REFLECTING ON CULTURAL TRAINING OUTSIDE OF CULTURAL PLACE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective paper is to explore ways to provide quality cultural training to the faculty of a small Christian college in the area of blending Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. Although we are using various methods, including a one-week immersion in an Alaskan Native village, it seems that progress towards indigenizing the curriculum and methodologies is agonizingly slow. How can we bring effective change in a Westernized setting with limited opportunities for rich, Indigenous cross-cultural experiences for faculty and staff? After researching immersion training, vicarious learning, and simulations, these authors came to the realization that we were missing the forest for the trees. It is the students who hold the power to impact the faculty and the classroom environment. All they need is a collaborative alliance with the faculty to demonstrate their knowledge, culture, and ways of knowing.

Keywords: *Indigenous ways of knowing, cultural immersion training programs, culturally responsive instructional strategies*

PURPOSE

Alaska Native students have been pursuing Western higher education since the introduction of American schools in Alaska in the 1870s. How to provide an effective curriculum and environment for Alaska Native students has been debated and criticized by leaders and members of both cultures ever since. Experiments in education and educational philosophy developed outside of the Alaska experience and by educators unfamiliar with Alaska Native lifestyle and traditions often had disastrous impacts on individuals, families, communities, and cultures. Add in some terrible actors toward Alaska Native people, individuals, or institutions who took advantage of the access to vulnerable people in financial, sexual, and religious ways, and the potential for destruction rose exponentially. Language barriers and semi-nomadic subsistence patterns limited the amount of information and time in the schoolhouse. Adult responsibilities that fell on youth due to tragic early death or injury of a parent from disease or the risk-filled lifestyle in Bush Alaska often pulled students out of schools. Even in the most intact and affluent families, children were expected to help with subsistence and family responsibilities that often limited attendance at school. Despite these substantial barriers, Alaska Native students rose to the challenge and arrived at institutions of higher learning, then as they do now, with the goals of succeeding in Western culture and/or returning to their own culture to better prepare for the next generation and to improve the lives in their communities. However, the debate on how to provide an education that will most effectively benefit Alaska Native students continues. This debate is taking place in three distinct areas: village communities, within the state of Alaskan government, and in higher education institutions. It is this latter context that will be the focus of this paper.

As Title III Project Director at Alaska Christian College (ACC), I, Nathan Hanna, have been tasked with providing professional development training to help our faculty understand and con-

nect with the Alaska Native culture of our students. I am a Caucasian, Western-educated teacher who transitioned into Alaskan village life for a 25-year teaching career. My wife and co-author, Sandra King, is Cup'ig Eskimo, the Title III Cultural Connections Coordinator, and is in charge of ACC's cultural training, including an immersion training for faculty that takes place in Mekoryuk for one week each summer. Her experiences being raised in a village setting with village schools and transitioning to a Western higher-education institution give her a separate set of perspectives. She recently retired from a 25-year educational career, including serving as a teacher in urban and village schools, village school site administrator (principal), and district office administration. Together, we are a cross-cultural team with experiences in both village and Western higher education that should equip us to address the goals of the Title III program; we are writing this reflective paper together to pursue how to do this most effectively.

Our reflective approach will be the simplified version of Dewey's (1933/1986) model as outlined by Greenberger (2020). We hope to follow the intentional approach of identifying how to best provide cultural and professional development for ACC faculty by analyzing the problem, considering the best options to solve the problem, assessing how those solutions might affect future practices, and validating those solutions.

Included in this paper are several narratives from each of our unique perspectives to highlight how our different perspectives can be very different yet, hopefully, collaboratively blend Western and Indigenous ways of knowing. The purpose of this reflective practice is to explore effective ways of providing cultural training and experience to the faculty and staff of our Alaska Native-serving institution of higher education. Another purpose of this reflective practice is to gain insight into developing more robust cultural training for postsecondary faculty at a small Alaska Native institution on the road system in rural Alaska.

Sandra's Narrative of Moving from Village Culture to Western Higher Education

Standing outside the dorm of Lathrop Hall on the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) campus with all my belongings and observing students was an eye-opening experience. I began to lug my suitcases and boxes into the dorm with no one offering to help me, which I found so unbelievable. Growing up in rural Alaska, we were taught to help those who were working. Poppa often said in our language that we needed to be good to others because we do not know if we are entertaining angels. Transitioning from village culture to Western higher education was a significant challenge, but the Rural Student Service at UAF program made a world of difference for me. They provided advisors, tutors, and academic advice that helped me acclimate to my new surroundings of higher education. Having academics, meals, and a quiet-time dorm schedule were good boundaries.

As a student, it was challenging to be in enormous classes with students who spoke over each other. In our Cup'ig culture, we grew up waiting for people to pause before we interjected our comments or thoughts. Our non-verbal communication signals were also a barrier to effectively communicating with our non-native instructors and acquaintances. As newcomers to the higher education system, we adjusted to the new life with Rural Student Service advisors who were constantly checking up on us and encouraging us to keep working hard. The first year in any new thing is like a roller coaster ride, but gaining confidence was a big part of academically succeeding, and learning the expectations helped us to be successful in this major trailblazing chapter.

Nathan's Narrative of Moving from Mainstream Culture to a Village School

Teachers like me who move to *bush* Alaska to teach in Westernized educational settings within the villages have a built-in incentive to understand, appreciate, and adapt to Native culture—to be a part of the community. The settings are so isolated that no other opportunities exist to socialize or recreate. Those teachers who "live" at the school as an island of Western, mainstream America and do not assimilate into the village do not last long or become cynical and isolated. Those who become a part of the community achieve a more-lasting impact by building bridges of communication, giving and receiving respect, and blending ways of knowing in the classroom. In order to become a part of the community, a Westerner must learn the culture from the culture-bearers (young and old can teach a novice) in the time and ways that

are prescribed by the Indigenous ways of knowing. This may take months, years, or even a lifetime. You must demonstrate competency after scaffolded instruction by doing the thing.

THE PROBLEM

As a starting point for exploration, I took the ACC campus site visitation report by an expert in the field of cross-cultural education from the University of Alaska, which focused on evaluating the college's cultural responsiveness and gave suggestions for serving Alaska Native students (Barnhardt, 2012). Some of the recommendations had been successfully implemented, such as identifying and developing relevant AA degree programs with "marketability" to Native students, like the paraprofessional education degree program and the behavioral health degree program we now offer. However, other areas, such as those that provide opportunities for students to tap into their own knowledge systems and ways of knowing in the humanities classrooms and curriculum, have been largely untouched. This made me realize that the interface between the faculty and students was still overly reliant on the Western model without the collaborative input of the recommended Indigenous models. It makes sense to expose and train our faculty to the models, communities, and culture bearers that would allow them to integrate Native ways of knowing with their knowledge specialties and teaching styles to best adapt our curriculum and approach to meet the needs of Native students. How to accomplish that is the problem.

THE PROBLEM

As authors, we hope to explore how to successfully support the development of a Western faculty/staff in a small, Native-serving college in the area of blending Indigenous and Western ways of learning and ways of knowing.

- Soldotna is a Westernized setting with very limited opportunities for rich, Indigenous cross-cultural experiences for faculty and staff.
- Students arrive from village settings with a mindset and skill set that does not translate well into Western higher education expectations concerning prerequisite knowledge and skills.
- Focusing on bringing students up to speed in these areas leads to overreliance on the "deficit model" and little time for building bridges between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing.
- What was surprising to us was that, though there is a high level of interest and commitment by the staff to build these bridges, the lack of access to village life, culture, and experiences makes it difficult to provide training that leads to actual changed teaching practices and an appreciation of what the students are bringing to the table. The differences between providing cultural training to Western teachers in the villages and Western faculty of higher education serving Native American students were unexpected.

WORKING IDEAS

We will explore three approaches to providing cultural training to faculty and staff: immersion training, vicarious learning through visiting elder interactions, readings and discussions, and simulations. Although all of these have been used to some extent by ACC, evaluating their effectiveness and optimizing our approach is the end goal. The interface between faculty and students will have the greatest impact on improving the success rate of Alaska Native students. Concentration on cultural awareness is an anchor to solidify cultural competency.

The most obvious solution to increasing cultural awareness among ACC faculty/staff is to continue developing and improving ACC's one-week immersion training. As part of the Title III program, at least two faculty and two staff members per year have participated in this training that takes place in Mekoryuk, AK, during the summers. The purpose of our orientation is to help build bridges of respect and understanding between the cultures and increase the effectiveness of educators working with Native American students. Unfortunately, participation is limited because of the high cost of travel and logistics and the extended time commitment (one week plus one week pre/post readings and discussions). The research clearly shows the benefits of deep immersion experiences in bringing about change in educators (Cohen, 2001).

We have both had the opportunity to lead the cultural immersion training in Mekoryuk, Nathan in 2021 and Sandra in 2022. Although it was a team effort both times, it was interesting to see the different philosophies of leading the training. What has happened as a natural result of our partnership is something we would like to intentionally reproduce in the collaboration between Western faculty and Alaska Native students.

NATHAN'S NARRATIVE OF DELIVERING A WESTERN STYLE OF CULTURAL IMMERSION TRAINING:

Our training focuses on avoiding pitfalls, miscommunication, and misunderstandings that often cause conflicts between cultures. Although these potential differences are almost infinite, here are some that we explore: village life vs. urban life; spontaneity vs. planning; flexibility vs. rigidity; place vs. mobility; community vs. individuality; subsistence vs. career; and village opportunities vs. mainstream opportunities. We pay close attention to the following topics in village life: communication, family relationships, religion, alcohol, abuse, suicide, racism, grief, subsistence, opportunities, and leadership.

The orientation format includes instructional discussions, elder interactions, interviews with former ACC students, and visits to village hotspots (tribal office, city office, church, school, clinic, washeteria, store, and fish plant). We also take advantage of whatever subsistence opportunities arise for individuals or the group, such as berry picking or fishing. Free time, perhaps the most important learning time, is prioritized.

Sandra's Narrative of delivering Indigenized Style of Cultural Immersion Training

When I was younger and making coleslaw, I asked my maternal grandmother if I was cutting the cabbage correctly. She responded with, "Is that how you see coleslaw when you are eating?" When I asked my mother to teach me how to make a quspeq, she responded, "If you had been watching me all these years I've been making quspeqs, you would know how to make one." She also said, "I learn how to make things by watching others or looking at what was already made." These are Cup'ig women who reiterated that observation and scaffolded practice are key in learning our way of life. Indigenous educators of all cultures are easily identifiable by those within the culture. Each group has a unique way of teaching their people a way of life.

Vicarious Learning

Vicarious learning refers to learning by listening to oral instruction or storytelling by elders, culture bearers, or students about the culture and their experiences. It can also include reading and discussing texts that shine a light on the Native lifestyle and perspectives. In the past, there has been a dearth of research that tells the stories of Alaska Natives in higher education. Archer Olson (2023b) has provided a treasure trove of first-hand narratives and analysis that provides a rich, varied picture of the experiences, challenges, and barriers that Alaska Natives have faced. Although Cohen (2001) suggested that vicarious learning is less effective in driving change of behavior than immersion, it is the "Native" language of Western education and is thus easier to access for faculty members. Much information can be transmitted efficiently, and if combined with experiential learning, it can be effective. Storytelling can be the common ground that both Indigenous and Western ways of teaching share and value.

Simulations

Simulations can place educators in the role of learners while students share knowledge and skills using Indigenous instructional methods to communicate the purposes and meanings of Native dance or the survival skills of Native youth Olympics. These simulations in experiential learning provide opportunities to improve empathy and cross-cultural understanding. Simulated court hearings (Anderson, 2022) could be adapted to tribal court simulations.

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

Sandra and I moved to Soldotna from rural Alaska several years ago to take positions with Alaska Christian College. This was our second stint at ACC, as I had spent a year working sabbatical from my village job a decade ago. I returned to the same Title III position I had at that time, Project Director, which was the same job but paid by a different grant. The goal of this grant was to increase the engagement, persistence, and success of the Native American students that made up 95% of our enrollment. Sandra was working as the Cultural Connections Coordinator, also under Title III at ACC, and we worked together to provide oppor-

tunities for faculty to receive cross-cultural training. Some of the cultural initiatives had introduced or implemented in our first stint remained, but others disappeared.

The majority of our faculty is Caucasian, and many have never experienced the village lifestyle that our students have grown up in. We have recently established an immersion experience that includes a one-week stay in an Alaska Native village. It includes pre- and post-readings and discussions. This is a well-received training but is limited by cost and logistical constraints to just four faculty/staff per year. We have also invited Native elders and leaders to come on campus and share their experiences and expertise. However, there is a frustration that these have had limited impact on actual classroom practices and curriculum. This lack of change in key aspects of the school's approach has created dissonance for us because the faculty's desire to understand and connect with students is genuine, but the opportunities for deep learning of culture outside of that culture's "place" are few and far between.

Most of our faculty are adjuncts with a limited amount of time with Alaska Native students; this is only a small part of their weekly lives. They have families, other jobs, and interests that fill much of their daily experiences. They are not paid very much. They are not depending on Alaska Natives to provide them with the community as I was when living in an isolated village with only a few other non-natives to relate to. They can put up with a few difficult hours of teaching and find success in other areas of their lives.

Most of the full-time faculty are more invested and have moved much further into indigenized instruction; however, often, it is an approach that is strongly influenced by higher education Native culture, which is quite distinct from the village Native culture that is the lived experience of most of our students. This higher education Native culture has been developed by Native graduate-level students and research that sheds light on particular Native perspectives and cultures but often does not reflect the day-to-day lives of Native people in the village. Despite the intra-cultural disconnect, there is still a great deal of useful information that these full-time faculty are modeling for the adjuncts, particularly in teaching styles, culturally appropriate activities and communication, and the overall respect and focus on our students' heritage and what they bring to the table.

As the only Alaska Native on the instructional side of the school administration, Sandra has a difficult position. Faculty rightly wish to pick her brain, invite her into the classroom, and honor her perspectives and opinions. However, she cannot be the only resource, perspective, and solver of problems. We regularly try introducing more elders, Native leaders, books, and other resources to build on. We want to encourage faculty to develop their own network of Native sources, including coming to view their own students as their primary resources.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

Understanding the differences between Western and Indigenous education has been explored by Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005). Native traditional educational processes are centered around the natural world with no distinct division between living and nonliving components; all are connected. Learning is rewarded with food, clothing, and shelter, as well as community standing. Contributions of specific skills, knowledge, and toolmaking require that all members work for the common good. Particular-place knowledge is especially necessary for survival. This last element is difficult to communicate for students who move into a new, Westernized place where their place knowledge and skills are unneeded, unrecognized, and unappreciated.

These ideas are further explored by K. Archer Olson (2023b), who defined the three sources of Indigenous knowledge as traditional, empirical, and revealed. Traditional knowledge is that which has been formalized and passed down orally through generations. Empirical knowledge is obtained through observation, adaptation, and a form of scientific inquiry. Revealed knowledge is discovered through spiritual sources such as dreams, visions, or insights during fasting.

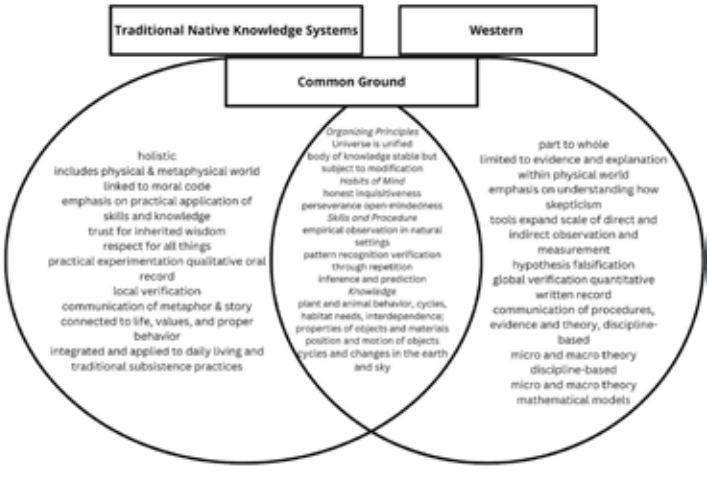
The standard model of Indigenous learning (SMIL) developed by Dr. Weiterman Barton (2013) includes five highly effective threads recommended for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous classrooms: storytelling, place, interconnectedness, intergenerational learning, and experiences. ACC recently brought Dr. Barton to Alaska to train our faculty in this model. It provides the framework

for our future approach to indigenizing our curriculum and classrooms. Indigenous instructional design frameworks provide a guide for Western faculty to be more mindful of important components to support Indigenous learners.

Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) affirmed that Western education tends to organize knowledge into complex theoretical frameworks which require decontextualization so they can be communicated and taught in a classroom through text. Competency is usually assessed through testing objective knowledge and written integration of ideas. Indigenous competency is demonstrated by putting knowledge into practice or demonstration.

Barnhardt (2007) emphasized that the goal of integrating the Western Knowledge stream with the Native Knowledge stream is that they are additive rather than displacing one another. The cultural standards and guidelines that Barnhardt advocated are all "phrased in positive and proactive terms, rather than dwelling on and delineating the negative aspects of past educational practices" (Barnhardt, 2007, p. 14). This approach conflicts with much of the current research, including critical race theory (CRT), decolonization, and the painting of Western approaches to education as white supremacy and systemic racism. Although historical oppression and trauma have played a significant role in the debate, assigning blame by skin color or ancestry is racist on its face and only results in anger, unforgiveness, and contempt on both sides.

Figure 1. Venn Diagram Blending Indigenous and Western Knowledge Systems:



Note. Visualization to illustrate key components of traditional Native and Western knowledge systems and the common ground between the two worlds. From "Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska Native ways of knowing," by R. Barnhardt and A. O. Kawagley, 2005, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 36*(1), 8–23.

Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) articulated that collaboration requires both sides to confidently share the strengths that make up the great areas of common ground, as demonstrated in the Venn diagram and pictured (see Figure 1). Then, and only then, will doors of respect be opened to share the unique contributions each cultural approach to knowledge has to offer.

Not all CRT research is focused on the assigning of blame and covers a great deal of practical teaching practices that are effective with Indigenous students, like collaborative teaching, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, peer teaching, and reciprocal teaching (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). Critical race theory often requires white educators to acknowledge complicity in oppression and historical trauma, to remain silent until permission is given to speak, and to adopt a submissive posture, often under the threat of condemnation or expulsion. Frederick Douglass (1845) argued that slavery was just as destructive to the soul of the slaveowner as it was to the body of the slave; therefore, CRT, when used as a tool of retribution and vengeance, becomes destructive to the soul of the one who wields it, and to the goal of additive streams of knowledge.

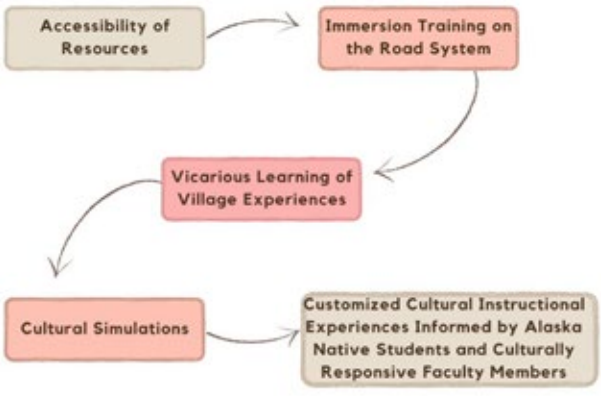
Here is where reality confronts us with a dilemma. When we add the two approaches together, there is more volume of information and practices. In the Western model of higher education, there is a finite and rather insufficient amount of time to interact with the necessary material using this combination of Western and Indigenous approaches. It is the conflict of academic Chronos time versus Indigenous Kairos time discussed by Archer Olson (2023b, 2023c). Indigenous teachers who return to their village often feel trapped between culturally responsive teaching and the standard expectations of their school districts (Archer Olson, 2023b). This is the same dilemma that many of the faculty at ACC express. There is a strong desire to see Native students succeed at the college level. This includes preparing them for continuing education which may not be as culturally responsive. The faculty is interested and open to Indigenizing the curriculum and methodology, but they are not familiar enough with the deep cultural understandings that would come with a long-term immersive experience to do this without student input.

DECISION

This brings us to the point of decision. How can we successfully support the development of the faculty at a small, Native-serving college in the area of blending Indigenous and Western ways of learning and ways of knowing? Archer Olson (2023b) argued that we must equip our faculty by the means we have at our disposal to recognize the sensitivity, legitimacy, and complexity of worldviews that are sometimes in opposition to our own and so open the doors to new ways of teaching and learning. The means at our disposal are limited—our immersion training which is limited logistically and in time; vicarious learning, which is limited in effectiveness and modeling; and simulations which take up a great deal of limited instructional time. These must all be used to prepare the faculty to relationally connect with Alaska Native students and provide culturally appropriate opportunities so that students themselves feel empowered to Indigenize the classroom with the deep knowledge and cultural competence that they bring from a lifetime of immersion in their home culture. The products, skills, and information that students bring to the table must become the long-term immersive experience that faculty can grow into and share with colleagues.

A decision tree was constructed to illustrate the consideration of designing cultural training for a small Alaska Native college on the road system in rural Alaska (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Decision Tree for Cultural Training:



Note. This figure illustrates the reflective evolution of thoughts building robust cultural professional development for faculty at an Alaska Native college. Adapted from "Decision Tree for Cultural Training," (Unpublished figure) by K. Archer Olson, 2023a.
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Our faculty, many of whom are adjunct faculty, have challenging lives, families, careers, continuing education, medical complications, other jobs, and many obligations that make pursuing a long-term immersion in village Alaska a very remote possibility. However, all can learn cultural sensitivity and responsiveness and develop ways to invite students to demonstrate their cultural knowledge by "doing the thing." In fact, some of our faculty are already modeling this approach and are sharing their successes with their colleagues. These key faculty are the culture-bearers of the culture that we want to see at our college.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

This reflective process has branched in unexpected directions. What began as somewhat of a venting about a problem without realistic solutions has refocused my attention on our college's greatest assets: our students. I am reminded and inspired that they have the tools and manpower necessary to address the needs of each classroom in becoming culturally responsive. Helping students and faculty see each other as allies in the challenge of blending Indigenous and Western ways of learning and ways of knowing is the most important outcome of all the training that Title III provides.

Etuaptmumk's (*Two-Eyed Seeing*) allows Western faculty to embrace the strengths of strong academic preparedness and content skills with Indigenous ways of knowing, creating fertile learning environments for Indigenous students (Hall et al., 2015). The standard model of Indigenous learning (SMIL) provides five threads for Western faculty to consider supporting *Two-Eyed Seeing* in classroom instructional design (Weiterman Barton, 2013). As instructors develop curriculum and lesson plans to support core subject matter competencies, storytelling, experiential learning, intergenerational interactions, interconnectedness, and place (physical, spiritual, and intellectual) should all be integrated all time for Kairos moments to evolve and support great depths of learning, evaluation, and application (Archer Olson, 2023b; Weiterman Barton, 2013).

Recommendations for future research should consider unique Indigenous populations with regard to culturally responsive instructional strategies. Additional research might consider how increasing cultural competence aids in facilitating

the transference of instructional practices. Indigenous instructional design frameworks and models should continue to be developed for various regions across the state and country. Jernigan et al. (2020) advocated that local tribes and villages should be able to utilize current peer-reviewed research and adapt it in meaningful ways to support their specific educational outcomes.

Limitations of this reflective practice are identified by the sparse amount of literature to support cultural training for Western faculty supporting Indigenous Alaska Native learners in postsecondary education. Financial resources are limited to sustain long-term professional development beyond federal funding. Shifts in faculty and administration change the culture and direction of the magnitude of supporting culturally responsive instructional practices with evaluations, cultural competence training, personalized professional development, and mentorship opportunities. These limitations can all be mitigated through the increased development of our students as the primary source of cultural development of our faculty and staff.

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