In the United States, Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are facing the loss of many indigenous languages. In an attempt to preserve or revitalize local languages, a number of school districts in Alaska have developed bilingual education programs ranging from transitional models to dual language immersion. Marlow & Siekmann (eds.), *Communities of Practice: An Alaskan Native Model for Language Teaching and Learning*, describes a graduate program at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF) designed for language teachers and administrators. Emphasizing the sociocultural aspects of second language acquisition, the book demonstrates the successful implementation of education and linguistic theory in bicultural education. The book’s research base speaks to scholars, and the vignettes of personal experience will appeal to anyone who works with multicultural populations.

The Second Language Acquisition Teacher Education (SLATE) program, embedded in an existing graduate linguistics program, teaches Master’s and Ph.D. students theory and teaching strategies for second language acquisition. Edited by two of the four founding faculty members, the book describes the first two years of the SLATE program, detailing its extensive research foundation. The events of those two years provided data for
the faculty’s grounded theory action research, which is presented in the final chapter. The focus of their research was the application of linguistic and education theory in bridging the cultural gap between themselves, as Caucasian educators, and their predominantly Alaskan Native students.

It must be noted here that most of the Alaskan Native students were Yup’ik. One was Alutiiq, which is closely related, and another Gwich’in, which is an Athabascan language/cultural group. For the purposes of this review, their cultural worldview, while not identical, is similar enough to be combined with that of the Yup’ik in discussions of culture. Many, though not all, of the Yup’ik students spoke Yugtun (often just called Yup’ik), at varying levels. There were a few Caucasian students as well, who worked with Yup’ik populations in various language programs.

A large part of bicultural education and particularly of successful bilingual education, is the socio-cultural component, part of which is recognition and validation of the minority culture, which includes its language (Crago, 1992). Recognizing that the majority of their students would be Alaskan Native, the UAF professors who founded the SLATE program identified sociocultural theories from education and linguistics and applied them in their fledgling program. Observing students’ progress through the program, they documented the effects of applied theory, the most noticeable of which were from empirical language validation, dialogic engagement and critical pedagogy. Demonstrating experiential constructivism in action, the graduate students experienced the benefits of research-based education in a powerful way, becoming equipped to teach others in turn.

The founding of the SLATE program is a story unto itself. All of the students in the Master’s program were Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), indigenous heritage-language teachers, or administrators, many of whom lived and worked in remote villages. Accessible only by boat, plane, or snowmobile for much of the year, the students relied on distance education except for intensive summer sessions. The four Ph.D. students, all Alaskan Natives, lived in Fairbanks as they conducted their research. Their research, like that of the faculty, focused on the socio-cultural dynamics in four of the Master’s level classes.
The format of the book reflects the three stories that are woven together: the creation of the SLATE program itself, the doctoral students’ research, highlighting the results of SLATE’S research-based programming, and the faculty research. The first three chapters, written by faculty, describe the unique Alaskan context, the research on which the program is based, and its resulting structure. The next four chapters, written by Ph.D. students and faculty, reflect action research with data collected from participation in four Master’s level classes. The final chapter presents the faculty’s research, followed by an epilogue to answer the inevitable “What happened to-?” questions and illustrates the impact SLATE graduates are having on language programming in Alaska.

The cultural divide between Caucasian faculty members and predominantly Alaskan Native students is the issue at the heart of the book, and the authors weave numerous examples of cultural differences through the text, providing examples of other perspectives and other ways of thinking. While the many elements that comprise a culture cannot be discussed here, a brief description of the two worldviews as they relate to learning/teaching is in order.

As a rule, Western Europeans and Americans accept the notion of the teacher as an expert who imparts knowledge or skills to a group of novices until they get it “right.” Native Alaskans, however, traditionally view an individual (particularly a young individual) presenting himself as an expert as offensive, or at best, laughable. Bringing attention to oneself in class to say, “I know the answer!” or to call oneself an expert is considered boastful, a characteristic to be discouraged in children (Pewewardy, 2002). Generally speaking, Native Alaskans do not teach so much as enable someone to learn for him/herself. Children are guided, side-by-side, with no divisions, no podiums or desks, between teacher and learner. Information is shared laterally, through stories, dance, and collaborative effort, not given, hierarchically, as a completed body of knowledge. Furthermore, the learners, not the teacher, are the agents in the learning event, and no two learners come away from an event with the same experience. It is difficult to say therefore, that one has the right answer (Hain-Jamall, 2013).

The central theme in Communities of Practice, and important to anyone working with minority cultures, is the determination with which UAF worked to avoid “the traditional Western academic model that suggested
hierarchical, top-down asymmetrical power relations” (p. 33). To that end, the UAF faculty wove dialogic engagement into every aspect of the SLATE program. Dialogic engagement on its own involves open, bilateral dialogue. An extension of the concept is intersubjectivity—the process through which people, or groups, with different perspectives take the perspective of the other in order to come to a common understanding (Carspecken, 1996, as cited in Marlow & Siekmann, 2013). Dialogic engagement, and sometimes intersubjectivity, took shape in casual conversations, group discussions, journal entries, and reflective essays. The key to the culture-crossing endeavor, constant dialogic engagement, enabled faculty to adjust learning situations to suit Native learning styles, including the use of Yugtun where appropriate, in discussions, presentations, and written assignments.

Vignettes throughout the text give a human voice to the book’s discussion of theory. One student, for example, discovered crying as she took a quiz, was asked in Yup’ik if she was ok. She replied, “I’m fine. This is the first time that I’ve ever had to take a graduate course in my life where I could write in Yup’ik because I have a professor who is able to read and understand it. That is why I am crying.” (p. 47). This empirical validation of her heritage language demonstrates for students and readers alike the importance of not only respecting and valuing a language, but of using it.

In response to student feedback, the program became progressively more Yup’ik in nature. Native Alaskan misgivings about Western education eased, but non-Yup’ik Natives and White participants began to feel somewhat uncomfortable. What held them together was their shared purpose in “eradicating and replacing hegemonic colonizing practices, particularly in relation to language revitalization, maintenance, and education” (p. 47). This is the hallmark of a community of practice. As E. Wenger, who coined the phrase with J. Lave, puts it, this “community” is a group of practitioners who “interact and learn together” (Wenger, 2009, p.1). They share resources, ideas and experiences as they work toward a common goal. As professionals, the students recognized that learning to work with and within Yup’ik cultural practices would help them achieve that goal. The final section of the book contains the professors’ constructivist grounded theory research, as defined by Charmaz, (2000) (p. 137), and an epilogue. The research chapter describes a three-day
A debriefing session in which faculty discussed various aspects of the mostly completed two-year program. It was an unstructured affair, and they took turns taking field notes. On the third day they sat down, found themes, coded them, analyzed them, and wrote them up in article format.

While writing an article in three days is hardly the norm, the reality is that the four experienced researchers had been involved in dialogic activity on the same topics for over two years. What comes to light in their discussion is the personal aspect of the SLATE project. There had been no mention earlier, for example, of faculty visiting students in distant villages, which often involved chartering small planes. The professors agreed that the free time with students in the village, the chance to meet families, and the surprisingly strong effect of isolation all contributed to their understanding of students’ backgrounds and strengthened student-faculty relationships. Similar to the way that using Yugtun at the university provided empirical evidence that the language held value, the act of flying to remote villages, sometimes more than once, demonstrated, in a way that words never could, that the faculty were committed to their students’ success.

One understated, but striking, illustration in Communities of Practice is the way the authors fill page after page in an effort to describe empowerment without paternalism, only to discover it is an existing Yup’ik concept called ellangluni. Ellangluni is something like “becoming aware.” In acquiring this awareness, a person becomes empowered, but it is an empowerment that cannot be given; it must come from within. It is active, not passive, and it requires action. In recognizing they were discussing the same concept, faculty and students realized the goals of intersubjectivity. Participants from different cultures had arrived at a common understanding.

With understanding as a central theme, there are illustrations throughout the book of theory in action which are useful, particularly for scholars involved in policy-making and program development. Saving the book from drowning in research citations and explanations, thankfully, are the Native Alaskan students’ stories. They offer insights into their cultural worldview--their collective perspective and ways of doing things--with examples from their classrooms and from their own childhood learning experiences. They expressed their frustration in having to “survive” in a Western university and their excitement in developing Yup’ik materials for classroom use. A
sentiment not explicitly expressed, yet clear nevertheless, was the joy that accompanied the realization that they had the power to change the many inequities they saw in Alaska’s public schools. They had reached ellangluni.

References


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