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Teaching as Learning in a Yup'ik Eskimo Village

Learning about and getting involved in the local community are necessary to become a successful high school teacher in Tununak, Alaska. Kimberly C. Price describes cultural challenges and shares the experiences that have made her a learner as well as a teacher.

As I sat on the floor helping one student, another from across the room quietly asked, "Kim, can I go to the bathroom?" Hearing my name but not the question, I looked up and raised my eyebrows inquiringly. The student turned and left the classroom. Oops. I immediately realized my error. In Yup'ik culture, people raise their eyebrows rather than nodding their heads to indicate *yes*. I had just given the student permission to do whatever it was she had asked to do.

That was three years ago when I first came to Tununak, a Yup'ik Eskimo village of approximately 350 people on the southwest coast of Alaska. Now, each time I visit home, my mother tries to break me of the eyebrow nod that has become second nature for me but is meaningless to people in Atlanta.

After graduation, I was offered a job in a suburban high school, but the school was a carbon copy of the one from which I had graduated. Part of my graduate school experience included realizing that my frame of reference as defined by my suburban existence was extraordinarily narrow. I wanted to see what else was out there for me as a person and as a teacher. In my first three years of teaching, there is no question that I have learned just as much, if not more, from my students and this community than my students could ever learn from me. Learning about and becoming a part of the community were essential aspects of becoming a teacher in this village.

Accessibility to our village is provided by plane, boat, four-wheeler, or snowmobile, and we had transported the students to the airstrip by a sled pulled by snowmobile.

My Classroom: The Village of Tununak

"There's a fire extinguisher on the rear wall and one beneath my partner's chair. The survival gear is in the nose of the aircraft. We'll stop in Toksook, then head to Bethel." The pilot finished the familiar speech before turning around and starting up the engines of the Twin Otter.

"I'm a chaperone," I thought. "How did that happen?" It seemed that only yesterday I was a student. I quickly turned around to count my students yet again, each bundled, according to district policy, in snow gear (snow pants, snow boots, winter coats, and so forth). We were on our way to Bethel, about 120 miles away, where students from villages all over the district would gather for the district speech contest. No yellow buses here. No paved roads for that matter. Accessibility to our village is provided by plane, boat, four-wheeler, or snowmobile, and we had transported the students to the airstrip by a sled pulled by snowmobile.

Tununak is nestled in a small bay beside a river, and it is surrounded by a treeless landscape of tundra and rolling hills that changes with the seasons—rich green in the summer, yellow and brown touched with red in the fall, and pure white tinted with blues and grays in the very long winter. From my bedroom window, I can watch the Bering Sea as it changes from blue water to white ice.

The village population is almost entirely Yup'ik. This is the same "Upik" as the title charac-

ter in *Julie of the Wolves*—her birthplace on Nunivak Island is one quick plane hop away. Because of the extreme isolation of this part of Alaska and the lack of exploitable resources, the Native language and culture have survived longer than those of other indigenous peoples. Many of my students spoke predominantly Yup'ik until they got to school, and most still speak it fluently, especially when they do not want me to understand what they are saying.

The village consists of approximately seventy houses, one main road running from the airstrip to the school, two stores, a video/DVD rental shop, and a post office. The largest building in the village is the school and the second largest is the old BIA school building, which now houses the nine certified staff members and their families in six apartments. Most of the village is without running water; families pack water in five-gallon buckets from wells and use honey buckets for sewage.

This village has become my classroom.

A Way of Life: Teaching in Bush Alaska

Only four teachers currently teach the thirty to forty students in seventh through twelfth grade. Each day, I teach the fifteen high school students in five to eight different classes, and it is not uncommon to have two to three different classes going on in the classroom at the same time. Over the past three years, I have taught English, Drama, English Language Development, Film as Literature, Health, P.E., Pre-Algebra, Algebra I, US History, Alaska Studies, Survey of Social Sciences, Photography, Mass Communications, Spanish I, and Contemporary World Studies. After school, I have sponsored speech contests, dance classes, and student government. At a recent basketball tournament hosted by our school, I simultaneously kept score, supervised student council concession sales, and trained yearbook staffers on how to take pictures with the new digital camera. Finally, the other high school teachers and I must perform all of the duties of high school counselors—studying transcripts, writing schedules, and helping students to plan careers, apply for college, and locate scholarship money.

I have heard it said that teaching in the bush is not a job, it is a way of life, but there are numerous benefits that make the workload worthwhile. One of the most exciting aspects of teaching so many subjects in such a small setting is the opportunity for integration and collaboration. Working with other teachers or alone in my classes, integration has become a crucial aspect of building context in literature. For example, reading *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* by Melba Pattillo Beals while studying the civil rights movement in US History empowers students with the background information they need to comprehend the text, while at the same time bringing to life the civil rights movement in a way the history text fails to do.

Perhaps the most valuable part of teaching in this setting is how well I get to know my students. I have now taught many of them for three years for at least half of the day, and coaching extracurricular activities means my relationship with students extends well into evenings and weekends. It is normal for students in this village to visit teachers, and it is not uncommon for me to have students hang out or do homework at my house. I know all of their parents and most of their siblings and grandparents. All of this interaction with and knowledge of my students pays off in planning

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Playing basketball, going to church, and participating in Native dancing are probably the most effective ways to build relationships with people in the community. Here Kim Price participates in the Feather Dance at the community center. Left to right on the mat: John Flynn, Paul Link, Frank Link, and Stacy Asicksik. Left to right standing: Alma Kanrilak, Kim Price, Elsie Hooper, Charlotte Kanrilak, Theresa Lincoln, and Lisa Usugan. Photo by Bruce Price.

lessons that will engage students. At this point, I know their strengths and weaknesses, their learning styles, their interests, their goals, and their fears. I know what motivates them and what makes them shut down. I know their favorite authors and genres and, for some of them, their favorite colors.

I am also thankful that I get the rare opportunity to see my students learn and grow over the years—from scatterbrained ninth graders who could barely write a paragraph to focused seniors capable of independently producing thoughtful papers and projects. Teaching students over several years and receiving emails from students off at college has afforded me great opportunities for reflective practice, reinforcing my understanding of teaching and learning as ongoing processes that will not end as long as I want to be an effective teacher.

Weather Permitting: Lessons in Flexibility

Every aspect of life here is critically linked to weather—hunting, fishing, travel, and even school. Our weather is particularly unpredictable, and they say that the wind only stops blowing when it changes direction. The weather, along with other aspects of life in bush Alaska, requires that we have a "weather permitting" mentality about our teaching.

We rarely have a normal day of teaching. We frequently have visitors, such as the dentist (who sets up in the library), the social worker, guest speakers, and even Santa Claus. However, the unpredictability of the weather means that we never know when they will arrive or how long they will live at our school. We recently hosted a five-team basketball tournament in which two teams were weathered-in. For two days, we had twenty-one extra boys sleeping at the school and taking classes with our students. We have had to cancel school for two days because half our staff was stranded in Bethel, and we have had to delay or cancel school because of whiteouts or winds gusting to 50 mph resulting in wind chills of 30–40 degrees below zero. On the other hand, nice days in the spring also affect the classroom as boys miss school to go seal hunting and girls have to check out early to help clean seals.

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For my English classroom, "weather permitting" means organizing my class in a way that is conducive to high absenteeism and frequent interruptions. Writing workshop, reading workshop, and literature circles work well for this. I allow students to read and write independently in class while I circulate and conference with them. Students who miss class can easily read and write at home and get the notes for minilessons or literature circles from their peers. Because of the ESL needs of my students, we occasionally have whole-class reading for more complex texts, such as *Romeo and Juliet.* We enjoy these corporate readings but do not engage in them often because of the difficulties caused by fluctuating attendance and frequent interruptions.

Flexibility is also needed for non-weather-related problems. Unfortunately, the transition to Western lifestyles has brought with it problems for Alaska Natives. Alcohol abuse is fifty percent higher among Alaska Natives than whites in Alaska, and marijuana dependency is twice as high ("Summary" 6–7). The Fetal Alcohol Syndrome prevalence rate among Alaska Natives is seven times the high end of the national rate of 0.1 to 0.7. The Alaska Native suicide rate is 4.2 times that of all races in the United States, and the attempted suicide rate of Alaska Native males between fifteen and nineteen is 5.6 times that of all Alaska males aged fifteen to nineteen. Finally, 25.7 percent of the Alaska Native population live below the poverty level compared to 17.8 percent for all races in the United States ("Special Reports").

Although the village is completely dry, we still have problems with alcoholism, which can further lead to violence, theft, depression, suicide, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. There are also problems with abuse, neglect, and gambling addiction. With everyone so closely related, we simply cannot ignore these issues when our students are carrying them into the classroom each day. One of my colleagues sees it as "taking the students as they come."

I have found that reading and writing are the most constructive methods of helping students cope with the struggles they face outside of the classroom. On days when students shut down and refuse to tell me what is wrong, journals and email become our methods of communication. I have also used reading novels such as *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *The Watcher* by James Howe, and *When She Was Good* by Norma Fox Mazer as a way to help students un-

derstand that they are not alone and that there are ways to overcome problems.

I cannot control weather or what goes on outside my classroom, but I can work to insure that my classroom is a place where students feel safe and focused on learning.

We Don't Live in Igloos: Culture and Community

After a long day breathing the stale air of the school, two other teachers and I zipped along the frozen river on snowmobiles, inhaling crisp, cool air and waving to people ice fishing in the last moments before the low sun set near five o'clock. At the post office, we stopped to talk to the parents of some of our students, got our mail, and then headed home along the snow-covered road through town. We came across an unusually large gathering of community members and stopped to see what was going on. Beluga whale. Once a staple of the Yup'ik diet, it is now a rare delicacy. We watched the waves splashing red against the shore as several men dragged the heavy head up to the road where old and young dropped by to watch the butchering and take a bit home to their families for dinner. Everyone in the village had beluga that night, including us. Sharing in village life is crucial in building relationships and trust in the community. This participation also helps us as teachers to better understand the cultural frame of reference through which our students view the world.

Susie Angaiak, a village elder, demonstrates basket weaving for Nadene Slatts during Yup'ik class. Photo by Ken Groves.

I cannot paint a complete picture of my experience here without describing the school's relationship to community and culture. In such a small place, it is impossible to go anywhere without interacting with students and parents. When I run in the fall, I see women and children picking berries near the airstrip; young boys fishing in the river by the bridge; and my high school boys, carrying 12-gauge shotguns or .22 rifles, heading off to hunt before the geese migrate south for the winter. Even going to the store or to church is a chance to touch base with the parents and grandparents of my students.

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In many ways, the school has become an integral part of community life. Our gym is used for everything from Native dance festivals to community potlucks. I have learned to Eskimo dance, boiled over 1,000 eggs for Easter, cooked Thanksgiving dinner for the whole village, directed Christmas plays, cooked senior dinner, and served walrus blubber at a potluck. Almost everyone in the village plays basketball, and I play basketball with the women from the community about once a week, which offers the other teachers and me a chance to interact with parents and others from the community in a nonteacher way.

Sewing *Quspaqs*: Creating Our Classroom

Relevancy is an important part of any classroom, but here it is both essential and unavoidable. I simply cannot avoid the importance of culture and tradition when students have excused absences for subsistence activities. These activities inevitably become material for writing assignments. Their passion for basketball becomes an essential tool in teaching math concepts. And in literature, relevancy means providing novels and stories that are relevant to what students are dealing with in their lives. My students relate easily to teen protagonists in a variety of young adult novels, including everything from books by

Lurlene McDaniel and R. L. Stine to the *Fingerprints* and *Fearless* series.

As much as my students love YA literature, more complex works present a different challenge. When many students have never even left this region of Alaska or seen a big city, it becomes essential for teachers to build bridges between the lives of students and the story worlds that are often so completely different from anything the students have encountered. I have used the Internet, documentaries, and contemporary movie clips to help students with classic works like *The Crucible*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Romeo and Juliet.* Once the context is built, it is also important to help students make connections between events in the village and ideas in the texts, such as the scapegoating of *The Crucible*, the social stigma of *The Scarlet Letter*, and the rivalry in *Romeo and Juliet.*

Cultural context also affects the way I approach discussions of literature and language. Lisa Delpit points out that students of different cultures have different ways of interacting with authority. Patrick J. Finn reminds teachers that students of different cultures not only have different ways of interacting in the classroom, but they also have different ways of knowing. If teachers ignore these factors in the classroom, then they are expecting students of different backgrounds to learn new skills and information while at the same time overcoming and adjusting to differences in discourse, learning modalities, and relating. Delpit notes that it is also our responsibility as teachers to help nonmainstream students understand the "power codes" that enable people from dominant culture groups to maintain power (282). Students need to be explicitly informed about these codes so that they can interact in mainstream society if they so choose. This presents a sort of Catch-22 for teachers working with students from a different cultural background. How can we best respect students' culture and make accommodations for cultural differences while at the same time encouraging students to grow and learn in ways that empower them to interact on equal footing with dominant culture groups? This is the dilemma explored by Bob Fecho in his article, "Learning with April":

As a teacher in Tununak, I have had to balance my desire to inspire inquisitive lifelong learners with my desire to respect and uphold Yup'ik cultural values.

> As a teacher I have always been committed to [presenting] my students with the full spectrum of options before them, urging them to seek the most from the world, to see education as a means for pursuing their individual rainbows and challenging the status quo. But equally, I have always been committed to respecting the beliefs of my students, to allowing them to understand their own needs, to giving them the room to bring who they are into the classroom. (18)

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The importance of family, the defined gender roles, and the acceptability of revenge in traditional Yup'ik culture give some students a very different frame of reference for interpreting stories and history than one might expect. In Alaska Studies, we read *Bird Girl and the Man Who Followed the Sun: An Athabaskan Indian Legend from Alaska* by Velma Wallis, a moving legend that my students love reading. In the novel, Bird Girl enjoys hunting but is told by her tribe that she must stop hunting, marry, and fulfill her role as a woman. Daagoo, a young man who enjoys exploring rather than hunting, is likewise told by his tribe that he must settle down and perform the proper duties of a man. I expected students to be angry at the parents for trying to control the lives of the young people. Instead, many students understood that it was necessary for Bird Girl and Daagoo to perform their duties for the survival of the people; however, even as the students defended the decisions of the tribes, they related to the predicament of the protagonists. Many of them are also struggling with the inner conflict of desiring to respect their elders while at the same time desiring to seek their own education and careers in the outside world. Some students, on the other hand, are at the opposite end of the spectrum and tend to reject traditional culture altogether.

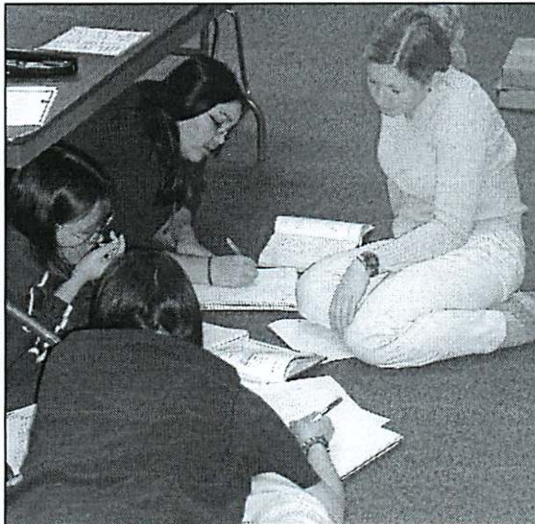
Although part of me fought against the strictly defined gender roles, I had to let go of my personal beliefs and expectations to honor those of my students. At the same time, I wanted to challenge them to seek their own ideas concerning the conflict between traditional and modern culture. Three years later, we are still discussing this and other issues as they arise in various works. We even wrote about this conflict in a

shared experience of creating a short story entitled "Migration" about a high school senior trying to decide whether or not to go to college.

> "Atam! Look!"
> "Ca?"
> "I got a letter from UAA!"
> "Did you get accepted?"
> "Wait." I looked around then headed toward the door. . . . I waited until we were a good distance from the PO and ripped open the letter.
> "Oh man! I'm accepted."
> "What?"
> "I don't wanna go!"
> "Ciin'guk? You should go."
> "But I'll get homesick."
> "Man. I'd go. . . . Who wants to stay here?"
> "But I won't know anybody."
> "You can meet people. Don't be so . . ."
> "You're not going."
> "Because I can't. I have to help my mom. You know that."

As the story developed, we dealt with issues that our four seniors would soon be facing.

Learning about the Yup'ik language has also been a vital part of helping me to be an effective teacher here. The more I learn about the language, the better I understand the logical mistakes students make in their writing. For example, the Yup'ik language lacks articles and gender-specific pronouns, making it fairly common for students to leave out *a*, *an*, or *the* or mix up the pronouns *he* and *she* when needed. Helping students become aware of these linguistic errors empowers them to take control of their English language writing.



Having noticed that people do everything on the floor (from eating to using a sewing machine), Kim Price began to conduct most small-group instruction there. Pictured from front to back: Lisa Usugan, Laurentia Albert, Lucy Inakak, and Kim Price. Photo by Ken Groves.

Culture also influences my classroom communication. Yup'ik teachers have been known to describe outside teachers as having a tendency to "holler or scream," meaning they give too many verbal instructions (Mohatt and Sharp 65). My students are quick to complain if I "talk too much," and I have learned to speak in a softer, slower manner that is more comfortable and familiar to my students. Also, storytelling is a natural form of instruction used by elders to teach important life lessons and values, and I have learned that my students are much more engaged when I tell stories and give anecdotal examples rather than teach straightforward lessons.

Much of what I have learned about classroom structure has been from the junior high teacher, our only certified teacher who is actually from the village. She has impressed upon me the importance of routine and consistency. This corresponds with research on Yup'ik classroom instruction:

> Outside teachers who spoke softly, who had a well-organized routine in which the children knew what to do without being told, and who spoke in private face-to-face situations with the children received praise as good instructors from the Yup'ik teachers. . . . The rules should be clear, the routine predictable, and the children should be expected to follow this routine without continual direction by the teachers. One then organizes beginnings through having engaging activities waiting for the children and by moving from student to student to insure the organization is reestablished each day. Within this routine the children should have the flexibility to make decisions and the freedom to move to a different activity or to take a short timeout. (Mohatt and Sharp 65)

Again, the workshop model correlates with this description of classroom organization.

Finally, watching the elders model traditional crafts and activities while interacting with and quietly correcting the students during Yup'ik studies classes has allowed me to see firsthand how the children are naturally instructed. The elder women

silently go about their task of sewing a *quspaq* (traditional dress) or making a headdress, while the teenaged girls watch and begin their own with occasional input and assistance from the elders as needed. This method of instruction has become the model for my own classroom instruction in which I model an activity either before or while students are engaged in the activity and give them assistance when they need it.

The more I learn about the language the better I understand the logical mistakes students make in their writing.

Conclusion

While student teaching, I had the bright idea of walking into a predominantly African American class and teaching a culturally relevant Civil Rights unit as my first unit. Not surprisingly, the students spent the first several days giving me cold stares and wondering why this twenty-two-year-old white woman thought she knew anything about racism. This time, I spent three years living here before attempting a unit on the portrayal of people of the North in literature. My students avoided these books because they thought they would be *qumli* (cheesy) and fake; however, after doing a unit on People of the Circumpolar North in our Contemporary World Studies class, I approached this unit of literature as a chance for them to assess the accuracy of the portrayal of Natives in young adult literature. Although there was some resistance, the students took on that challenge and were completely absorbed in the story worlds of *Dogsong* by Gary Paulsen, *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George, and *Minuk: Ashes in the Pathway* by Kirkpatrick Hill. They had found books that, even with slight inaccuracies, captured their lives. As one student put it, "they seem real." It took me three years to build the trust and relationships necessary to do this unit.

I have heard our district described as "a challenging place to teach, an exciting place to learn." This is a perfect description of my experience here. I am certain that I would not have been effective as a teacher in this place if I had not been flexible, open-minded, and willing to interact with and learn from the people in this community. More than ever, I am convinced that the education profession is more about learning than teaching.

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