated in the project changed in three fundamental ways: knowledge, comfort level, and attitude.

First, they left the intensive more knowledgeable about Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning, especially the importance of incorporating place-based learning, story-telling, non-verbal learning methods, Elders' wisdom, and periods of silence into their teaching practices.

Second, they felt more comfortable about addressing Alaska Native issues in their classrooms, and they expected their Alaska Native students to also feel more comfortable sharing ideas and opinions in their classrooms.

And third, they experienced a dramatic shift in their attitudes about course pace and cultivating student relationships and were particularly drawn to practices that would improve their teaching and benefit more of their students: 1) slowing down their teaching speed; 2) covering less information at a deeper level; 3) allowing students more time to reflect on course material; and 4) working harder to nurture relationships with and among students.

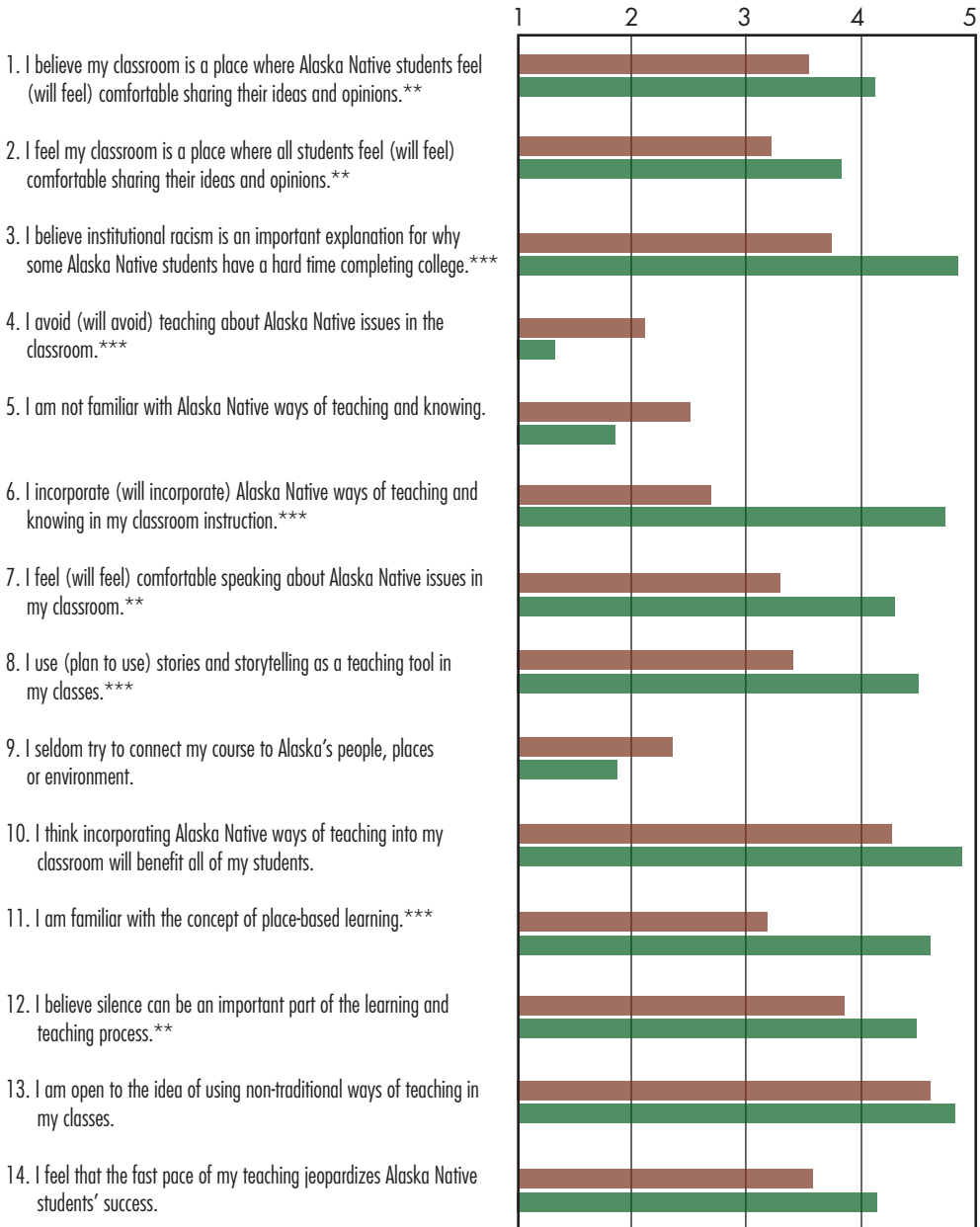
And we were all good students. The data showed a high level of interest, engagement, and commitment to the project. Although it was hard at first to put away our phones and our deadlines and to spend time just sitting and reflecting, we all seemed to adapt quickly. I actually enjoyed walking into the intensive in the morning knowing that I was not going to spend time that day stressing about all the other things I should or could be doing. I liked being given permission to free myself from other thoughts and to focus on the here and now. You'd think this might make us worry even more, but if so, it didn't last long. I think we all fell easily into the routine of no routine. As the week drew to a close, you could feel a sense of sadness. But we also felt grateful and privileged. We felt like we had spent a week of our lives in a really meaningful way. It was unlike any class I had ever attended, but it ended up doing what every professor or teacher hopes: it made us focus, pay attention, actively participate, throw our assumptions out the window, and learn something new.

As I walked through the participants' poster session at the end of the year, I was impressed anew by the passion and hope of my colleagues. I won't pretend that this was a random sample of faculty members from our two campuses; these are some of the most dedicated, respected, and innovative faculty in the whole state. Yet there is no doubt in my mind that these folks entered the intensive with open hearts and minds and left deeply moved and changed. Ironically, perhaps the most interesting thing that these energetic, fast-moving, and enthusiastic faculty members learned was to slow down, quiet their brains, and be mindful of their surroundings.

After the intensive I began teaching a course called *The Self in the 21st Century*. One of our readings concerns a "new" approach to teaching in elementary school – incorporating mindfulness and meditation into the classroom. The idea is to teach children to stop, to tune out distractions, and to be mindful of their bodies, their surroundings, and their brains' activity. As I read up on it, I couldn't help but think: this might be a new approach for elementary school teachers in the 21st century, but it is a way of teaching and learning that has been around for thousands of years. Isn't it about time we discovered it again?

## Chart I: Questions on Alaska Native Issues and Students

1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree  
 ■ pre-mean ■ post-mean





# Quantitative Results

Charts 1 to 5 present the results from a 48-item survey designed specifically for this project.

- The survey was administered before and after the intensive to all faculty participants (n=17).
- All of the items are worded in the form of statements such as, “I believe institutional racism is an important explanation for why some Alaska Native students have a hard time completing college.”
- Participants responded to each statement using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
- Post-mean differs significantly from Pre-mean: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

## Alaska Native Students and Issues

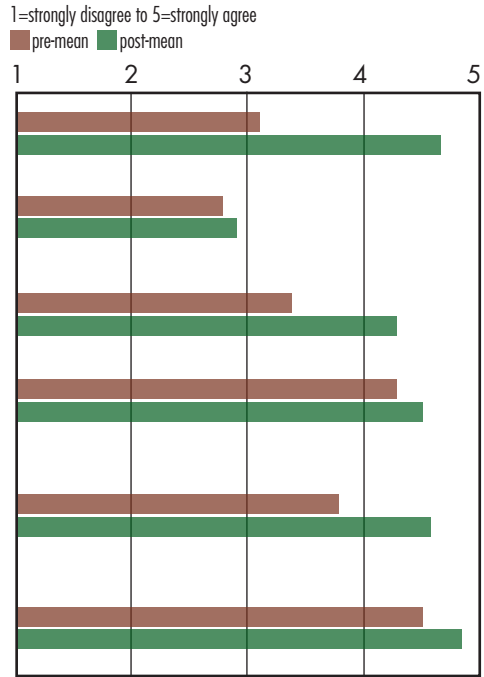
Chart 1 displays changes in means for items assessing attitudes about Alaska Native issues and students. This section of the questionnaire showed the greatest gains, as these items directly tapped into core parts of the intensive.

There was a statistically significant change in the desired direction on ten of the fourteen items in this scale. From the pre-test to the post-test:

- 88% were more likely to say they would incorporate Alaska Native ways of teaching and knowing into their classroom instruction.
- 71% agreed more strongly that institutional racism is an important explanation for why some Alaska Native students have a hard time completing college.
- 65% felt their classroom was now more likely to be a place where all students would feel comfortable talking about Alaska Native issues.
- 65% indicated they were more likely to use stories and storytelling as a teaching tool in their classes.
- 65% agreed to a greater extent that incorporating Alaska Native ways of teaching into their classrooms would benefit all of their students.
- 59% were less likely to say that they would avoid teaching about Alaska Native issues in the classroom.
- 56% agreed more strongly that they were familiar with the concept of place-based learning.
- 53% showed a positive change in their beliefs that silence can be an important part of the learning and teaching process.
- 53% increased how comfortable they would feel speaking about Alaska Native issues in their classroom.
- 53% agreed more strongly that their classrooms would be a place where Alaska Native students felt comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions.

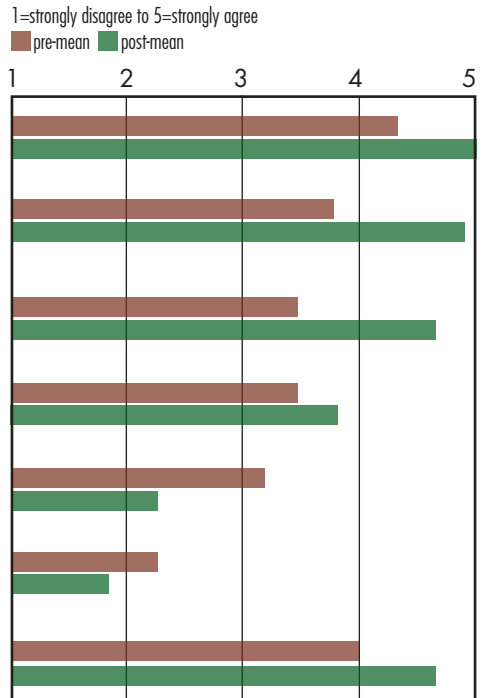
## Chart 2: Questions on Earth and Nature

1. I encourage (will encourage) my students to connect with nature and their environment.\*\*\*
2. I have never thought about how to incorporate nature into my curriculum.
3. I believe tying course material to the question of earth's systems is my responsibility as a teacher.\*\*
4. Helping students understand "how to be a whole person" and encouraging them to reflect on their values, traditions, and life purpose is an important part of my job as a professor.
5. I encourage (will encourage) students to explore and examine how the way we learn and function at the university contributes to a healthy or unhealthy planet.\*\*\*
6. I believe teaching content should always be actively placed within the context of the greater community and environment in which it occurs.\*\*



## Chart 3: Questions on Course Pace

1. I think (will think) about the pace of my class when developing lectures and classroom activities.\*\*
2. I strive (will strive) to give students time to reflect on the material I present.\*\*\*
3. I believe many of my students would benefit if I were to slow down my teaching.\*\*\*
4. I often find myself speeding up during the end of a class in order to fit more material into the day's class.
5. I feel that slowing down the pace at which I teach would mean students will not learn everything they need to know.\*
6. I believe covering everything in my text or course content guide is the most important thing to do.
7. I think that my students would benefit if I covered less material at a deeper level.\*\*



## Connecting Curricula to Earth and Nature

Chart 2 presents changes in means on items assessing attitudes about the importance of incorporating Earth and nature into the college curriculum. These items also tapped directly into core aspects of the intensive, so the significant changes in this section are not surprising. The smaller amount of change on the item about incorporating nature into one's curriculum is not unexpected; this is a difficult thing for people in many disciplines. This intensive might have caused some people to see how little they thought about this aspect of their teaching before.

There was a statistically significant change in the desired direction on four of the six items in this scale. From the pre-test to the post-test:

- 76% said they would be more likely to encourage their students to connect with nature and their environment.
- 59% agreed more strongly that they would encourage students to explore and examine how the way we learn and function at the university contributes to a healthy or an unhealthy planet.
- 50% increased their agreement that it is their responsibility as teachers to link course materials to questions of the sustainability of earth's systems.
- 35% more respondents agreed that teaching content should always be actively placed within the context of the greater community and environment in which it occurs.

## Course Pace

Chart 3 shows changes in means on items assessing attitudes about course pace. There were fairly dramatic changes here. The qualitative evaluation (described below) also suggests that the intensive had a very large impact on how participants feel about slowing down the pace of their courses. The Western model of university teaching is largely content-oriented rather than process-oriented. Most professors teach the way they were taught, with an over-arching goal of covering a specific set of material. The intensive seems to have led many of the Fellows to challenge these habits and assumptions.

There was a statistically significant change in the desired direction on five of the seven items. From the pre-test to the post-test:

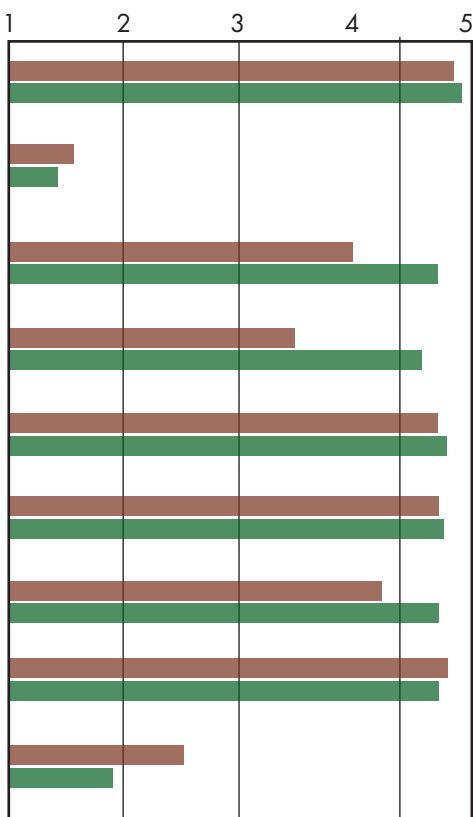
- 82% stated they would be more likely to strive to give students time to reflect on the materials they present.
- 65% agreed more strongly that many of their students would benefit if they were to slow down their teaching.
- 53% agreed more strongly that they would think about the pace of their classes when developing lectures and classroom activities.
- 50% agreed more strongly that their students would benefit more if they covered less material at a deeper level.
- 47% disagreed more strongly that slowing down the pace at which they teach would mean students would not learn everything they need to know.

## Chart 4: Questions on Relationships, Experiential Learning, and the Learning Environment

1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree

■ pre-mean ■ post-mean

1. Learning my students' names is a teaching priority for me.
2. I don't think it is necessary or beneficial to student learning to know something about my students' lives outside of the classroom.
3. I believe that attending to relationships and emotions is a critical part of a professor's job.\*
4. I need to pay more attention to cultivating relationships in (and outside of) my classes.\*\*
5. A professor should actively try to make students feel more comfortable in his or her classroom.
6. I believe that my own values affect my students, even when I do not explicitly state what those values are.
7. I think I would be a better teacher if I paid more attention to how my own values and traditions influence my teaching.
8. I feel faculty on my campus should strive to offer students multiple ways to show they have mastered course material.
9. I feel uncomfortable when there is silence in my classroom.\*



## Relationships, Experiential Learning, and the Learning Environment

Chart 4 presents means on items assessing attitudes about building relationships with students, experiential learning, and the learning environment. There was less change on these questions, largely due to how strongly participants agreed with them to begin with. In the pre-test, they scored within a half point from the maximum on five of the nine items, leaving very little room for improvement. Nevertheless, significant changes in the expected direction did occur on items about paying attention to relationships and being comfortable with classroom silences.

There was a statistically significant change in the desired direction on three of the nine items in this scale. From the pre-test to the post-test:

- 59% agreed more strongly that they needed to pay more attention to cultivating relationships in (and outside of) their classes.
- 48% showed increased agreement that attending to relationships and emotions is a critical part of a professor's job.
- 41% showed a decrease in how uncomfortable they would feel when there was a silence in their classrooms.

## Learning Style

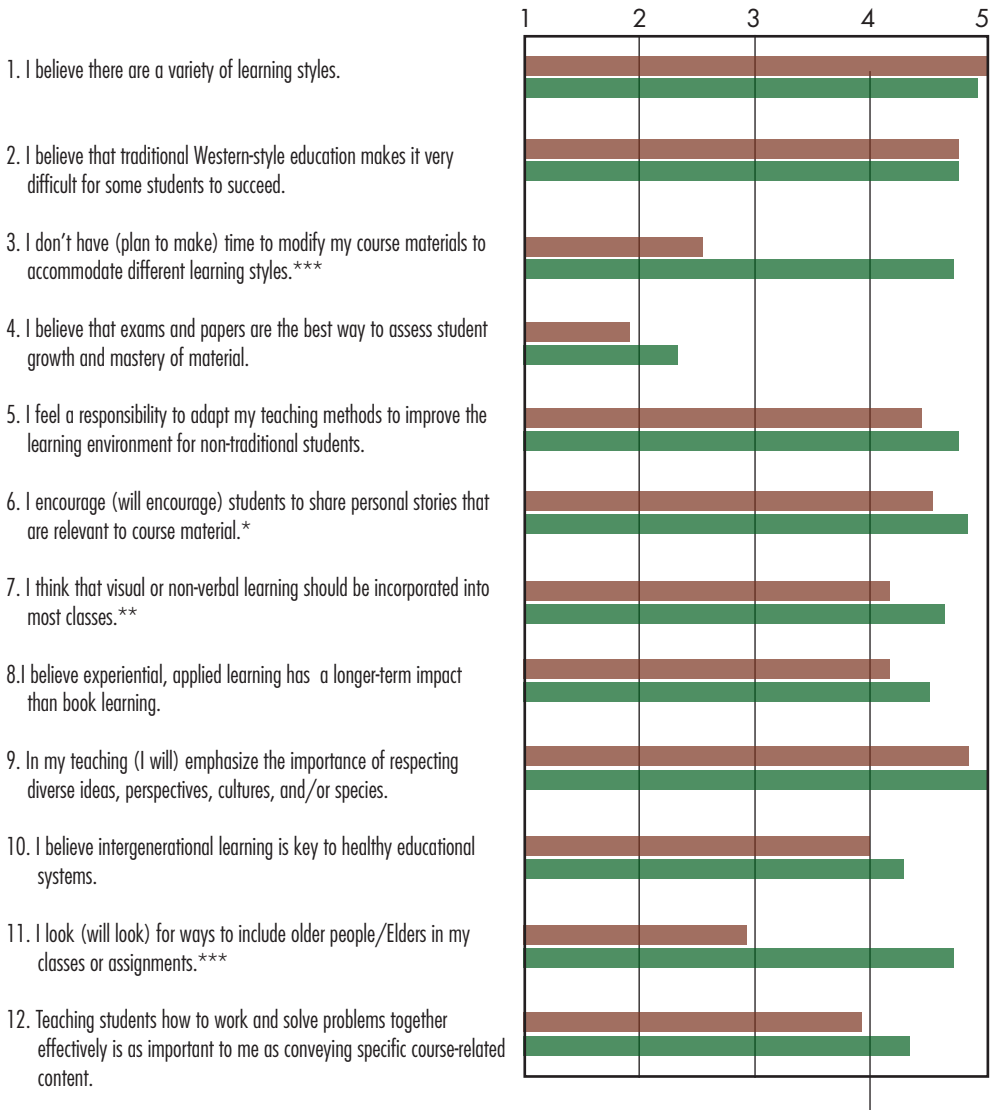
Chart 5 displays means on items assessing attitudes about learning styles. As with items on relationship, there was very little disagreement about these items to begin with. Items that had enough room for improvement to show change included those about modifying course materials and incorporating Elders or older people in classes or assignments. After the intensive, participants were significantly more likely to welcome relevant personal stories from their students and to consider non-verbal or visual learning as part of their classes. These data are underscored by responses to the qualitative evaluation completed post-intensive, and reflect some of the core parts of the intensive's aims.

There was a statistically significant change in the desired direction on four of the twelve items in this scale. From the pre-test to the post-test:

- 88% agreed more strongly that they planned to make time to modify their course materials to accommodate different learning styles.
- 87% agreed more strongly that they would look for ways to include older people/Elders in their classes or assignments.
- 47% agreed more strongly that visual or non-verbal learning should be incorporated into most classes.
- 38% agreed more strongly that they would encourage students to share personal stories that are relevant to course material.

## Chart 5: Questions on Learning Styles

1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree  
 ■ pre-mean ■ post-mean



# Qualitative Results

At the end of the week, we also asked participants to address two open-ended questions about the gains they made in knowledge and pedagogical strategies. Responses are summarized below.

## ***What, if anything, do you feel you know as a result of participating in this intensive that you didn't know before?***

### **A new appreciation of the institutionalized racism and oppression experienced by Alaska Native students and faculty.**

- *The degree of pain and alienation that our Native students and faculty feel as a result of institutionalized racism and years of oppression.*
- *A great deal, such as how Alaska Native people (at least those we heard from) feel about experiences within the current systems and interactions with the dominant culture.*
- *The best way for me to respond is not in terms of knowing new info but [of deepening and broadening] my understanding of the complexities, barriers, opportunities for addressing institutional racism and incorporating Alaska Native ways of knowing and learning in the classroom. I came into the intensive with prior learning that I can connect every day.*
- *I visited the local Native community in Eklutna, which I had never realized was nearby, and discovered my bank (Wells Fargo) denies them access to a local in-holding picnic ground that was once Native land.*
- *I know that I have allies and that this effort is vital, however hard it may be, and however often I may fail.*

### **Ideas for incorporating Alaska Native ways of knowing, teaching, and learning into our teaching arsenal.**

- *I have gained both a deeper understanding of issues of pedagogy and knowledge that will impact Native students and new methods and ways of thinking about teaching and learning that I can apply next semester.*
- *I feel that I have specific strategies that I can use in the classroom to improve learning for all students, but especially Alaska Native students. I feel that I could honor and define Alaska Native ways of knowing.*
- *The improvement of protocol when approaching Alaska Native community members. Not asking direct questions or too many questions.*
- *I have developed a sense of responsibility to keep learning, incorporating, and teaching about Alaska Native issues. That, I think, is more important than any fact or concept that I have learned.*
- *I know how much knowledge that is essential to the continuation of life and culture is in danger of being lost forever.*

- *How critical slowing down the pace is to Native students and how that can benefit a number of non-Native students.*
- *A variety of teaching strategies.*
- *I believe that the strategies and information I received will assist me to help Alaska Native students become more successful in both my classes and the academic setting. I have received practical information that will help me to mentor Alaska Native students as well as other students.*
- *I know that it's not only important but CRITICAL to teach all of my classes and to conduct every aspect of my life from the context of sustainability.*

### **The value of Elders' wisdom and storytelling.**

- *The depth and influence of Elders' knowledge in traditional and cultural traditions.*
- *From reading I learned more about respect for Elders, their stories. I learned about the consequences of wrong thinking and behavior.*
- *I better understand how the stories do their work. I also feel better about some things I already do/used to do.*

### ***What changes might you make in your own teaching as a result of your participation in this intensive?***

#### **Change course pacing.**

- *Slow the pace down to create a comfortable place for students to engage.*
- *I will change pace for sure.*
- *Pacing is going to be a big part of my change.*
- *More reflection on pace – which has been bothering me lately – and non-verbal learning.*
- *Relax deadlines; fewer surveys of lots of content.*
- *Relax the pace of the class.*
- *Slow it down. Go outside more. Attend to my students' (and my own) emotions. Contextualize everything with consideration to this amazing place and its history.*
- *I will try to slow down. I will try to model two different learning environments – fast and loud and slow and quiet.*
- *I will do my best to emphasize the importance of community, in the classroom, slowing down, storytelling, etc.*

#### **Change my teaching.**

- *I will actively think about every course I teach and make any changes I can to improve the experience of Alaska Native (and all) students) -- slow the pace/more consciously try to build relationships.*
- *I will use storytelling.*



- *I will talk less.*
- *I will highlight and explore the learning that comes from observing and listening.*
- *More time for reflection, more use of non-oral/non-written theory of expression, more use of colleagues' ideas.*
- *Use storytelling/role playing/theatre of the oppressed.*
- *I teach an oral fluency course that I would like to make more based in speaking and listening than on writing and reading. This would be more accessible to many of my students, and would emphasize the target skills more effectively.*
- *More focus on the process of teaching and learning.*
- *I will do my best to emphasize the importance of community in the classroom, slowing down, storytelling, etc.*
- *More intentional with approaches and outcomes versus spur of the moment.*

### **Develop place-based connections in my classes.**

- *Promote a sense of place.*
- *Encourage connection to place.*
- *More emphasis on place. Find a way to get Elders involved in classes again.*
- *Slow it down. Go outside more. Attend to my students' (and my own) emotions. Contextualize everything with consideration to this amazing place and its history.*

### **Pay more attention to diverse students and learning styles.**

- *Options for students in how they demonstrate learning.*
- *More incorporation of issues related to diversity.*
- *More personal tolerance and respect for students from diverse groups.*

## **Results from Students**

Participants were encouraged to administer a set of similar questions at the beginning and end of classes in which they implemented new strategies. Although only three provided these data, the results suggest that both faculty (from before to after the intensive) and students (from the beginning to end of the course) agreed on the value of slowing class pace and covering less material at a deeper level; linking course material to the sustainability of earth's systems and to Alaska's people, places, and environment; and connecting class material to students' personal stories and lives.

Four faculty members also collected additional data from their students in order to assess the value of incorporating Alaska Native ways of teaching, knowing, and learning into their classes. Students in an upper-division writing class increased their beliefs about the value of devoting time in class to reflection, feeling that it improved their writing and understanding of material. Students in a lower-division course on Race, Ethnicity, and Identity felt better prepared to respond to prejudiced remarks and were more likely to say that their responses would likely have a benefit. Students in an upper division political science class showed positive change on the value of having students from different cultural backgrounds share their viewpoints and traditions.



## **Reflection**

If you tried one or more Alaska Native ways of teaching in your learning environment, how might you document the impact?



# Pausing for Reflection

**Learning without reflection is a waste. Reflection without learning is dangerous.**

CONFUCIUS

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## THE PROJECT

# Pausing for Reflection

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Because of the interdisciplinary nature of our cohort, each participant worked with a unique set of goals, strategies, and content concerns in their classroom projects, making it nearly impossible to roll up those results into a meaningful whole. Fortunately we were able to use this project as a laboratory for applying the classroom-based research techniques known as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). A different group of faculty members had spent the previous year familiarizing themselves with this rigorous model for conducting classroom-based applied pedagogical research. In a series of workshops, they shared the basic principles and practices with the cohort and helped them design and document projects during the year. They published their efforts under the project title of Making Learning Visible, now UAA's broader SOTL initiative.

Our participants were nearly unanimous in appreciating how much the structured and disciplined SOTL approach improved their ability to learn from each other. Although each did his or her own thing, they all approached their classroom-based research in a similar fashion, posing similar questions, gathering similar “artifacts,” and sharing the results with their colleagues in a structured and professional manner. An instructional designer helped them create posters and web pages describing their projects. At the end of the year, we celebrated those achievements in a poster session following the annual faculty development awards ceremony, also held in our familiar library conference room.

And then it was over, again. Or was it?

We could practically hear the echoes of that long-ago evaluator saying to us, “OK. Off the record. What do you think you really accomplished here?”

We had sixteen faculty members. One intensive. A year's worth of in-class experimentation, a dozen or so online portfolios, and now a book to share with colleagues, allies, and friends. It took a tremendous amount of work to get us to this place. Was it worth it?

We'd say absolutely. We achieved much of what we hoped for and a few things else besides. Among them:

- **A shift in the consciousness** of some of our most dedicated long-term faculty in such a way that future dialogues about Alaska Native issues, students, and perspectives can be conducted with greater respect, understanding, and mutuality.
- **The development of a small but sturdy community of allies** who understand more clearly what is at stake with indigenous issues and higher education; who can support each other as they wrestle with Native issues on their campuses and in their classrooms; and who may invite and inspire other colleagues to join them on this path.

- **A positive influence on the learning climates** for students, especially those from cultures outside the mainstream. Participants changed their perspectives in ways that will impact their teaching on students from Alaska Native and other collectivist cultures, leading to a healthier learning climate and a more balanced exchange of ideas.
- **Fresh inspiration**, fresh approaches to teaching, and a chance for faculty members to connect with each other around best practices.
- **Increased awareness** of issues between indigenous communities and higher educational institutions and of the need for productive dialogues on those issues.
- **Strengthened ties** between our universities and local indigenous communities.
- **The ability to reach** other educators and to add our voices in support of transforming higher education by recognizing the validity, legitimacy, efficacy, and power of indigenous ways of teaching and learning.
- **Greater respect** for our responsibilities and opportunities as educators to have a positive impact on the well-being of the earth.

## Related Efforts

This project was one very important step in a much longer journey. It took place within a much broader context of related efforts. Each step builds on those that came before. Along the way we have been strengthened and supported by others walking similar paths.

In recent years UAA has launched a number of initiatives and programs to support Alaska Native students and call attention to Alaska Native concerns.

**Books of the Year.** Our 2008-2009 Books of the Year program featured three books that would introduce issues critical to Alaska's Native peoples, correct historical inaccuracies, and authentically represent Alaska Native voices so classroom discussions could be conducted in an informed and respectful way.

- *Growing up Native in Alaska* (edited by A.J. McLanahan) interviews twenty-seven young Alaska Native leaders about their lives, their futures, and the challenges of walking in two worlds.
- *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (Harold Napoleon) describes the collective trauma and cultural losses suffered by Alaska's Native peoples following the epidemics resulting from contact with non-Native cultures from the 1740's through the early 1900's.
- *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues: Response to Frequently Asked Questions* (edited by Libby Roderick) provides much needed background information about Alaska Native cultures and issues.

**Forums for Alaska Native Youth.** In 2009-2010, we held a series of forums entitled “Warriors for a New Era” that gave Alaska Native students a chance to learn about the politics of subsistence harvesting, the dynamics of internalized oppression, and other critical issues. We also held a mock conference on subsistence issues, in which students researched and represented the views of important Alaska Native organizations and used traditional indigenous discourse and deliberation methods to engage with one another.

**Faculty Development Initiatives.** We added an overview of Alaska’s Native cultures, students, and issues to our New Faculty Orientations so our newest faculty can teach effectively and ethically in Alaska. Jeane Breinig, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, led a faculty learning community on Alaska Native Students and Issues that showcased effective teaching strategies and programs. Internal funding sponsored five faculty members to attend the Evergreen State College Summer Institute on Writing and Teaching Native cases, part of a larger effort to develop culturally relevant curriculum on key issues in Indian Country. The College of Business and Public Policy then sponsored an Institute in Alaska, attended by roughly fifty faculty members.

**Cultural Immersion Partnership.** A partnership with the Alaska Humanities Forum’s Take Wing Alaska project supports Alaska Native high school students from rural communities to make a successful transition to an urban university and eventually return home to work in their communities. The program includes a cultural immersion experience, funding faculty members to attend a week-long summer culture camp in one of the rural Alaska Native villages.

## **Fortunate Factors**

None of these things just happened; they required careful strategizing, material and moral support from key individuals and administrative units, and the persistence to follow through in the face of personal and institutional constraints. We have been extremely fortunate on a number of fronts. We’ve had the support of several key administrators whose own backgrounds included experience with Alaska’s Native cultures, academically and beyond. A few are that rare breed of leaders who support creative endeavors that don’t fit neatly into academic boxes. Our Vice Provost and our former Director of the Center for Advancing Faculty Excellence both championed this work that in other hands might have been seen as too narrowly focused or even irrelevant. Subsequent Directors have continued to support it, recognizing its importance to education in our state.

We couldn’t have done it without the Ford Foundation which, by renewing our Difficult Dialogues grant, gave us a specific mandate to deepen the work on indigenous issues in higher education, lent credibility and material support to the effort, and strengthened our existing team.

Finally, we live in a state in which indigenous cultures have a very strong presence. Our institutional mission statements openly acknowledge our responsibility to serve the many

peoples of Alaska, and we had several talented individuals with pre-existing relationships and understandings of Alaska's complex Native cultures and communities eager to lead the work on the ground.

“These fortunate factors allowed us to experience a degree of success more quickly than might be possible in other settings,” says Libby. “Nevertheless, we hope our ideas and experiences might prove helpful to individuals or groups working at other institutions. The need for indigenous wisdom is greater than ever these days, as higher education struggles to stay relevant in a rapidly changing world, as the marketplace demands graduates who can work productively with people from a diversity of cultural backgrounds, and as the world grapples with daunting environmental, social, and economic challenges. We hope and believe that this project moved us a step closer to fulfilling that need.”

**“Honoring indigenous pedagogies and perspectives in mainstream universities does not necessarily mean that one set of values must replace the other. If we truly wish to serve the highest good of our students, we need educational partnerships that offer them the best of both worlds. Because the imbalance has been so great for so long and because indigenous perspectives have been systematically misunderstood, marginalized, and distorted by colonialism, it will take a considerable conscious effort to move them to the forefront, to a place of equity. Yet this can—and as many of us would argue must—be done.”**

Libby Roderick





**Dr. Diane Hirshberg** is Associate Professor of Education Policy at UAA's Institute of Social and Economic Research and director of the UAA Center for Alaska Education Policy Research. She was born in Massachusetts and raised and educated in Massachusetts, California, and New York. Her degrees include a Master of Public Administration from Columbia University and a Ph.D. in Education from UCLA. She has conducted Alaska-based research on school improvement, education policy, indigenous

education, and how policymakers' views of race are related to the decisions they make concerning Alaska Native education. Diane was one of the Faculty Fellows who participated in this project.

## Good Work

### Diane Hirshberg

The intensive was really valuable for me. I have studied Alaska Native education issues and spent time in indigenous communities, but I had never really taken the time to reflect on my own classroom and research practices as they relate to these issues. I have taught in the field of education, and I have looked at issues of pedagogy. I've tried to give my students multiple ways of engaging with materials. But this experience called for a completely different depth and a greater sensibility, especially for thinking about things like the environment and personal relationships. It goes a long way beyond engaging in dyads.

It is a luxury to spend time with colleagues working on practice. And yet it should be one of the things that we do regularly. We know that collaborative practice is key to changing and improving education, and we talk regularly about its importance at the K-12 level. But we don't practice it very often in higher education. We don't have other people look at our practice, and we don't spend the time collaboratively developing it. This experience brought all of that together for me: both what I know to be best practices from my work in education and then this very profound sense of connection with the people upon whose lands we do our teaching and learning.

None of us have enough time. And absolutely this is difficult work. But on the other hand, if we don't take the time to do it, our practice will never improve. We know on this campus that we have very low retention rates for our indigenous and non-traditional students. This work really helps you think about how to reach those students, how to differentiate your teaching in a way that allows you to continue with rigor and with getting the content out there but that also makes learning accessible, regardless of where our students come from. And that's just critical. We cannot *not* do this work.

We are in an incredibly diverse community. At UAA we are also intentionally situating ourselves as part of our local, state, and national communities. We recognize our role as an engaged university. And we have an obligation to be able to communicate with people who are coming from different political backgrounds and perspectives, different social systems, different religious beliefs. This helps us do that, and it helps us equip our students with the tools to do the same.

My students are going to graduate into a world where the boundaries are really almost erased—through technology, advances in travel, and the incredible influx of immigrants who have recently moved to this community. This is equipping us to be successful and to help our students be successful as they move forward into this brave new world that is so full of challenges and dangers, but also so rich with possibilities.



## Reflection

Can you do this “good work?”  
What would it take to get started?

## MANIFESTO

# Indigenizing Higher Education

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What do we mean when we speak of “indigenizing” higher education? One vision calls for a balanced partnership between western and indigenous practices, for higher educational institutions that respect the best of western academic traditions while simultaneously honoring indigenous worldviews and ways.

A handful of universities both here and abroad have set these priorities and begun this work. New Zealand is the world leader, with visionaries like Graham and Linda Smith and initiatives that have put indigenous values, practices, languages, and pedagogies closer to the center of many of their institutions. Several Canadian and Australian universities are following suit.

Advocates of sustainable education are calling for something very similar: an education that will ensure a just, healthy, prosperous, and environmentally sustainable society for future generations. Many U.S. universities are adopting best practices identified by groups such as the Carnegie Institute and Campus Compact that take students into more community and place-based experiences. A few, such as Wisconsin’s College of Menominee Nation, are aspiring to full-fledged integrated transformation.

Here are a few examples of changes institutions could make to move in this direction:

- **Place** at the center of university studies and life the preservation of, understanding of, and living in balance with the surrounding lands, waters, creatures, and air. Teach outside more often. Articulate the links between disciplinary material and the biosphere. Help students reconnect with the natural world and understand the human place within it. Design university buildings and campuses to reflect human respect for and connection with the natural world.
- **Emphasize** learning that is place- and problem-based and trans- or inter-disciplinary. Lead students in tackling real-world problems (such as increasing rates of asthma, contaminants in the food supply, or the impact of technology on peoples and places) through the lens of multiple disciplines. Show students how to use disciplinary tools (from psychology, justice, literature, journalism, economics, physics, etc.) to help solve such complex and pressing questions.
- **Teach** students to think not just critically but systemically. Help them identify the linkages between the economic, social, and environmental components of any issue. Routinely explore the upstream and downstream impacts and opportunities of actions and decisions.
- **Build** diversity of all kinds into university practices and courses. Cultural, political, intellectual, geographical, economic and biological diversity would be cultivated, studied, and championed. Staff, faculty, and administrators at these institutions would reflect a much wider range of human backgrounds and experiences. Decision-making roles would be occupied by an ethnically diverse group of leaders.

- **Include** the operations and maintenance of the institution itself as part of the curriculum. Give staff, students, faculty, and administrators roles to play in helping to ensure that the institution's physical plant contributes to, rather than detracts from, the health and integrity of surrounding lands, waters, creatures, and peoples.
- **Recognize** Elders as the equivalent of faculty in relevant fields. Create many more settings where they can function in the role of professor. Compensate them appropriately.
- **Acquire** campus foods from local and/or regional sources as much as possible. Prepare them without the chemicals, pesticides, and other additives shown to be detrimental to human health.
- **Integrate** indigenous pedagogies and others appropriate to your region into the teaching practices of your faculties. Routinely use examples, case studies, and imagery from a wide diversity of cultures.
- **Assess** technologies for their impact on the learning community and the wider society. Use only those shown to have beneficial effects on student learning and on the lands, waters, and peoples of the region.
- **Include** indigenous languages in university business and curricula. Offer them as courses. Give faculty and students who speak these languages credit for mastery of multiple languages in the same way you give credit to those with command of both English and a European- or Asian-based language.
- **Use** research and assessment practices and protocols that reflect the cultural diversity of the world's peoples. Ensure that research is conducted in a way that honors the subjects, their communities, and the natural world.
- **Balance** serious work with play and humor.

These are just initial ideas, and hardly exhaustive. Each institution would necessarily create its own unique forms. What can U.S. institutions learn from those beyond our borders who are taking the lead in this endeavor? Check out the resources listed in the back of the handbook for possibilities worth exploring.

# A Few Ideas for Indigenizing Your University

Here are some very basic steps we took, and are continuing to take, to move our initiative forward and make progress toward the goal of true partnership between Alaska Native and university communities. We hope you can adapt them to your situation.

## **Build relationships.**

- Identify and cultivate administrative champions.
- Identify and train allies wherever you can find them.
- Initiate or develop connections with indigenous students, faculty, organizations on and off campus, community members, and tribes.
- Connect with others working to transform the university culture (especially those working toward inclusive excellence and/or sustainable education).

## **Build awareness and articulate connections.**

- Help people see the relevance of indigenous perspectives and how they can bring fresh ideas to existing challenges in economics, research, technology, and other areas.
- Take advantage of every opportunity (large and small, formal and casual) to link indigenous issues to existing paradigms.

## **Strategize for the long haul, but take it a step at a time.**

- Develop a vision that helps people (yourself included) to imagine what is possible. Aim for true equity and inclusiveness, even if it seems like a distant dream for your institution at this point in time.
- Set manageable goals; break them down into smaller goals that can be accomplished this year, this month, this week, today. Take today's actions today.
- Offer support and appreciation for yourself and others for each step along the way. Celebrate even seemingly small accomplishments. Share stories of other large visions that were realized through patience and persistence over time. Enjoy each other's company and have as much fun as possible as you move toward the vision.
- Keep going!

## **If you don't have a specific group to work with...**

**Identify** the indigenous student population at your institution. They may be hard to notice; invisibility is a key component in the oppression of indigenous peoples.

**Reach out** to the indigenous nations in your region. Find out where they live and where their young people attend college. What are their educational goals? What are their options? Is there a tribal college nearby? Reach out to the people and programs who serve this population. Ask them to help you find ways to help your faculty learn from those communities and cultures.

**Build relationships**, if you do not already have them, with indigenous leaders, community leaders from other cultural backgrounds, faculty of color, and international faculty. Invite them

to share the teaching and learning practices that come from their cultural backgrounds; create opportunities for them to share with your institution's faculty. Don't expect them to teach you; accept responsibility for your own learning. As you nurture these relationships over time, you will begin to develop resources both on campus and off for cross-cultural faculty learning.

**Emphasize practices** that create inclusive excellence. Inclusive excellence is the result of practices that create learning environments in which students who have been marginalized by the educational system in the dominant culture can thrive. In most cases, these approaches are equally effective with students from the dominant culture<sup>27</sup>.

It is not necessary to have in-depth knowledge of specific cultural backgrounds in order to foster inclusive excellence. Many simple changes can help create educational spaces in which more students can learn and thrive. A few examples:

- Vary your teaching techniques.
- Provide multiple ways for students to show that learning has occurred.
- Use cooperative and collaborative teaching and learning styles.
- Create occasions for authentic human exchanges.
- Relate course material to learners' lives.
- Use inclusive language that reflects the diversity of student backgrounds and identities.
- Use problem-solving goals and case studies as learning tools.
- Ask for feedback from learners about behaviors, practices, and policies that create barriers to their learning.

\* Tisdale, 1995; Wlodkowski and Ginsburg, 1995

# Steps Towards Equity

Modify course offerings and degree programs to become more relevant to village and/or community needs.

Include indigenous examples in course content.

Hire and promote more faculty, staff, and administrators with Native ancestry so students see role models within our institutions.

Engage indigenous students as mentors, guides, and friends early in the college journey.

Provide safe spaces for Native students to connect with one another and rest from the demands of the dominant culture.

Connect students with local indigenous communities and resources near our campuses.

Learn about and try to honor traditional ways of communicating (eye contact, body language, other non-verbal expressions).

Provide assistance with money management and navigation of a foreign campus, community, and system.

Include indigenous artwork, music, activities, foods, and other culturally relevant offerings on our campuses.

Sponsor on and off-campus forums that bring indigenous issues to the forefront.

Pursue programs and projects with Native communities/individuals as partners.

Provide cross-cultural orientations, workshops, and seminars for professors and researchers engaged in or pursuing projects that require cooperation and collaboration with Native peoples and communities.

Allocate funding and support for innovative, creative programs that allow Native young people, the campus, and the general public to become more aware of issues faced by Native peoples.

Show that you care personally about individual indigenous (and non-indigenous!) students by making time to talk, walk, sit, or just hang out with them, in your office or outside. Ask how things are going, where they are from, if they have any relatives in the nearby area or far away. Your warmth and concern can make a difference.

Learn about indigenous ways of conducting research and assessment; validate these other ways of knowing in addition to Western academic protocols.

# Why This Matters

Libby Roderick

The academy is widely assumed to be the best source for the highly specialized knowledge and technological skills people need to be successful in the world. The university helps students develop the critical thinking, theoretical, and technical skills necessary to get good jobs, do good work, and thrive within this society. The goal is to prepare them to engage effectively in a heterogeneous democracy: to navigate, respect, and benefit from diverse perspectives and ideas. At its best, the academy accomplishes these goals very well.

But the academy also comes from a particular place, history, and set of traditions that makes it harder to see certain things differently—such as the human relationship with the natural world. The humanistic tradition postulates a world in which human beings are valued above all other creatures by virtue of such capacities as language and reason. From this position it is difficult to even recognize, much less experience, the indigenous view of human beings embedded within a network of equal relations with all species, each of which has special capacities. From the humanistic point of view, indigenous cultures are seen as mere artifacts of more primitive times in human history. They are worth studying in the anthropology or linguistic classroom perhaps, but not relevant or scholarly, let alone central to the challenges of this modern time. Obviously, this book strives to promote a different viewpoint.

Because who really knows what it may take for coming generations to survive the challenges that lie ahead? Human populations are growing, extreme weather events are increasing, and food and water security is weakening. Many of us are increasingly concerned about a widespread lack of natural knowledge and practical skills and a human consciousness that fails to recognize its interdependence on biological life support systems. Even people wired into global networks need clean air, water, and food; even the most sophisticated abstract thinkers need healthy ecosystems to support their lives. What if the global technology and information culture does not prove sufficient to meet the demands of the future?

We as educators owe it to future generations to take a close look at ourselves. We are still, by and large, educating people as if mental skills were separate from and superior to physical ones, as if long-term intimacy with a particular place on the earth had little to teach us, as if it was somebody else's job to ensure that the next generation learns how to live in right relationship with the rest of the world's life forms, systems, and peoples. We still mostly teach as though economics and psychology have nothing to do with earth sciences, let alone with each other. What if we are wrong about this, perhaps dangerously so?

Throughout history, many of the most creative and transformative ideas in any society (whether business, educational, scientific, or other) have come from the margins of that society. People on the outside can often see what those near the center can't. At first, many of these "outsider" perspectives are ridiculed or simply ignored. They tend to gain respect and recognition only when problems within the prevailing paradigms grow too numerous and the old, familiar solutions no longer work.

Indigenous orientations—including attitudes of humility and reciprocity with respect to other life forms; traditions of gift-giving; and a recognition of our profound interdependence



with the complex web of life—stand in almost direct contradiction to those of the modern Western world. As a result, Native cultures are ideally positioned to offer productive critiques of mainstream Western thought and to point towards new solutions for some of humanity’s pressing problems.

Given our commitment to scholarship, academic rigor, and the well being of future generations, we owe it to ourselves to be open to new perspectives about education, our relationship to the planet, what’s real, and what’s really important. In fact, this kind of rigorous, reflective thinking is what Western scholars do best. The finest teachers actively challenge the status quo within which they teach, including their own assumptions, and are willing to draw knowledge and wisdom from all available sources, including those beyond the traditional bounds of higher education. By wrestling with these difficult issues and holding these necessary difficult dialogues within our minds, departments, and universities, we ensure our own integrity.

Our world is interconnected in extraordinarily complex ways, and we are well served when our ways of teaching and learning reflect that fact. Indigenous ways of teaching and learning bring to the academy an integrated, systemic, and longstanding way of perceiving and moving within the world. They heighten our faculty’s capacity for a kind of teaching that prepares students to address the world’s profoundly interdisciplinary challenges. They help us better equip our students to become leaders who can build businesses, communities, nations, and perhaps even a global village, capable of working cooperatively and of protecting the natural world that makes all this possible.

By honoring the best of both ways of teaching and learning, we can help new generations of learners move into adulthood with the best chance of contributing to the creation of a just, healthy, prosperous, and sustainable world.

And really, is there anything more important than that?



## Reflection

Does academic freedom give us  
the freedom to step outside our own  
educational paradigms?

How many of us ever do that, and  
what happens when we do?

# Afterword

Ilarion Mercurieff

Working side by side with Oscar and Libby to engage sixteen professors from two Alaskan universities in Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning was an amazing process. It took months of planning to create one week-long semi-immersion experience, but the time was as rewarding to me as it was to the faculty who participated. Each time I hear a story, personal or otherwise, I learn something new. Each time someone steps forward to share, I recognize the courage involved and appreciate the opportunity their sharing offers for growth. I came away feeling like “we” have new allies in our struggles for equal time and treatment vis a vis people of the mainstream society.

There is no question that this program produced a palpable change in the attitudes of the participants towards Alaska’s Native peoples, for what we have to deal with in today’s world and for what we have to offer as well. Each participant had an individual experience, but all were made keenly aware of institutional racism and the ways in which we are complicit in it whether we are aware of it or not. At least now, the participants will have a heightened awareness about that dynamic and be on the lookout for it.

They will also have a greatly increased awareness of the possibilities that Native approaches offer for student engagement. As Don Rearden’s experience illustrates, Native ways of teaching and learning can have significant impacts on the behavior and thinking of all kinds of students, not only about Native issues but about all kinds of issues. The experience changed their consciousness. This was our desired result. As Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying: “You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it.”

Most gratifying is the fact that people were changed at an individual, personal level. They learned something they can carry with them for the rest of their lives: how to be quiet and how important being quiet is every day of our lives; how to watch, listen, and learn without taking notes or recording the lessons; how to more truly be with nature; or any of the myriad of other lessons that were available to them. Whatever they learned about Native ways brings nothing but positives into their lives. The Elders say that nothing is created on the outside until it is created on the inside (of us) first. It is our hope that the participants learned things that will help them better understand themselves. The more one understands oneself, the more one will understand other people and, indeed, all of creation.

This is our dream in putting together this book: that members of the academy would come to understand how the Way of the Real Human Being can foster thinking critical to dealing with the daunting problems of violence and ecocide; and that they would use this knowledge to stimulate real actions to decolonize their universities. Indigenous ways have a lot to offer the world. We hope this book will have a positive impact on partnerships and alliances between indigenous peoples and those of the mainstream.

It took ten thousand years of time-tested and successful survival strategies to bring us Native peoples to this point. Surely there must be value in this that cannot be ignored.

*Qaxaalaakux Unguneesh.* Thank you very much

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Alaskool ([www.Alaskool.org](http://www.Alaskool.org)). Online materials about Alaska Native history, education, languages and cultures.

Alaska Native Knowledge Network ([www.ankn.org](http://www.ankn.org)). Resources for compiling and exchanging information related to Alaska Native knowledge systems and ways of knowing.



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“Two very different systems, with two very different relationships to place and community. Intimacy and universality; tied to place and transcending place. Can we offer our students the best of both worlds?”

Libby Roderick

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For ten thousand years, Alaska’s Native peoples have survived and thrived in some of the harshest conditions in the world. During that time, they perfected teaching and learning practices that ensured the survival of their young people and communities. Those ancient practices offer fresh insights for educators who care about the state of our world and seek ways to make education more relevant and engaging.

This book describes a unique higher education project that broke some difficult silences between academic and Native communities, introducing a small group of non-Native faculty members to traditional Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning. It presents a model for a Native-designed and run faculty development intensive, strategies for applying indigenous pedagogies in western learning environments, reflections on education by Alaska Native Elders, and reports from participants on what they learned and what they tried in their classrooms. It is intended to stimulate discussion and reflection about best practices in higher education for anyone open to discovering the knowledge and wisdom of the Way of the Real Human Being.