Keep Talking

Be the change you wish to see in the world.

Gandhi

Contents

FACULTY INTENSIVE

The One We Didn't Choose

In early project planning, when we first started talking about a joint Books of the Year program, we were thinking in general terms, not about any specific issue or topic. We wanted a book that would stir a little controversy, but we didn't want something that would generate controversies we did not yet have the skills to handle productively. It was easy to think of potential book titles, and our steering committee spent several lively hours brainstorming through our collective favorites. *White Teeth! Red Mars! The Poisonwood Bible! The Satanic Verses!* Most of us were taking notes for our own summer reading. Say, what was *The Satanic Verses* about again anyway? Some of us remembered the fatwa against author Salman Rushdie, but not the plot of the book.

Because we wanted books that would engage our faculties, we asked for their help in nominating titles. Over the next couple of months, a faculty committee reviewed thirty-five nominations, short-listed eight, and finally recommended four to the steering committee, who then made the final selection.

The two books we chose made a rough pair, loosely tied to themes of culture, immigration, language, and survival. All these are issues Alaskans face; both books we chose were set in California. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is a nonfiction account of a Hmong family in central California and *The Tortilla Curtain* is a tragicomic novel about Mexicans and Americans in the canyons around Los Angeles. Both books are complex, accessible, tonally neutral and brilliantly written explorations of the deep rifts between colliding cultures. Both turned out to be excellent choices for a wide range of classrooms, topics, and reading levels.

But we still had some unfinished business with the book we didn't choose. *Ordinary Wolves* by Seth Kantner is, by all accounts, a gritty but lyrical novel about growing up on the Yukon Delta in western Alaska. We didn't choose it, even though it was the top recommendation—and the only unanimous choice—of our faculty committee. We didn't choose it, even though those who'd read it said it was amazing. We didn't choose it, even though it was about Alaska, and we knew it would have an immediate relevance to our students. We didn't choose it because it was written by a white man, and we were concerned that it would spawn some difficult dialogues that neither campus was adequately prepared to address.

White people and others in the dominant American culture have been holding the strings of power over indigenous peoples in the Americas for hundreds of years. The dominant culture creates and enforces the public policies (including land management, resource extraction, economic development, education, and social welfare) that largely determine how Native people must live. It also largely determines how Native people have been perceived. In choosing not to choose this book, we simply recognized that white people (including teachers, artists, novelists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, travel writers, scientists, and priests) have been telling stories about Native people's lives through non-Native eyes for centuries. We were afraid that if we chose "another one of those" we might be perpetuating an old problem instead of looking ahead to a new solution. We didn't want to go there, at least not yet. We certainly didn't want to start there.

INTEGRATION OF ACADEMIC AND ALASKA NATIVE CULTURES

Fast forward two years. Our third faculty intensive, in May 2007, was different from the first two. We'd learned a lot and could do a better job of nurturing community, presenting topics, introducing strategies, and engaging the group. The group had greater ethnic diversity, and the presenters took a more intentional stance with regard to minority cultures and points of view. Because of this, we had a chance to go where we hadn't gone before.

Our facilitator, Libby Roderick, announced to the group on Monday afternoon that over the course of the week they'd be given time to plan a discussion around a real difficult dialogue chosen by the group. We brainstormed a list of potential topics and used a repetitive voting exercise to narrow it down to a single issue: whether our universities ought to privilege research over teaching. We broke the sixteen participants into groups of four and asked each group to develop a 75-minute course module that would address the topic, incorporate some of the strategies and techniques presented in the intensive, and bring in any others the group wanted to model. On the final day the groups would present their proposals and the participants would vote for the one they wanted to experience. That group would then lead the others through their exercises. The intention of this assignment was threefold: 1) to help participants integrate new approaches into their own thought processes; 2) to help them actively imagine how to create classes that might address difficult dialogues within their own disciplines; and 3) to give them a chance to participate in a real difficult dialogue where something was actually at stake.

A number of the participants privately expressed their disappointment over the innocuous nature of the chosen topic; while the research versus teaching question may be a major point of contention in some higher education circles, it wasn't really that controversial here. Several were disappointed that some of the topics with wider implications (especially the suggested proposition that both universities should hire faculty in numbers that reflect the ethnic demographics of their community) had been rejected by the group in favor of a highly academic topic.

As the week progressed, a different issue kept surfacing: the discrimination and invisibility experienced by Alaska Native people, both within Alaskan universities and beyond. This third cohort included one Alaska Native professor who was willing to speak out on a wide range of experiences and conflicts and who, with the support of the facilitator, voiced these concerns at some length. During one of these discussions, at a pivotal moment, Libby asked the group if they would be willing to change their difficult dialogue topic from teaching versus research to one related to Native cultures and higher education. Everyone immediately agreed, and the group jointly constructed a new question to debate: "Should all Alaska university faculty, researchers, and scientists be required to attend an Alaska Native-designed and run cultural orientation program?" The small groups began creating modules around this new topic.

On the final day, the groups presented their proposals and voted on which to put into practice that day. The approach selected was structured around six techniques that all began with the letter "d": Depiction, Dyads, Discussion, Documentary, Debate, and Debriefing. It started with a fictional scenario, in which the administrators at both of our universities had mandated that all faculty members attend a week-long Alaska Native-designed and run cultural orientation program as part of their contracts. The announcer described the enormous backlash this hypothetical mandate had created, with students, faculty, and community members in an uproar of protest. Thousands of angry e-mails had been sent to university administrators; some faculty had signed a petition insisting that

the policy be withdrawn, and others had resigned in outrage. Those of us in the room were to imagine ourselves as attendees at the public gathering that had been called for all university and community members to learn more about the policy and the issues at stake, and to engage in a dialogue about whether it should be continued.

The group led us through various exercises designed to help the "meeting attendees" become more informed about the history of Native cultures with respect to Western systems of education, the differences between Native and non-Native ways of thinking and learning, and our own biases. The final exercise was a modular debate. The group leaders divided those present into five small groups and assigned them to represent one of five constituencies: students, faculty, union leaders, university administrators, and Alaska Native elders. The constituent groups were to meet together briefly, establish their position on the question (for, against, or split), and prepare themselves to represent the opinions and positions of their constituencies to the larger group.

When the large group reconvened, each constituency was given a brief opportunity to articulate its positions and concerns. The administrators were in favor, the faculty leaders opposed, and the students, faculty, and Native elders were each split. After each turn, the broader group had an opportunity to ask questions and hear responses about that constituency's positions. No winners were proclaimed, but there were several moving moments and illuminating exchanges, including the Native professor struggling to respond as his own father, a Native elder, might have. All participants came away with a heightened understanding of the various perspectives and concerns and a deepened appreciation of the need for actually talking about these things, regardless of which side prevailed in terms of an actual policy decision.

The discussion was so successful that the project team felt ready to have this conversation in public. In the fall, we held a public event that featured a four-person panel (three professors and a Native community leader) and four freshmen from the UAA Seawolf Debate Team. The students engaged the question in a parliamentary style debate, with two speakers for the proposition and two against. The panelists followed with short prepared remarks. After these two formal airings of opinion, a facilitator opened up the discussion to audience members.

These experiences represent the beginning of the possibility of real dialogue between our two universities and the broader Alaska Native community, a potential which we hope to realize on our campuses in coming months and years. We are ready to at least start this conversation now, and with the lessons learned over the past two years, we hope we are ready to move it to a deeper level of dialogue, understanding, and action.

Modular Debate

A form of debate that demonstrates multiple perspectives (rather than just two) and engages an entire classroom (rather than only a few students at a time).

- Identify the issue and frame the proposition. (see pages 54-55)
- Identify various constituencies who might hold different positions on the proposition.
- Assign students to a constituency (or let them self-select) and ask them to identify and/or research the positions of that group.
- Conduct the debate, allowing equal time for each constituency group to present its views.

ALASKA'S NATIVE PEOPLES: A CALL TO UNDERSTANDING

As the next step in introducing Alaska Native issues to a larger university and community audience, we have chosen a theme for our 2008-09 Books of the Year that focuses on "Alaska's Native Peoples: A Call to Understanding." A joint faculty committee from both universities chose two books already in print, and a group of faculty and Anchorage community members created a companion volume of frequently asked questions about the Alaska Native experience. These three books create a strong set for teaching and provide an introduction to the range of voices and issues related to Alaska Native cultures and communities today. All three are nonfiction works that address critical issues, correct historical and other inaccuracies, and authentically represent the Alaska Native cultures and peoples. The companion reader also offers links to selected creative writing by Alaska Native authors. All three books are short, appropriate for many different disciplines, and accessible to students from many backgrounds.

We plan to host many related activities throughout the academic year, including forums, guest speakers, theater events, and more. We are very excited to be, at long last, bringing considerable visibility to these critically important issues on both our campuses, and to begin having some long overdue difficult dialogues on them.

Using a Book to Explore Alaska Native Issues

A few ideas for engaging with a book.

Sentence completion
Referring to all or parts of a book, ask students to take out a sheet of paper and complete the following sentences:

- The story that struck me most in this book/section was...
- The question I would most like to ask the author is...
- In order to begin talking about the issues raised in this book/section, the most relevant (name your discipline) terms would be...

Out-of-class events/exhibitions
Ask students to attend a lecture, art exhibit, or public policy meeting on a topic related to one or more of the books. Ask students to identify the issues brought up in the out-of-class event that are also discussed in the books.

Hatful of Quotes
Type out sentences or passages from the books and put them in a hat. Have students draw papers from the hat. Letting them decide who will go first, ask students to read their quote and comment on what it means.

Circle of Objects
Use a version of the Circle of Objects to illuminate one or more of the themes in the books.

BOOKS OF THE YEAR, 2008-09

Growing Up Native in Alaska
– A. J. McClanahan

This book includes interviews with twenty-seven young Alaska Native leaders about their lives, their futures, the impact of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and how they are "finding innovative and creative ways to live in two worlds."

Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being
– Harold Napoleon

This book outlines the initial effects and continuing impact of the epidemics that afflicted Alaska Native peoples from the 1770s through the 1940s. Napoleon's premise is that this death on a massive scale wiped out the culture-bearers and left psychological and spiritual scars that continue today. Routes to healing are also discussed.

Why Do Alaska Natives Get Free Medical Care (and other frequently asked questions about Alaska Native issues)
– Edited by Libby Roderick

This book of readings was prepared by UAA and APU faculty and Anchorage community members as a companion volume to the Books of the Year. It provides responses to common questions about Alaska Native issues, including identity; language and culture; subsistence; the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA); the effects of colonialism; education; health care; and the future. It also includes suggestions for additional reading, and will be available both in hard copy and online.

Alaska Native cultures teach that relationship matters first (relationship to ourselves, our community, the land and waters on which we depend); that cooperation and connection are essential to learning and living; that taking time matters, people matter, emotions matter. It's a different world view, and it might be a critical one if we wish our children and grandchildren to survive and thrive on this planet.

Libby Roderick
Center for Advancing Faculty Excellence

LESSONS LEARNED/NEW BEGINNINGS

As the grant-funded portion of the APU/UAA *Engaging Controversy* project draws to a close, and the institutionally supported efforts move forward, we are faced with questions of sustainability and momentum familiar throughout academia. How do you keep a critical project going once your grant funding goes away? How do you sustain your momentum and build on it to achieve even greater success? Like many of the big questions we have faced over the last two years, we don't have all the answers. All we know is that we have to try.

We also have the value of a great many important lessons hammered home over the three years of this project. We know much of what it takes to engage difficult dialogues in higher education. Among other things, it takes:

- **The ethics to prepare carefully.** Anticipate everything you can think of, plan for every eventuality. Consult with as many people as you can; more minds are smarter than fewer minds. Have planned strategies and backup strategies, little things you can do such as dyads or Quick Writes or silences that buy you time to think. Once you engage in a difficult dialogue, stay flexible. Drop your plan and respond in real time to important issues that come up on their own.

- **The courage to make mistakes.** All good teachers know that trying new things is risky. Mistakes are to be expected. If you can't make mistakes, you won't get learning, and if you don't get learning, you're never going to change anything. So we need to support each other to make mistakes and to learn from them.

- **The humility to stand corrected.** If you say or do something that inadvertently hurts someone, you may get corrected. Listen to these corrections. Acknowledge your mistakes. Apologize.

- **The willingness to try again.** This brings us back to the core values of civil discourse: the principle of nonviolence and the willingness to stay in the game. Avoidance is not the answer, and waiting is the same as not doing. So learn from every experience, and then keep talking.

We expected this *Difficult Dialogues* project to have a dramatic positive impact on our faculty, on our students, and in our classrooms—and it has. Even more remarkable is the effect it continues to have on how we approach all of our dialogues: in faculty governance groups, with our state and municipal governments, and in addressing the ongoing challenges of being a welcoming place for Alaska Native faculty, students, and community members.

Dr. Michael A. Driscoll
Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
University of Alaska Anchorage

EPILOGUE

Our project's success was due in part to the fact that it allowed us to speak to the varying needs of at least three major (often overlapping) groups of stakeholders in the university communities: those who view institutions of higher education primarily as sources for liberal educations; those who view them largely as training grounds for workers; and those who see them as "necessary evils" for accommodating to the dominant society.

First, this project exemplifies one of the primary things a university has to offer: a liberal education. Those who experience a liberal education encounter knowledge from different disciplines and cultures and thus experience different ways of making knowledge. They have the opportunity to encounter new ideas and perspectives, make new discoveries and connections, learn mind-blowing things and possibilities, and, with a little luck, grow into more sensitive, self-reflexive citizens who can tolerate the tension of the many paradoxes in the multiple realities that surround them. For those who view the university primarily as a place to offer and acquire a liberal education, the *Engaging Controversy* project was a rare and precious opportunity to fulfill the loftiest ideals of higher education.

Another stated or unstated purpose of many institutions of higher education is to prepare students for the work force. While universities can and do help prepare students for the work force by teaching them specialized skills, they must also prepare them to navigate the disparate and the unexpected by enabling them to question, evaluate, reflect, and act. This project gave faculty members the incentive to make room for activities that do just that, thereby satisfying some of the needs and desires of the workforce development constituency.

Finally, particularly amongst minority and working class communities, there exists a view of the university as a primary instrument of assimilation into the social and economic status quo. While people in these communities may recognize the necessity of acquiring the skills to survive in the dominant economy, they may also resent or fear the accompanying losses that attend having to adapt to the values and ways of the dominant culture. The project allowed these perspectives to be aired, stimulating necessary and, we hope, ongoing discussions and institutional change.

In the end, we came a long way toward realizing the potential for our universities to be places of profound learning, of courageous inquiry, of deep transformation: all the things we say they are and try to make them be for our students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community partners. We believe this is the most appropriate use of our academic freedom—holding honest difficult dialogues about critically important issues that make or break our civil society, and doing so openly, democratically, nonviolently, and productively. We thank the Ford Foundation for giving us this opportunity.

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

KAY LANDIS is a graduate of the University of Alaska Anchorage with a BA in English (1991, magna cum laude) and an MFA in Creative Writing (1995). She served as Associate Editor for *Lessons Learned: A Guide to Accident Prevention and Crisis Response; Lessons Learned II: Using Case Studies and History to Improve Safety Education;* and UAA's renowned literary journal *Alaska Quarterly Review.* She has been with the *Engaging Controversy* project since the beginning, serving as grant writer and support staff to project leaders.

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This book tells the story of a partnership between two universities who have spent several years exploring productive ways to engage difficult dialogues in classroom and other academic settings. It presents a model for a faculty development intensive, strategies for engaging controversial topics in the classroom, and reflections from thirty-five faculty and staff members who have field-tested the techniques. It is intended as a conversation-starter and field manual for professors and teachers who want to strengthen their teaching and engage their students more effectively in conversations about the most important issues of our time.