

Creating Space and Defining Roles: Elders and Adult Yup'ik Immersion¹

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Indigenous language revitalization efforts often rely on elders as a key component. However, integrating elders into a language teaching program is not without challenges. In this paper we explore how two Alaska Native faculty integrated elders into a summer intensive language teaching program. Specific attention is given to how the faculty fostered a unique learning environment which capitalized on elders as language models, tradition bearers and language learning/teaching advocates. Specific attention is given to the challenges faculty faced in creating an immersion context to meet language learning goals while simultaneously creating space for elders to share traditional teachings.

Introduction

As the name implies, the *Yup'ik Language Proficiency Program* at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Kuskokwim Campus is specifically designed to develop the Yup'ik language skills of program participants. All participants are would-be language teachers who are place-bound due to job and family responsibilities, and therefore unable to participate in more traditional language classes offered on a college or university campus. To accommodate place-bound students, we created a summer intensive language program and adapted a Master-Apprentice language learning model in which each language student, or Apprentice, is paired with a fluent speaker, or Master, to support ongoing language learning throughout the year. (See Hinton, Vera & Steele, 2002 for a complete discussion of the model as developed and used in California.)

The success of this program model is in large part dependent upon the participation of local elders as language Masters. These elders, themselves fluent in local dialects of Yup'ik, not only provide the regular social interaction necessary for the student's Yup'ik language development, but they also provide access to the local ways of saying and doing things that are essential to recognizing and supporting the student's local Yup'ik language development and identity.

As Fishman (1991) and others (cf. Hinton & Hale, 2001; Reyhner & Tennant, 1995; Sims, 1998) have noted indigenous language revitalization efforts often rely on elders as a key component. Not only are elders key advocates for language/culture maintenance and revitalization (Lipka & Ilutsik, 1995; Sims, 1998), they are essential resources for language/culture documentation and curriculum development (Hermes, 2007; Jacobs, 1998; Linn, Berardo & Yamamoto, 1998; Lipka & Ilutsik, 1995; Moore, 2003), and in many cases, elders may provide the best or only model for language use (Christensen, 2003; Hinton, 2001b; Sims, 1998).

Reliance on elders in language teaching, however, is not without its challenges. Both a lack of energy (Hermes, 2007; Hinton, 2001b; King, 2001) and a limited knowledge of second language teaching techniques (Greymorning, 1997; Hinton, 2001b; King, 2001; Reyhner & Tennant, 1995) are frequently cited. To overcome both these limitations, elders are often paired with younger community members, often second language speakers who may in turn draw on their own language learning experiences (cf. Greymorning, 1997; Hermes, 2007; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Kipp, 2000; Linn, Berardo & Yamamoto, 1998; Simms, 1998).

In this paper we explore the ways in which elders have been integrated into the *Yup'ik Language Proficiency Program's* summer intensive experience, the *Yup'ik Language Institute*. We look at the roles played by faculty in the program and how those roles are affected by the presence of elders. As a university program, faculty, students and elders are assigned the classroom based roles of teacher, student and visiting-expert, respectively. Tension arises when these classroom based roles come into conflict with the traditional roles of community member and elder and the status ascribed to these roles. By overtly recognizing and addressing this tension, program faculty, elders and students were able to step out of their westernized roles to create a program that draws from both cultural traditions to create a "third space," an instructional space for ongoing cultural and social negotiation and hybridization.

"Third space" has been described in a variety of ways. For Aoki (1996), the third space is a hybrid of cultures in contact; an ambivalent space which is simultaneously one, the other and the bridge between the two. In this sense, "third space" does not represent a transition from one culture to the other, but rather a bridge as a space all its own; an in-between space drawing on cultures in contact and reconstructing a new, joint understanding of self and others (Aoki, 1996). For Moje, et al. (2004) the third space represents a coming together of "the 'first space' of people's home, community and peer networks with the 'second space' of ...more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church." Like Gutiérrez and her colleagues (e.g., Baquedano-López & Turner, 1997; Gutiérrez, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejada, 1999), Moje and her colleagues value third space as both a productive scaffold to student learning as well as a space to "challenge, destabilize, and, ultimately, expand" those practices valued in school (2004, p. 44). In the Alaskan context, third space has been described as

that space “between the culture of traditional Western notions of knowledge and schooling and the ways of knowing, interpreting, and interacting of the heritage cultures of indigenous peoples” (Webster, Wiles, Civil & Clark, 2005). Common to these and other discussions of third space is the concept of continual negotiation and renegotiation between cultures in contact. In this sense, “third space” is not a static concept but the dynamic result of what Stairs (1994) describes as continuous cultural negotiation.

Our application of “third space” expands these notions slightly. We suggest that although all the participants in the *Yup’ik Language Proficiency Program* share a common Yup’ik culture and Yup’ik understanding of the world, a third space is nonetheless being co-created by the program faculty (Oscar Alexie and Sophie Alexie),² their students, and program elders as they negotiate the demands and expectations of a university language program while simultaneously acknowledging and maintaining Yup’ik cultural norms. Following Stairs (1994, 1996), we see the *Yup’ik Language Proficiency Program* as culture-in-the-making. As such, it draws on the surrounding academic/western and Yup’ik cultures as well as the experiences of faculty, students, and elders to produce a continuously evolving cultural and instructional creation, a third space.

Methodology and Framework

This article presents data collected from the *Yup’ik Language Proficiency Program*, between 2003 and 2006, and includes data derived from a series of telephone conversations between the authors over a period of months beginning in late December 2005 and ending in March 2006. The analyses of program data were conducted, in part, within the broader program evaluation required of a grant-funded project. The focus in this inquiry was guided by the question: How can the *Yup’ik Language Proficiency Program* better incorporate Yup’ik Elders into the program’s philosophy and implementation? Initial program evaluation and reflection revealed that faculty were uncertain about how to fully integrate elders into the program in culturally Yup’ik ways.

Focus Groups: Additional data was collected in June 2006. Two focus group discussions, one with program elders and the other with program students, were conducted as part of program assessment by Oscar and Sophie Alexie in Kasigluk, Alaska during their annual summer session in 2006. Discussion topics focused primarily on student and elder reasons for joining the program and suggestions for improving program performance. Both focus groups were videotaped. The student focus group was conducted in English by Oscar and Sophie Alexie and transcribed by Patrick Marlow. The elder focus group was conducted in Yup’ik. It was not transcribed. Rather, Oscar and Sophie Alexie—both experienced courtroom interpreters—reviewed the video with Patrick Marlow and provided a real time translation, during which Patrick Marlow took notes. These notes were subsequently reviewed in a joint debriefing session with all three authors.

Researcher Dialogue: The first of the relevant telephone conversations took place on December 7, 2005. This conversation was structured as an informal interview conducted by the project's co-manager and internal evaluator, Patrick Marlow. In the interview, Oscar and Sophie Alexie described their language teaching experience and philosophy, their approach to dialect issues in the classroom, and their specific experiences relating to the *Yup'ik Language Proficiency Program* and elder involvement in that program. This initial conversation was recorded and transcribed.

Reconstructive Analysis: Drawing on experiences as a program evaluator in 2003 and working with teachers and students in the region, Patrick Marlow undertook an initial reconstructive analysis (Carsprecken, 1996) to fill out details and expand on events and anecdotes described in the interview. These initial reconstructions were subsequently revised, expanded upon, and revised again during the course of four subsequent telephone conversations between December 2005 and January 2006. While these subsequent discussions were not recorded, notes were taken by Patrick Marlow, and member checks were made at the beginning of each subsequent conversation (Carsprecken, 1996, p. 141).

Quoting and Paraphrasing: It must be noted here that we have broken with the conventions of work based on interview data. We have not included direct quotes from the taped telephone conversations. During member checks both Oscar and Sophie Alexie expressed considerable discomfort with the use of quotations attributed directly to them. Therefore, all quotes from Oscar and Sophie Alexie have been recast as paraphrases which have themselves undergone multiple member checks to guarantee that the intended meaning has not been altered.

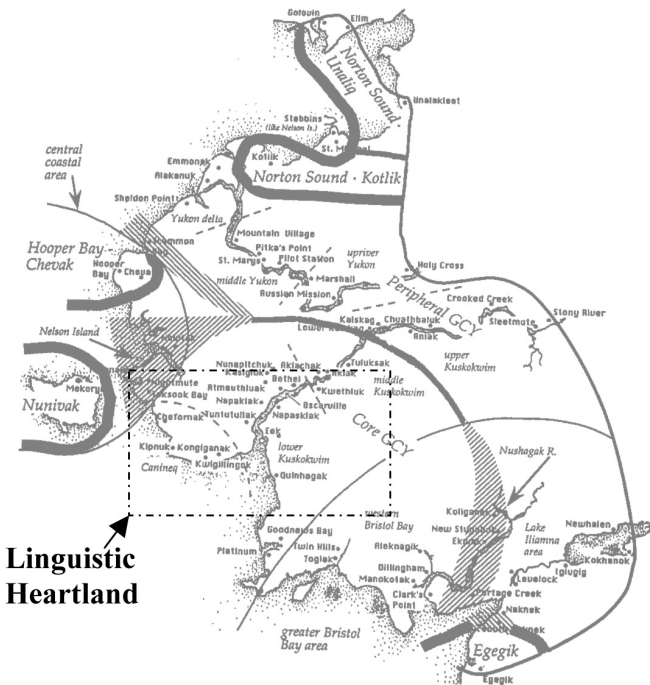
Language Status

Traditionally, Central Yup'ik is spoken throughout Southwestern Alaska, from Norton Sound to Bristol Bay, covering more than 112,000 square miles, an area roughly the size of Arizona. More densely populated in comparison to the rest of Alaska's indigenous populations, the "Yup'ik Region" has a combined census of approximately 23,000 Yup'ik Eskimos scattered in more than 60 villages. Transportation within the region is limited to plane, boat and snowmobile, as none of the villages are connected by road. Unemployment averages around 16%, and nearly 59% of schoolchildren within the region live below the poverty line.

While more than 60% of schoolchildren in this region are classified as limited English proficient, only about one-quarter of all Yup'ik villages—mainly those on the lower Kuskokwim River, on Nelson Island, and between the two—have a majority of children growing up with Yup'ik as their first language. In nearly all other villages, a local variety of English, heavily influenced by contact with Yup'ik, is the first language of most, if not all children. Although nearly half the Yup'ik Eskimo population speaks Yup'ik natively, outside of what is now the "Linguistic Heartland" (see map below), the average age of the youngest speakers now ranges from approaching thirty to approaching fifty (Krauss, 1997,

p. 6). While there is great variation from village to village, in some villages—especially those in the Yukon Delta and Bristol Bay regions—only the grandparental generations still speak the language.

As the map below indicates, Central Yup'ik forms a dialect continuum with five major dialects, including (North to South) Norton Sound, General Central Yup'ik (GCY), Hooper Bay—Chevak, Nunivak, and Egegik.³ Within these, Jacobson (1998) further divides Norton Sound into Unaliq and Kotlik subdialects, while General Central Yup'ik (GCY) is divided into Peripheral and Core subdialects. Finally, according to Jacobson, “a number of lexical (and to a lesser extent, phonological) features cut across dialect and subdialect boundaries” (1998, p. xii).



Dialects of Central Alaskan Yup'ik
(adapted from Jacobson, 1998, p. xiii)

In this sociolinguistic context, it is not surprising that a broad range of Yup'ik language programs have developed within the more than sixty schools and nine school districts in the region. Since the beginning of Yup'ik medium education in 1968 (Marlow, 2004; Orvik, 1975; Reed, 1974), schools, school districts and universities have worked to overcome personnel shortages and meet the needs of evolving Yup'ik language programs. Today, program types range

from language and culture enrichment programs, to transitional bilingual programs designed to facilitate acquisition of English by Native speakers of Yup'ik, to immersion programs designed to facilitate the acquisition of Yup'ik as an ancestral language where that language is all but lost. Unfortunately, while a handful of communities have teachers fluent in Yup'ik and experienced in language pedagogy, few have personnel familiar with immersion education and some (especially those in the Yukon Delta and Bristol Bay regions) lack even teacher assistants proficient in Yup'ik.

The Yup'ik Language Proficiency Program

Independently funded through 2008 (U.S. Department of Education grant #S356A050047), initially the *Yup'ik Language Proficiency Program* was part of a larger grant funded project known as the *Yup'ik Language Institute*. The Institute was a 3-year^d grant funded project (U.S. Department of Education grant #S356A020049) to help fill teacher shortages in language programs in Southwestern Alaska. The project was a partnership between the Alaska Native Language Center, Kuskokwim Campus (both part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks), and the Lower Kuskokwim, Lower Yukon, and Kuspuk school districts.

The Institute provided training and access to degree programs to four audiences: Yup'ik-fluent certified teachers and teacher assistants, and non-fluent teacher assistants and high school students interested in language education as a career path. The current paper focuses exclusively on programming for non-fluent teacher assistants who received training in speaking, reading, and writing Yup'ik. All courses counted toward a 30-credit Certificate and 60-credit A.A.S. in Yup'ik Language Proficiency.

As noted above, participants in the *Yup'ik Language Proficiency Program* were place bound and therefore unable to participate in traditional on-campus courses. In order to accommodate these students, while at the same time promoting language acquisition, we adapted a Master-Apprentice language learning model in which students are paired with a local elder fluent in Yup'ik. Both student and elder participated in language classes, including annual two-week summer intensive language retreats. Students entered the program in the summer with their elder. Language learning continued year-round through one-on-one master-apprentice style tutoring and periodic face-to-face language workshops facilitated by program faculty. The program, including three summer intensive language retreats, was designed to be a two-year course sequence leading to a 30-credit certificate in *Yup'ik Language Proficiency*.

The distance delivery portion of the program relied heavily on Master-Apprentice work. Students were asked to meet regularly (5-10 hours per week) with their elders to continue language learning on their own. As in most other Master-Apprentice programs the authors are familiar with, students were asked to keep a journal of their activities with the elders. The journals were shared with program faculty, who in turn provided feedback intended to help students get the most out of their Master-Apprentice relationships.

In addition to the largely self-guided Master-Apprentice work, students participated in two to three face-to-face meetings each semester with program faculty. Face-to-face meetings generally focused on completion of specific tasks related to course completion (e.g., transcription or composition assignments associated with a writing class, or coverage of specific grammatical points associated with a grammar class). Depending on the task, elders may or may not have been present at these face-to-face meetings.

The proficiency program accepted its first cohort of seven students in spring 2003. In late May/early June 2003, these students, along with six elders participated in a summer intensive language retreat at St. Mary's Catholic Mission, a former Catholic boarding school. The mission was selected for the retreat largely based on the quality, availability, and relative isolation of its facilities. Located in the village of St. Mary on the Yukon River, the mission provided a private location where program faculty felt they could easily create an immersion retreat. Two years later in 2005, the summer program was relocated to the village of Kasigluk. Although lacking the centralized facilities of St. Mary's Mission, Kasigluk is one of the few remaining Yup'ik dominant villages along the Kuskokwim River. As such, it offered students a more complete immersion experience, including the opportunity to live with Yup'ik speaking host families.

From the beginning, the program faced two serious challenges. First, as a distance program it was impossible for program faculty to provide students with regular face-to-face interaction in the language. While many communities faced with this problem have sought to create audio/video or computer-based distance delivery programs, program faculty felt that technology-assisted contact could not substitute for real face-to-face interaction. They hoped, therefore, that a Master-Apprentice styled program would provide that face-to-face interaction.

Second, Central Yup'ik forms a dialect continuum with five major dialects (see **Language Status** above). With only two full-time Yup'ik instructors (Oscar and Sophie Alexie) and two adjunct faculty available to teach in the program, it was impossible to overtly recognize and honor this level of linguistic variation. Elder involvement, it was hoped, would allow the faculty to teach courses using their own Core subdialect of GCY without compromising the student's access to their own unique local ways of saying and doing things.

Throughout the program, whenever elders and students brought up dialect differences, Oscar and Sophie made it a point to listen, acknowledge the variation and model how students could all learn about different dialects from one another, while encouraging students' use of their own dialects. A specific example of how students might do this was discussed in the Elder's Focus Group in 2006. Sophie described a student, Maggie [not her real name], who was taking a Yup'ik course in Bethel. When Maggie went home to her village her mother sarcastically said "You talk like those downriver people." Maggie responded, "You understand me right?" When her mother agreed, Maggie went on, "And if you teach me our own dialect I will learn even faster." By the time Maggie returned to Bethel, she was peppering her speech with the words, and using the typical sing-song intonation

that mark her village's dialect. On her return to Bethel, the faculty praised her new "accent" and encouraged her to continue speaking like her own people.⁵

Ciuliqagteput: Our Two Leaders

In attempting to integrate elders into the summer program, program faculty members were directly confronted with issues of status and role. As noted in our discussion of methodology above, an individual's ability to perform a given role (e.g., teacher, program organizer, leader) is dependent upon his/her having sufficient status within the community to undertake that role. In Yup'ik culture, as in most Alaska Native cultures, an elder is to be treated with deference. It is unacceptable to make demands of, or correct an elder. Furthermore, as in many other North American indigenous communities (see Deyhle & Swisher, 1997), leadership itself is not granted simply on the basis of one's job title, but rather based on the willingness of those who are to be led. Not unexpectedly, therefore, both Oscar and Sophie frequently noted feeling uncomfortable in their roles as leaders in the presence of elders. As Oscar explained in an early telephone interview, in Yup'ik culture the elders are the "real" leaders. As such, it is up to them to sanction (or not) younger community members like themselves to take on leadership responsibilities under their guidance. Yet within the University context, Oscar and Sophie were the program organizers and class instructors; Oscar and Sophie were responsible for creating a safe learning environment and implementing a curriculum they believed would facilitate language acquisition.⁶

The tension between Oscar and Sophie's leadership roles as instructors and program organizers and their roles as subordinate community members manifested itself inside and outside the classroom. On the first day of the program in 2003 one prominent elder expressed surprise to 'discover' the program would last two weeks when in his experience no program ever lasted for more than a few days. According to Oscar, the elder was warning him. He would give it a few days, but after that, if he didn't like the program, he would leave. If Oscar and Sophie were unable to secure the elders' support, the program would fall apart before it even started.

Fortunately, this same elder and his wife both turned out to be "natural teachers." They were patient, able to stay in the target language, and thoroughly enjoyed sharing their knowledge with the students and instructors. They returned each year through 2008, even when they did not have students to work with in their home community. And each year the same story was told to the new elders.

I thought we were going to be here two or three days and home on the third day. We weren't told we were going to be here for two weeks. So we went to St. Mary's. When we got there, our boss told us we were going to be here for two weeks. I thought, 'Oh Gosh, if I had understood that we were going to be there for two weeks, I would not have gone.' Then that same boss told us 'Boy it's a good thing you didn't know you were going to be here two weeks.' It doesn't bother me anymore. [Elder Focus Group: June 6, 2006]

These same two elders began calling Oscar and Sophie *ciuliqagteput* or ‘our two leaders/bosses’. They would call upon the rest of the group to wait for the *ciuliqagteput* to decide what and when things are to be done and even insist that everyone should go to bed when the *ciuliqagteput* went to bed. As Sophie explains, she was slightly embarrassed by this, but there was nothing she or anyone else could do. The elders have this authority and in exercising it they demonstrated their respect for Sophie and Oscar and openly recognized them as the program’s leaders.

Students Do Not Understand

As in other immersion efforts, Oscar and Sophie sought to maintain the general “patter” of the classroom in the target language (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Hinton, 2001a). However, as Sophie reported, some elders felt this was cruel.

When we first did this [in 2003], one of the new mentors commented ‘It seems like you teachers are very cruel because they are just sitting there even if they don’t understand a word.’ [Elder Focus Group 2006]

In 2003, one elder in particular translated for students frequently. The translations were often accompanied with a direct challenge: “I don’t know why you are trying to learn Yup’ik. You don’t know it, and you won’t learn it anyway.” Within the framework of Yup’ik culture, this statement can be seen as an attempt by the elder to challenge the student to work harder and respond quicker, much like a parent challenging a child playing too close to a frozen pond: “Go ahead. Get wet. You’re going to do it anyway.” However, program faculty feared the students would be trained into the rote memorization and translation necessary for the rapid response the elder was looking for, rather than the thoughtful and creative language production they hoped for. Worse yet, Oscar and Sophie feared students would be dissuaded from language learning generally, since, as the elder put it, “...you won’t learn it anyway.” (See Kwachka, 1985 for a discussion of the role of teasing in Alaskan Inupiaq language shift.)

This is not to say that all such challenges made by elders were harmful or problematic. As Sophie later put it, the elder was knowingly taking a gamble by challenging the students in this way. In this particular case, the gamble did not pay off. The students involved became resentful of the elders negative comments and attempted to avoid the elder (and her corrections) by suggesting that elders be rotated among the students. In contrast, a student in 2007 was moved to tears when an elder criticized her work on a headdress she was making as part of a class project. The elder, noticing that the stitching was crooked, took the headdress and ripped out the stitching in class. The elder responded to the student’s tears saying the student could cry all she wanted, but that would not help her to learn to make the headdress properly. This same elder then took the time to direct the student as she re-stitched the headdress.

Since a direct challenge to an elder would cause both the elder and the instructor to lose face, challenges (and corrections) had to be accomplished by

indirect means or, ideally, come from the elders themselves. Oscar and Sophie avoided direct correction of students, preferring to model correct language use. This strategy was extended to modeling desired “teacher behaviors” for elders—e.g., no translations and positive reinforcement of students. Further, two elders that seemed to “get it” early, were presented as models for other elders. Again, in order to avoid any possible loss of face, this was done indirectly. In 2003, after several days of observing the elders and their interactions with students, two elders were quietly singled out and asked to provide a short presentation in Yup’ik for the students. The elders were asked to select the activity themselves and then to demonstrate the activity for the students (and other elders). One elder narrated the making of a fishtrap using strips of spruce wood and twine. What was particularly noteworthy about this presentation was that traditionally one “shows” or demonstrates an activity with little or no narration (Battiste, 2002; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). However, this elder, recognizing the goal of the activity was in fact to teach language, described each action in great detail. The second elder also “wowed” Oscar and Sophie by bringing in a carved shoetree. Rather than simply describing the object as one might expect, she explained (in simple Yup’ik) that as a child she didn’t have dolls, so she used whatever was handy and pretended it was a doll. She then went on to pretend the figure-eight shaped shoetree was a little girl’s doll. She held the pretend doll like a baby, bathed it, changed its diaper, and dressed it. All of this was narrated in simple Yup’ik. Both elders were thanked for their creative and successful presentations. In subsequent activities, in and out of class, elders were then reminded of these demonstrations and explicitly asked to emulate them.

Each year new elders joined the program and Oscar and Sophie had to rebalance their roles as instructors/program organizers and subordinate community members. In 2006 a new elder “took over the classroom” when she felt sorry for the students who did not immediately understand what was being said in Yup’ik. She proceeded to provide English explanations, at times moving to the front of the room thereby physically taking charge of the class. At one point, Sophie stepped out into the hallway and allowed the elder to lecture to the students for several minutes before returning to the classroom. Not able to challenge the elder herself, Sophie relied on the returning elders, students, and faculty to both model and talk about the importance of staying in Yup’ik. As the elder herself said in the focus group discussion:

And this is what I learned...when you’re teaching the language and they don’t understand something, interpreting isn’t going to help. Just keep using your language and using body language. That is something that I really learned. Because at home our kids mostly speak in English...Because we really love our children, and we say something in Yup’ik and when they don’t understand we feel sorry for them and interpret. And I learned it is a mistake to do that. [Elder Focus Group 2006]

Discussing Taboos

Even returning elders presented challenges. When class discussion (in an all female class) turned toward menstrual taboos and traditional activities associated with a woman's first menstrual cycle, one elder present became very uncomfortable. When she announced the topic was not something people talk about at home, Sophie responded by politely insisting that the topic was an important one and asking the elder "How else are they going to learn?" When another elder agreed with Sophie, the conversation continued. Sophie considered this exchange a serious gamble on her part. If the second elder had not backed her up, Sophie would have lost face with both elders and possibly some level of respect outside the classroom.

Creating Space for Elder Teaching

In Yup'ik culture, elders are the primary tradition bearers; they are *the* traditional teachers. One way in which an elder fulfills his/her role as teacher is to tell "stories," often personal narratives, in an effort to share important life lessons. Younger people are expected to stop what they are doing and listen respectfully and learn. As noted above, Oscar and Sophie, as younger people, are of lower status and likewise expected to put aside what they are doing (e.g., teaching a language class) and listen.⁷ As Wyman (2004) points out, elder teachings *in Yup'ik* "lay at the center of a whole system of beliefs about subsistence and social control, which, in turn, formed the basis of local strategies for self-reliance in the face of globalization" (p. 36).

Naturally, elders participating in the first summer program in 2003 frequently wanted to take time to share their stories with the group. In attempting to share their stories, we suspect the elders felt they were accomplishing the goals of the program as they understood them, i.e., to teach the Yup'ik culture and related Yup'ik language.

As organizers of an immersion retreat, Oscar and Sophie attempted to facilitate the teaching of content through the target language. However, as Oscar later explained many elders found this to be difficult.

It took most of the first summer session before the elders really settled in and understood that we wanted them to speak Yup'ik and only Yup'ik to the students. That was very hard for most of them. The elders were afraid the students would miss the point so they would translate everything. They really wanted the students to understand what they were saying.

In the authors' experience elsewhere in Alaska where the Master-Apprentice program has been implemented, it is common for elders to feel that their message—their life's lessons—are at least as important, if not more so, than the language in which that message is being shared. As a result, when students do not understand the message, the elders may become frustrated and insist on translating the stories into English so as not to lose all of the meaning.

Rather than directly challenging elders for redirecting class time, Oscar and Sophie instituted two regular events. Neither event was planned in advance of

the first Institute, but each was negotiated and evolved naturally within just a few days of arriving in St. Mary's. Both events provided elders space to tell their stories and fulfill their role as tradition bearers. First, Oscar began each morning with a "Rap Session." Usually lasting only 5-10 minutes, this daily event gave everyone (elders, students, and instructors) an opportunity to share whatever was on their mind and allowed everyone a chance to clear the air before the day was in full swing.

In the morning session, Sophie and Oscar encouraged students to share any worries or thoughts of home that might weigh down on them. Elders and more advanced students described worrying about relatives with health and legal issues, and sent their prayers to the subsistence fishermen so that they might return safely. Oscar also gave daily updates on instructors and students who are not there at the time, and when they might re-join the group. (Wyman, 2007, p. 1)

Second, an "Elder's Night" was established. A daily event, Elder's Night took place in the evenings from 7 until late (occasionally lasting until 11 or 11:30). Elder's Night offered the elders the opportunity to share—in Yup'ik—their life's lessons. As an elder-run event, attendance was taken by the elders themselves and students were officially required to attend three nights a week. Students were given the freedom to pick and choose the nights they would attend, leaving other nights free to call home, complete homework, or just take personal time. The elders themselves set the agenda and were invited to speak on any topic of interest or importance to them. In 2003, in an effort to further the language learning goals of the program while guaranteeing the content of lessons was not lost, the more advanced students were invited to interpret the elder's words for less advanced students, whenever understanding was in question. But as Sophie explained, the translations quickly became a distraction:

When we first did this, one of the new mentors commented 'It seems like you teachers are very cruel. Because they are just sitting there even if they don't understand a word.' And then we made a mistake in St. Mary's. Whenever we had elder's night, we had some of the students who were able to understand interpret for the people who couldn't understand. But we dropped that right away because it got to be an interruption and whoever was interpreting would miss out on what the elder was saying because they were busy interpreting. So we dropped that completely. After this we are going to be what you call 'cruel'. [STUDENT] comes into every elder's conference, she doesn't understand what's happening but she is sitting there gathering the sounds. And just before we go home, you can tell her speech is getting better. Her language skills seem to be coming up now. [Elder's Focus Group 2006]

As Oscar and Sophie later explained, the student in the above excerpt became an example for all the others. Even though she knew no Yup'ik at all when she joined the program, she attended every Elder's Night, listening intently. Over time, it became apparent that she could get the gist of the elders' conversations even though she did not know many of the words they were using.

This seemed to surprise her, the elders, and the other students and lend support to Oscar and Sophie's contention that hearing the language, even if you don't understand it, will help you to learn it.

While the Rap Session and Elders' Night both emerged quickly and naturally in 2003, making these efforts work required Oscar and Sophie to initially challenge the elders in a fairly direct and potentially face threatening way. As Oscar explained, if an elder redirected class for more than a few minutes, even if the information they wanted to share was culturally important, Oscar would stop him/her and politely ask in Yup'ik if the topic could be saved for Elder's Night. Oscar was naturally nervous. As stated earlier, correction of an elder is not generally acceptable and may cause both the elder and the instructor to lose face. By interrupting the elder, no matter how politely, he ran the risk of embarrassing the elder and himself. However, once established as an acceptable pattern, the elders themselves and even some of the students started saying "That's for Elder's Night."

It is important to note here that elder teachings were not limited to the Rap Session and Elder's Night. Nor was language instruction limited to class time. As the following excerpt shows, although Elder's Night was an elder-defined and elder-led event, instructors frequently interjected their own observations in ways that supported language learning

Periodically in the [Elder's Night] session, instructors shared short, relevant insights about language learning itself. Sophie identified words in the stories and shared her own memory of learning certain words in other villages, then later learned what they meant. She encouraged students to listen and try to remember words from other areas, as well as their own. (Wyman, 2007, p. 2)

Just as Elder's Nights were seen as opportunities to talk about and facilitate language learning, 'formal' classes were opportunities to facilitate interaction with and learning from elders.

During one morning, for instance, a group of students were creating questions for a jeopardy game by looking at k-12 curriculum guide for integrating traditional culture into the classroom. They began by re-phrasing some of the culturally-relevant information (e.g., plant and animal life, child-rearing practices, traditional beliefs) into Yup'ik questions for the game to be played later in the day. As students thought about what they were reading in terms of broad topics, this sparked their curiosity and they asked elders clarification questions, as well as worked to pose original questions of their own. The activity as a whole flowed from active discussion among the elders and the instructor to more directed work as the teacher helped students to shape their attempts to phrase questions using their existing language skills...The process overall highlighted and underscored the role of the teacher as one able to move back and forth from facilitating both general inquiry and discussion in Yup'ik with elders, to working directly with learners to facilitate and scaffold the process of learners using their developing productive skills. (Wyman, 2007, p. 6)

Discussion

In the *Yup'ik Language Institute*, Oscar and Sophie fostered a unique immersion learning environment which capitalized on elders as language models, tradition bearers and language learning/teaching advocates. Accomplishing this required tactful negotiation and collaboration with the elders themselves. Together they identified appropriate elder role models, and established spaces both outside and inside the classroom in which elder teachings could take center stage. In making it work, Oscar and Sophie demonstrated their ability to float between and among multiple roles as program organizers, community members, teachers, and program participants. Together, the elders, instructors and students were able to create a uniquely Yup'ik-University space, a third space that broke down the boundaries of the traditional classroom and re-negotiated Yup'ik cultural expectations of elder leadership, creating environments in which students could hear and use the language to interact in meaningful ways with other community members.

Although the faculty, students, and elders are all themselves Yup'ik, the authors believe the program represents a “westernized” if not “Western” context in which participants are simultaneously assigned school-related roles (i.e., teacher, student, visiting expert) and appropriate community roles (i.e., community member, elder). We understand social roles to refer to the conventional modes of behavior that society expects a person to adopt. Status refers to the position an individual holds in a community’s social network. The two concepts are interrelated. An individual’s ability to perform a given social role is dependent upon his/her having sufficient status within the community to undertake that role (Crystal, 1987, p. 41). Therefore, tension arises when the relative status of an individual is incongruent with the social role s/he is expected to perform. We conclude that many of the summer program’s challenges stemmed from a disjunction between the social roles individuals are expected to fulfill within the program and the social roles and associated status those individuals hold within Yup'ik society.

Oscar and Sophie were aware of their positioning as both program faculty members responsible for the *Yup'ik Language Institute* and community members subordinate to community elders. They recognized themselves as both cultural outsiders calling on elders to behave in un-Yup'ik ways (e.g., narrate ones actions rather than teach through direct demonstration; speak in a language students did not appear to understand; discuss topics that may be taboo) and cultural insiders intimately connected to, and bound by, Yup'ik cultural norms. The cultural dissonance in Oscar and Sophie’s dual positioning was mediated by two factors that worked together to create a unique cultural space, a third space, within the *Yup'ik Language Institute*.

First, the elders came to recognize Oscar and Sophie as *ciuliqagteput*, ‘our two leaders’. Oscar and Sophie did not seek this recognition and they continued to recognize the traditional authority of the elders. Oscar and Sophie led by example and (whenever possible) created opportunities for elders to model for

one another. Using only the target language and positive reinforcement with students, Oscar and Sophie sought to embody their desired language teaching behaviors. When the opportunity presented itself, they invited elders to model language lessons for both students and other elders. Oscar and Sophie recognized challenging an elder was always a ‘gamble’ that had to be carefully considered and negotiated. Would another elder support the challenge or would the challenger simply lose face in front of the group? Although their position as *ciuliqagteput* grew over time, they always remained community members subordinate to the authority of elders. Thus their positioning was never settled once and for all. Rather, one or the other role (and sometimes both simultaneously) was foregrounded depending on the nature of the activity and the willingness of elders to recognize a given role.

Second, space for traditional elder teachings was created both inside and outside the classroom. As discussed above, Oscar and Sophie did not initially plan for the Rap Session or Elders’ Night. Both emerged naturally as part of the first summer program in 2003. Both events reflected traditional Yup’ik patterns of instruction. As children, Oscar and Sophie vividly remember parents and elders taking time each morning to give moral instruction and share their hopes for the day with children. At night, elders told stories for both entertainment and instruction. By formalizing these events, Oscar and Sophie created explicitly elder controlled spaces paralleling well-known Yup’ik models for these traditional teachings.

As noted above, elder teachings were not limited to specific times or events. The Institute was an immersion retreat; it was a single language learning event. Classes, Rap Sessions, and Elder’s Nights all occurred in Yup’ik. Throughout the Institute students were coached in how to get the most out of their time with the elders and elders were given time to share their knowledge with students. As Morgan (2005) points out, Indigenous language programs cannot rely on study abroad to provide the immersion experience. Therefore, language programs like the *Yup’ik Language Proficiency Program* must create the community life needed for active language use. However, meeting the language learning goals of such programs may push faculty, students, and elders to behave in ways that may run counter to the very community life they seek to create. By acknowledging their own dual positioning, by acknowledging and maintaining Yup’ik cultural norms, by creating spaces for elder-led events, and by working to integrate language and cultural learning throughout the Institute, Oscar and Sophie were able to lay the groundwork for a successful program. Even so, the programs success ultimately relied on the ability and willingness of all participants (faculty, students and especially elders) to work together to form a third space, a dynamic language learning environment drawing upon both Yup’ik and Western educational models.

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Endnotes

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title *Fostering Yup'ik Oral Proficiency: Elders in the Classroom* at the National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE) Indigenous Bilingual Education Pre-Conference Institute held in Phoenix in January 2006.

²The terms “program faculty” and “instructors” are used interchangeably with the names of two of the authors, Oscar Alexie and Sophie Alexie. In order to protect the anonymity of other program participants, including both elders and students, names are generally avoided. Where such avoidance would affect the readability of the paper, a pseudonym is used.

³We have chosen here to adhere to the classification of dialects presented by Jacobson (1998). However, Krauss (1984) lists the following eight dialects: Bristol Bay, Coast, Hooper-Bay—Chevak, Kuskokwim, Nelson Island, Nunivak, Yukon, Igushik.

⁴Initially funded for the period 2002-2005, the project received a one year no-cost extension through summer 2006.

⁵Since the greatest number of speakers speak the Core dialect, and the hub town of Bethel is squarely within the Core region, the reverse of Maggie's experience is even more common—speakers of “minority” dialects have long been laughed at and ridiculed for their “funny accents.” (See Kwachka (1985) for a discussion of the role of teasing in Inupiaq language shift.) As Oscar Alexie recalls, the Bethel store in the late 1960's/early 1970's was a gathering place for people from all over the Yup'ik region.

“People from Mekoryuk, from the Yukon, and from the coast would come in to buy supplies. Especially in those days, they would meet each other at the store and catch up with people they hadn't seen in a long time. So people would talk and be overheard by the locals. Some people would come right out and laugh because they thought the visitors sounded so funny.”

This attitude may play into language shift by encouraging people from outlying areas to speak English in order to avoid being laughed at or teased. Today a similar attitude is found among young people in Bethel with regard to English as the modern/urban language and Yup'ik (generally) as the backward/provincial language.

⁶The tension acknowledged here is similar to that felt by indigenous researchers working within their own communities. As Brayboy (2000, p. 416) notes, the researcher (and we add the teacher) is aware of his/her own dual positioning and must find ways to reconcile

the two. This reconciliation is made more difficult when both roles are foregrounded simultaneously.

It is worth noting here that the status differences between instructors and elders may have been partially mediated by the fact that both instructors are over fifty years of age, and only one generation removed from the elders themselves. We suspect a larger age gap between instructors and elders might make it more difficult for the instructors to take on a leadership role for the group.

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