TEACHING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ENGLISH TO BOTH NON-NATIVE AND NATIVE ALASKAN STUDENTS IN RURAL ALASKA: THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article is about looking at education from a different perspective, an approach that accommodates the non-native Alaskan educator (in this case African), non-native and native Alaskan students as well as their education by audio teleconference distance delivery from both bilingual and multi-cultural points of view. A myriad of viewpoints are presented by educators and researchers regarding education by distance delivery. As an African educator, when I came to live in Alaska, I came with various ideas, myths, fictions, and, to some extent, stereotypes about Alaska and Alaskan students. However, by living with and among Alaskans, I have come to realize the idea that fundamentally, both native Alaskan and non-native students are all individuals like other students in any part of the world. They come to institutions of higher learning with their baggage that need to be unpacked and re-packed, and this can be done successfully only if the students’ home culture is affirmed and respected by educators.

The first/indigenous people on the American continent to be taught English as a second language were probably the native Alaskans and the American Indians.
James E. Alatis (1973, p. 41)

The first/indigenous people on the sub-Saharan continent to be taught English as a second language were probably the native Africans.
Mercy Tsiwo-Chigubu

Too often, educators and researchers are oblivious of the fact that non-English speakers, especially students undergo traumatic cultural conflicts while attending school. The question at hand is: “What are the academic joys and stresses of a native African educator on the American soil, teaching Early Childhood Education by distance delivery to both non-native and native
Alaskan students in a rural college setting?” On the other hand, an interesting question to pose would be: “What frustrations and academic joys are experienced by students in this same environmental setting as mentioned before?” Before we can think of the answers, it is important to understand the dynamics that culture brings to a scenario of this magnitude.

**Culture**

The differences that exist between a teacher’s culture and that of individual students can simultaneously create conflicts and misunderstandings, as well as harmony and peace. If conflict becomes the order of the day, consequently some students will develop strong feelings of alienation and resentment against the class, school, or the teacher. Sooner or later, they will learn to withdraw psychologically and in time, physically. Sadly, school drop-out rate and suicide rate by native Alaskan students is among the highest in the US. This high drop-out rate and exceedingly high suicide rate are probably attributed by the lack of relevant curricula, poor self-image, low self-esteem, depressing environments, high unemployment, and low socio-economic status. Too often, teachers and the education hierarchy are oblivious of the fact that native Alaskan students undergo traumatic cultural conflicts while attending school, which comes to them from a Western orientation, an environment totally different from the native Alaskan home culture.

This article is about looking at education from a different perspective, an approach that accommodates the non-native Alaskan educator (in this case African), non-native and native Alaskan students as well as their education by audio teleconference distance delivery from both bilingual and multi-cultural points of view. A myriad of viewpoints are presented by educators and researchers regarding education by distance delivery. As an African educator, when I came to live in Alaska, I came with various ideas, myths, fictions, and, to some extent, stereotypes about Alaska and Alaskan students. However, by living with and among Alaskans, I have come to realize the idea that fundamentally, both native Alaskan and non-native students are all individuals like other students in any part of the world. They come to institutions of higher learning with their baggage that needs to be unpacked and re-packed, and this can be done successfully only if the students’ home culture is affirmed and respected by educators.

You will find that at home some are sad, others are happy; some are fat, others are thin; some are talkative, others are quiet; and some like to sleep at night, others during the day. At school, some are negative, others are positive; some are curious and motivated, others are demotivated; some are assertive, others are timid; some like to talk, and others like to listen; some giggle, and others like to be serious. The list goes on and on. What I have come to learn by the total immersion I have had in rural Alaska is that the Alaskan indigenous students descend from very old, conservative, and stable cultures. While the major assumption of this article is that teaching non-native and native Alaskan students is no different than any other children, the ultimate assumption from an African perspective is predicted on the belief that good teaching requires that teachers understand and respect the unique individualism of all students including the cultures and backgrounds, which the students represent. True understanding and respect of the students by educators may involve an attitude that must per- vade all of teaching regardless of the students’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds, especially when teachers are not members of the predominant culture, or the culture to which the students belong.
Cultural Orientation

Upon my arrival in rural Alaska, I was immersed in cultural workshops and seminars where I took an intensive exposure to the Yupik culture. To eradicate stereotypes and myths about Alaskan people and students, there is a need to expose non-native newcomers to the knowledge of research on native Alaskan bilingual and multicultural education in order to adequately understand and meet the needs of their native Alaskan students. The cultural immersion at the onset of my arrival in rural Alaska was in fulfillment of this requirement.

Cultural Shock

The cultural immersion was fruitful to me; however, I also experienced a big cultural shock. The facilitators of the workshops were both native Alaskan Yupiks. They both wore t-shirts that read: “Proud to be Eskimo.” I could not believe my eyes when I saw this because before I came to Alaska, I had been groomed that to say “Eskimo” is to be socially mean and undesirable. The question that came to my mind was: “Mercy, are your eyes seeing properly, or all I had learned about Alaska was based on stereotypes, myths, and fictions? Will you cope to teach here in Alaska when you know very little about the culture of the Yupik Alaskans, “Eskimos,” and the rest of the native Alaskan culture?” This was the beginning of a challenging cultural shock, a semester that would involve teaching culture as part of my Early Childhood Education courses, which I would teach both on campus and statewide in the whole of Alaska.

The two Yupik Alaskan instructors wearing the “Eskimo” imprinted t-shirts puzzled my thinking, and I began to revisit the perceived notions I had about indigenous people of Alaska. The more I did this, the more cultural shock I experienced. I realized this was the beginning of an unknown journey, which would bring joys and frustrations throughout my entire 2003 spring semester. Here I was, an African woman, with an African education, and a western PhD in Early Childhood Education coming to teach Alaskan students courses on “Culture and Young Children” as well as “Learning Environments for Young Children.” I began to question myself if I really knew the Alaskan culture especially after the “Proud To Be Eskimo” t-shirt episode. My classes were all conducted by audio-conferencing distance delivery to the whole state of Alaska, including both rural and urban, as well as to both non-native and native Alaskan students.

The Early Childhood Education courses that I taught statewide were designed to promote developmentally appropriate practices that are culturally responsive. The early Childhood Education students were expected to focus on the fact that the learning activities planned for young children are placed at the correct level for their age and are suited to individual children’s taste, ability, and culture (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In my teaching, I incorporated the five standards for effective pedagogy. The first one is that: Teachers and students must aim to produce together, thus the teacher must facilitate learning through joint productive activity with the students.

The second standard for effective pedagogy in rural Alaska is that as a teacher, one has to develop language and terminology that is culturally sensitive across the curriculum. I therefore developed competencies in the Early Childhood Education language and literacy of instruction across the curriculum. It has been noted that competencies in themselves are not sufficient to ensure successful practice (Whitty & Wilmott, 1991). The culturally responsive framework I
developed and utilized for my students acknowledges that teaching by audio-conferencing is highly complex and demands an extensive set of competencies and skills that are underpinned by the personal judgments, beliefs, and values of educators and practitioners.

The third standard is the importance of making “meaning.” Successful, effective pedagogy includes the promotion of reflective practice that bears meaning, and which encourages critical evaluation of practice with regard to its effectiveness and appropriateness (Mailhos, 1999; Muijjs & David, 2001; Reynolds 1999). In lieu of bringing out “meaning,” I contextualized teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of students’ home communities by giving my students hands-on assignments that promoted cultural navigation along students’ cultural road maps.

The fourth standard I used is teaching critical and complex thinking. I challenged my students toward cognitive complex thinking as a way of involving critical reflection because it is important to distinguish between the technician and critical reflective practitioner for, as stated by Day (1999), “When technical competence ceases to involve critical reflection . . . the quality of teaching is likely to suffer” (p. 39).

The fifth standard I utilized is teaching through conversation. Alexander (1995) suggested that the effective practitioner develops a comprehensive range of pedagogical techniques, as represented by the framework I designed for my audio-teleconference classes for rural Alaska. Using professional judgment, as an Early Childhood Education practitioner, I engaged students through dialogue, and instructional conversation selected appropriately from an expansive repertoire of skills and strategies in response to the learning and developmental needs of the students.

It is important to note that exploring assessment involves examining pedagogical goals, values, expectations, and outcomes (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). In concluding this article, I need to mention that in my endeavors to accomplish that, I measured the extent and effectiveness of enactment of the five standards in my audio-conference distance delivered classes. Before getting into much detail regarding pedagogy, I would like to talk briefly about Alaskan natives. It is only appropriate that this article be dedicated to them, and indeed to their spirit of originality. I also dedicate this article to all non-Alaskan natives in Alaska.

Alaska in a Nutshell

Allow me to mention a few words that I came across during my stay in Bethel, which is part of the Bush Alaska. The term “Bush Alaska” means any remote region of Alaska that is not connected to the road system. During my entire stay in Bethel, I had no access to the road system. However, that was not a deterrent to getting connected to my students. I taught Early Childhood Education courses throughout the whole state of Alaska by audio-conferencing. My stay in Bethel allowed me to come in contact with many Yup’iks. Literally, Yup’ik means “real people,” (the English spelling is Yupik). They are an Eskimo group that lives in Alaska’s southwestern region, including coastal areas, islands, and along the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers.

One of the favorite Eskimo foods is Eskimo ice cream akutaq (Yup’ik) and agutuk (English spelling) which is made with berries, sugar, and Crisco (or seal oil). For Yup’iks, the family is extremely important, and grandparents play a very important role in childrearing. It is
common to hear a young child say, “Yesterday I went hunting with “apa” (grandfather in Yup’ik). Of course if you go on further to ask what “apa” brought them when “apa” came to visit them, the child would proudly answer, “Oh! Yes, apa brought me this qaspeq (Yup’ik) that I am wearing. A qaspeq is an Eskimo cultural attire, which is casual, colorful shirtdress with a hood and flounce. The English name is kuspuk.

Bethel is very close to Russia, and hence there is a great deal of Russian influence within the Yup’ik culture. By living in Bethel, I experienced the “Selavi” (Yup’ik) for Russian Christmas and the English is Slaviq. In some of the churches, Slavonic services are predominant. Slavonic is a form of Old Russian used in Russian Orthodox church services. As part of some of the annual celebrations, there was what is called “starring,” which is the Russian Orthodox tradition in which a party of carolers follows twirling stars through the streets, stopping to sing and share food or small gifts at houses along the way. This is a form of culture that I found very fascinating and intriguing. It is a tradition that I found to incorporate the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). In the light of a pluralistic view of the intellect, I witnessed a very unique artistic intelligence in this starring performance.

The various symbols entailed in the starring procedures were marshaled in an aesthetic fashion that was intertwined with outstanding linguistic intelligence they utilized in ordinary conversation and purposeful legal briefs. By the same token, I found that during starring, bodily-kinetic intelligence was used as they danced gracefully. Even musical intelligence was used as part of the ceremony, just as the logical-mathematical intelligence was directed in an aesthetic vein, and spatial intelligence was deliberate and conspicuously utilized by the fishermen within the community, as witnessed from the dip-nets lying everywhere one’s eyes could see. This experience connected me to Eskimos in a unique way, as well as to the Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, which to some degree turned out to be an individual, let alone a cultural disillusionment.

I realized that individuals could train intelligences. Yes, they could also train their intelligences through informal and/or non-scholastic training regimens, but through the vestiges of their own culture and traditions passed on from hundreds, if not thousands, of years past. These are years past that have seen not only Yup’iks, but Inupiats, an Eskimo native group that has inhabited Alaska’s northernmost region for many thousands of years. Another group of native Alaskans is the Athabascan, which is an Indian group that occupies the Interior and some parts of South-Central Alaska. The other group is the Aleut, which is a native group that lives in Pribilof Islands and along the 1,000 mile arc of islands known as the Aleutian Chain. What I learned is that they call themselves Unangan (Aleut), a term Aleuts use to refer to themselves as a people. That has significant cultural connotations, and as a non-native teacher, one has to be cognizant of such cultural challenges. One also has to bear in mind that the Aleut is an Alaska native group that suffered the greatest cultural loss when non-natives began arriving in the mid-1700s. There is no reason to wonder if a non-native teacher in this part of the world finds that there could be some open bitterness, hostility, or resentment vented against him or her, if that occurs. The vestiges of anger, pain, grief, opportunities violated, and losses suffered are obvious and are clearly written on the walls, if not on some of the faces.
Conclusion

Exposure to teaching early childhood education by audio-conferencing to non-English speaking university students in rural Alaska made both the learners and the teacher accomplish the “intrinsic motivation” in a number of ways. Due to the culture of Alaskan natives which frowns upon “competition against others,” or the notion “me against them,” self-satisfaction (as witnessed from the Proud To Be Eskimo t-shirt incident) summoned became intrinsically linked to performance mastery, with the result being perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1962). Evidently, the cultural shock sooner than later unveiled in front of my eyes the fact that within any given culture, self-motivation is best sustained by adopting attainable subgoals that lead to large future ones (Bandura, 1962). Speaking from an African perspective, I truly believe that these subgoals, or “proximal goals” as Bandura refers to them (1962), are very important because they provide both the non-native teacher (example, I was there as an African professor with a western PhD, and whose mother tongue is not English), as well as the non-English speaking Alaskan native student with a standard of performance that acts as a “road map” pointing the way to mastery of the ultimate present and future goals.

References


