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PUBLICATION PROJECT IN ALASKA OFFERS WAYS TO OPEN NEW WORLDS TO BASIC WRITING STUDENTS

ABSTRACT: *This article explains how a publication project can deliver a "real world" writing experience for basic writing students, which provides students a tremendous incentive to 1) thoroughly consider audience, 2) aggressively rework their pieces, and 3) fully comprehend the importance of accuracy, in much the same way journalism students are trained.*

The piece focuses on an award-winning project in Alaska called Chukchi News and Information Service that publishes essays of primarily Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut students in the Alaska press. It also addresses the benefits of publication projects generally, such as Foxfire-style programs that create their own media.

In Kotzebue, Alaska, an isolated Inupiat Eskimo community 30 miles inside the Arctic Circle in northwest Alaska and just 175 miles across from the easternmost tip of the former Soviet Union, an unusual publication project for basic writing students has forged a powerful incentive for students—primarily Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts—to achieve excellence in composition.

This project, called Chukchi News and Information Service, has been operating continuously since 1988 with roughly 175

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published pieces to its credit. The thrust of the project is to instill exemplary performance in student writers by offering them an outlet to publish their essays in the statewide Alaska press, ultimately providing a voice for Alaska Native (Eskimo, Indian, Aleut) and other rural Alaskans in newspapers and magazines that otherwise would not be heard. Students submit their work to the editors of the Chukchi News and Information Service project, who in turn work with newspaper and magazine editors to get the pieces published in the press across Alaska.

The Chukchi News and Information Service project operates out of Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska in Kotzebue. (The Chukchi name comes from the fact that Kotzebue sits on a spit that juts into the frozen Chukchi Sea, a part of the Bering Sea.)

Student participants live in rural regions of Alaska and are committed to preserving the history and knowledge of their forebears, while affirming their own experiences as rural people. The college relies heavily on "distance delivery" education to bring the majority of its courses by satellite-assisted audioconference to students throughout Alaska's vast, sparsely populated rural regions.

Virtually all Chukchi's students live in small, remote communities that typically are accessible only by airplane, snowmobile, and dog team in winter or by boat and airplane in summer. They attend classes in their home villages by calling in to a centralized telephone "bridge" that enables everyone to hear and talk to everyone else in these huge audioconference "classrooms," that are spread hundreds of miles apart across America's last great wilderness. Typically, written assignments travel back and forth via the mail, computers, and fax machines.

Despite the obvious constraints of teaching and learning "over the telephone," rural Alaska students benefit from this type of education because it enables them to stay in their home villages, where they can continue to pursue traditional subsistence hunting and fishing activities. In other words, they can remain immersed in the ways of their culture while still pursuing college degrees.

The majority of distance education students in rural Alaska are Alaska Natives, the official name for all of Alaska's three main aboriginal groups: Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts. Generally, Yup'ik Eskimos inhabit southwest Alaska; Inupiaq

Eskimos live in the north and northwest; Athabascan Indians are in the Interior; Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida Indians live on Alaska's Panhandle; and Aleuts live along the windswept Aleutian Islands.

Each group has its own language and cultural tradition. For instance, Yup'ik and Inupiaq Eskimos, even though they live "next" to one another geographically, speak distinctly different languages.

Most rural students of the University of Alaska enroll in basic writing classes to fulfill standard university requirements, of course, but also to overcome the difficulties they encounter with English as a result of bilingualism (their Native language being their first language) or of speaking a form of pidgin unique to rural Alaska called "village English."

All basic writing students at Chukchi College may participate in Chukchi News and Information Service if they are enrolled in a variety of classes ranging from developmental English to freshman and sophomore composition to magazine and news writing courses. This publication project "marries" the two disciplines of English and journalism.

Pieces distributed through Chukchi News and Information Service have run in publications as diverse as Alaska's largest newspaper, the *Anchorage Daily News*, to smaller regional papers such as the *Tundra Drums*, to specialized periodicals such as *Mushing* magazine for the sleddog crowd. Many of these pieces are argumentative essays ("opinion pieces" in journalism jargon) written in basic writing classes. Other pieces reflect the kind of news and feature stories typically assigned in journalism courses.

The project's method of teaching writing to both Alaska Natives and non-Natives centers on rewriting, not just once or twice, but multiple times in order to prepare a piece for publication. Instructors' emphasis on the kind of clear, straightforward writing that is suitable for newspapers serves Native students and English as a Second Language students particularly well as they struggle to overcome the difficulties of bilingualism or "village English."

When students must rewrite a piece repeatedly to bring it to publication standards, they typically acquire a deep understanding of the sheer hard work required for top-quality writing. In addition, by focusing on writing as communication with a larger audience, students learn the importance of considering audience, purpose, and style.

As instructors, we usually plant the idea of publication in students' minds starting with the very first piece they write in most classes—a short autobiography. Given a trusting classroom atmosphere, students will share their life stories with other students and the professor in a writing workshop, despite their initial fears about reading aloud. After students have rewritten their piece at least once, we typically mail final versions to all students. The message here? Students right away understand that their audience includes everyone in the classroom, not just the professor. By sharing their work in class, students not only inspire each other, but they also get adjusted to the idea of sharing their work with a wider audience.

Those who then elect to seek a still larger audience through Chukchi News and Information Service typically write about culturally relevant and pertinent subjects such as growing up in a family of reindeer herders; averting the tragedy of fetal alcohol syndrome; facing substance abuse among Alaska Natives; hunting, fishing, and gathering in a traditional subsistence economy; coping with the changes brought about by the clash of the Western and Native cultures in this century; and performing traditional tasks such as drying and smoking salmon or tanning animal skins.

"I have seen my mother prepare a whole caribou hide to make leather rope," writes Genevieve Norris of Shungnak, a Native resident in one of northwest Alaska's most remote and traditional Inupiat Eskimo villages. "My mother then washes and strips the hide with a sharp knife, making strips as thin as spaghetti. When this thin leathery rope is dry, my father can use it to make snowshoes and basket sleds" (8).

As Ms. Norris records traditional family activities in this essay for a freshman English composition class, she is also learning the value of audience-based writing. In preparing this written communication for a larger readership across Alaska, Ms. Norris feels—as do all students—the greater responsibility for accuracy that newspaper writing requires as well as the subtle pressure to be precise in describing her own culture if she is to share her world view with thousands of readers.

In fact, classroom research elsewhere has demonstrated that when students are presented with the "real life" situation of having their work published, they fully understand, perhaps for the first time, the importance not only of accuracy but also of audience. Educators Karen Durrant and Charles Duke tested this idea in a class of 25 creative writers, who first were asked

to analyze popular magazines to determine their target audience.

> Initially students were not informed that they would be submitting the pieces for possible publication. We did this to see how students would approach the assignment. Several students were ready to turn their pieces in after one revision; however, when students learned that they actually would be required to submit the pieces, they requested more time for revision and went back to their analysis to check on how well their articles seemed to meet the expectations of the magazine's audience. Such a reaction merely reinforced our belief that students need to write for genuine audiences and have their work submitted to those audiences for consideration. (169)

Durrant and Duke's findings also, then, point to the inherent lesson of publication in teaching the value of rewriting or revision. We find that although students initially may resist the concept that rewriting is an essential element of good writing, the "carrot" of publication motivates them—sometimes even spontaneously—to rewrite their pieces six or seven times in order to bring them to publication quality.

These findings are consistently mirrored in Foxfire spinoffs and other writing projects. Ann Vick, an educator who ran a Foxfire project in southwestern Alaska high schools in the mid-to-late 1970s, called Cama-i, recalls:

> . . . experienced students from Bethel and Emmonak conducting a workshop session in Mountain Village and, with no adults present, the whole group staying a half-hour after the bell had rung because they were involved in the discussion of whether or not to begin a magazine. And it is students writing article drafts or painstakingly preparing camera-ready copy over and over again, willing to do whatever is necessary, however time-consuming, to get it "right." (xix)

In working student pieces through a series of rewrites, as editors of Chukchi News and Information Service, we try to preserve the student's voice while also providing guidelines for proper usage and grammar. For instance, we left intact the conversational tone of Siberian Yup'ik Eskimo Linda Akeya when she describes what is done with a polar bear once it has been butchered:

> Some people can't stand eating the meat, and I am one of these people. But I wouldn't mind keeping the fur. (13)

Certainly, these sentences could have been edited to make them more succinct, but not without destroying Ms. Akeya's unique voice.

Also, it is important to understand that by preserving the student's unique voice, the editor also remains faithful to the text's meaning. For instance, Inupiaq Eskimo Dollie Hawley tells her readers how a missionary teacher came to her village on the northwest coast of Alaska and "civilized the Natives":

> I can also remember the teacher teaching us our manners, such as saying "Please," "May I?" or "Excuse me" and "Thank you." She also taught us not to slurp whenever we ate our meals. Slurping was a very big problem in those days. Thanks to God we all learned not to slurp. (14)

With the deceptively simple and humorous phrase, "Slurping was a very big problem in those days," Ms. Hawley conveys the complexity of contact between aboriginal peoples and Western culture. On the one hand, she appreciates the "civilizing" benefits that the missionaries brought, while on the other hand, her humor satirizes the self-righteousness of Western culture.

When developmental students, and particularly minority students, publish pieces drawn from their own experience, they learn more about themselves and their culture, thereby enhancing their self-esteem in an otherwise overwhelming, sometimes indifferent system of higher education.

For instance, in order for Inupiaq Eskimo Hannah Loon to describe how to search for *masru* (wild Eskimo potatoes) that are stored in mouse caches (mounds in the tundra), she must sharpen both her writing and foraging skills. Participation in the traditional subsistence activity of food gathering enables her to take pride in Native culture:

> When you find a mound, simply probe it with your stick, or gently step on the ground to see if it is soft. Open the soft spot with the pick and lift the top layer out gently. Using a pair of old gloves, feel around in the hollow area for roots. (17)

With the reinforcement inherent in writing about traditional activities, Ms. Loon can hone exemplary academic skills while respecting her ancient culture and Alaska's rural environment. Indeed, the best student writing for Chukchi News and Infor-

mation Service often springs from the very activities that have sustained aboriginal cultures for thousands of years.

Likewise, Eliot Wigginton found himself concerned with the very same issue of preserving culture when he initiated the Foxfire publications. Wigginton suggests that the value of preserving the culture shouldn't end with its benefits to the community but should be extended to the student participants themselves. Early on in the Foxfire experiment, he discovered that students need a deeper purpose than simply recording local history and lore.

> Few of my students seemed to have a genuine appreciation for roots and heritage and family—the kind of appreciation that goes far deeper than simply being amazed at finding out that Grandpa can cut down a tree and make a chair or a banjo out of it or that Mom used to be a midwife and knows how to deliver babies. I'm talking about the peculiar, almost mystic kind of resonance that comes—and vibrates in one's soul like a guitar string—with an understanding of family—who I am and where I'm from and the fact that I'm part of a long continuum of hope and prayer and celebration of life that I must carry forward. (75)

For minority students, the affirmation provided by readers can be especially powerful. For instance, Inupiaq Eskimo Geri Reich is a nontraditional student (as are most writers for the project) who works as an electrician at the Red Dog Mine in northwest Alaska. She was asked in class if workers at the mine had noticed her byline in the local paper. "Oh, yes," she replied. "Practically everybody." She said even "the white guys" who work at the mine and live out of state are now taking an interest in the region, including the problems that local Native people face. She said many of the non-Natives now seem to look at her as a real person and with respect for the first time. She wasn't, in her words, "just a dumb Native anymore."

Instructors who wish to develop a publication project in their classrooms may choose to follow the Foxfire model and create a campus magazine, or simply an in-class publication. For instance, an educator who also has successfully blended journalism with the teaching of basic writing, Maureen Maas-Feary of Genesee Community College, has applied a "journalist's beat" approach to basic writing classes, in which each student covers one subject area that he or she can write about with authority. In piloting this approach, she oversaw the publica-

tion of class magazines drawn from these beats.

> The first publication was greeted enthusiastically. It provided a class meeting's worth of reading and discussion material, along with a concrete example of the completion of one great circle of the writing process. (85)

If nothing else, as Maas-Feary suggests, a document of published pieces provides great inspiration for students in the class, as well as for future students.

Indeed, a class-produced magazine, or even an anthology, may be useful as a supplement to a standard text written by professional writers. R. Michael Gold goes so far as to suggest supplanting the professional text with student work:

> We urge our students to keep audience in mind when they write. Let us also remember to keep *our* audience in mind when we select readings—with particular attention to avoiding essays that are too specialized, difficult, or controversial. We might simply dispense with outside readings and study only texts produced by class members themselves. Or we might look for outside readings in any number of sources: popular magazines, newspaper editorials, campus publications, published anthologies of *student* essays, and the like. (264)

So the benefits of publication create a domino effect within the classroom. Student writers initially benefit from seeing their work in print. The next crop of students benefits from the models published by former students.

These writing projects can be duplicated in other basic writing classrooms, particularly in multicultural classrooms, throughout the nation. Because we believe so strongly that students should be provided opportunities to develop basic writing skills beyond the classroom, we recommend that educators initiate some kind of publication project, if not predicated specifically on the Chukchi News and Information Service project, then perhaps by starting with the kind of desktop-published, in-house collection of student writing described above.

As for initiating a Chukchi News and Information Service-style project, it could be tested in communities where far more daily and weekly publications serve greater groups of people than the small number of presses in Alaska. And, in large communities, if the mainstream press is hesitant to run student pieces, typically the smaller regional or minority press often

needs free-lance contributions. Basic writing instructors can, at a minimum, develop a cooperative relationship with the editor of the campus newspaper.

Regardless of what approach to publication is chosen, students get excited whenever and wherever they see their names in print. For most participants in Chukchi News and Information Service, this is the first time they have seen their bylines published. Most important, publication provides basic writing students, early on, with a powerful incentive to exceed the expectations of traditional classroom learning.

As a result of their participation in Chukchi News and Information Service, students reap positive feedback from readers in their communities and in their classes. At the same time, non-Native readers in urban areas of the state learn more from these publications about the unique culture of Alaska's Native peoples—the Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts who have lived off this vast remote land for at least the past 10,000 years.

For example, readers of Inupiaq Eskimo Hannah Loon's article about village English undoubtedly came away with a better understanding of this nonstandard, rural language. Loon writes:

> I do not use proper English with those who speak to me in village English because it may intimidate them or make them feel uncomfortable. Although village English may sound "funny"—meaning "bad"—to English instructors, it has its own beauty to my ears. There's no such thing as "correct" village English. I structure my sentences any way I desire. Rules don't limit village English as long as the listener understands. (13)

Such an essay can do much to dispel many of the negative connotations that village English harbors among non-village and non-Native Alaskans and even among Native peoples themselves.

Nevertheless, the above examples do not mean to imply that Native and rural people write only on Native and strictly rural issues for publication. Rather, rural Alaskans' world view also includes interests and concerns shared by other minorities as well as the mainstream audience across America, such as: health hazards of smoking; computers; fish farming; tourism; corporal punishment; mutual funds; cancer; and AIDS.

Also, Chukchi News and Information Service writers come from a variety of backgrounds, not just Alaska Native culture. For instance, Korean-born "Edward" Jae Chang, an English as a

Second Language (ESL) student, published a piece that describes his Kafkaesque experience in the airport when he arrived in America:

> I was trying to find Asian people to ask questions, but I could not find any, and all the other people looked the same, like twins. I was worried that my mother, who was already in America, was going to leave the airport without me. (8)

This kind of publication project not only enhances cultural awareness and understanding for all peoples, but it also provides a kind of permanence for the experiences of voices not otherwise heard in the mainstream press. In other words, this kind of project helps write and preserve "the people's" history. For Chukchi News and Information Service, specifically, the project's unique writings on a vanishing way of life join Alaska's historical record, which will be available to future historians, anthropologists, and other researchers, and most importantly, to the people themselves.

We feel Chukchi News and Information Service is a publication project that works well among a diverse minority student population throughout rural Alaska and could be adapted readily to minority student populations throughout the United States. By duplicating the Chukchi News and Information Service writing project, particularly among other minority groups nationally, many of the same benefits of publication would result. For instance, as students provide exemplary pieces to newspapers and magazines in other regions of the United States, the press would respond by reflecting the minority experience more accurately, not just in today's media but for tomorrow's historical record. Also, basic writing students would take greater pride in their cultural experience at the same time as they heighten their readers' awareness of a different world view.

After the sheer hard work of seven or eight rewrites, basic writing students see their work published in the press, tasting for the first time, perhaps, their influence upon the public mind. Ultimately, this awareness of the power of publication provides student participants with a tremendous incentive to acquire the writing skills they need to succeed in college, and more importantly, to become leaders in the Information Age.

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