

Reflections from the Field

Domestication of the Ivory Tower: Institutional Adaptation to Cultural Distance

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Several years ago, a student and a faculty member in our off-campus teacher-education program went on a hunting trip out on the tundra of western Alaska. The student, a Yup'ik Eskimo who had grown up in the area, had completed only a few years of formal schooling but had successfully worked as a teacher's aide in the local school and had decided to pursue becoming a certificated teacher. The faculty member, who had a doctorate and several years of teaching experience, had just moved to the area as a field coordinator for the University of Alaska's Cross-Cultural Education Development (X-CED) Program and was about to begin his postdoctoral training in arctic survival. The student and the faculty member had worked out a deal in which the faculty member would help the student overcome some weaknesses in his reading and writing skills, while the student would teach the faculty member a few things about living on the tundra.

Everything went fine during the first day out, as the faculty member followed closely behind his mentor, carefully staying in the track of the leading snow machine. By the second day the faculty member had built up enough confidence in his ability to read the seemingly featureless terrain that he decided to venture off the track and break a trail of his own. He had barely started to break trail, however, when he found himself waist deep in water. More than a little embarrassed, he gratefully accepted his guide's assistance in retrieving himself and his snow machine from the water, acknowledging his ignorance as his mentor pointed out the yellowed patches of snow that should have alerted him to the potential danger.

However, the real danger had just begun. Now he was out on the open tundra with wet clothes and a snow machine that had become waterlogged and was rapidly being transformed into an iceberg, a fate that he himself was in danger of suffering. Without delay or explanation, the student began digging in the snow for a particular kind of tundra grass, and he urged his wet partner to do the same. After they had dug up a substantial pile of the hollow reedlike grass, the faculty member

searched for dry matches, assuming they were going to make a fire with the grass. To his considerable surprise, however, the guide urged him to take off his rapidly freezing clothes and to dispose of all his wet undergarments. Although the prospect of standing naked on the windswept tundra did not appear inviting, he grudgingly acquiesced.

Having disposed of his tight undergarments, he was now directed to get back into his baggy snow machine body suit. Once he was inside the suit, the student proceeded to stuff the grass in around his body and around his feet in the wet boots. To his delight, he soon stopped shivering and, before long he suffered from nothing more than a bit of discomfort caused by the scratchy insulation and the stiffness of the frozen outer garment, along with a slightly bruised ego. On his way back home, as his guide towed the ice-coated snow machine propped up on a sled, the faculty member wondered what he could possibly teach his "student" about literacy that would be anywhere comparable in value to the lessons he had just learned.

Although this incident is more dramatic than most student-faculty interchanges in our field-based teacher-education program, it is not uncommon for university faculty who work in rural Alaska to find themselves the learner rather than the teacher. It is uncommon, however, for faculty members to be prepared to assume such a role and to know how to capitalize on the unique opportunities that it provides. And it is even more uncommon for a university system to recognize and give credence to faculty who are in other-than-conventional "ivory tower" roles. It is to these opportunities and dilemmas that I will address this article, drawing on the experience of over 30 faculty members (some native, most non-native) in the X-CED native teacher-education program who have lived and worked in native communities throughout rural Alaska over the past 25 years. Even though Alaska is the focus of these reflections, it describes opportunities for capitalizing on a field setting that are available to faculty at any university, regardless of its size or location.

Why put faculty in the field in the first place? Why not bring the students to the campus where everyone can get on with their tasks without all the redefinitions of roles and the institutional adjustments that field-based programs require? Can the university change its modus operandi to accommodate diverse cultural contexts and still perform the functions for which it is designed, or must students acquire the "culture" of the university if they are to partake of its services? What happens to notions of "theory" and "practice" when faculty and students become collaborators in knowledge construction and application? To respond to these questions, I will need to provide a little background on the educational scene in Alaska.

Field-Based Training for Native Teachers

Back in 1970, when we began to offer our bachelor of education degree off campus in rural communities, Alaska had six certified native teach-

ers, only two of whom were teaching in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and state-operated schools that served rural native communities at that time. Most of the few native people who survived four or more years at the university were drawn into positions in urban centers, where their academic skills and leadership aspirations could be put to use addressing statewide needs. At that time native people had just emerged as a statewide political force to negotiate the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act as it wound its way through the U.S. Congress. The act was passed in 1971, and as a result Alaska Natives faced an unprecedented period of new institution building that, in turn, required a massive effort in human resource development to prepare native people for the many new decision-making roles that would emerge.

Early on, the native leadership identified education as a critical factor in their development plans and, as a result, exercised their newly acquired political power to restructure the educational systems serving rural Alaska. By 1976, they had pushed a bill through the state legislature creating 21 new regional school districts that replaced the BIA and state-operated systems; they had negotiated a class-action lawsuit and acquired legislative appropriations to establish 120 new village high schools throughout rural Alaska; they had lobbied to establish the Alaska Native Language Center at the university and to mandate bilingual education programs in all state-funded schools; and they had pressed the university into establishing a new rural division that included several community colleges and extension centers to provide on-site services in rural Alaska. It was in this politically charged climate that the X-CED program evolved and adopted the posture of an "educational-development" program, rather than the narrower role of a "teacher-education" program, and it was in this context that the role of field-based faculty emerged.

In 1970, less than ten percent of the native students who entered the University of Alaska completed a four-year degree program. Less than 20 percent made it past the first year. Although a variety of orientation and support services on campus have helped improve these figures over the years, there are still some inherent difficulties that native students face when they move into a university setting, and in many ways, these are the same difficulties university faculty face when they take on a position in the field.

First of all, for native students entering the university there are the obvious differences in living conditions: dormitories, dining halls with non-native foods, the pub, downtown, and lots of rules and bureaucratic procedures. Although this lifestyle often is quite new for students who come from rural villages, it is not as difficult to adjust to as are the different social and behavioral routines of the campus community. Rigid schedules, impersonal relationships, inaccessible faculty, expectation of aggressive verbal participation and spotlighting in class, incomprehensible homework assignments, parties down the hall, and visitors from

out of town—all of these can produce serious conflicts and pressures that require considerable adjustments for many native as well as other rural students (Barnhardt 1994). But even these adjustments are not as difficult to manage as the differences in the ways of thinking that permeate a university campus.

The Ivory Tower versus the Real World

The “ivory tower” symbolizes detachment. The traditional campus environment is designed to protect faculty and students from “the real world,” or put another way, it is a reality unto itself. It is a literate world that relies heavily on decontextualized knowledge and in which this knowledge must be displayed in highly specialized literate forms. As an institution for perpetuating literate knowledge, the university has served us well. But, as our faculty member out on the tundra learned so convincingly, there are other kinds of valuable knowledge in the world and there are other ways of conveying knowledge than those symbolized by the image of the ivory tower.

These other kinds of knowledge have been variously characterized as traditional knowledge, oral knowledge, indigenous knowledge, or practical knowledge, depending on which body of literature you are reading. Some of the distinguishing features of such knowledge are that its meaning and use are context bound, it usually has utilitarian value, and it is generally acquired through direct participation in real-world activities. If considered in its totality, such knowledge can be seen as constituting a particular worldview, or a form of consciousness (Kawagley 1995; Nee-Benham and Cooper 2000).

Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981:100–102) examined what they called a “Native reality set” and identified four aspects that distinguish “bush consciousness” from “modern consciousness.” People who live in the northern “bush” country (the Scollons were looking particularly at Athabaskan Indians in northern Alberta) tend to favor a lifestyle with an emphasis on self-reliance, nonintervention in other people’s affairs, the integration of useful knowledge into a holistic and internally consistent worldview, and a disdain for higher-order organizational structures. The Scollons point out that this outlook can cause considerable internal conflict when native individuals encounter the componentiality, specialization, systematicity, bureaucracy and literate forms inherent in “modern” forms of consciousness.

Native students trying to survive in the university environment (an institution that is a virtual embodiment of modern consciousness) must acquire and accept a new form of consciousness, an orientation that not only displaces but often devalues the worldviews they bring with them. For many, this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make, so they withdraw and go home, branded a failure. Those who do survive in the academic environment for four or more years often find themselves caught between different worlds, neither of which can fully satisfy their

acquired tastes and aspirations, and thus they enter into a struggle to reconcile their conflicting forms of consciousness. The recent articulation of the emic dimensions of this struggle from multiple indigenous perspectives has opened up intriguing avenues for redefining both the uses of knowledge and the associated ways of knowing (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Kawagley 1995; Meyer 2001).

It was with these concerns in mind, along with the increasing demand for native teachers in Alaska's rural schools, that led us to establish our off-campus teacher education program on an experimental basis in 1970. For the first four years, the program was offered to students on-site in rural communities, but the faculty remained on campus and provided the instruction through a combination of audiotapes, videotapes, written lessons, regional workshops, on-site tutors, and summer courses on campus. The on-site tutors and* team leaders, who were experienced teachers, worked with students in teams of four or more per site, helping to translate the oftentimes incongruent and contextually meaningless instructional materials from the university into terms that made sense to students in a real-world context. Tutors and program coordinators spent as much time trying to educate the teaching faculty about the students' reality as they did helping the students make sense of faculty expectations. The students, who were coping with real children in real classrooms and were highly goal oriented, insisted that their training address the day-to-day realities they were facing in their schools and communities.

The field-based program, which in practice turned out to be a reality-based collaborative learning process with all of us functioning concurrently as students and as teachers, seemed to work. Of the 48 native students enrolled in 1970, 36 had graduated by 1974, thus increasing the number of native teachers in the state sixfold. Virtually all of them worked and took on leadership roles in rural communities throughout Alaska, where they still are today. In the meantime, they have been joined by an additional 250 similarly trained native teachers, as well as graduates who have completed campus-based programs (Barnhardt 1994). Although these teachers still constitute only five percent of the teaching force in the state, they have become a potent force in the rural schools where the turnover rate of outside teachers is so high that after two or three years, the native teachers often hold seniority.

More than a fifth of the native graduates have gone on to pursue master's degrees (and now several doctorates) at institutions such as the University of Alaska, University of British Columbia, and Harvard University, with little apparent disadvantage resulting from their lack of detachment from the real world while undergoing their undergraduate training. Several have obtained administrative credentials and are now serving as principals in their schools; two have moved into superintendencies. However, this does not mean that these graduates have encountered no difficulties or discrimination in their subsequent roles as teach-

ers or students, nor does it mean that they have all been an unqualified success as teachers or administrators, although their names appear regularly on lists of outstanding teachers, including six Milken awardees (Tetpon 2000). Their strength lies in the fact that they have learned to trust in and build upon the knowledge they acquired through their experiences in the real world, along with the literate knowledge they gained through the books they read and the papers they wrote during their training.

The difference between the training of the field-based students and that of their campus-bound counterparts is that their active participation in a real-world context has made it easier for the students in the field to integrate their training experiences into the framework of a "bush consciousness," an accomplishment that, in turn, has allowed the students to use their formal education in ways that are compatible with the ways of thinking and behaving preferred in their communities. Most reports to date indicate that the ability of these native graduates to "tune-in" to their students has had a very positive effect on the academic performance and social behavior of native students in school. The most dramatic impact has been in those schools where native teachers have become a majority of the teaching staff. These schools report not only an improvement in the academic performance of their students but also of parent attitudes and general community support for the school (Barnhardt 1982). Native teachers, grounded in their culture and community, offer a simple, cost-effective solution to many of the historical problems schools have faced in rural Alaska. And it has been largely through the opportunities provided by the field-based teacher education program that this solution is becoming a reality.

Field-Based Faculty

Providing native students with the opportunity to remain in their natural environment while pursuing their teaching credential has turned out, however, to be only one step in the process of demystifying the ivory tower. And in some ways this was the easiest step because there was somewhat of a precedent with conventional correspondence study and various forms of technologically-mediated instruction that became available along the way. The next step, that of placing faculty members in the community with the students (which took place in 1974), was not quite so easy and has yet to be fully supported and appreciated by the university, although it has been wholeheartedly endorsed by rural students and communities.

The primary rationale for placing faculty in the field has been to reduce the cultural distance and the role dichotomy between the producers and the consumers of knowledge in rural Alaska. To accomplish this task, field-based faculty members have had to go beyond their usual responsibilities of generating and conveying literate knowledge to help legitimize on an institutional level the indigenous knowledge and skills of

the native community, or as Jack Goody (1982) has put it, to foster “a re-valuation of forms of knowledge that are not derived from books.” Such a responsibility requires that faculty members respect indigenous knowledge and can help students appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness as they develop their own distinctive teaching styles in the context of a school. Put another way, it means being careful not to train out of students* those very capacities, or the “nativeness” that we want them to bring into their role as teacher.

The significance of this legitimization or validation function was driven home to me a few years ago when I visited a rural community to attend, along with two resident field faculty, a regional development strategy conference organized by one of the most successful native corporations in Alaska. The president of the corporation, a native shareholder who had held that post since the corporation was formed in 1971, spent two days discussing with his native constituents and various agency personnel his recent successful lobbying effort with the U.S. Congress and his negotiations with the state government and a multinational mining corporation to develop a world-class lead-zinc mine within the corporate region. The plan for developing the mine reflected a great deal of political and business savvy and a highly sophisticated understanding of the social, cultural, and economic implications of large-scale development. The agreement with the mining corporation was a model of careful balance between conventional profit-oriented economic considerations and protection of the traditional subsistence lifestyle of the region. By all measures but one, this person was an effective, knowledgeable, and respected leader. The only measure in question was his own estimation of himself.

The next day, at nine in the morning in the middle of a blizzard, this same 50-year-old native leader was the first “student” to show up at an introductory undergraduate class on rural community development that we were offering at the local community college. He should have been teaching the class. Instead, he was sitting there listening to us faculty neophytes discuss development theories and models that he had long since tested out in the real world. But he lacked a university degree, and that somehow left a question mark over the validity of his accumulated knowledge and expertise. With our limited experience, we were not in a position to teach him much that he did not already know, but as “university professors” who had descended from the ivory tower to participate, however briefly, in his world, we were in a position to help him validate his grounded knowledge by putting it in the context of our book knowledge. Through this process, we greatly expanded our own store of useful knowledge.

Oftentimes it is in the act of teaching that we ourselves learn the most, and in the act of learning that we become the most effective teachers. Nowhere can such symbiotic relationships be more fruitful than when we work together with our students to test theory against practice in a real-

world setting. Field-based faculty are in an ideal position to take advantage of just such opportunities. By doing so, they move beyond the usual detachment and presumed objectivity of conventional purveyors of university knowledge and become an integral and contributing part of the developmental processes in the community.

In rural Alaska, where social issues are close to the surface; institutional structures are still evolving; cultural traditions are varied and rapidly changing; economic problems are endemic and severe; and new kinds of knowledge and skills are sorely needed, it is incumbent upon university faculty and the institution as a whole to become actively involved in the life of the community, not just in the guise of public service, but as collaborators in the search for new solutions that will build upon, expand, and give credence to all forms of knowledge.* It is to help facilitate such a development process that lead us to place university faculty members in the rural communities of Alaska.

We have found, however, that placing faculty members in a field setting does not in itself achieve the goals outlined above. There also are the issues of how prepared the faculty members are to capitalize on the field setting, and how willing and able the institution is to support and reward the faculty members for services rendered outside the hallowed halls of the ivory tower.

Faculty Member as Fieldworker

The most effective faculty members in our field programs have been those who have been able to engage themselves and their students in a process of sense making and skill building by actively participating in the world around them. These faculty members use books and pencil and paper (and now computers) as a means to add breadth and depth to the students' understanding, but not as the sole source of knowledge. They engage the students in tasks that allow them to integrate various forms of knowledge and to apply and display that knowledge in a variety of ways. Together with their students they develop new knowledge, following an inductive process that builds from the students' background and therefore allows the students to develop their own emic perspective. At the same time, these faculty members use literate forms of knowledge to acquaint the students with other perspectives. They measure their students' achievement through the students' ability to effectively perform meaningful and contextually appropriate tasks. They expose students (and themselves) to the ambiguity, unpredictability, and complexity of the real world and thus help them to become equipped to find solutions to problems for which we may not even have a theory yet.

Field faculty and their students are in a position to test the established paradigms of thought and allow the self-organizing principles of complex adaptive systems (Axelrod and Cohen 2000; Barnhardt and Kawagley 1999a; Prigogine and Stengers 1984), to produce new kinds of emergent structures and adaptive strategies that extend our under-

standing of the world around us. They have the opportunity to develop explanatory frameworks that will help us establish a greater equilibrium and congruence between our literate view of the world and the reality we encounter when we step outside the walls of the ivory tower. However, not all faculty are willing to leave the security of the university campus with its differentiated and protective structure of academic disciplines and venture into the uncertainty of the world outside. Even those who do often hesitate to make themselves vulnerable to challenges to their authority and beliefs and, instead, protect themselves behind a veneer of academic aloofness and obfuscation (Smith 1999).

One of the characteristics that distinguishes faculty members who do make use of a field situation from those who do not is an interdisciplinary academic orientation. Faculty members whose background indicates that their interests and perspective are not tightly constrained by the boundaries of a single academic discipline (or established professional field) tend to maintain a similar openness of perspective in the field situation and thus are able to be more responsive to the conditions around them than those faculty who carry a predefined and fixed complement of academic baggage with them (Barnhardt and Kawagley 1999b). Flexibility, adaptability, and a tolerance for ambiguity are essential qualities for success in a field faculty role.

Another strong predictor of success in a field faculty position is prior fieldwork or* applied experience. Regardless of the discipline, faculty members who have extensive previous experience doing fieldwork, particularly if it includes intensive immersion in a cross-cultural situation, are able to enter into the field faculty role with much less difficulty and to quickly capitalize on the symbiotic educational opportunities that it provides. They are already well versed in the role of learner (researcher) and have little difficulty adding to that the role of teacher. Those faculty members who are predisposed to the role of teacher often find it difficult to submit to the role of learner. Faculty members (and teachers) who can bridge the gap between the ivory tower and the real world are better prepared to assume a leadership role in the reconciliation of educational theory with practice, of learning with teaching, and of reading books with survival on the tundra (Barnhardt 1998; Harrison 2001).

Culturally Responsive Educational Institutions

The successful placement of faculty in a field situation requires adjustments on the part of the individual faculty member, but it also requires some adjustments on the part of the institution employing that faculty member. These adjustments on the part of the institution tend to be much harder to achieve than those of the individual. The University of Alaska has yet to fully come to grips with the special circumstances under which field faculty must carry out their responsibilities. Problem areas include mechanisms for participation in faculty deliberations and decision making, criteria for promotion and tenure, expectations for

scholarly productivity, evaluation of teaching effectiveness, and accessibility to campus resources and support. Over time, however, through a combination of developments from within and outside the institution, the University of Alaska has begun to make peace with the distributed nature of its programs and operations, and in a recent accreditation review, was encouraged to see its multifaceted makeup as an asset rather than an impediment.

For their part, native people in Alaska have learned enough over the years about the inner workings of higher education institutions to be no longer intimidated by them, and are now actively reshaping the way the existing system operates to make it more responsive to their cultural and educational aspirations (Kirkness and Barnhardt 2001). Where the mainstream higher education institutions appear unable to make the necessary accommodations, native people have taken the initiative to create their own institutions in the form of tribal colleges, five of which are currently emerging on the educational scene in rural Alaska. Likewise, the original graduates of the X-CED program have accumulated sufficient experience with schools to see new possibilities for how the K-12 system can be reconstituted to address better the unique cultural considerations that come into play in native communities, recent accountability regimes notwithstanding (Lipka 1998). These indigenous initiatives have now evolved to the point of Alaska native educators (teachers and Elders) developing their own "cultural standards" to address those areas of educational need not included in the generic state standards for students, teachers and schools (Assembly of Native Educators 1998).

All of the above work has drawn heavily on many fields of study with both a practical and theoretical bent, not the least of which has been educational anthropology. The many variations of cultural analysis that are reflected in the realignment of educational structures and practices outlined above derive in large part from the research traditions and "ways of seeing" that have emerged over the past 30 years under the banner of the Council on Anthropology and Education (Wolcott 1999). The strength of these traditions in the Alaska context has been their adaptability in both form and function to accommodate the emergent properties of an ever evolving complex adaptive educational system and cultural milieu. It has been through the interplay of teacher, learner, and researcher across diverse cultural contexts that new constructs have emerged and new educational opportunities have been generated—the ivory tools on the tundra have begun to blend with the literate traditions of the ivory tower. Hopefully, both will continue to benefit from the encounter.

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