A REFLECTION ON TEACHING TRANSFERABLE LANGUAGE ARTS EDITING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO INDIGENOUS ALASKA NATIVE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This reflective paper explores a personal experience teaching a developmental English course through John Dewey's reflective lens and an attempt to identify, define, analyze, solve, and test an unexpected problem encountered in the classroom. The issue identified was that students were not transferring learned writing and editing skills to major assignments or using said skills in other courses they were enrolled in. This led to examining the lack of experience teaching Alaska Native English learners and a lack of knowledge of student cultures and backgrounds. Through research and cultural training, the decision was made to add an element of knowledge exchange in the classroom by giving students the opportunity to teach about who they are and their culture and languages. Class content contained no connection to Alaska Native culture or way of life until Dr. Barton presented the Standard Model for Indigenous Learning (SMIL). There was an understanding that the curriculum did not need to be redesigned entirely but rather incorporate the five threads of SMIL into the content already created. Possible hindrances embedded in curriculum design were also explored and with the discovery of the importance of giving students the time and space to practice the application of skills taught in the classroom on major assignments. Through this reflective practice journey, self-reflective questions led to culturally responsive instructional strategies to target academic readiness skills supporting Indigenous Alaska Native first-generation students to reach course goals.

Keywords: *class workshops, culturally relevant pedagogy & andragogy, reflective practice, skill transference and application, standard model of indigenous learning.*

PURPOSE

Success and retention in a college often depends on the students' reading and writing abilities. When students graduate high school, there is an expectation from the student and higher education organizations that those students have the necessary skills to enter into and pass first-year college courses. However, Melguizo et al. (2021) found a discrepancy between what college readiness means in high school and higher education institutions.

While researching rates of student placement in English developmental courses in the University of Alaska system, Hodara and Cox (2016) discovered that a high percentage of Native Alaskans from rural areas were being placed in a develop-

mental English course during their first year in college. The institution I teach at has had an average of 97% of incoming students test into the developmental English courses over the 2020-2023 academic years (Williams, personal communication, March 30, 2023).

When students arrive on campus for their first semester, they participate in a series of placement tests. Based on these scores and a handwritten writing sample, they are enrolled in the corresponding math and English classes. A majority of the first-year Alaska Native students are enrolled in my developmental English rosters to gain the skills needed to succeed in the freshman English course. At this small private college, I am the instructor for most of the language arts courses. I teach creative writing and research writing for sophomores; however, this reflective practice focuses on my experiences teaching one of the two developmental English courses.

The purpose of this reflective practice was to critically examine the unexpected realization that my Alaskan Native Indigenous English Learning first-generation college students were not transferring learned academic reading and writing knowledge and skills to other classes.

REFLECTIVE LENS

For this reflective practice, I used John Dewey's model of reflective thinking. Dewey is considered the founder of reflection and argues that reflection is not a passive activity. He insists that reflection is an "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads" (Dewey, 1933/1989, p. 118). Every educator should practice the art of reflection since it is vital for personal and professional growth.

Whenever an educator faces an unexpected event or problem, it can be beneficial to reflect on exactly what the problem could be. As part of Dewey's process for reflective thinking, I must first identify a problem, define it, analyze and explore why it occurred, brainstorm possible solutions, and then test those possible solutions (Dewey, 1922/1983). The intended outcome of completing this reflective practice was for me as the instructor to gain knowledge and skills of Indigenous teaching methods to enhance first-generation Alaska Native learning experience in higher education.

PROBLEM

Often in higher education, students are given an assignment to submit, and compositions are given error feedback and a grade by the instructor. The student is expected to use this feedback to examine their own skills and produce better writing materials in the future. However, students can still not have editing skills, and there can be a repeated lack of visible improvement in writing ability. Writing a draft and putting it through a revising process is a core step in producing any improvement in writing ability (Brown, 2007, p. 404). Sangeetha (2020) concluded that by explicitly teaching students how to self-edit and giving them the tools to do so, it was found that they could improve their writing ability and that independent learning was also promoted.

From my experience, I was familiar with using peer editing activities in the language classroom. Peer editing is often used to reduce writing anxiety, facilitate critical thinking engagement, and add student collaboration in the classroom (Byrd, 2003). As part of teaching this group of Alaskan Native college students how to self-assess and correct, they were assigned to edit their peers' in-class writing at the end of class lessons. Each student was tasked to look for the proper use of connectors that show additional information and contrasting information learned in class that day and utilize the learned editing techniques to help their classmates improve their writing compositions.

It was assumed at this point that students understood and could use these learned editing techniques when they created major writing assignments assigned as homework. However, students submitting final compositions showed they did not utilize their learned knowledge and editing skills on out-of-class homework assignments. Through discussion with other faculty and adjuncts, I found they also were not seeing any improvement in student writing abilities in their respective subject courses. Despite self- and peer-editing knowledge and skills being specifically taught and practiced in the classroom, the problem was that my Indigenous Alaska Native first-generation students were not using or transferring those learned skills from this entry-level general education language arts course.

WORKING IDEAS

In my first year of teaching Alaska Native first-year college students (fall semester of 2021), I did not know much about my students or their culture. I felt that I was not qualified to teach this people group despite having Native American heritage myself. I knew very little about this people group because I grew up estranged from that part of my family tree. This led me to default my class structure and content to what I thought would be useful knowledge and skills for any college student's academic success. I made several assumptions about my students that I believe impacted the effectiveness of knowledge and skill retention and transference in my courses.

TEACHING NATIVE ALASKAN ENGLISH LEARNERS

My first thought of why my students were not transferring and applying learned skills and knowledge beyond a given lesson was my lack of cultural knowledge. I knew little about Alaskan Natives and never had the opportunity to encounter the people or cultures before. Even though I have a fraction of Native American blood and have many Native American relatives on my father's side of the family, I could count on one hand the number of times I met them.

In my previous teaching experiences, I taught students from many different countries, cultures, and backgrounds. Most of these were in a college setting with students who already excelled at academics in at least one other language, if not more. When I started teaching at this small college specifically geared toward Alaska Natives, most students in my classroom were experiencing higher education for the first time.

I walked into the classroom without knowing how to teach Native Alaskan students. I knew I lacked the cultural knowledge, and it was a jarring learning curve for me to teach students unfamiliar with Western academics. I felt I needed to learn how to teach all over again.

LESSON APPLICATION AND PURPOSE

When I first began teaching my developmental English courses, I began with a class structure I was used to using when teaching ELL (English Language Learner) students. I used some class time to review previous lessons but no class time for students to practice using those editing skills in their major writing projects. I expected my students to understand that in-class lessons were meant to be applied to their major writing assignments and that they were taught to aid their success. Connecting class lessons with student purpose and their home culture without being explicitly told is what I assumed my students could already do on their own as adult learners. I assumed my Native Alaskan students would understand why I had them complete the assignments I gave them like students from my previous teaching experiences.

However, many of my Native Alaskan college students asked me why they needed to do a given assignment. I was also often asked what the purpose of a specific lesson was, and they wondered why they needed to learn it at all. My lessons or assignments were not considered useful or beneficial in their other college courses or culture. It took me several months, but eventually, I recognized that I did not begin teaching my Native Alaskan students by first asking, "What would be valuable skills to Alaskan Natives?" I only thought about what useful skills would benefit college students in general and assumed my students had the same approach to learning as I did.

CLASS STRUCTURE

I then reflected on my class structure and realized it did not allow students to practice revisiting primary writing assignments. The classes I taught were formatted in a way I was familiar with. It was how I was taught and how my own college education was formatted. Remembering and using all the lessons taught in a course and applying them to my assignments was a big part of my instructors' expectations. When assigned a project, I was expected to figure out how to apply class lessons and content to complete the project independently. I valued my instructors' feedback and often used those notes to improve the assignment for a better grade and to enhance my writing style for future assignments.

However, my students often would quickly type the paragraph or essay they were asked to complete. After the final submission, there was no time or incentive in the course to review their work and resubmit for a better grade. I found that it was rare for students to read or understand any written teacher feedback. Students did not practice editing but submitted whatever they "brain dumped" into a document and called it good. Therefore, I thought

it could be that students were not improving their writing or reading skills owing to the structured setup of my language arts classes.

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

I was unhappy with the curriculum I used in my first semester of teaching first-generation Alaska Natives. The initial course design was lacking, and I felt it was not designed well for the context, so I spent my winter break redesigning the curriculum. During the spring semester of 2022, I taught my new curriculum. The first several weeks went smoothly, and students were engaged and doing well in the classroom. Students received the new activities well, and I was ecstatic at how improved students appeared in class.

My second course design for my developmental language arts class began with a few lessons introducing the essay format and organization of the upcoming major writing assignment. We covered the various paragraph formations, types of information that needed to be included, and purpose of the type of essay. Students were also introduced to the essay type's specific grammar and vocabulary needs. Each lesson consisted of students practicing identifying the element or elements of the lesson and ending with using or correcting the element independently.

Lessons included were the steps of essay formation, beginning with topic brainstorming and essay outlining. Students were then to take their outline and expand on it to create a full draft. They were then expected to take what they had learned from class lessons to edit their draft on their own and submit a polished final essay. The only piece that was officially submitted and given a grade was the final essay.

The unexpected problem that arose was the low quality of final assignment submissions. It was apparent that students did not use any editing skills to improve their basic draft created in class. Most students simply typed what they had handwritten without making any edits. In further investigation, I discovered from asking other instructors that students were not using any learned skills or knowledge in assignments for other classes they were taking that semester. I was left questioning my entire approach to teaching Native Alaskan college students.

We were halfway through the semester when I noticed this problem, but I devised a plan for the next class period. It began with most of the roster arriving on time rather than half the students trickling in fifteen to forty minutes late. Being able to start relatively on time with everyone present kept me from having to repeat myself for late arrivals and made the lesson proceed smoother than usual. My students gave off good vibes and were seemingly fully engaged in the language arts lesson.

I always found that my students were in better moods when the sun shone. Winter on the Kenai Peninsula can sometimes have weeks of thick, dark clouds blocking any happy rays from peeking through. Many Alaskans use their vacations this time of year to go to Hawaii, Texas, Florida, or any tropical southern state to soak up the bright, never-ending giver of Vitamin D. In Alaska, the sun being out is often equated to being the time to do some hard work. My students' moods and energy levels were noticeably improved, and motivation was high since the sun deemed us worthy of its rays that day. I was not going to let this opportunity get away from me.

The lesson's scaffolded activities flew by, and students quickly understood and completed practices well. Just in case, I always had an extra activity or two on hand for those few students who excelled in a lesson and needed something more challenging. Most often, these extra activities were never used, but we ended this day's class with every student completing the extra activity. Completing this in-class assignment showed me students' capability of using the new skill on their own without any other teacher-guided practice. I was surprised when each student did a wonderful job. A few had begun class confused about the assignment, but before I could help these students myself, other students took the initiative to help those who needed an extra hand.

I had a proud teacher moment watching my whole class help each other complete this activity that I initially did not expect to use. Making my rounds every few minutes, I checked in on students working alone and in groups to see if anyone had a question or needed a light nudge of help if they were stuck. Feeling left out of the activity, I barely had anything to do. I was not used to sitting and watching my students work in a classroom.

Despite my stiff and aching lower back from standing and teaching that day, my energy level was up. I was in this giddy teacher's high from how well class went. Students left the room in good spirits, appearing to be encouraged and motivated by their new skills and knowledge. I was confident and proud that each student appeared to have a solid grasp of the knowledge and skill taught in that day's lesson. I packed up my materials and belongings with more energy than I usually had at the end of a teaching day.

On my non-teaching days, I often hung out in the tutoring center for a few hours. A few days later, that same week, I was interacting with a student and helping them complete a written assignment for a content class. The student would have to use specific language skills to complete the content assignment. I knew the student was familiar with one of the primary skills required because the language arts lesson had gone so well a few days before. However, the student was seemingly frustrated and stumped. They could verbally disclose the content correctly but had no idea how to put it in writing form for the assignment.

I realized that I expected that my Native Alaskan English learning students would transfer skills and knowledge learned in my class to other contexts. I ended my teaching days with the unconscious expectation that my students would remember and use those learned language art skills for any future writing assignments they would have in my class or any other course. I started re-evaluating my new curriculum, questioning my approach to teaching editing skills. I understood that it takes time, practice, and repetition for skill and knowledge to be used automatically, but it seemed as if my students were not enrolled or attending my language arts class at all.

I decided to contact a few other adjunct instructors for their opinions and observations in their classes. Those I held discussions with agreed that they saw no improvement in written assignments for their classes despite students being explicitly taught the language skills in my classes that were needed to complete those assignments well. Students' writing ability was often described as "village English" and not academic.

This problem of students not using or transferring learned skills weighed heavily on me. I had just spent countless hours over the winter break rewriting my curriculum, and it was much better than before, but it seemed like it was not working as well as I hoped. My lessons did not have a lasting impact on my students, but I did not want to recreate the curriculum a third time if I did not have to.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

The problem was that my Alaskan Native Indigenous English learning first-generation college students did not use learned academic reading and writing knowledge and skills for major homework assignments or transfer those skills to other class assignments. The first thing I reflected on was how I did not feel qualified to teach Native Alaskan college students owing to my lack of experience and understanding of their culture. I desired to be a successful educator to my students and knew I needed to learn much more before I could be effective in the classroom.

During Alaskan Native cultural training for staff and faculty hosted by the institute's Title III grant employees, a discussion was held on students' attitudes toward non-Alaska Native teachers. Many Alaskan villages are not connected to any road system requiring travel strictly by plane or boat. One of the ongoing issues the village location affects is the quality of education available in the village schools. In most cases, qualified teachers only stay in a village community for a year or two before accepting a position elsewhere. Never-ending teacher turnover often leads students and village communities to resign themselves to the continuing revolving door of *kass'aq*—"white person" —teachers (Jacobson, 2012; Kaden et al., 2016). As a Caucasian, I believed that my status as another new *kass'aq* teacher in the eyes of my students could possibly be contributing to their unwillingness to learn from me. I wondered if it might be that I had not yet earned their trust or respect due to my students' past experiences and preconceptions of non-Alaska Native teachers.

My second thought was that my students did not understand or connect the purpose or application of the lessons I was teaching. With just a little digging, I found that the education system in Alaska has been through one change after another with little consistency. According to Smirnov (2021), the first recorded education system in Alaska began in 1784 by Russian immigrants who aimed to convert Native Alaskans to Christianity. Over two centuries later, after the implementation of numerous school systems, someone finally asked the Indigenous what

their needs and opinions were on the education of their people. One source notes,

> *"...in 1994, the Alaska Indigenous Affairs Commission, based on a study conducted, showed that the path full of trial and error in the organization of school education of Indigenous peoples led to the understanding that all previous systems were imposed by the authorities, bypassing the opinion of local residents, which led to a negative attitude to the system school education, and often to its neglect" (Smirnov, 2021, p. 187).*

When creating my class curriculum, I neglected to consult my students on their needs and what would be useful skills to learn. How could I expect my students to understand the purpose and application of class lessons when the curriculum held no connections to Native Alaskan culture or values?

In October of 2022, my third teaching semester, Dr. Sandra D. Weiternam Barton spent a week conducting training at the institution I teach for. She held workshops and private consultations with faculty and staff showcasing the Standard Model of Indigenous Learning (SMIL) she developed specifically for fellow Native Americans. The SMIL consists of five threads described as necessary pieces in the learning process of Native Americans (Weiterman Barton, 2013). Dr. Weiterman Barton (2013) promotes that understanding and implementing these five threads in a classroom will help inform and shape appropriate instructional methods and curriculum for classrooms geared towards Native American students.

Storytelling has always been a part of Native Alaskan culture. The thread of "storytelling" represents the idea that lessons are transmitted through stories passed down from generation to generation. "Experience" is another thread in the SMIL that represents personal knowledge and the need for hands-on experience and interaction in the learning process. These are connected to the "intergenerational learning" thread that describes the importance of sharing wisdom between generations. There are always opportunities to learn from those younger and less experienced than us. The "interconnectedness" thread reminds us everything is connected, whether seen or unseen. Moreover, the "place" thread highlights the importance of awareness of multiple realms, such as spiritual, emotional, and physical (Weiterman Barton, 2013).

My final idea was that my class structure did not allow for my students to practice revisiting and revising written assignments. Despite being given feedback on submitted assignments, students did not use instructor comments to improve their skills. Instructors cannot assign a major writing project and provide written feedback, then expect the student to improve their skills in the next project. Even though it has been found that students prefer this method and are less likely to be proactive in seeking instructor feedback, this method promotes a lack of self-efficacy concerning their education (Zhengdong Gan et al., 2021). According to Carless (2020), students should be the center of the feedback process. The instructor must provide space and opportunity for a student to respond to the feedback. Only then will students learn to create internal feedback and improve their skills and knowledge.

Not assigning and grading the different parts of an essay could also leave the final submission open to plagiarism. As suggested by Burke and Sanney (2018), assigning students and having them submit each part of the essay creation will help prevent plagiarism. Designing a course where each major step of a project must be submitted creates less pressure to cheat in an attempt to gain a higher grade, and it also promotes students' experience in practicing feedback dialogue with their instructor.

DECISION

I started this reflective journey not wishing to rewrite my class curriculum for a third time completely. Any teacher in a classroom can make a difference by intentionally fostering a positive teacher-student relationship and scaffolding curriculum. By adapting our teaching methods to build on our students' strengths, we can positively influence their motivation and attitude toward education (Liu, 2022). Through the various training and research explored during this project, I learned there was no need for such drastic changes in my course. Looking at the course I already had, I made three simple adjustments that made all the difference.

The first thing I added to my course was something I called Word of the Day (WOTD). I created a small form for students to fill out by giving me a word in their native language, whether an Alaska Native dialect, English, or any other language. They

also had to provide a definition, what language the word was from, an example sentence using the word, and a sentence explaining why I, as the instructor, needed to learn it. In the first five minutes of my lessons, I would write my WOTD on the whiteboard for everyone to see, along with the definition. Students helped me learn the word's pronunciation, a more detailed meaning, and how to use it in daily conversations. During the first few weeks of the semester, students did not seem to care much about me learning a few words in their native languages. I received maybe 8-10 words total and quickly ran out of words that my students had given me since I learned at least two a week. I encouraged students to fill out more forms and give me more native words to learn but to no avail. By the third week of being out of words, students noticed and asked me why I quit learning Yupik words. I told them they did not give me enough, so I ran out. Students came to the front of the classroom and grabbed markers to write on the board. I learned ten more words that day in Yupik, and other students filled out more WOTD forms. I loved learning about my students, their experiences, their language, and their culture from them directly. It took time, but to this day, my students in my English courses never let me run out of words to learn.

Secondly, I found Dr. Barton's SMIL training invaluable, and I immediately implemented all five threads into my classroom without any major lesson or curriculum changes. I decided to spend an extra five to ten minutes each class session after the WOTD, discussing how a specific skill is used in village life. I repeatedly insisted to my students that they already used that day's class lesson every day at home in the village—I was simply helping them learn how to write it on paper professionally. For example, I started my class with a story in a lesson on writing imperative sentences for a process paragraph. The story was about a child with her family at a fish camp being told not to go near the fire, but the child was curious and constantly reached for the flames, not understanding the danger. I then asked my students what they would say to their younger siblings if this were happening at their family's fish camp. All my students responded with a variation of "Don't touch the fire!" I explained that these were all imperative sentences. I then asked my students to give me more examples of imperative sentences, specifically in the context of teaching someone. I was connecting class lessons to what my students were teaching me about their culture and experiences, allowing them to easily understand the purpose of learning a particular skill and completing an assignment. Using Dr. Bartons SMIL, I began to naturally teach from a strengths model of learning rather than a deficit model. Seeing the positive difference it made in my students' attitudes and understanding of what I was teaching was amazing.

In addition to the minor presentation adjustments previously mentioned, I also decided to have students turn in each step of the writing process. I made room in my course schedule and added at least one class session for students to create each step. I did not change any lessons or add content. I simply created in-class space for students to do their work with easy access to help from me as the instructor. Students were now required to handwrite and submit brainstorming notes, outlines, and drafts. Each assignment was given a grade and returned to the student with one or two things they did well and one or two things needing improvement before completing the next step. Students then would take their handwritten draft and edit it over two class sessions for the grammar and vocabulary required for that particular essay type. The final would then be typed, and students would double-check their

Figure 1. Decision Tree for Culturally Responsive Language Arts Skill Development:

Note: Cyclical process of supporting Indigenous Alaska Native first-generation students in a general education language arts course (Archer Olson, 2023a).

grammar, punctuation, and spelling using a grammar check before being submitted to the Learning Management System (see Figure 1).

An unexpected positive outcome of this process was how much students were motivated by physically seeing improvement in their writing as they created each part of their essay. They could claim ownership over the whole process as they pointed out and corrected most of their errors. Students have specifically sought me out to tell me how they have used their new language art skills to earn high grades in other classes they are taking. Many students noted how they felt better prepared for writing assignments in content classes due to how they learned in my developmental classes.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

The problem I faced was that my first-generation Native Alaska college students were not using or transferring learned language art skills. When starting this reflective practice, I was frustrated and questioned my skills as an educator. As humans do, I naturally wanted to place blame elsewhere and not admit that I could be the reason or part of the problem. However, Damore and Rieckhof (2021) argued that to solve problems effectively, one must consider and evaluate all possibilities contributing to the issue. The hardest part of this reflective practice was directing questions to myself and investigating how I could have been contributing to the problem.

In the future, I will implement the same three adjustments to all my courses regardless of level or content. I have already seen multiple changes in classroom performance and skill retention, and I have seen how relationships with my students are positively affected and deepened with respect on both sides. There will also be an added and increased number of opportunities where my students can draw upon their strengths, and their culture in the classroom will be my next focus. I might first adjust the types of major writing assignments and exchange them for projects that would allow my students to showcase their cultural knowledge and skills while learning to write in various academic formats.

Traditionally, in post-secondary settings, first-year students are expected to arrive with the necessary writing and composition skills to be successful in their coursework. In my experience, a wide gap exists between what high schools deem college-ready skills and what is demanded of students in college courses (Melguizo et al., 2021). Rural Alaska schools are so far removed physically from Alaska colleges and universities, which only creates more roadblocks and hoops for Alaska Native students to consider and jump through when deciding to pursue a college education. More research is needed on bridging road system English skills with English skills from rural villages off-the-road system is an area where more research and programs are needed if we are to fully understand why a minority of Alaska Natives attempt to earn a degree and why so many drop out during or after their first year.

More research is needed to examine the classification and re-classification of Alaska Natives language learners to promote college readiness skills. Alaska Native languages are complex and subconsciously learned through traditional oral language methodology and do not require explicit instruction (Umansky et al., 2021). Indigenous receptive language learners learn English through explicit contextual instruction from a Western pedagogical approach (Zhang et al., 2022). Shifts in understanding alternative knowledge systems should be addressed through professional development and mentoring programs within post-secondary institutions for faculty.

Research-based Indigenous instructional scaffolded design models offer a framework for supporting culturally responsive strategies cross-curricular (Archer Olson, 2023b). Most faculty have specialized content expertise but lack pedagogical training or instructional design insight, creating a need for robust professional development and mentoring to scaffold skills and build self-efficacy skills and confidence. The standard Indigenous learning model provides an easily adaptable framework for any subject area focusing on storytelling, experiential learning, intergenerational learning, interconnectedness, and place (Weiterman Barton, 2013). Traditional Native instruction is facilitated through a relational approach, guided instruction, Kairos time, and contextual inference when teaching new skills (Archer Olson, 2023b).

Recommendations for specific cultural training are imperative to emulate and bridge Indigenous and Western instructional approaches. Providing instructors with multiple opportunities to engage

with students' culture first-hand, training on specific instructional strategies geared toward students' culture, and allowing students to share their cultural experiences with their teachers can positively impact student learning and retention. Every culture has bias and adopts strategies that are familiar through educational experiences. Increasing cultural competencies fortify skills necessary for supporting diverse learners and is an investment for retention and course completion for the institution.

A limitation is that full-time faculty may have different lived experiences than adjunct faculty in their ability to invest time and resources in course reflections. Many adjunct faculty have full-time jobs outside of one or two courses picked up as a side income. Reflective practice can be intensive in merging practical and scholarly experiences for application within the classroom.

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