Visually Accessing Oral Tradition

Alaska Humanities Forum: Educator Cross-Culture Immersion

University of Alaska, Anchorage

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Background Information

As an itinerant specialist I provide consultations and trainings to sites that serve students who have been identified with a hearing loss. In this role I am more removed from offering direct services to the students and instead find myself primarily coaching the team of teachers charged with providing education to these students. The objective being to ensure that each student in rural Alaska with an identified hearing loss receives the proper accommodations in order to access education even if a trained specialist is not onsite. Accomplishing this necessitates cooperation of both the team and the student. It requires trainings with the teachers on what the appropriate accommodations and strategies are and how to utilize them/provide them, while simultaneously developing the student’s identity and self-advocacy skills.

In my role I have limited time with both the students and staff when onsite. On average I am onsite only twice a year for about two- three days per visit. Depending on level of need, I model lessons through distance delivery (video conference calls conducted in American Sign Language) with students that are often based on Deaf culture and identity. From the information presented and gathered during this course along with my experience at Culture Camp I have come to recognize that these sessions could easily incorporate teachings from my student’s Native culture. There are many parallels that can be drawn between the two cultures. One of the pillars of both cultures being oral tradition. Yes, Deaf culture practices the art of “oral tradition”. They simply do it manually and have their own set of features specific to their form. Just like Alaskan Natives.

Storytelling was the heartbeat of the McGrath camp. Within oral tradition one can access all surface, shallow and deep culture if they are aware of the markers. I want this for my students.
To reference my thoughts prior to camp,

“While I am learning to immerse myself in the various cultures of Alaska, the biggest challenge is acknowledging that even as a non-native outsider, I tend to have more access to the culture than the students I serve. Oral tradition and music are integral parts of passing down information through generations of Alaskan Natives, a process that often limits my students from having equitable access… Collaborating with the Deaf Community of Alaska and Native Alaskan elders will be paramount.”

Therefor there is no question in my mind that this is something pertinent to address, but it is also very evident that it is not something I can present to them independent of community input. Due to this line of thinking I want to emphasize that the following is a draft. Ideally a member of each community I serve can support me in creating a more accurate representation of their culture’s storytelling characteristics. I want to be mindful of the diverse subgroups of Alaskan Natives as opposed to generalizing. By doing this I can promote cross-cultural awareness. I can offer them tools to draw parallels that can help them identify key features of a story in both cultures. I can support them in creating their own manual stories that uphold Alaskan Native values and traditions.
References


Hershfeldt, P.A. et al. (December 2009). DoubleCheck: A framework of cultural responsiveness applied to the classroom behavior. TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus (6)2. Online: http://tinyurl.com/kp2p869


Lesson Overview

This is a series of lessons that have been designed to incorporate Alaskan Cultural Standards for Education beyond the standard Self-Advocacy/Identity Development and American Sign Language curriculums currently being implemented. These lessons are geared towards students that have an intermediate level of expressive and receptive ASL. However, the lesson can be adapted and modified for students with limited language or those who identify as Hard of Hearing and use Total Communication or Listening and Spoken Language as their primary mode of communication. This lesson plan is primarily designed for a 1:1 setting or self-directed work/independent study. The DHH specialist can provide assistance via Distance Delivery (VTC) for additional support.

Introduction

Oral tradition transcends cultural barriers. Storytelling often has a driving purpose, perhaps there is a moral or a warning. In the Deaf community manual storytelling holds a similar amount of weight as oral storytelling in Alaskan Native communities. One similarity for both is that there are rarely written documentations of these stories therefor the only way to access is to either see them or hear them for oneself. With new technology however, documenting these stories is now a possibility through video/audio recordings. Still Deaf Alaskan Natives will need explicit instruction on this aspect of their culture since it is not easily accessed by them. It is important for them to have access to this tradition. It is also important for them to understand how to tell their own story, in their own modality. The lesson will encourage students to analyze their identities and address their bicultural/multicultural experience. It will also focus on expressive and receptive language skills.
Target Standard
Alaska Cultural Standards for Education
Culture in the Classroom: Standards, Indicators, and Evidence for Evaluating Culturally Responsive Teaching

**Standard A- Cultural Connections:** Culturally-responsive educators incorporate local ways of knowing and teaching in their work.

- **CA1.** The educator plans lessons that incorporate knowledge of students’ cultural background/practices into the teaching of content.
- **CA2.** The educator integrates and connects traditions, customs, value, and practices of the students when interacting with new content.
- **CA4.** The educator uses students’ cultural traditions, customs, values, and practices to engage them in their learning.
- **CA6.** The educator seeks guidance regarding knowledge about and use of students’ traditions, customs, values, and practices when teaching.

**Lesson 1: Alaskan Native Oral Storytelling and Sign Language Literature Introduction**

Pre-lesson Questions: What do you already know? Is Deaf culture an “oral culture”? Why or why not? Do you have a favorite story (signed or oral)? Who is your favorite story teller? What do you like about this story or this storyteller? Do you feel confident when you retell this story?

Student Viewing:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VlyAb2qaG1  
Introduction to Oral Storytelling  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=26&v=-9Saota5WsA  
Introduction to Sign Language Literature

Discussion 1: Is Deaf culture an “oral culture”? Why or why not? Where in your community have you witnessed/observed/participated in storytelling? Who tends to be the storyteller? Why do we tell stories? What are reasons storytellers want to share a particular story with their audience? Does the audience influence the story? What is your favorite story to tell?

Reflect: What is the message in your favorite story? Identify three reasons this story is powerful in your memory.

Independent Work:
Lesson 2: Features of Storytelling in Both Cultures (Compare and Contrast)

Basic Techniques in American Sign Language Literature

- Sign Space, Setting the Scene, Characterization (Role Shifting), Time, Changing Perspectives, Inanimate Objects.
- Cinematic Devices/Features of ASL: Camera Angle - eye level shot / low angle shot / high angle shot / cuts - Distance Shots - full scene / multiple distance shot / closeup – Mobile Framing - Speed of motion image / slow motion / zoom
- **Visual Vernacular** is a form of storytelling that incorporates visual complexity of the world using strong movements, large sign space, elements of sign poetry and miming, as well as gestures and facial expression.
- Handshape Story, Handshape Rhyme, Alphabet Story, Number Story
- Style of articulation is often adjusted to fit audience receptive skills level

Basic features of Alaskan Native Oral Storytelling (input from elders and community members requested)

- Inflection of voice
- Hand gestures and movements/dance
- Ceremonial garments (formal storytelling)
- Often bring object that represent the village
- Role of Nature, Animals and Life Lessons
- Purpose to preserve history
- Remains the same for adults and child audiences

Present examples of each. Depending on the language input/level of a student make sure there are CC’s or interpreting available for Oral storytelling. **IF POSSIBLE INVITE AN ELDER TO COME TELL A STORY OR TWO**, this can involve the entire class or to the student 1:1. An interpreter must be present for this. Front load the process by meeting with the elder if possible. If the elder is willing to tell the stories/video record the story for later viewing do this. A child with hearing loss will need visual cues to following along with the live telling of the story. Or will need to have the opportunity to refer back to the story, and chuck the information for better recall and processing. Have the student identify what features they observed. Are there any that are also present in Sign Language Literature?

Examples for Sign Language Literature

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCG9oGn7AOWCLUCofIH8-Rw

http://deafstudiesonline314.weebly.com/

Examples of Alaskan Native Storytelling

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJJPULFwl60 (has visual PPT to improve access)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUYH4zDegnM

Independent Work: Sign a 1-minute video retelling your favorite story or the story told by the visiting elder. This story can be a piece of Sign Language Literature or an Alaskan Native story
(with support depending on need/language access or level). This is a draft and does not need to be perfect. The student can have ten minutes to complete this before submitting it to the teacher/aid.

LESSON 3: Personal Experience Narrative

Pre-lesson discussion: In storytelling there are different genres. Present the following information from http://moving-tales.com/oral-story-types/ to the student. Provide examples of each from both cultures.

- **anecdote** – this is usually a short account of a real incident or event, often interesting or amusing though sometimes biographical. Example: You’re in a cooking class and are about to learn how to make a souffle and the chef prefaches the lesson by telling you about the first time he made a souffle and it was a disaster. Anecdotes are used to lighten the mood, to reminisce, to caution or to inspire.

- **fable** – these are fictitious stories in prose or verse meant to teach a moral lesson. The characters in fables are usually talking animals, but can also include anthropomorphized (now there’s a good word for scrabble!) plants and inanimate objects. Fables can be found in the folklore of almost every country.

- **parable** – a simple narrative used to illustrate a universal truth. Usually religious allegories. Parables are similar to fables in that they are succinct stories designed to impart a lesson in moral behavior the principal difference being that parables usually feature human characters. The best known source of parables in Christianity are found in the Bible. Parables also appear in the Torah, and in Islam and in Sufi story traditions.

- **myth** – these are traditionally ancient stories of unknown authorship which typically involve the exploits of supernatural beings, Gods, ancestors, or heroes in an attempt to explain aspects of the natural world, or the the psychology, customs or religious rites of a society.

- **legend** – these are stories handed down through generations which are loosely based on historical events. Such events can include miracles, and superhuman feats. The Brothers Grimm defined a legend as ‘a historically grounded folktale’, as opposed to a fairy tale, which they deemed ‘poetic’.

- **rumor** – these are almost always transmitted by word of mouth and provide “information” about a person, or event. There are different kinds of rumor, some based on wished for outcomes, others based on feared outcomes, and still others based on a desire to undermine group loyalty or interpersonal relations. Rumor as you might imagine, is a useful and prevalent storytelling device.

- **gossip** – where there’s a rumor, it will always be carried by the winds of gossip.

Anecdotal Stories are predominant in both Deaf culture and Alaskan Native cultures. For this reason, Personal Experience will be the focus of the student’s project.

Student Project: Option 1-Students will be expected to select a memory or experience specific to their life in Rural Alaska and create a Sign Language Literature piece telling their story. The video will be between 3-5 minutes in length and should include Alaskan Native features such as Nature, Animals and Life Lesson (depending on age of student). Option 2- Students will find an elder in their community and select one of their stories to retell in a 3-5 minute Sign Language Literature piece. The collaboration with an elder may require an interpreter or additional support from the DHH specialist for communication purposes.
Option 1
- Pick a story
- *Choose a language for the first draft (ASL, English, Image Story)
- Identify the three aspects of Alaskan Native Storytelling included in the story (Nature, Animals, Life Lesson)
- Create first draft – share with Ms. Koenigs and community member for editing and approval
- After receiving approval work to interpret into Sign Language Literature if you have not done so already
- View other student examples from http://aslhonorsociety.org/Literature_Competition.html
- Identify three features of Sign Language Literature included in your story (1 Cinematic Device, 1 Role Shift, 1 other)
- Create second draft in Sign Language Literature format- share with Ms. Koenigs and community member for final editing
- Create Final draft and Submit

******Option to present to the class live or to have a Movie Theater showing to celebrate the accomplishment, share Deaf culture with the general education class or school, show the ability for cross-cultural application of traditional knowledge.

Option 2
- Choose an Elder or Elder’s story from the community
- *Choose a language for the first draft of the retell (ASL, English, Image Story)
- Identify the three aspects of Alaskan Native Storytelling included in the story (Nature, Animals, Life Lesson)
- Create first draft of the retell – share with Ms. Koenigs and community member for editing and approval
- After receiving approval work to interpret into Sign Language Literature if you have not done so already
- View other student examples from http://aslhonorsociety.org/Literature_Competition.html
- Identify three features of Sign Language Literature included in your story (1 Cinematic Device, 1 Role Shift, 1 other)
- Create second draft in Sign Language Literature format- share with Ms. Koenigs and community member for final editing
- Create Final draft of your retell and Submit

******Option to present to the class live or to have a Movie Theater showing to celebrate the accomplishment, share Deaf culture with the general education class or school, show the ability for cross-cultural application of traditional knowledge.

*Due to student’s bilingual/multicultural identity, they will have the opportunity to select the language of their first draft. Some students will choose to use ASL, others may choose to write, while perhaps others may use a picture story to outline their Personal Experience.

Post Project Debrief:
If a student worked on a retell from an Elder consider inviting the Elder back to the classroom for a showcase/viewing party.
Have the student answer the following reflection questions:
*Again, the student should have autonomy over their preferred expressive/primary language. Ideally the answers would be submitting in video format in American Sign Language.

Was this assignment important to you and/or your identity? Why or why not?

Is Deaf culture an “oral culture”? Why or why not?

Why is Oral Tradition part of Alaskan Native culture?

Do you feel confident in Sign Language Literature of Alaskan Natives Stories? Why or why not?

**Rubric for Grading:**
TBD

**Extension**
- Students can have the option of composing their Sign Language Literature into English text.
- Students can have the option of translating their Sign Language Literature into ASL Gloss.
- Students can have the option of entering Marie Jean Philip’s ASL Poetry, Storytelling, Deaf Art Competition 2019
- High School Students can have the option of entering the ASLHS ASL Literature Competition 2019 [http://aslhonorsociety.org/Literature_Competition.html](http://aslhonorsociety.org/Literature_Competition.html)