

## ***Expanding Worlds: Incorporating Alaska Native Cultures into the Public Schools***

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### **Abstract**

This session will describe and share a semester-long curriculum called *Alaska Studies* that introduces Anchorage 11<sup>th</sup> graders of all ethnicities with Alaska Native history, cultures, and art. The presenter will explain the process whereby the local school district accepted the material as part of its curriculum, and will involve participants with one or more activities from the curriculum.

### **Introduction**

Perhaps since the coming of Western schools, but certainly since the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, Alaska Native people have worked and schemed to make the schools their children attend more relevant to their own lives and cultures. Parents and Elders have worked on several fronts at once:

- To have more Native teachers educated and certificated
- To include instruction in the children's Native languages in the schools
- To make the school environment more conducive to learning in a variety of ways
- To develop teaching materials, lesson plans, and curriculum with a content that reflect traditional knowledge and cultures and acknowledge the presence and contributions of the Native inhabitants of the state

It is the last point that I will speak to today: the development of curriculum materials that become a part of the standard curriculum that all students study.

But first, I'll give a little background about myself. I am an anthropologist by initial training, but I soon got seduced into education. I have combined my anthropological perspective with formal training in the field of education over the years as I helped develop (always as part of a team effort) major instructional units at the elementary, middle, and high school levels on various topics dealing with Alaska Native cultures and history. I have worked both within the system – 13 years at the Anchorage School District – and outside the system, for Native organizations that have developed materials to be inserted into public schools. The reason I tell you this is because it explains how I have come up with my four rules for Native curriculum development. Baby Boomers will remember the Joni Mitchell song, "Both Sides Now." I've looked at curriculum from both sides now, from in and out, from win and lose.

### **The Four Rules**

My career has spanned 37 years so far, and I have had my share of both successes and failures. The first assumption many people make is that a successful curriculum is defined by being interesting, authentic, accurate, utilizing best practices, and able to teach students volumes of new facts while helping them realize uncounted understandings. But this is only 25% of what makes for success. The failures I have experienced can all be

placed on the doorstep of the other 75% of the process. In my experience, the quality of the materials has been nearly irrelevant to whether or not they were used in schools or resulted in student learning.

Here, then, are the four rules, which I'll explain in more detail in a moment:

1. Write good stuff.
2. Be "invited" to write curriculum by the school district where the material will be used.
3. Teach teachers both content and teaching strategies that support your curriculum.
4. Support teachers long after the development of the material with additional training and replenishment of supplies.

### **Rule 1: Write Good Stuff**

Every educator strives to work with quality materials and teach them well, so I won't offer a crash course in curriculum development or best practices here. Instead, in case there are non-educators in the audience, I'll simply list some things all who develop curriculum with a Native emphasis need to consider. I'm going to put them in my personal order of priority.

1. Maintain high standards of authenticity, accuracy, and appropriateness. This usually means that the local Native community must be intimately involved in the creation of the materials.
2. Curriculum must be standards-based. This will ensure that the skills and knowledge you are teaching are demanding yet within the students' intellectual and emotional grasp.
3. The writer must be excited about the topic in order to design material that excites kids.
4. The lessons have to motivate the kids to want to learn. Except for some sponge-like 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> graders, this means that the material should relate directly to students' lives, families, home, and interests.
5. Life is not divided into academic disciplines; avoid a similar division in the curriculum as much as possible. Or, put another way, make the units interdisciplinary.
6. Use primary sources as much as possible, but be aware that dependence on "an elder" to teach part of the curriculum can be a weakness in the plan. People with the necessary knowledge might not be available or interested in working in the schools, schedules might be hard to coordinate, or although local protocol might make it appropriate to pay elders, the school might not have funding.
7. Keep in mind that the students will engage in a variety of learning styles and that the instructor's teaching style might not be the best fit with all of them. Similarly, students will come to the lessons with a wide range of abilities and skills and these must be accommodated in the plan.
8. Focus. There's a universe of information about any given culture, but an overwhelming amount of information paralyzes the teacher. Choose the part of that universe that you will write about and be realistic about the amount of time it will take to do so. Two helpful tools in deciding the focus are "enduring

- understandings” – five years from now, what do you want students to still remember and know from the lessons; and “essential questions” – what questions about the culture, environment, or history does your curriculum answer?
9. Incorporate activities that engage kinesthetic, affective, and cognitive domains; include variety with a minimum of lecture.
  10. Don't expect teachers to have time to look things up – provide the information for them.
  11. Assessments have to be part of the process.
  12. Production values should be as high as you can afford. Students notice when money has been spent to produce beautiful books and instructional materials. And they notice when all they are given are Xeroxed copies of worksheets. Get a graphic designer. Put money in the budget for printing.

**Rule 2: Be “invited” to write curriculum by the school district where the material will be used.**

It is a rare occurrence for a district to actually ask a tribal organization, unsolicited, to design new curriculum. There's almost always an impetus for it – such as a grant opportunity, or, in the case of the Anchorage School District, a major community malfunction. The curriculum I will share was requested in large part in response to an ugly instance of racism in our city. Several white male high school students were driving through town one night targeting Alaska Native pedestrians with paintballs. They were caught and ultimately sentenced to community service, and the incident caused a public uproar. Of course there were those who claimed the Native community was overreacting, but in general the citizens were embarrassed and galvanized.

At the same time, federal funding had been made available to the Alaska Native Heritage Center to improve the achievement of Native high school students. The Center wrote into the proposal a chunk of money to pay for the development of curriculum for all students, as a way to improve the general school environment for Native students.

Thus, this project occurred because a racist incident motivated the school district, the Heritage Center had funding to make a solution possible, and there was a great deal of community support. After the unit had been developed and pilot tested, the district office took it to the school board and had it adopted as required school district curriculum. It has now become the district's responsibility to support the curriculum.

In contrast, I have recently been involved in a project in another part of the state that similarly received federal funding for a curriculum development effort. The idea was to teach 9<sup>th</sup> graders about the local Native culture. The materials were researched and written, but the district had had no involvement in planning the project. Individual teachers were interested in using parts of the curriculum, but they were constrained by existing district curriculum and No Child Left Behind requirements. They couldn't find the time to teach something that was not an integral part of the curriculum. The project closed two years ago and, though I know of three or four teachers in the entire region who are using the material, the project failed to bring about improvements in the lives of

the Native students – or the non-Native students who were to have used the curriculum. There was never buy-in on the part of the major stake-holders, the school district.

**Rule 3: Teach teachers both the content and teaching strategies that support your curriculum.**

Unless the teachers come from the cultures that you are teaching about, don't expect them to know about those cultures. Even if teachers are of the culture, their knowledge might not extend to the topics you cover. Not everyone is an expert in local habitat, or medicinal plants, or oral tradition, for instance. You should be prepared for the fact that your materials will teach both the teachers and the students at the same time.

But, good as materials are, they can't do it all. You must undertake workshops, credit courses, in-services – whatever format works in your area to introduce the new material. The optimum plan goes something like this:

- Involve teachers in putting together the outline of the curriculum. They can help decide how long the unit should last, how it fits into other parts of the curriculum, what academic standards the curriculum should address, how it can be scaffolded onto existing lessons.
- Conduct a pilot test of the first draft with a handful of dedicated teachers who don't mind being guinea pigs. The findings will be surprising. Activities that you knew would be a hit might fall flat. Or a lesson that depends on downloading something from the Internet might be impossible due to an electrical storm – or a defunct Internet link. Or teachers might not understand the point of a lesson and teach it completely backward. This is what happened once when I was piloting a unit about cultural change in the Aleutian Islands immediately after contact with Russians. The lesson was supposed to show what is lost when oral tradition is no longer passed down regularly from generation to generation, sometimes as the result of the development of writing systems in the Native language. I observed one classroom where the teacher used the lesson to celebrate the advantages of literacy – precisely opposite the point I wanted the material to make.
- Hold training for all teachers who will use the materials. Training should include:
  - Background information on the cultures, generally taught by an elder
  - An introduction to the materials; teachers' physical interaction with the photographs, maps, books, and guide is essential
  - An opportunity for teachers to try the activities in a failure-proof environment

**Rule 4: Support teachers long after the development of the material with additional training and replenishment of supplies**

This is the part of locally developed curriculum projects that most often fails, because grants end, staff leaves, and interest swerves to new projects. To get a sense of how to continue to support your curriculum, think of what happens with trade textbooks:

- Representatives visit the district office annually
- New catalogs and order forms for replacements are sent out annually
- Revised editions go out periodically
- Sometimes companies offer training on their textbooks

If the curriculum designer is not in-district, and is not a publishing house, then this level of service is not possible. This is when having the district as the co-producer (see Rule # 2 above) helps: it becomes the district's responsibility to support the curriculum. But the tribal organization is never off the hook completely. When it comes time to train new teachers in the content and strategies, the district will, appropriately, turn to the tribe to provide a portion of that training.

### **The Anchorage School District Alaska Studies Curriculum**

Now I'll show you some of the features of the curriculum itself to give you a sense of how I tried to incorporate those features of good curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

My message to tribal organizations is this: **Do** prepare quality curriculum in partnership with your local schools. **Do** plan to provide teacher training on the use of the curriculum and on your tribal history and culture. And treat your curriculum like a child: the birth is the easy part. It's the care and feeding throughout life that is crucial. Remember the four rules and you will mark your efforts down in the "success" column.