

Why Should Yupiaq Literacy Slow Student Progress?

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The imposition of Western names, linguistic constructions and literary forms was an insidious attack on the psychological and spiritual nature of Native people and very destructive of the social order ... Rather than accepting the world as 'given', or indeed a 'gift' as many oral cultures do, literacy brings with it the challenge to 'edit' the world, to remake it as one would craft a written text ... Literacy destroys the unity of the spoken word (Eastham, 2003).

In the above statements Eastman highlights some of the profound changes that are brought about with the introduction of literacy into an oral society. The impact of literacy on the indigenous universe is immediate, for “language is the way we participate in the living reality of that universe” (Eastham, 2003). As an act of self-preservation, Native people metaphorically adapted to living in a cocoon of Native language and culture from which they are now beginning to re-emerge as a mature, self-organizing people with a regenerative and harmonious synergistic life-way that can contribute to a new social order.

The Euro-American educational system has made only feeble attempts to acknowledge the existence of Native languages, and even less attention has been given to the impact of literacy on oral traditions. Classrooms are filled with eager youngsters wanting to learn the Native language, but they are often stymied by having to learn to read and write that language at the same time. How many times have parents, teachers and aides observed that the Native youngsters know how to break the written word into its constituent parts and construct its enunciation, but cannot carry on a conversation with their parents or grandparents. This vaunted linguistic process thrusts the Native youngsters into using the adopted orthographic form to make an artifice representing the spoken word. In other words, Native language learners enter into an unreal world of meaningless letters to make a word that abstractly represents something from the real world.

Nature is our metaphysic, and to fully appreciate our relationship with the world around us we need to teach for mastery and fluency of the Native language at the level of everyday conversational use. This fluency in the Native language is a desideratum needing immediate attention. For example, in the Native communities dealing with the effects of global warming we need to make the Native language the working language during those deliberations. When sharing our collective knowledge, we must draw upon the deep knowledge embedded in the Native language because “Nature speaks in wholes” (Eastman, 2003). It is the Native language that is best equipped to represent the meaning of community and place. This process allows us to psychologically and spiritually address the original condition of place and the changes that are now taking place. It is this collective knowledge that will guide us in adapting to changes to place, in forming talking circles to deal with grief due to loss, in planning and bringing to fruition new shelters, food and means of transportation, and in working on a new Native identity that will be necessary as we are thrust into an altered reality and lifestyle.

This we can do successfully even without outside help. However, there will be a few occasions whereby we will need to consult with “experts” knowledgeable about the effects of contaminants, sea level rising, climate change, plant and animal extinction, introduction of new flora and fauna, and so forth. All this will require careful planning, organizing, implementing and assessing the success or failure of our efforts. Our problem-solving tools that are embedded in mythology, stories and life ways will give us strength, intention, and hope for success. More than ever, the Native characteristics of sharing, cooperation, teamwork, consensus, determination and use of a living Native language will give us the strength to deal with the changes that are impacting our lives.

Reference

Eastham, S. 2003. *Biotech Time-Bomb: How genetic engineering could irreversibly change our world*. Auckland, NZ: RSVP Publishing Company Limited