

## 2015 Alaska Native Studies Conference Annual Meeting

### *Cooperative Cross-Cultural Instruction: The Value of Multi-cultural Collaboration in the Co-teaching of Topics of Worldview, Knowledge Traditions, and Epistemologies*

Arevgaq Theresa John & Michael Koskey  
Center for Cross-Cultural Studies  
University of Alaska Fairbanks  
201 Eielson  
P.O. Box 756730  
Fairbanks, AK 99775-6730  
[tjohn@alaska.edu](mailto:tjohn@alaska.edu)  
[mskoskey@alaska.edu](mailto:mskoskey@alaska.edu)

#### **Abstract**

joint individual paper (two co-presenters)

For four years (2011, 2013, 2014, 2015) two faculty members of the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Center for Cross-cultural Studies have collaborated to co-teach a course entitled *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (CCS 612). This course examines the acquisition and utilization of knowledge associated with the long-term habitation of particular ecological systems and the adaptations that arise from the accumulation of such knowledge. Intimate knowledge of place—culturally, spiritually, nutritionally, and economically for viability—is traditional ecological knowledge, and this perspective is combined with the needs of an Indigenous research method to better understand and more effectively explore the proper role of traditional knowledge in academic, cross-cultural research. This presentation and paper explores the strategies tested and lessons learned from teaching students from a wide variety of academic and cultural backgrounds including the social and life sciences, and the humanities, and from Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural origins. The instructors, too—and most importantly for this endeavor—come from an Indigenous (John) and non-Indigenous (Koskey) background, and though hailing from very different cultures and upbringings work collaboratively and with genuine mutual respect to enable an understanding of variations of traditions of knowledge and their application to academic research.

In 2010, Arevgaq Theresa John acquired her doctorate degree from the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her thesis is entitled *Yuraryaraput Kangiit-llu: Our Ways of Dance and Their Meanings*. In 2011, Arevgaq was hired by Center for Cross Cultural Studies as an Assistant Professor of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Michael Koskey acquired his doctorate degree from the Department of Anthropology, University of Alaska Fairbanks. His thesis is entitled *Cultural Activity and Market Enterprise: A Circumpolar Comparison of*

*Reindeer Herding Communities at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Arevgaq and Koskey have co-taught the course entitled Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK 612) since 2011 (except one year). In addition, Arevgaq also teaches Native Ways of Knowing (PSY 602), Native Ways of Healing (PSY 606) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CCS 608). Koskey also teaches Cultural & Intellectual Property Rights (CCS/RD 602), Field Study Research Methods (CCS 603), and Sustainable Livelihoods and Community Wellbeing (CCS 656). Both Arevgaq and Koskey have also taught a great many more courses at UAF in other departments.

### Conceptual Background

*Qasgimi ciuliaput ukanirpak yuungnaqpiaryamek pakengnaqsaramek elitnauriuralallruut*

Indigenous ancestral rights on *yuungnaqpiaryaraq*, the masterworks of science and survival, and the essence of prosperity were fundamental Indigenous pedagogical themes were taught by the Elders inside *qasgiq* or communal learning centers. *Qasgiq* was a learning place where the wisdom and knowledge on Indigenous pedagogical theoretical frameworks and methods were transmitted holistically to ensure that community members equally embraced the essential learning tools needed to understand science, survival and prosperity. Men, women and children were carefully guided, mentored and counseled were expected to listen, respect and to cooperate in the community by abiding to the rules of ancestral ethics and rules on *yuungnaqpiaryaraq*. A person that demonstrates proactive community participation, embraces connections with their environment, ceremonies and rituals, spirituality, science, survival and prosperity is regarded to have reached balance and harmony in life.

According to these values and perspectives, in addition to traditional academic values within the humanities, the Traditional Ecological Knowledge course is designed so that Arevgaq and Koskey can lead discussions equally. Koskey teaches traditional knowledge topics and concepts in which he is knowledgeable, whereas Arevgaq leads discussion of Indigenous articles and concepts. The practice of co-teaching various topics enhances student learning by demonstrating that two scholars with two very different backgrounds can come to understand and comprehend each other's worldviews, thereby achieving a genuine cross-cultural understanding for the purposes of research, but also for mutual trust, understanding, respect, and collaboration.

Arevgaq and Koskey divide student work (reflection and research papers) throughout the semester to provide students both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldview and academic feedback. The students appreciate the varying degrees and types of responses they receive from our expertise areas. For an example on the topic of worldviews, Arevgaq discuss how Yupiit and Indigenous worldviews are similar by using Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley's Tetrahedral model (1998). Kawagley's tetrahedral metaphor of the Native worldview represents a circle of the universe or a circle of life that has no beginning and no end, including the human, natural and spiritual worlds. There are two-way arrows between them, as well as to the worldview at the apex, that depict communications between all of these functions to maintain balance (John, 2009). Kawagley designed center circle as self, community and mindfulness.

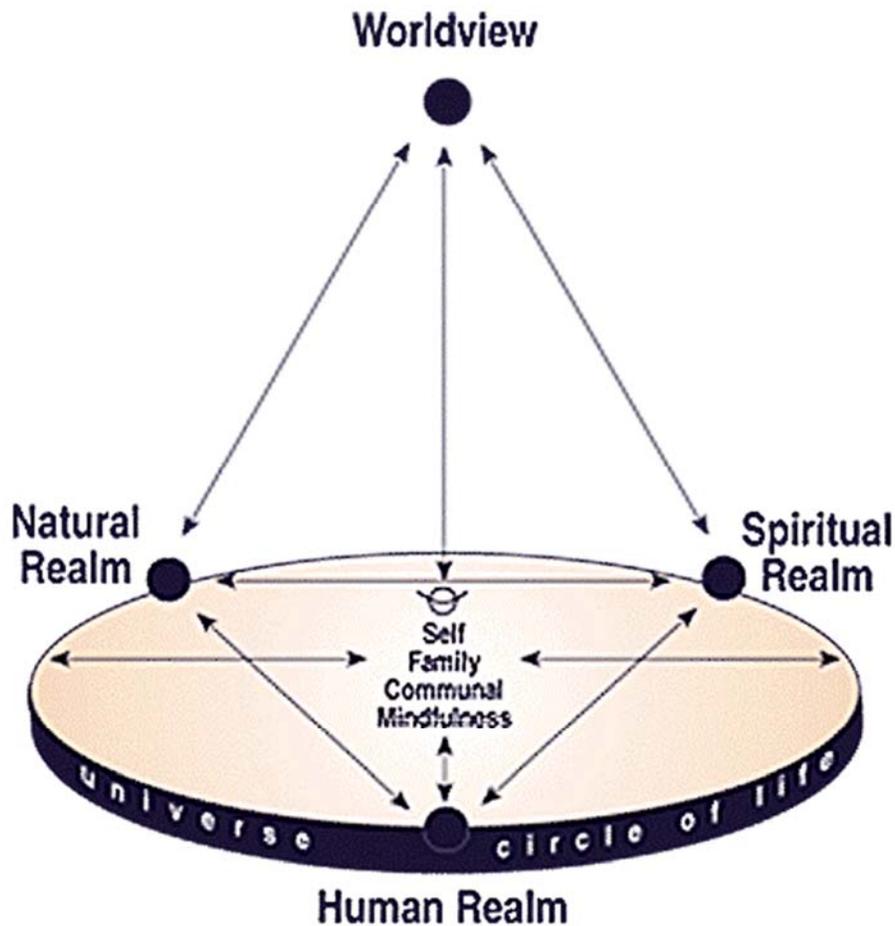


Figure 1. The Tetrahedral Metaphor Worldview Model (Kawagley 1995).

On the other hand, Koskey discusses non-Indigenous worldviews and perspectives, and works to provide understandings of links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews, helping to reconcile similarities and differences, and highlighting notions of universality and particularities that may or may not be translatable between cultural perspectives on existence. Of course, these include epistemological and ontological concerns, and here is where students have some difficulties. In response, Koskey and Arevgaq promote and develop capacities for intellectually and experientially inhabiting multiple realities simultaneously—a quality of Mindful Inquiry (Bentz and Shapiro 1998) in research (itself a concern of/aspect of Critical Theory). In this

manner, the depth of course feedback enhances our comprehensive theoretical frameworks through multiple methodologies.

The multiple Yup'ik comprehensive theoretical frameworks and methodology are *qanruyutet*, *qulirat* and *qanemcit*. The *qanruyutet*, or the words of wisdom, are words that inscribe proper ways of living in traditional educational frameworks. *Qulirat* and *qanemcit* are instructions on the Yup'ik traditional knowledge system. *Qulirat* are stories of the ancestral accounts and *qanemcit* are stories of the personal accounts. These “three Qs” are the Yup'ik tools of traditional construction of knowledge systems that articulate theories and methods of the Yup'ik pedagogical system. Cooperative and cross-cultural teaching methods are a huge benefit for the students to learn from multiple Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, thus opening students' minds for understanding and utilizing multiple methodologies and knowledge traditions for their own research.

#### Introduction: Theresa John

As an Alaskan Indigenous person, I have experienced the classic traditional village lifestyle, listening to *qanruyutet* (advice) and *qanemcit* and *qulirat* (oral traditions) from distinguished Indigenous Elders, parents, grandparents, shamans, and cultural educators who emphasized and encouraged the importance of leading a genuine Yup'ik way of living (John, 2010). Fortunately, despite of outside cross-cultural forces and influences, I have been able to sustain a traditional cultural lifestyle that encompasses cultural resiliency and self-sustainability. My late father, Chief Dr. Kangrilnguq/Aaquqsaq Paul John, a former Chief of Association of Village Council Presidents, mentored and guided me throughout my life to maintain and to revitalize the Yugtun

language, epistemic values and principles, pedagogy, ontology, oral narratives, native worldviews and traditional ecological knowledge skills. I attribute this knowledge to our ancestors, and respective Elders and distinguished local experts who have provided me the critical skills in knowing the Indigenous construction of knowledge systems that I implement in all of the courses that I teach at the University of Alaska. Below I describe my situated identities (Gee, 2007) that have been influenced by Yup'ik epistemic principles.

### Yup'ik woman

As a Yup'ik woman, I was trained by my maternal and paternal grandparents, their siblings, parents and extended relatives to know who I am as a Yup'ik person, a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter and a community member with responsibilities and knowledge about the appropriate values and principles to follow regarding social interpersonal communications. This meant that I have to speak Yugtun, dress like a Yup'ik, think like a Yup'ik and eat natural resources from our region, dance like our ancestors and teach others all that I know about *yuuyaraq*. Harold Napoleon (1996) defined *yuuyaraq* as a way of being a human. In the TEK class, I incorporate the concept of *yuuyaraq* by defining the epistemic values and principles of Indigenous societies so the students understand the importance of family kinship systems. As a member of a rural community that depends upon a traditional subsistence lifeway, I have a responsibility to partake in annual hunting and gathering activities as prescribed by the traditional family value system. In order to meet the role of a woman in subsistence, I have been taught to get involved in the processing and storage of land and ocean survival substances such as caribou, moose, mink, beaver, seals, fish, birds, berries and edible vegetables from the land. As a Yup'ik woman with a career, I have to ensure that I make annual calendar plans in advance

to be part of family hunting and gathering endeavors (John, 2009). As defined, *yuungnaqpiaryaraq* is an essential element of our science, survival and prosperity that highlight success in life passed on by the community experts.

### Professional dancer

As a professional dancer, I am a member of the community dance group. It is my responsibility to maintain and sustain our community songs, music and dances even though I do not live in my village. The essence of our dances is that they tell stories. The stories entail historical and contemporary nuances of our people. In class, I occasionally highlight original ritual songs and dances to demonstrate cultural stories through music. It is critical that I stay connected with the local, regional and statewide ritual dance leaders and coordinate my travel plans. Being forced to live outside of the community due to my career, it is at times difficult to find time to practice and perform with the community. I am responsible for learning the new compositions by interacting with the dance leaders via long distance technology. My teasing cousin, Mr. Joseph Asuluk, Sr., calls me on his cell phone to share his new compositions to keep me updated. It is vital to maintain proactive visibility, advocate for cultural role models, and to sustain close cultural bonds. In class, I discuss how rituals and ceremonies were critical forms of prayer that were practiced by the villagers inside the *qasgiq*. The men, women and children participated in seasonal community ritual events told various stories.

### Community member

As a community member, I am responsible for maintaining my Indigenous identity, kinship ties, and practice the traditional educational, social and subsistence economy. My educators

emphasized the importance of knowing who we are and how we relate to ourselves in the community, especially the disabled, elderly, widowed and orphaned children who have critical survival needs. Their needs include food, clothing and shelter. The communities' fundamental concern is the welfare of all children. Each member is expected to partake in the child's psychological, social and pedagogical upbringing that encourages prosperity. Traditional education emphasizes the essences of harmony, compassion and knowledge (John, 2009). Students learned about the essence of proactive community membership in class and the importance of how they need to reach out to the people in their academic practice in order to establish open relationship with their research participants.

#### Indigenous scholar

My role as an Indigenous scholar is to practice research with respect for and honor of our ancestors and our people's worldview. First and foremost is to work with the people and to ensure that the research is locally based with respect to the Indigenous knowledge system with reverence, honor, discipline and integrity. I have to look from inside the minds of the people in order to develop an accurate context and method. How do the Yup'ik people view their world to be, and how can I address our genuine traditional knowledge system and parallel it with western theories and methodologies? The concept of theories and methodologies in the Yup'ik way are delivered through the process of *qanemcit*, *qulirat* and *qanruyuutet*. The fundamental aspect of the traditional educational knowledge system is based on the welfare of the child who the whole community educates together (John, 2009). In class, I share these critical aspects of Indigenous scholarship that students need to know and understand in their field research.

### Associate professor

As an associate professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I have a professional responsibility to adhere to the laws of the institution. My authentic Yup'ik background is skewed toward a Yup'ik worldview based on interconnected, spiritual and holistic Indigenous ways of knowing, within the western learning institution. With a lack of depth of understanding within western research and context about traditional Indigenous knowledge systems, I often provide my own unwritten knowledge from the teachings I have gained from the Elders and local experts. It is natural for me to incorporate our language, dances, traditional values and principles as addendums to the curriculum in institutional settings (2009). The students in class gain invaluable knowledge of how they can collaborate with the local experts. My late father, Chief Dr. Kangrilnguq/Aaquksaq Paul John, stated that college institutions reminded him of the *qasgiq* learning system.

The multiple “situated identities” I described have been influenced by Yup'ik epistemology that provides wisdom of understanding our authentic worldview. The Yup'ik pedagogy system profoundly played a role in framing/teaching me how to “act” in these identities (John, 2009). In co-teaching, I have incorporated the Indigenous traditional knowledge skills that I have learned from my ancestors, parents, and grandparents in classroom discussions, response to student reaction papers and their research papers.

### Introduction: Michael Koskey

In contrast to Theresa John's Yup'ik culture and upbringing, I come from a culturally mixed background with frequent relocations in life until moving to Alaska over twenty years ago. Born

in Germany, my family came to the United States when I was six years old, leaving behind living in small-town central Germany. We came to Florida where I grew up in a rural, then a suburban area. Joining the US Marine Corps at age seventeen, I was stationed in such diverse places as South Carolina, North Carolina, California, and during the 1991 Gulf War, in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Using the GI Bill, I completed my undergraduate work and after mustering out of the Marine Corps, eventually began my graduate studies at Purdue University in Indiana, then completing my PhD at UAF.

In the course of these events, besides the places already noted, I also lived and/or worked in Wales (UK), Belize, and Siberia (Sakha and Chukotka, Russian Federation)—mostly connected to my educational pursuits. Each of the places mentioned had profound effects on my development as a person, though in the end none had the great and positive effects that coming to know and work with Alaska Native peoples—particularly Elders—provided. Forever indebted to those who for, seemingly to me, no apparent reason took an interest in me, I came to understand my German-Southern US-Academic “culture” and “identity” in new contexts. Learning how (and being taught) to open my mind to other worldviews, traditions of belief, and ways of experiencing existence, I came to recognize the profound wisdom, knowledge, and ethics espoused by Alaska Native Elders. I came to realize that *every person*, no matter whom, has something to teach us if we are willing to learn.

Fortunate to find myself in this place—this condition—I was again fortunate and lucky to be offered a faculty position at UAF, initially in the Department of Alaska Native Studies. As of Fall 2014 I have been an assistant professor with the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies. For my

second semester as faculty at UAF (in spring 2008) I was assigned to teach the Cross-Cultural Studies class entitled “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” due to my academic background and research. Humbled to be offered a course previously taught by the widely known and respected Oscar Kawagley, who had created the course, I knew I could never adequately fill his shoes. So began an intense quest to learn all I could about Indigenous knowledge traditions in Alaska and beyond—a process that, of course, continues to the present.

### The Course: *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*

Starting in 2011 and continuing to the present, my friend and colleague Theresa John offered to join with me in teaching this course. It was immediately clear that though we come from vastly differing backgrounds that we would be able to offer the students something unique—a course on traditional knowledge taught by a Yup’ik woman from a traditional background (co-author Arevgaq Theresa John) and by a non-Indigenous culturally western man (Michael Koskey)—both with academic backgrounds. By providing two (and when possible, more) cultural perspectives on the topic of traditional knowledge and its use in academic research, students are able to gain a more well-rounded understanding of traditional/indigenous/local knowledge issues, particularly as they are discussed and applied in an academic and research context.

Over the years that I have been teaching this course—both with and without Theresa’s appreciated presence as a co-teacher—students of many cultural, national, linguistic, and disciplinary backgrounds have taken the class. These include students from the Cross-Cultural Studies MA program, the Indigenous Studies PhD program, the programs in Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development, the Northern Studies program, the Natural Resource

Management program, various Fisheries programs including the interdisciplinary Marine Ecosystem Sustainability in the Arctic and Subarctic (MESAS) program, many Interdisciplinary MA/MS and PhD students, and others. Students have ranged from early twenties to early seventies in age, include a near equivalent balance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, with students participating from across Alaska and the Lower-48, but also from such faraway places as various localities in Canada (including Nunavut), Denmark, Norway, Ghana, Macedonia, Azerbaijan, Siberian Russia, and Bangladesh.

Some of these students were physically at UAF during the time they took the course, but most participate through audio-conference—a feature of all courses taught by the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies. This mixed-delivery condition enables people from all over the world to participate in the class, which highlights notions of Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies, differences and understandings of variable worldviews, and how to put all these to use while conducting respectful cross-cultural research in a western academic institutional setting. Considering notions of insider-outsider relationships and mindful inquiry, Indigenous perspectives are taught alongside the academic perspectives of Human Ecology—a fundamental tool in working with multiple traditions of knowledge simultaneously, and a critically important approach to the study and understanding of human and non-human interactions within shared ecologies. These considerations are taught and discussed in historical and contemporary terms with emphases on addressing community challenges and need, and is therefore heavily focused on applied research situations.

Each of these topics—along with the diverse readings from the class that come from both academic and non-academic, Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources—is discussed, explained, and debated cooperatively from both Arevgaq Theresa John’s Indigenous and Michael Koskey’s non-Indigenous perspectives. We strive to demonstrate through our cooperative actions and interpretations of the readings that multiple and differing knowledge systems need not be mutually exclusive, and in fact can significantly complement one another. Within this notion we also strive to avoid the notion that traditional (ecological) knowledge should be incorporated into or subsumed under western methodological traditions (i.e., the notion of incorporating traditional ecological knowledge *into* “western” science). This, we contend, continues the assimilationist behaviors of the past, and does not create a balanced space or perspective for exploring multiple complementary traditions of knowledge.

But more important academically, we recognize that fundamentally different traditions of knowledge—resting on they do on significant differences in worldviews—require the cross-cultural researcher to be able to simultaneously “accept the reality of” multiple worldviews simultaneously. Only through developing this capacity can we effectively work cross-culturally under conditions of multiple epistemologies, ontologies, cosmologies, and worldviews, and furthermore this can only really be achieved by including scholars or others from all cultures involved in the research or education. To this end we promote community-based participatory research (CBPR) techniques.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) requires that the research community be involved in all aspects of the research process, from devising the research questions (or

community need to be addressed), analyzing the data, devising conclusions and/or solutions, to applying findings and solutions to the research problem or endeavor. This requires partnerships and the development of trust—in other words, relationships. Through these relationships a more genuine understanding can be achieved cross-culturally, and by extension more accurate, applicable research outcomes can be attained.

Through the advantages of cooperative teaching of a graduate level class by two instructors of very different cultural origins, we have greatly enhanced the capacity for all students—indigenous and non-indigenous—to understand one another cross-culturally. It is our hope and intention that our cooperation and mutual respect are seen by the students to underlie our capacity for mutual understanding of our differing perspectives as they derive from our differing cultural backgrounds and experience. The consistently positive responses and feedback received from students helps us to better-inform ourselves of our successes, and to eliminate or alter aspects of the course that seem superfluous or irrelevant to the topic and student interest. This dynamic assessment is integral to the course and its content, organization, and delivery, and we hope to use these successes within this course to inform future educational techniques and methods for other cross-cultural and indigenous studies classes and topics.

*Ciuliamta Uyangtakut: Our ancestors' look down on us*

The Nunakuyarmiut Traditional Council of Toksook Bay on Nelson Island carefully selected this critical Indigenous ritual theme for their annual ceremony in the past ten years. This theme derived from the late Elders, Dennis Panruk of Chefornak, and Chief Dr. Kangrilnguq/Aaquksaq Paul John of Toksook Bay, to reclaim our ancestral right to express our worldview. The

important message of the theme is the essential interconnectedness of the human, land and spiritual realms. Elders state through love in humanity, there will be harmony and balance in life.

---

### References

Bentz, V.A. and J.J. Shapiro (1998). *Mindful Inquiry in Social Science Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Fienup-Riordan, A. (2005). *Wise words of the Yup'ik people: we talk to you because we love you*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Fienup-Riordan, A., & Rearden, A. (2005). *Yup'it Qanruyutait: Yup'ik words of wisdom*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Gee, P. (2007) *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

Gegeo, D.W., & Watson-Gegeo, K.A. (2001). "How we know: Kwara'ae rural villagers doing indigenous epistemology. *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 2001, 55-88.

Jacobson, S.A. (1995) *A practical grammar of the Central Alaskan Yup'ik Eskimo Language*. Alaska Native Language Center and Program. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks.

John, T. (2009) *Yuraryaraput Kangiit-llu: Our ways of dance and their meanings*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

Kawagley, A.O. (1995). *A Yupiaq worldview: A pathway to ecology and spirit*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Napolean, H. (1996). *Yuuyaraq: The way of the human being*. Alaska Native Knowledge System: University of Alaska Fairbanks.