



YAAVESKANIRYARAQ

Cultural Education

Outreach Project

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ALASKA
HUMANITIES
FORUM

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Yup'ik/Cup'ik Ways of Knowing

'Yaaveskaniryaraq' - a word used by the Yup'ik Eskimos of Western Alaska - has a variety of subtle meanings: 'moving from one place to another, moving forward to gain wisdom or insight,' and 'repositioning and extending one's life with a better attitude.' It's an appropriate title for a course in the humanities adapted specifically for Yup'iks and drawn almost exclusively from their Eskimo culture. The creator of the original program is world-renowned educator Earl Shorris. His concept, called the Clemente Course - based on a European model of humanities instruction - was introduced into Western Alaska and adapted to the teaching and learning styles of its Native American inhabitants.

This booklet sets out to show how the first 'Yaaveskaniryaraq' courses were developed and the steps that other interested communities might take to bring this educational program into their lives.



Yaaveskaniryaraq

Moving forward to gain wisdom



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Preface

'Yaaveskaniryaraq' is humanities-based curriculum that focuses on the literature, history, art, science, spirituality and social systems of Yup'ik civilization. It was created by Yup'ik instructors Luck Sparck and Cecilia Martz and is founded on the idea that people are both teachers and students, and that wisdom comes from many sources.

The 'Yaaveskaniryaraq' curriculum is based on the Clemente Course in Humanities, as outlined in Earl Shorris' book New American Blues. In his book, Shorris talks about the positive, transformative role that teaching the humanities can have in the lives of underserved people.

Village elders from four Western Alaskan communities became the course's teachers, sharing their knowledge, philosophy, and practices with adult students. Growing up in an age before there were schools, churches, or health clinics in their villages, the elder teachers were able to rekindle the



Hunters push through the ice to open water

spiritual history of the Yup'ik people. They taught how the social structure of the extended family reinforced and influenced community decision-making. Additionally, elders were able to share traditional place names, help students identify and name medicinal plants, recall the ancient ways of hunting and gathering, and pinpoint the traditional sites of fishing camps.

In the first year, students from Chevak met every other weekend from September 1999 through June 2000. In the second year, the program expanded into three additional communities: Aklak, Aklachak, and Tuluksak.

Many people participated in planning and implementing this program. In addition to Lucy Sparck

and Cecilia Martz, thanks are extended to Joe Slat, Superintendent of the Yupiit School District; to Mike Williams, Joe Lomack and Willie Kassayuli, members of the Yupiit School Board; and to Steve Lindbeck, past Executive President of the Alaska Humanities Forum.

— Jane Angvik



The Clemente Course Breaks Barriers

It is a pattern that has occurred time and again throughout history. New people move into an area and soon their ideas come to dominate – culturally, politically and economically – those of the indigenous population. Along the way, traditional methods of education change and community members begin to feel disconnected from their culture and language. Inter-

generational rifts develop between the elders, who speak their traditional language, and the children, who are learning new methods of communication. Often, however, the new methods are found wanting. A high proportion of children are unable to assimilate the new language and, therefore, are unable to compete in the newly emerging culture. They find

themselves estranged from their cultural heritage and, at the same time, unable to adapt to the new ways.

Motivated educators have addressed the problem and have attempted to bridge the gap between traditional teaching/learning methods and those imposed by the new culture. Among the most innovative of these educators is Earl Shorris. His Clemente Course, developed at Bard College in New York, is based upon the premise that real civic participation requires the self-reflection naturally encouraged by reading and studying the humanities – literature, history and art. The course is designed to bring the long-term underserved adult out of poverty and into a life of family and renewed civic involvement.





The Yup'ik Variation

While the original Clemente program started with a focus on the "Great Books" of Europe, it has naturally evolved to include cultural, historical and artistic knowledge based on local tradition. 'Yaaveskaniryaraq', a locally developed, Yup'ik-focused humanities course, was created in Western Alaska. Readings and discussions included a combination of Yup'ik stories and legends, as well as Plato's Republic.

The program in Western Alaska came about because a small, but dedicated group of educators and local citizens began to recognize that the intrusion of Western-based educational systems into rural Alaskan communities was leaving a large number of youth behind. The

situation had deteriorated to a point where communication between students and their parents, elders and leaders was literally non-

existent. It was apparent that many children were being inadequately served by a Western education system that did not have a solid grounding in traditional teachings.





Steps to the First Yaaveskaniryaraq/Clemente Course

Once the group had started meeting and involving area elders and educators, Clemente Course founder Earl Shorris was invited to become a consulting member. Over the first few months, a course of studies was devel-

oped, along with a method for evaluating the program's effectiveness. Chevak was selected to be the site of the first class, primarily because of the local availability of Cecilia Martz, a leading Yup'ik educator. The group

established important relationships with the University of Alaska Anchorage, RURALCap, and Chevak's Yupiit School District. They also engaged in fundraising with assistance from the Alaska Humanities Forum. Plans for expansion of the program to a second community were prepared.

Staff at the University of Alaska Anchorage worked with Cecilia Martz to develop a course description so students could obtain college credit for participating in the class. The UAA College of Arts and Sciences waived their standard tuition fees for the Chevak students because they saw the program as an opportunity for Alaska Natives, who might not otherwise have college experience, to learn about the importance of the humanities to the human condition.



It takes a committed group of residents to ensure the local Yaaveskaniryaraq course takes root in the community and is effective for all who participate.

Participants in the Yaaveskamiryaraq course developed a better understanding of the history, language, religion and philosophy of the Yup'ik/Cup'ik people.

to better understand the philosophy and history of the indigenous people of the region. Three students dropped out of the program after the first session when they realized their fluency in the Cup'ik language wasn't adequate to complete the course. Those who remained performed well and were motivated to complete the yearlong course of study in May 2000. Students met every other weekend for a year and were periodically tested on their mastery of the subject matter. Developing an understanding of local place names and the relationship of animal spirits to human experience was crucial to the students' growth.

The second year, the program expanded to Akiak, Akiachak, and Tuluksak. Local elders were recruited with the support of school district personnel to form the adult education



program. The Yupiit School District coordinated its efforts with the University of Alaska to expand the yearlong program in these communities throughout 2000-01 and saw 45 students graduate in May 2001.

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Chevak Course Benefits

The Yaaveskaniryaraq/Clemente Course in Chevak had a profound impact on those involved in the program as well as the community at large. It is expected that the ripple effects coming out of the successful completion of the first course will reach into other communities within Western Alaska and other rural regions of the state.

A summary of the comments stated by participants and results obtained include:

Students

- Realize they can be Yup'ik/Cup'ik and be proud of it
- Realize there is much more they want to learn
- See the need to become more proficient in their own language
- Have become literate and proficient in their own history
- Realize one project can teach many things through interaction with elders
- Have new motivation to learn from elders

Elders

- A renewed understanding that they have much to offer
- Increase confidence and an opportunity to share what they know and feel is important
- Compensation helps establish feeling of worth for sharing traditional knowledge
- Increased dialogue and support between and among elders
- Elevation of their position in the local society
- Increased motivation to continue to share their knowledge

Community

- Fostered curiosity and interest
- Increased desire to be part of the group and learning experience
- Individuals and organizations provided an opportunity to support a project that helps local people.

Key course activities were outlined as:

- Readings and translation in English-Yup'ik/Cup'ik-English (with Yup'ik/Cup'ik texts and English language)



- Writing practice in Yup'ik/Cup'ik language
- Introduction to Alaska Native oral historical and literary tradition and works
- Examination, explanation and exposure to Alaska Native dance, music and art
- Presentation by and interaction with Native elders
- Oral and written evaluation
- Conferences
- Quizzes
- Final examination

Student performance was based on a pass/no pass system and determined by the following criteria:

- Attendance and participation – 30%
- Grades on assignments and quizzes – 30%
- Oral readings – 25%
- Final Exam – 15%



Village Life From a Child's Perspective

One key purpose of the 'Yaaveskaniryaraq' course is to ensure that communication and understanding are improved between students and their parents, elders, and leaders. The course helps to provide a connection between participants, their families and their community. With this goal in mind, children and other family members were asked to show examples of traditional village life through drawings and other artwork.



Are You Interested in Starting a Clemente Course?

Much was learned along the way toward development of the first Yaaveskaniryaraq/Clemente Course in Western Alaska. Establishing such a course required a sustained commitment from the individuals involved in its creation and

evolution. While the process will be different for other communities and cultures, a few action steps are recommended to ensure the best possible result.

Yaaveskaniryaraq/Clemente Action Steps

1) A core organizational group should learn all they can about the genesis of the Clemente program and the steps taken in development of the Yaaveskaniryaraq/Clemente Course. Be certain to become knowledgeable enough to describe the program to others.

2) Invite a group of interested people in your community to an informational meeting. See if a similar course will help the needs of the community and assess the level of commitment available within the group.

3) If the prospects appear bright, organize informally as a group, agree on a name, and commit to a regular meeting schedule. Use traditional organization and communication methods and invite others to attend.

4) At the second meeting, describe the course to the area elders and leaders, and with their approval, begin the process of defining purpose and goals.

5) At subsequent meetings, act on the following items:

- Identify the student population
- Develop the course curriculum with the assistance of area elders
- Design courses that can be taught through traditional methods
- Identify individuals capable of teaching
- Identify organizations inside and outside of the community as potential partners who can provide financial support, expertise or in-kind services or meeting facilities.
- Work to secure college credit for the program
- Develop and submit proposals for grants from non-profits, foundations, corporations and other appropriate institutions.



For information about the Chevak Yaaveskaniryaraq/Clemente course,
please call either Joe Slats, Superintendent, Yupitt School District,
at 907-825-4427, or Cecilia Martz in Bethel at 907-543-3506.

This project was funded in part by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum,
421 West First Ave, Ste. 300, Anchorage, AK 99501. For more information about the Forum,
please visit the website at www.akhf.org or call the Forum at 907-272-5341.



This project is a humanities course designed by Yup'ik instructors, for Yup'ik students to learn about the history, philosophy and ways of knowing of the Yup'ik people. *Yaaveskaniryaraq* is a Yup'ik term that can mean repositioning, transferring or extending one's life with a better attitude. It includes the concept that people are both teachers and students and that wisdom comes from many sources. — Jane Angvik

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