Eleven Years of Implementing Traditional Yup'ik Oral Stories in the Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

The *Ciulistet* Research Association first began to document traditional Yup'ik knowledge in 1986. Many of these documentations focused on traditional Yup'ik oral stories that were ONLY traditionally passed on by our ancestors within the oral framework. The Yup'ik certified teachers employed within the Western educational system were trained within that framework and soon realized that as educators it was our duty to incorporate these traditional methods of instruction. We began to search for methods that would complement both the Western and Yup'ik educational systems in implementing the traditional Yup'ik oral stories. This paper will examine the cross-cultural pedagogical approaches utilized.

Traditional Yup'ik Oral Stories

Traditional Yup'ik oral stories were embedded in many social functions of the society. The winters were filled with many community celebrations and the most passionate, spiritual and pleasurable was presented in the form of Yup'ik dancing and drumming. The men in these dances revealed and relived stories of great feats and adventures, or ridiculed a fellow kinsmen in exaggerated story forms, or presented the

quiet individual dances of the Yup'ik women as, with downcast eyes, told stories through soft dance movements passed down by their mothers (NELSON 1899). Through the skilled orator of the elders who shared the sacred stories *qulirat*, legends and *qanemcit*, stories of the people within the *qasgi*, or community house or within the privacy of the *qasgi*, or men's house, told stories that were for the upbringing and reinforcing of the values and beliefs for the men and young boys and likewise the women telling and sharing family stories embedded with values and beliefs within the privacy of the sod houses. Many stories were told during the spring, summer and fall camps as individual families in semi-nomadic movement gathered and stored food and materials needed for the long winter survival. Also, stories were told through the use of the *yaaruin,* the story knife by the women and young girls and most importantly stories were found within the traditionally Yup'ik clothing. The women had to pass this knowledge on to their daughters so that the clothes would reveal the correct story of the family and the men had to recognize these stories on the clothing.

Traditional Yup'ik Pedagogy

Traditionally, the whole community was engaged in Yup'ik dancing thus requiring all members of the community to know and understand the rituals, the rites and passages and all aspects of this form of story telling. The men of the community often engaged in composing songs and dances for the upcoming winter celebrations and the women had to train the young women the story dances that were passed on to them. The great orators were the elderly men who at a young age had the aptitude for learning tales and learned those skills beginning at a very young age. These tales were very much a dramatic recital (ORR 1995), likewise women shared stories in similar fashion within the privacy of their sod homes or spring, summer or fall camps. Those who had that aptitude and took a great interest in learning these oral stories spent many, many hours practicing and reciting (NELSON 1899) those stories to an audience of elders who impressed on those young minds that the stories were not to be altered (ORR 1997). If they weren't able to adhere to this expectation then these stories shouldn't be told at all. Stories were also learned and practiced though the sharing of the *yaaruin*, the story knife (the story knifes were made of ivory or wood – and stories were told with the help of the illustrations as revealed in the mud or snow). Many *yaaruin* stories dictated the story of the traditional Yup'ik clothing – the intricate patterns and the meaning and historical events revealed on the fancy squirrel parkas.

Traditional Yup'ik pedagogy involved being immersed (ILUTSIK 1999) into the activity that the individual learner was naturally partaking. For example, a very important person that played into the learning process was the mother in the home environment or the men in the *qasgi*, the men's dwelling. The child was immersed in many traditional Yup'ik

activities whether it was in the preparation of the winter celebrations and/or listening to oral stories through elder orators or women within the privacy of the sod homes or at spring, summer or fall camps and through the *yaaruin*, story knife. The child observed and imitated the dance stories and oral stories in play and shared the *yaaruin* stories – practicing within the privacy of their peer group in a non-threatening environment. At a later stage when the child showed an interest in learning the art of story dancing, oral story telling or *yaaruin* the adult "teacher" begin to guide them with patience and taking them through small steps at a time. For example, I grew up immersed in summer and fall camps. I have wonderful experiences of being at the fall camp where my family processed fish for the long winter. My first duties were to bring fish to my mother as she cut the fish and I played on the beach. And then being presented with a *uluaq*, a women's knife by my father so that the following year my mother made a big "show" of bringing my *uluaq* to the fall camp. I was then given the small female fish to practice – these fish were used for dog food but was a great contribution to the family. Throughout the whole process I was praised as the cuts began to equal the talents of my mother. And then in the late evenings after a long day of work (the days are long in Alaska) and an evening snack we would crawl into bed in our canvas tents. My mother would begin to share traditional family and common oral stories that her grandfather had shared with her as a child (she grew up during the time of the great flu epidemic – many of her immediate family members perished during that time. As a result the traditional kinship system was broken and her grandfather raised her). But, sadly the sharing of these oral stories did not take the natural steps and it was only later that as an adult that I begin to remember these stories and begun to understand the embedded values and beliefs.

Another important aspect of the traditional Yup'ik pedagogy was that the stories had imbedded values and beliefs. The traditional Yup'ik practices were that each individual was astute enough to find the implications of the stories that would guide them to becoming that *Yupiaq*, "real" person. And at all the different stages in ones' life the story would have embedded a value or belief that would continue that guidance.

Cross-cultural Pedagogical Approaches

We faced many challenges in the implementation of a traditional Yup'ik pedagogy into a historically Western based pedagogical environment. Foremost, cultural thought and processing information is of a holistic nature. The traditional oral stories in any of the aforementioned forms were presented to the listeners without analysis. And most importantly, the oral stories were not put down in the written format**.** When traditional stories are written down then they become set in time – a history of how things were then.

The fluidity of the story becomes frozen (MATHER 1995) when the stories are written down. Also, lost is the inflection of the storyteller's voice and body and facial expressions needed to tell the story. We also realized that culture is always changing as with the stories

– stories change to fit the needs of the community (except the *Bible*) but interpretations are constantly changing. These challenges also meant that we had to align our instructional strategies to fit within the schools curriculum goals and expectations, The Alaska State Standards/The Grade Level Expectations in Reading, Language Arts, Math and Sciences and The Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools.

We were taught, trained and now taught using the Western based pedagogy. As a result we begin to doubt our own experiences as Yup'ik teachers and to question ourselves:

- How was it possible to implement the Yup'ik pedagogy into the current instructional framework?
- Do I have a thorough and deep understanding of the Yup'ik subject matter?
- Do I have enough experiences of my own Yup'ik culture?
- Is it okay to use a translated version of the story from the Yup'ik to English?
- Have I memorized the story correctly, will I be able to do justice to the story and use the correct Yup'ik dramatic tones, intonations, etc.
- Many of the traditional Western based stories have "happily ever after" endings whereas within the traditional Yup'ik context, our stories end with a question, "questions to ponder and think about". Will I be able to stand within this cultural framework?
- Will I be able to fulfill the academic disciplines as outlined by the district and State mandates?

We begin very cautiously with the permission and support of our elders as we had to justify to Western based academic administrative personnel that this cross-cultural integration utilizing Yup'ik pedagogy would benefit the students – grounding students of Yup'ik ancestry and introducing the Yup'ik culture to those students whose heritage was another than Yup'ik.

We begin first by transcribing and translating the Yup'ik oral stories that we had heard and documented at the Ciulistet Research Association meetings. We then memorized these stories and made sure that the right intonations complimented the story told in the original Yup'ik form. We then used the stories as theme unit stories that we would incorporate into our teaching – beginning with the oral story and using the story throughout the entire unit. We felt that by sharing the story through out the whole unit (some of the stories were told at least ten times throughout the whole unit) the students would begin to memorize the story like many traditional Yup'ik people had in the past. And most importantly, we didn't analyze these stories as is so common within the Western education system.

For example, we incorporated a story entitled *The Sisters*, told and shared by my late mother Lena Atkiq Paul Ilutsik. It is a story about berries so we included this lesson in the fall, when we are able to bring the students out to gather the berries that are mentioned in the story. The unit is about three weeks long and incorporated into the language arts, math, science and arts strand. The students begin by listening to the story followed with the students going out to collect and gather berries. The berries are then sorted, becoming a math activity, with estimations as to how many cups the students had gathered, then made into *atsiuraq*, a thin pudding made with water, sugar and flour which in itself becomes a scientific unit because although measurements are estimated those measurements and the cooking process do produce a thing like pudding. The leaves of the different berries have also been gathered and impressions are made of the leaves in an art class, etc. And all these activities are intertwined into this unit with the theme story told throughout the whole unit. We make sure that we have addressed the local curriculum and addressed the Alaska State Standards, The Grade Level Expectations and The Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools.

Conclusion

As with many educational practices throughout the United States pre-made materials and modules for the Western based curriculum is purchased through large communities and pre-screened by a committee of educators and then adopted into the district curriculum. Thus, simplifying the lessons taught with a quick review and pedagogical approaches that the teacher has been trained. Whereas, within the context of the local Yup'ik culture the teachers who are of Yup'ik descent and are concerned about grounding the students in their cultural history and knowledge must do extensive research and create units that will incorporated Yup'ik pedagogies and cultural knowledge. This process takes much time, many, many hours of volunteer time, a deep understanding and grounding of themselves as a Yup'ik person, an understanding of the Western based educational pedagogical methods and creative insights as to how to incorporate both pedagogies.

We have for eleven years been utilizing this model of addressing both the Yup'ik and Western pedagogically approaches to teaching within this cross-cultural setting. We have witnessed that those students that we have had eleven years ago are now entering young adulthood, many entering as University students have a solid cultural grounding and are proud of their cultural heritage.

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