CROSS-CULTURAL UNIVERSITY TEACHING: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR

Final Report

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by

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What Did You Learn Today, Professor?

The following discussion is an outgrowth of a year-long seminar in which five University of Alaska-Fairbanks faculty members, along with two associates, examined their own teaching in five regularly offered classes in which Alaska native students were enrolled. In this account, I will attempt to document my own consciousness-raising on the issues and questions regarding university teaching that appear to be of significance as a result of the seminar and related teaching experience. The course that will serve as the focal point for this discussion is ANS 430, "Alaska Native Education," which was offered for the first time during the Fall, 1980 semester, through the Alaska Native Studies Program. In addition, I will be drawing on ten years of teaching experience at the University of Alaska, both on campus and in the field through the Cross-Cultural Education Development (X-CED) program.

Getting Ready for Class

Because this course was to be a subject of discussion in the faculty seminar, I gave more attention than usual to my own thinking-through processes as I prepared for and carried out my teaching. Looking back over the semester, I find that the period of greatest anxiety and frustration for me was during the planning and preparation preceding the course. Since the course was a new offering under a new degree program, I had little to go on, beyond the course description, around which to plan and organize the course. While there was a certain amount of factual knowledge that I wanted students to acquire on the history and structure of Alaska Native Education, I was also concerned that they develop the ability to analyze some of the more subtle and

complex issues within a broader social and political framework. The knowledge base seemed fairly easy to establish through a combination of readings and lectures. The analytical skills would have to be developed, however, through a more open-ended experiential process whereby students would draw on their own varied experiences, so I had to leave certain aspects of my planning flexible enough to adapt to whatever situation arose and allow the class to nurture its own development. Only when the number of students and the composition of the class became known, could the latter process begin to take shape.

Since this was a new course for me and for the University, I had considerable latitude regarding both the content and processes of the course. It was the only course on the subject that many students would be taking, however, so I had to reduce an enormous number of possible topics and issues down to the few most critical ones that could be adequately addressed in the time constraints of one semester. This resulted in my identifying a series of complex issues that required considerable chunks of class time to be adequately developed and treated. The class periods were scheduled, therefore, in three-hour per week blocks to allow for in-depth analysis of the issues and varied approaches to the treatment of the subject matter, the latter including a field trip to Nenana where two school districts are headquartered.

Having learned through prior experience as a student and instructor that one of the chief concerns of students at the beginning of a semester is an explicit statement of the instructor's expectations for them in the course, I prepared a course prospectus. I listed the topics that I thought needed to be addressed during the semester; I listed some readings, with others to be assigned later; I indicated that students would be required to complete two

projects of their choice to be presented orally to the class and in writing to the instructor, one individually and the other in small groups; the final grade would be based on the two projects and class participation. As it turned out, the course prospectus provided a rough approximation of what transpired topically during the semester, but offered little indication of the kind of behavioral routines through which the course was played out. It helped me organize my thoughts going into the course, and it gave students some comfort by indicating what was expected of them, but the substance of the course grew out of the internal dynamics of each class session. Some sessions were more substantive than others, depending on how successful I was at resisting my own tendency to fall into an interminable monologue, a persistent habit that I discovered as a result of the faculty seminar and the video-tape sessions.

Since the course was organized around three-hour blocks of time late in the afternoon, it was important to plan each class session with a variety of activities that were compatible with the topic at hand, but varied the routine enough to keep everyone interested and alert. This also helped protect students from my monologue habits, since I usually tried to schedule student presentations, guest speakers, small group discussions, or a film sometime during each class period. While it didn't always work out as planned, most students were courteous enough to stay awake through most class sessions. If I became preoccupied with myself to the point of losing track of time and their interest, the students would gently remind me that it was time for a break by taking increasingly protracted glances at the clock. Each class session was a mutually negotiated affair. My sensitivity to the negotiation process increased as the semester progressed, particularly as a result of the

weekly faculty seminars in which we would view the video tapes and exchange views on our own teaching experience of the week before.

The Interactional Setting

The organization of time and space were factors that I found critical in establishing the conditions for particular kinds of teaching/learning processes to occur. The three-hour class periods were essential to explore many of the complex issues in adequate depth, and to provide opportunities for extended field trips without interferring with other classes. The setting in which the class met was also an important factor in determining the kinds of approaches that could be most efficiently utilized for teaching purposes.

The conventional setting for university teaching is a classroom with rows of desks for students, and a blackboard and lectern for the instructor. Past experience in such a setting by both instructor and students has created role expectations that determine to a large degree the kind of behavior that is necessary to mutually interact in that setting. Departure from conventional learned classroom behavioral routines can lead to anxiety and confusion that requires considerable time and effort to overcome. The conventional classroom setting provides a productive learning environment for certain forms of student-instructor interaction, particularly when large numbers of students are involved. It works better, however, for some instructors and students than others.

I had found over the years, that my own teaching style was more effective and that I was more comfortable working with students in a less formal setting than the conventional classroom. I had also found that many students, particularly Native, were more open and responsive to my teaching if I could reduce some of the role distance between myself as "teacher" and their role as "student." I chose, therefore, to hold the class in a seminar setting, with

the students and myself sitting around a large table. Since the enrollment for the class was only eleven, this was an easy matter to arrange. (I have, however, also taught as many as sixty students in a modified seminar format, with students grouped around several tables.)

By moving the class into a seminar setting, I was able to create a less formal atmosphere than a conventional classroom and I was able to interact with students in a more relaxed manner, all of which helped reduce the role distance to a certain degree. However, the quality of my relationship with the students did not develop as rapidly and to the degree that I had experienced in my work with students in the field-based program with which I had been previously associated. It wasn't until we began analyzing and discussing the video tapes of our classes in the faculty seminar that I began to appreciate the many subtle and insidious ways that roles are reinforced and role distance is maintained, even in a deliberately informal atmosphere.

Regardless of how inconspicuously I may have positioned myself or how non-directive I may have been in my manner, I was still the one who dominated the class. I brought in the papers to be handed out; I set the agenda for each class, or at least had veto power over it; I established the interactional patterns in the class; I made the judgements on performance (except for the one anonymous faculty evaluation exercise); and I determined when the class ended. In short, I dominated all of the significant behavioral routines in the class, and thus assured my predominant role. The parameters of the situation in which we were operating made it extremely difficult to reduce the role distance between teacher and student beyond a certain amount, and I was still uncomfortable with the amount of distance that was between us. I was also concerned about getting students to be more relaxed with each other, because the class was nearly balanced with native and non-native

students, and their understanding of the issues we were addressing would benefit from an open exchange amongst themselves as well as with me. The students needed to develop enough familiarity with one another and with me so that we could interact in a semi-formal setting with everyone having equal access to the floor and thus an opportunity to contribute their varied perspectives.

The breakthrough came about midway through the semester, when I was able to arrange a field trip to Nenana to visit the Nenana City Schools and to meet with central office staff of the Yukon-Koyukuk REAA, which is headquartered there. While the visits to the school districts were informative and sufficient in themselves to justify the effort, the real benefit came from the five hours of informal group interaction that occurred during the trip. The physical closeness created by crowding eleven people in a van (one student didn't make it) soon broke down any reserve they may have had about each other or me (though I still maintained my preeminence by serving as driver). By the time we got to Nenana and back we all knew a lot more about each other than if we had remained on campus, all of which made it much easier for us to deal with one another more directly in subsequent classes and to understand the different perspectives that were represented in the group. For the purposes of this class, the field trip was very instrumental in improving the quality of relationships amongst students, and between students and instructor, in a way that noticeably enhanced the teaching/learning process for the remainder of the semester.

The critical variable in this experience, and in my experience with students in the University's field-based program, was that students and instructor were able to interact on relatively neutral turf and establish relationships based on conditions that were less institutionally defined than

in a classroom, and thus they were able to achieve greater social parity and interactional equity. Such conditions are difficult to establish in a conventional classroom, or any formal campus setting, where the faculty members are firmly established residents and exert a dominant influence, while students are generally transients and are cast in a passive role. In those classes where open exchange and discussion are desirable, an informal gathering in a non-institutional atmosphere early in the semester can go a long way toward breaking down the social and institutional barriers that otherwise get in the way of productive interaction. For many students, particularly those from non-Western institutional traditions, the removal of those barriers may also provide easier access to the instructor, and thus the subject matter and the instructional process, regardless of the course content.

It is not necessary, however, that one step out of the institutional setting to reduce the barriers to effective communication. During the faculty seminar, one instructor commented that native students would often come to his office after a class to obtain clarification or help on topics presented during class. As a result, I made an effort to make myself more approachable out of class and found that many students, particularly native, did indeed seem to prefer an informal one-to-one exchange as a means to pursue points of concern as a result of the class.

The more varied the structures and opportunities for participation in the teaching/learning process, the more likely that all students will have access to that process. Each instructor must take these issues into account for each class and for each group of students that is taught. Some instructors are personally more approachable than others. Some classes call for more student involvement than others. Some students feel more comfortable speaking out in class than others. The degree and manner of participation that instructors

expect of students can be a critical variable in determining a student's success or failure in their classes. It is important, therefore, that instructors take care in shaping the interactional setting for a class, and that they (or the institution) prepare students for the kind of participation that is expected.

The Instructional Process

The instructional process on a university campus is generally a product of the interaction between two sets of participants--instructional faculty and students. The process usually occurs through the use of the written and spoken word, and is ostensibly under the control of the faculty member who is responsible for setting the frame. The instructor determines who speaks when, under what conditions, and on what subject. The students are responsible for learning what the instructor expects of them (sometimes referred to as "psyching out the instructor") and performing accordingly.

Most instructors receive little direct training for such a critical and multi-faceted role as "instructing" and, therefore, must call upon their own cumulative experience to develop a teaching style that results in effective instruction. Having had both training and experience as a teacher, I went into this class and the faculty seminar assuming that I could speak with some authority on the techniques by which one can best manage the instructional process in a university setting. The process I have outlined above seemed quite straightforward, and I had, after all, managed to survive ten years of practice without having been hanged in effigy.

As the semester progressed, however, I became painfully aware of my own limitations in understanding the subtle complexities of organizing behavior in ways that lead to productive teacher-student interaction. No one teaching practice appeared to be universally applicable for all instructors in the

seminar. Even such common routines as asking and reponding to questions were managed quite differently from class to class, requiring students to learn the unspoken rules that applied to each class and each instructor. Students who didn't learn the rules early on would soon find themselves in the backwater of the class, and oftentimes, these would be the native students.

As my understanding of classroom interactional processes grew, I was able to compensate for my limitations to a certain degree by consciously attending to the routines I had established in the class and seeking to recognize when students were faltering because of my own rather than their inadequacies. For example, I found that I often generated confusion amongst the students by jumping from one topic to another without an adequate transition marker. In one case, I digressed on a point for nearly five minutes, and when I came back, I jumped to a new topic without having brought closure to the last one. Students didn't know if they had missed something or if I was just rambling again. Having observed the quizzical look on some of their faces, I realized I would have to be much more attentive to the manner of my presentations if I was to give all students equal access to my teaching. While the lack of well-executed transitions from one topic to another presented problems for all students, it was especially frustrating for some of the native students who were dealing with English as a second language and finding it hard enough as it was just keeping up with my long-winded treatment of each topic. It was probably one of the factors that led native students to seek additional assistance through informal sessions in my office between classes.

This example serves as but one illustration of the many small ways that the instructional process can be unintentionally but seriously hampered unless mechanisms can be developed to raise our consciousness about our own teaching practices. My observation of other instructors teaching and their observation

of mine helped me to recognize areas that I needed to address to overcome some of the weaknesses in my own teaching. It is up to me now to find ways to compensate for those weaknesses.

Before I leave the topic of the instructional process (I'm learning!), I want to address the issue of course content. The way one teaches cannot be separated from what one is teaching. As indicated earlier, I was seeking, in this class, to develop some critical analytical skills in students as well as convey a body of knowledge. Most students were taking the class as part of an "Alaska Native Studies" major or minor, and thus were seeking an understanding of how existing institutional frameworks in education impact on their lives and how those frameworks came to be the way they are. It wasn't difficult to make the content of such a course "relevant" to the lives of the native students, since most of them had direct experience with the subject matter. The task, instead was to get them to detach themselves enough to put their own experience in a larger perspective and gain some insights that would help them address comparable issues in the future. The mix of native and non-native students in the class, coupled with readings on the Amish, Aborigines, and African bush tribes, provided the range of comparable examples necessary to stimulate dialogue and foster the rethinking of familiar notions. If the class had been more homogeneous, native or non-native, or if the subject matter had been farther removed from the students' experience, the instructional process would necessarily have been organized differently. Each class represented in the faculty seminar varied in the instructional process that was used because they each varied in content, students and instructor. Once again, each instructor must develop their own approach in response to the conditions they face in each class. While we can't subscribe to one instructional approach for all subjects, all instructors, and all students, we can,

however, collaborate and exchange experiences on the processes by which we individually develop our own approaches.

The Evaluation Process

Next to the frustration of planning a course for students I had not met, the most awkward aspect of teaching this class for me was evaluating what students had learned. It was obvious during the faculty seminar that each of us used different criteria and techniques to determine if the students (or we ourselves) were succeeding with our classes. Some of us used papers, while others used tests; some called for a fixed achievement level, while others relied on relative progress; some had objective grading procedures, while others called for subjective judgement; but we all sought to make clear to students what was expected of them in each class. What wasn't always clear to us or the students, however, was whether we were using grades as a device for rewarding students for what they had learned, or as a means for screening them into differentiated groups. My own past experience had indicated that an overly rigid grading procedure was likely to sort students in ways that didn't necessarily reflect what they had learned. Different students have different ways of displaying their abilities, so the more varied the grading criteria, the more likely that everyone will have an equal opportunity to display what they know and can do. I, therefore, required students to prepare both an individual and a group project for the class, and to present a report on each project both orally and in writing. While some students worked better alone, others preferred a collaborative approach. While some students did well on the written report, others excelled in making an oral presentation. Though other options for demonstrating performance were utilized to varying degrees, these were adequate to allow all students to do well on at least one aspect of the course requirements.

At no point during the class did grades appear to be a major preoccupation with any of the students. All but three students finished the class on schedule and with passing grades. Two students received incompletes, one of which has since been completed, and one student withdrew from the University altogether. The student with the remaining incomplete is a community college instructor who went on leave near the end of the semester. The students themselves gave the course an overall grade of "B," for which I was grateful.

In judging the overall success of a course, two general criteria are important: First, are the agendas that both students and instructor bring to the course being accomplished?, and second, does everyone have an equal chance at accomplishing their agenda? If one cannot answer in the affirmative to both questions, than a careful look must be taken at the processes by which the agendas are being played out. The history of Alaska natives experience with the instructional processes at the University indicates that they have not always had an equal chance at accomplishing their educational agendas. It is for that reason that the faculty seminar described in this report was organized, and it is to the end of providing everyone with equal access to a university education that our efforts in this regard must be continued. By exposing our teaching to one another, we can begin to make explicit what we do as teachers and seek more effective ways of teaching, thus assuming some of the responsibility for the differential impact of the institution on the clientele it purports to serve.

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