Anthropology, Education and Development in Rural Alaska

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At the risk of oversimplifying a highly complex set of issues, let me tell you a story.

Several years ago, the survival of a major caribou herd that migrates through the foothills of Alaska's Brooks Range was in serious question. A combination of hunting pressures, wolf predation, and a severe winter had reduced the herd to dangerously low numbers, and it was apparent that some kind of restrictive actions would be necessary to manage the herds return to a sustainably healthy size. The response of the State Department of Fish and Game in this matter was of considerable concern to the Native communities in the region, since many of them were dependent upon the caribou for their own subsistence. Up until this time, the herd had been large enough to permit unrestricted hunting for subsistence purposes.

After doing extensive surveys and reviewing their options in the situation, the game biologists recommended the imposition of individual bag limits to restrict the hunting take, until the herd could build itself back up. Each hunter would be permitted to take a certain number of animals, to be determined by the size of the herd and the number of hunters. This proposal immediately ran into stiff opposition from the representatives of the Native communities, not because they disagreed with the biologists' numbers, or with the need for some restrictions, but because they viewed it as a direct assault on some of their most cherished cultural practices. Traditionally, those men in the community who had the skills and the means to hunt would bring back sufficient meat to supply everyone in the village. The caribou would be

distributed equitably to elders and other community members who were unable to go on the hunt. The proposed individual bag limit, while technically reasonable, did not take into account the cultural fabric of the community. It treated people as isolated individuals, rather than as members of an interdependent cultural group.

The communities responded, therefore, that while they would respect the overall restrictions on the number of caribou to be taken, they would apply the bag limit to the community as a whole, rather than to the individuals within it. A single hunter might take twice the proposed individual allotment, but the meat would be distributed according to community needs. The biologists could have their numbers, but the community would retain its traditional distribution practices. This simple, but elegant, solution wasn't quite so simple, however. While the biologists could agree with the counter-proposal in principle, they couldn't agree with it in policy. Such a radical divergence from conventional game management practice could not be readily implemented in larger urban communities, nor could a dual policy be tolerated, so, for the purposes of uniformity and political expediency, the state adopted the individual bag limit as official policy, but pursued a policy of benign neglect with regard to its enforcement. The communities didn't win, but they succeeded in making their point.

The caribou herd has since regained its strength and the bag limits have been lifted. But more importantly, because of this and numerous other similar incidents, there now exists within the Department of Fish and Game a newly established "Subsistence Division," which is responsible for considering the cultural impact of fish and game management policies on the Native communities in Alaska. The particularistic orientation of the game biologists must now be reconciled with the more wholistic views of social scientists, including

Anthropologists, who are responsible for considering the effects of state policies on the customary practices of subsistence users, who have priority access to the game. This invasion of a once sacred unidisciplinary domain by forces with a new and different perspective is indicative of changes that are taking place throughout Alaska. And nowhere is this more evident than in the field of education. The old, conventional solutions to presumed black-and-white problems are no longer acceptable.

Since the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1971, and 21 rural school districts, along with 120 small village high schools, were created by the state in 1976, rural communities have actively asserted themselves on the educational scene in Alaska. Inherent in the issues they have raised has been a concern for the effects of schools on the cultural well-being of the communities in which they operate. And just as inherent in the situation has been the continuing inability of the schools to satisfactorily respond to the demands placed upon them by the communities, but not for the lack of trying. A vast array of "culturally relevant" curriculum materials, "effective teaching practices," and special educational programs have been implemented by schools throughout rural Alaska in the past ten years, and most with little apparent change in the schools' net effect on the Native students. While the drop-out rate has decreased, overall student performance does not appear to have made a corresponding increase.

Why has so much action produced so few results? Or is it possible that while we have been using conventional means to scrutinize the performance of individual students and teachers, we have missed the fact that the communities themselves have been engaged in a larger educational and cultural revolution, that exceeds our capacity to deal with through conventional ways of thinking about what schools do? Are educators facing the same problem with regard to

culture and schooling that the game biologists faced in trying to reconcile their approach to bag limits with that of the communities?

To each of the above questions, I would argue in the affirmative. Schools in rural Alaska have made considerable progress over the past decade, but not necessarily by design, or in ways that are readily measurable. Rural communities did obtain a large degree of local political control over their schools in 1976, when the state operated system was disbanded in favor of 21 rural districts. But they have since found that obtaining political control was only half the battle. The conventional paradigm of educational thought possessed by the certificated administrators and teachers that the districts are required to employ does not adequately accommodate the cultural considerations that have been raised by the communities. Consequently, the efforts to accommodate the local culture in the school are often in the form of superficial and artifactual add-on programs that have the effect of subverting rather than supporting the contemporary culture of the community. Well-intentioned teachers and administrators often leave the state in frustration when the tried-and-true techniques they have learned elsewhere don't produce the desired results in rural Alaska. The inability of "outside" educators to make the schools work to theirs' and to the communities' satisfaction, and the consequent high turnover rate, have led rural communities to place a heavy emphasis on the preparation of local people to work in their own schools. But they don't want the University training programs to turn out homegrown educators with the same handicaps of those trained elsewhere.

It is with these considerations in mind that I have approached the task of establishing a "subsistence division" in the School of Education at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, bringing to bear a background in anthropology

and education, and experience as a teacher and researcher amongst cultural minorities. What follows will be a summary of some of the ways my training in anthropology has influenced my work over the past dozen years at the University, in the areas of teacher training, curriculum development and program administration.

Teacher Training

The greatest challenge to my expertise, anthropological or otherwise, has been in the development of a field-based University degree program for the training of Alaska Native teachers, begun in 1970. It was a task for which there were no models and for which we found most teacher education literature, at the time, to be unsuited. The literature addressing the teaching of cultural minorities, including that from anthropology, assumed the teachers to be from a majority background, and we had few Native teachers against which to judge the teaching practices best suited for the training of minority teachers. What we did have was special funding to develop a program in which the majority of the training would be made available to students in their home communities throughout the state.

For me, the open-endedness of such a field situation was quite comfortable and provided an opportunity to build the program around an emic perspective, which seemed essential in the milieu of a still evolving educational system. But for the educators with whom I worked, the lack of explicitly stated, measurable objectives and the unpredictability of an inductive process for achieving vague goals were highly disconcerting. They found it difficult to work in an environment where the motto was, "we'll know where we are going when we get there." They tended to view the task in particularistic terms - take the courses offered in the campus program,

transform them into a correspondence format, and send them out to the individual students. If the students do their part, four years later we should have X number of Native "teachers."

With some background in anthropology and some familiarity with the influences of culture and context on learning, it did not seem likely to me that such a limited approach would produce many Native teachers, and those it did produce would be little better prepared than the teachers already teaching in the schools. To help us address some of these concerns, we brought in the closest thing we could find in the way of outside expertise on these issues, that being Harry Wolcott and John Collier, Jr., both of whom had been looking at education of Native Americans through the eyes of anthropology. With their help, and that of many other educational anthropologists over the past dozen years, we gradually began to formulate a rationale for, and approach to, teacher education that is now the basis for an undergraduate and graduate degree program in "cross-cultural education." The field-based undergraduate degree program alone has produced nearly 70 Native teachers since 1970, accounting for 38% of all baccalaureate degrees awarded to Native graduates since the University's founding in 1917.

What distinguishes this program from other teacher education programs? The most obvious, but not necessarily the most important, distinction is reflected in the courses required for the degrees in "cross-cultural education." These include undergraduate courses such as:

- culture and learning
- education and cultural transmission
- communication in cross-cultural classrooms
- curriculum development in cultural perspective

inductively build, with faculty assistance, their own teaching practices around the particular cultural situation in which they are working. Upon graduating, we hope they will be equipped to give rural communities that extra dimension of influence over the education of their children that they now find lacking. We are concerned, however, that the Native teachers not be expected to single-handedly reconstruct the school system. While one teacher can have some influence on the students that pass through his or her hands, and local teachers are more likely to stay in the community and accumulate experience and influence, their most significant impact will come about collectively, as their numbers reach a point where communities begin to develop a sense of ownership over the school. This point has been reached in a few communities, and the results look promising.

In an effort to offset the institutional tendency to look for particularistic measures of the program's and its graduates' effect (i.e., student achievement test scores, individual teaching performance, career patterns, longevity, etc.), we obtained an NIE grant two years ago to analyze video tapes of three Native teachers in a school where they constituted the teaching staff for the first seven grades. By all conventional measures, including test scores, the students in the school had made exceptional progress since the three local teachers had come on board. We wanted to know why. Through analysis of the video tapes, it was apparent that more was going on than met the eye. While on the surface, the classrooms looked fairly conventional, a closer look revealed a rhythm and style of interaction more akin to that present in everyday events in the community, than to that in other classrooms with non-Native teachers. Students were engaged in a highly efficient set of learning activities that flowed naturally from their interaction with the teacher. In addition, participant-observation in the

- cultural heritage in the classroom
- cross-cultural teaching methods

At the graduate level, you will find courses such as:

- education and cultural processes
- social organization of classrooms and learning
- field study methods in educational research
- culture and thought processes
- language, literacy and learning
- educational administration in cultural perspective

You will note that none of these courses are explicitly anthropological, nor are they specific to Alaska Native cultures. The courses are intended to provide teachers with an in-depth understanding of the processes by which culture influences education in any cultural setting, and to draw on a variety of disciplines and cross-cultural experiences to present issues in a comparative perspective. The instructional staff for the program range from anthropologists and linguists to psychologists and educators, all of whom participate in the design and delivery of the courses, and reside themselves in rural communities.

It is the location of the faculty and students in rural community settings that is the most critical feature of the program. Through daily contact with the real world of education in rural Alaska, the students and faculty are constantly assessing the efficacy of the ideas and techniques that are presented to them, and in turn, generating ideas of their own. Consequently, the program continues to evolve and adapt to the changing conditions in rural Alaska. The emphasis in the curriculum is on generalizable cultural processes, rather than on the cultural practices of particular cultural groups. It is the responsibility of the students then, to

community and school indicated a high level of parental support for, and participation in the school, which reinforced the efforts of the teachers. In short, the students were experiencing a degree of continuity between the culture being transmitted in the school and the socialization processes outside the school, that is seldom seen in rural Native communities.

The conceptual tools of anthropology have helped us, first, to train teachers in ways that build upon their Native skills and the cultural conditions in the communities, and then to examine their teaching in ways that identify the contextual features that give it significance. While such tools are particularly useful in a setting of rapid change and development, their application is not limited to such settings. The approach to cross-cultural teacher education that I have outlined here is generalizable to any situation where education is viewed as an inductive, generative process, rather than as a deductive, accumulative process. It is an educational process that grows into the future, rather than replicates the past.

Curriculum Development

As we went about the task of training teachers for rural schools through a field-based program, we also sought to develop curriculum models through which teachers could more readily capitalize on the contemporary cultural environment in which the students lived. If the schools were to deal with the living culture in the communities, the teaching/learning processes would need to be located in real-life everyday settings. Once again, we drew upon anthropology, this time to help us determine what contemporary life in rural communities and schools was like. Specifically, in 1977, we obtained funds for a two-year project to conduct fieldwork in eight rural communities for the purpose of developing curricula and teacher training programs suited to the

needs of the small, one-to-six teacher high schools that were being established throughout the state. We placed a team of graduate students out at the field sites for two years, during which time they conducted fieldwork and helped build a curriculum design that is intended to reflect the unique conditions in rural Alaska in its structure and content. The curriculum attempts to shift some of the control over the processes of learning to the community, by placing a heavy emphasis on community-based, project-oriented, experiential learning activities, including organized travel and urban-based learning experiences. The curriculum content is organized around three general areas of study - communication arts, environmental studies, and cultural ecology - which have served as the basis for resource materials development, as well as for the development of new teacher certification endorsements in the areas of humanities, math and science, and social sciences, respectively. With this curriculum structure, it is possible to offer a basic high school program in a small community with three specially trained teachers who know how to use the resources of the surrounding environment, and can serve as learning managers as well as teachers. Inherent in such an approach is attention to the contemporary cultural milieu in which the student lives, including features ranging from the micro-level of human transactions to the macro-level of federal, state and local political and economic structures. Thus, the ways of teaching can also take into account the local ways of knowing.

Program Administration

The implementation of the teacher training and curriculum development efforts I have outlined has required some additional assistance from anthropology in the areas of program administration and organizational change.

Conventional administrative practices designed to maintain established systems in a stable environment do not work very well in a developmental setting. In order to respond to diverse and rapidly changing conditions, we needed an administrative and organizational approach that would be fluid and adaptive. We needed personnel who had a high tolerance for ambiguity and felt comfortable in a loosely-defined, open-ended environment. We needed people who had a wholistic perspective and could interpret behavior and events in the context of evolving, organic systems. We needed people who were inclined toward a variable-generating rather than a variable-reducing style of administration, and who understood processes of institutional and cultural change.

It should be no surprise to this audience that to find such people, we looked to the field of anthropology, and particularly anthropology and education. We now have within our education faculty, a "subsistence division" of anthropologically trained faculty that outnumbers the entire faculty of the Department of Anthropology. We don't go around, however, self-righteously proclaiming ourselves as having an exclusive handle on the problems of education in rural Alaska. Like the social scientists in the subsistence division of the Department of Fish and Game, we don't see ourselves as replacing educational psychologists - the game biologists of education. Rather, we see ourselves as complementing their work by brokering the relationship between school and community and bringing to bear a sensitivity to the contextual and cultural influences that govern human behavior. That doesn't mean there aren't those who are threatened by the presence of anthropologists in the educational scene in Alaska, as you will see in the next issue of AEQ.

What I have presented here is a highly condensed and somewhat idealized version of a fairly complicated set of programs and activities in the field of education at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. If you would like more detail on any of what I have presented, please write.