

Ivory Tower Leadership By Ray Barnhardt

Providing Native teacher education students and faculty with the opportunity to remain in their natural environment while pursuing their teaching credential opened the door for implementing innovative teaching practices grounded in local cultural traditions. The primary rationale for placing faculty in the field was 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 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. Such a responsibility required that faculty members, including those of us in leadership roles respect indigenous knowledge and help students to appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness as they developed their own distinctive teaching and administrative styles in the context of a university structure.

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. It was through such community-based participation that I was able to provide avenues for the integration of alternative administrative practices.

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.

The most effective leadership experience came about when I was able to engage with students in a process of sense-making and skill-building by actively participating in the world around them. My challenge was to engage the students and faculty colleagues in tasks that allowed them to integrate various forms of knowledge and to apply and display that knowledge in a variety of ways. Together with their students they developed new knowledge, following an inductive process that built on the students' background. As faculty, we exposed students (and ourselves) to the ambiguity, unpredictability, and complexity of the real world and thus helped 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 (Barnhardt & Kawagley 1999),

to produce new kinds of emergent structures and adaptive strategies that extend our understanding of the world around us. Thus students and faculty have the opportunity to develop explanatory frameworks that 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.

Faculty members whose background is 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 (R. Barnhardt & Kawagley 1999b). Flexibility, adaptability, and a tolerance for ambiguity are essential qualities for success in such a role. Regardless of the discipline, faculty members who have extensive previous experience doing fieldwork, including intensive immersion in a cross-cultural situation, are able to enter into the alternative administrative role with much less difficulty and quickly capitalize on the symbiotic educational opportunities that it provides. 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 administrators) 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 (R. Barnhardt 1998; Harrison 2001).

Culturally Responsive Educational Practices

The successful placement of faculty and administrators in an alternative leadership 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 harder to achieve than those of the individual. 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.

For their part, Native people in Alaska have learned enough over the years about the inner-workings of education institutions to no longer be intimidated by them, and are now actively re-shaping the way the existing system operates to make it more responsive to their cultural and educational aspirations (Kirkness & Barnhardt 2001). Where the mainstream 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 and Charter Schools. 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. 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 (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. Hopefully, both will continue to benefit from the encounter.

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