

Enhancing Meaning through the Arts: Connecting People, Cultures, Communities

Melany Cueva and Regina Kuhnley

Contact: Melany Cueva ANC-CHAP ANMC 4315 Diplomacy Drive Anchorage AK 99508
(907) 729-2441 mcueva@anmc.org

In traditional cultures, values and knowledge are passed from the elders to the youth in a living circle of songs, dances, stories and crafts. Cultural ways of being and ways of knowing are thus interwoven into a vibrant tapestry of learning. Building upon the richness of these traditions, art in education enhances creative exploration and personal discovery. The use of art promotes learning by respecting people's ability to process information in many creative ways. This personal expression of creativity allows participants to connect with information in new dimensions.

Alaska is home to a rich multicultural heritage of Native people including the Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Aleut, Athabaskan, Yupik, Cupik, and Inupiaq. Each group celebrates unique traditions and distinct languages. Scattered throughout Alaska, which stretches 2400 miles from east to west and 1420 miles from north to south, are 226 rural communities ranging in size from 20 to 1100 people. The majority of villages are primarily accessible by only small aircraft since there are no roads connecting communities throughout Alaska in this vast land of harsh terrain and extreme weather conditions.

Community Health Aides/Practitioners (CHA/Ps) are individuals selected by their communities to provide village-based primary, emergency, and preventive health. Over the course of two years, these health providers receive four consecutively advanced sessions of medical training, three to four weeks in duration, at one of four training centers located throughout Alaska. Their training and skills are critical to the health of their people.

Cancer is currently the leading cause of mortality among Alaska Natives (ANs). CHA/Ps have identified a need for cancer education for themselves and their communities. In response, culturally respectful continuing education opportunities for CHA/Ps have been developed and implemented to increase understanding among ANs and to promote a village dialogue about cancer and cancer risk reduction.

Learning is enhanced when art is intrinsically woven into the fabric of education. The use of drawing, sculpting, crafts, role playing, charades, theatre, song, dance, and storytelling allow people to make new meanings and gain fresh insight into cognitive ideas by passionately engaging their hearts, souls, and minds. Art speaks strongly to the affective domain giving wings to spirituality and culture. Art symbolically represents the fluid process of circular connection allowing us to critically re-visit or re-member the past while spiraling forward in a dynamic process of embracing fresh insight. Interweaving art and education contains an element of risk taking; consequently it is important to nurture a comfortable environment in which participants feel safe and respected. It is from this place of feeling grounded that we invite people to stretch in new ways by embracing the possibilities of exploring classroom learning through art. Edward de Bono states, "The brain can only see that which it has been prepared to see. So unless we

prepare the brain by creating possibilities, we are unable to see new patterns and new ideas.” It is in giving ourselves permission to expand our realm of possibility that new insight and connections emerge.

Gardner’s (1999) theory of multiple intelligences reminds us that people have intellectual similarities and diverse dimensions from which they create meaning. He has identified nine intelligences which we all possess to varying degrees: linguistic, mathematical, visual, auditory, kinesthetic/motor, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and philosophical. These ways of knowing are closely linked to learning style preferences. By being attentive to all dimensions of learning we foster a supportive learning climate in which learning style, culture, and spirituality are respected.

Art allows us to expand the possibilities, creating a new paradigm to which people can choose to move. Reflecting upon play and women's learning Melamed writes:

"Human activity is a playful blending of adventure, surprise, energy, circularity, trial and error, and interconnectedness. In order to know and understand, the many parts of the self must interact and bounce off each other, in a somewhat random manner. Rather than ordered, sequential knowledge-building, most of us 'follow our nose', filling and refilling the moving empty spaces within a lifetime." (Hayes and Flannery, 2000. 115)

Drawing, sculpting, and crafts allow participants to form, mold, and manipulate ideas using their hands. For example, cancer course participants use clay to sculpt colorful foods which represent healthy lifestyle choices. To represent exercise they created feet, basket ball teams, and dog teams complete with mushers. They designed flexible sigmoidoscopes and mammograms. Birthday cakes symbolized yearly screening exams. Cigarettes, ash trays, and bottles reflected cancer risk factors. In another hands on learning activity, participants draw what pain means to them. This is a powerfully symbolic way of understanding our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about pain assessment and management. To reinforce breast health learning and skills participants make breast lump necklaces by stringing together wooden beads and buttons representing different sizes of breast lumps that can be found during self breast exams, clinical breast exams and mammograms. Learning activities which make use of hands-on art facilitate richer, more meaningful learning experiences as well as promote knowledge retention. As Gilbert notes a combination of tactile inputs to the brain involving taste, touch, sight, smell, sound, and emotion are more likely to be remembered. (Gilbert, 2002.8)

When educational activities incorporate role playing, charades, and theatre we are offered a way to explore and construct knowledge in new ways. By immersing ourselves in imaginary character roles and situations we "try on" differing behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Characters can give voice to what people are silently saying. In cancer courses, acting provides an opportunity for learners to increase awareness of the impact of lifestyle choices and decisions, and creates a bridge to current medical information. Acting centers learning in affective ways as well as cognitive domains. By sharing common stories we begin where learners are and with what they know best and from that zone of comfort they may journey along new paths of understanding.

Understanding, a 40 minute reader’s theatre piece has been used in the classroom setting to address cancer-related issues specific to ANs. The play incorporates the many stories generously

shared by people throughout Alaska. Challenging and sensitive themes, including emotions associated with cancer diagnosis, treatment, pain management, loss, and grief are explored. Ninety-five percent of written post play evaluations state people feel more comfortable talking about cancer as a result of watching the play; 62% have written positive intent to change behavior. Role playing, charades, and theatre are effective in stimulating dialogue in which people share their fears, their concerns, and their beliefs. This dialogue is an important step towards understanding cancer among ANs. Written post play evaluations include these comments; “Even if it (cancer) is embarrassing you should talk about it.” “I was reminded of how good it is to talk about things that frighten us because it makes the fear get smaller when you open up.” “It’s OK to be scared and it’s OK to talk about it.” An elder spoke, “Nobody talks about cancer. People are afraid. It is time to talk. I’m not going to stop talking.”

Music seems to melt physical, psychological, and emotional boundaries and penetrate levels of awareness unreachable by words or bodily touch. Music evokes images, memories and feelings and can act as an important link to awareness in the process of self discovery and self actualization. (Bailey, 1986) Music has the power to promote relaxation or energize. When cancer course participants were given the opportunity to express their knowledge creatively one group chose to write a song with actions to share important breast health information. They had singers, dancers, and drummers as part of their group.

Culturally, learning begins with the stories we are told. By sharing stories in the classroom we begin from a foundation of knowing instead of a knowledge deficit. It is this respectful starting point that helps people build bridges to new and meaningful constructs. We also affirm a person’s sense of being by listening to those stories they value. Stories are often a window into a person’s soul that allows us to glimpse values, attitudes, and beliefs. We each have a story that relates to the essence of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are journeying. Storytelling is a powerful facilitator of culture and spiritual identity and growth. Although there are reportedly no words for cancer in Alaska Native dialects there is a wealth of traditional knowledge from which people can draw strength and wisdom to cope with this relatively new disease. Course participants are invited to share their stories or sayings and relate how we can learn from their meaning.

“My Papa knew all the old stories. He was a great story teller. I remember as a little girl he’d take me outside to look at the moon and the sky. I’d ask him, Why are we looking up at the moon and the sky? Ah, he said, See the rainbow like haze spread out far around the moon? When you see that it means there’s a change coming. You gotta watch for the signs and be prepared. Papa knew all the signs and all the old stories.”

Learning is informed by what holds meaning and relevance for us. In her discussion of cultural relevance Tisdell (2003. 260) advises,

“To teach for cultural relevance, one needs to provide an experience not only in which individuals can explore the connection between their own identities but also the sociocultural forces that shape them. They need to make meaning and draw on the knowledge base and ways of expressing it that inspire their passion, that honor who they are and that continue to be a source of hope, agency, and celebration of the way they make meaning and work for social transformation in the application of what they are learning.”

The arts are a vibrant thread in the tapestry of learning helping individuals to explore new dimensions of knowledge, to create relevant expressions of meaning, and to connect with diverse cultural communities. Art in education enhances meaning and honors the rich traditional oral and artistic expressions of Alaska Native culture.

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