

Stone, *et al.* English Studies as a Site for Healing: A Conversation about Place-Based and Indigenous Pedagogies in the English Classroom

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## **English Studies as a Site for Healing: A Conversation about Place-Based and Indigenous Pedagogies in the English Classroom**

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### **Abstract:**

This article summarizes a roundtable discussion from the 2016 Alaska Native Studies Conference among professors and students from two English Studies courses at the University of Alaska Anchorage: History of the English Language and History of Rhetoric. Jennifer and Heather discuss how the courses are traditionally taught and how they redesigned the courses to incorporate place-based and indigenous pedagogies. Then, Tayler, Samantha, Hailey, and Arlo--students from a range of backgrounds who took one or both of the classes--describe how the courses encouraged them to develop critical perspectives, build new knowledge through undergraduate research, and experience personal and professional transformations that led to advocacy. The dialogue provides a range of pedagogical perspectives and considers English Studies as a potential site for cultural and historical healing.

### **Introduction**

English Studies is a discipline that examines the English language from a variety of perspectives. Rather than being one unified field, contemporary English Studies represents an array of areas of inquiry and research methods. Literature has long been a widely recognized part of English that involves the interpretation of fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry. The courses described below, however, emerge from different strains of the field. Jennifer works at the intersection of linguistics and literacy studies. Linguistics scientifically examines how languages are

learned, how they work, and how they vary over time and across groups. Similarly, literacy is studied as a nuanced social practice that is shaped by cultural, political, economic, technological, and historical factors. Heather's specialty is rhetoric and writing studies, interconnected traditions that focus on both theory and teaching. Rhetoric--what has traditionally been the study of speaking, writing, and persuading--has its theoretical roots in ancient Athens and is enjoying a contemporary renaissance as college-level students are asked to hone their writing and communication skills across a variety of contexts and media and for varied purposes.

From an Alaskan perspective, English Studies has been and continues to be an especially problematic field. Although critiques of the literary canon have grown over the past several decades, the bulk of literary studies still tends to focus on non-Alaskan, non-Alaska Native, and non-indigenous literatures. Whereas linguists have engaged in important work documenting Alaska Native languages, indigenous languages more broadly, and local Englishes, few scholars have examined the historical relationship between English and Alaska Native languages. Writing and literacy-related courses tend to value developing standard English, print-based literacies, and dominant forms of written communication, and tend not to include indigenous perspectives. And rhetoric tends to value classical Greek and contemporary Western perspectives, not systematically attending to indigenous points of view. English education at all levels has been especially problematic from a historical standpoint in Alaska. Ranging from the English-only policies of Sheldon Jackson's era to removing children from their families to live in English-only homes and boarding schools, the practices of English education have had devastating effects on local communities, cultures, and languages starting in the late 1800s and extending well into the 1900s. Although such overtly violent practices are no longer condoned, their effects linger. Today, different practices have emerged that are equally problematic, such as lack of inclusion and lack of encouragement to engage with Alaska Native ways of knowing and being. Clearly, we have a lot of healing to do.

As English educators, Jennifer and Heather have sought to interrupt the longstanding practices of English Studies and English education by reframing their English courses as sites for healing. For the 2016 Alaska Native Studies Conference in Anchorage, they invited four of their students--Tayler, Samantha, Hailey, and Arlo--to join them for a roundtable discussion of the courses. Below is a summary of the roundtable discussion. First, Jennifer and Heather describe the specific changes they have made in their History of the English Language and History of Rhetoric classes to incorporate place-based and indigenous pedagogies. Then the students reflect on the impact of these changes to their curricular and instructional experiences. Together, the group provides a range of perspectives on these pedagogical shifts and considers English Studies as a potential site for healing.

## **The Classes: History of the English Language and History of Rhetoric**

Shortly after coming to Alaska, both Jennifer and Heather recognized that traditional approaches to their history-related courses were inappropriate for an Alaskan context. They have taken different approaches to transforming their pedagogies to better address place in their teaching and account for Alaska Native histories and knowledges in their classrooms. Jennifer's approach to transforming History of the English Language was gradual; over the course of nine years, she slowly made the history of English in Alaska increasingly central to her class as she built her own understandings of Alaska and Alaska Native contexts. Heather, with mentorship from Jennifer, shifted her curriculum more quickly, and relied on her students' experiences and perspectives as well as collaboration with local experts to supplement her inquiry-based approach. In implementing these curricular shifts, Jennifer and Heather have attempted to reframe their English Studies classes as sites for healing by acknowledging the difficult histories that have shaped and continue to shape Alaska, incorporating Alaska Native perspectives and ways of knowing into their courses, and engaging students in undergraduate research projects that reframe the histories of English and rhetoric. Jennifer and Heather recognize their limitations as non-Alaska Native scholars originally from places other than Alaska. They recognize the inherent problems of Western traditions of research and representation and are committed to collaborating with students and community members from a broad range of perspectives. They view these course-level projects as one piece of a larger re-envisioning of English Studies that can play a necessary part in historical healing in Alaska.

### **How Are These Classes Traditionally Taught?**

Traditionally, courses on the history of the English language tend to focus on linguistic shifts in the English language over time, canonical texts that exemplify major periods, the emergence of standard varieties of the language, and the impact of contact with other languages on English. The story of English as told in most of the major textbooks is a classic underdog tale, where English triumphed over major invasions from Vikings and Normans to eventually become the global *lingua franca*. Such accounts of the history of English are problematic in that they downplay social and cultural aspects of the history of language, including the impact of English on indigenous cultures and languages. In short, as Morse-Gagné argues, the history of the English language is "the quintessential colonial course" (23).

Historical accounts of English typically are broken into four major eras, each marked by significant shifts in the language and in the sociopolitical contexts of English's use. The Old English era is marked socially by the formation of the English language by Anglo-Saxons from northern Europe, as well as from a series of Viking invasions that brought Old English into intensive contact with Old Norse.

Linguistically, accounts of Old English tend to focus on the more extensively inflectional grammatical system from the English we use today. The Middle English era emphasizes the impact of the Norman Invasion on English, where the language absorbed thousands of Norman French words, as well as the gradual extraction of English from Norman and Roman Catholic control. The Early Modern English period is often touted as the pinnacle of the language. This is the era of the English Renaissance and the global colonial export of English. Linguistically, accounts of this era emphasize the Great Vowel Shift, the impact of contact with global languages on English, and the growing impact of geographical separation on the language. The Late Modern English period emphasizes the establishment of national varieties of English, in particular documenting the difference between British and American varieties of the language.

Accounts of each of these eras tend to emphasize the “internal” linguistic history of the language over the social history of the language (Buck, 2003). What little social history is included tends to emphasize the triumph of English over invading languages and the inevitable spread of English, while downplaying the impact of English on indigenous languages and cultures. Such accounts also tend to view language contact solely in terms of the impact of contact on English rather than on the impact of English on the languages it came into contact with or the relationships that developed between English and other languages as the language spread globally.

Similarly, History of Rhetoric courses traditionally figure rhetoric as the quintessential Western scholarly pursuit, emerging in Ancient Athens alongside, because of, and in response to the birth of Western democracy. For many years, the traditional origin story of the field would begin with Plato and Aristotle, men with privilege who cultivated the theory and teaching of oratory and persuasion that would come to be central to the rise and fall of ancient Greece and Rome. Rhetorical education traditionally involved having (male) students learn and practice effective speaking and writing in order to fulfill their aspirations of being great statesmen.

Rhetoric remained a central part of education for centuries, expanding beyond Greco-Roman and European contexts to become part of, for example, U.S. education. Although the way that rhetoric has been studied and taught has changed greatly during the past two millennia, until the late twentieth century rhetoric was thought to only pertain to (White) men who wrote or spoke from positions of power. Rhetorical scholars examining feminism and race were some of the earliest objectors to this restrictive notion of rhetorical history, positing that women and non-White individuals, too, have long practiced rhetoric, even if they were never invited to partake in “official” sites of rhetorical education. Indigenous scholars are helping to rethink rhetoric’s boundaries from their areas of expertise, asking what peoples and practices continue to be left out of the rhetorical tradition and how studying rhetoric with indigenous questions and concerns in mind can add to the

field's understanding of communication (Baca and Villanueva, 2010; Lyons, 2000).

Despite these new approaches, often the history of rhetoric is taught in a relatively traditional, conservative, and, thus, exclusionary manner (Jackson, 2011). Revising this history can be time consuming, overwhelming, and problematic in that no course could ever teach all aspects and iterations of rhetoric. Many scholars replicate the "narrow arrow from Greece to the Americas" approach to teaching rhetoric's history because of these challenges (Powell, 2011, p. 122). When such foundational courses are not revised, however, they are complicit in what Rhetoric and Composition scholar Driskill (2015) calls a "discipline [that] participates in not only a physical occupation of indigenous lands but also in intellectual colonialism" (p. 57-8).

Both of these history-oriented courses traditionally overlook Alaska as a unique and valuable place for understanding English and rhetoric as socially significant sites of language change, education, and use. Also, Jennifer and Heather aspire to have their curricula be culturally relevant to their student body, which reflects the diversity of Anchorage and Alaska. Both Jennifer and Heather recognize that universities are often sites for excluding non-Western epistemologies and also see English Studies as a prime area for calling attention to the cultural contributions and epistemologies of Alaska Native communities in the various language practices of this region. Further, they wish to guard against perpetuating colonial ideologies, which could easily happen if they chose to *not* bring questions of power, exclusion, and violence to bear on these histories of language use and education as they focus on the local and regional. Instead, they seek to equip students to begin to recognize and position themselves vis-a-vis pervasive and unspoken epistemologies of academia that privilege the Western experience of language dominance. In other words, Jennifer and Heather see themselves as always already part of the history of English Studies as a colonial practice, and they consider themselves responsible to make those practices apparent in their classrooms. They also see their courses as potential sites for building critical capacities and action.

### **How and Why Have the Courses Been Changed to Include Place-based and Indigenous Pedagogies?**

Jennifer and Heather's course revisions were informed by local and international calls to incorporate place-based and indigenous perspectives into academic conversations. Locally, Breinig has suggested that "we [at UAA] have an opportunity and an obligation to educate all our students about Alaska Native histories and contemporary [Alaska Native] organizations and contributions" (Kalytiak, 2015). Breinig (2014) has argued that UAA students, responding to the disparity between the number of Alaska Native students enrolled at the institution and the relative dearth of "courses directly related to their histories, cultures, or languages" became the impetus for creating the Alaska Native Studies program at

UAA in the 1990s (p. 11). Extending the opportunities for students to see how Native ways of knowing intersect with other (traditionally Western) sites of knowledge creation *outside of Native Studies courses* seems to be one opportunity for remaining institutionally responsive to the legitimate concerns of students at the university. Such calls to action are part of a larger conversation about decolonizing the university. The course revisions described below attempt to engage in what Mignolo (2007) refers to as “epistemic delinking” or the rigorous practice of “learning to unlearn” (p. 485) that can eventually “fracture the hegemony of [colonial] knowledge and understanding” (p. 459).

Since moving to Alaska ten years ago, Jennifer has transformed her History of the English Language course to incorporate place-based and indigenous pedagogies. Over the years, she has learned about the history of English in Alaska from students, friends, elders, research participants, and the sparse scholarship that exists on the subject, and she has increasingly emphasized the history of English in Alaska in her curriculum. She also has participated in a number of professional development opportunities that have helped her to reshape her curriculum, including taking Yup’ik classes at UAA and the Alaska Native Heritage Center, attending a subsistence and language camp in Kali (Pt. Lay) through Iḷisaḡvik College, and participating in the Stop Talking professional development series at UAA. Each of these experiences enabled Jennifer to re-envision her course as a site for healing. These strategic shifts place Alaska at the center of the curriculum by situating Alaska in the long history of English in the world and in the United States, foregrounding historical struggles that have emerged from English’s presence in Alaska, and engaging students in undergraduate research about the history of English in Alaska (see Stone, forthcoming). Together, these shifts in curriculum and instruction attempt to engage in “rewriting and rerihting” the history of English in Alaska (Smith, 2012, 29).

First, Jennifer has situated Alaska in the long history of English worldwide and in the United States, and she has asked students to look for examples of differences in sounds, words, grammar, and discourse patterns that are unique to Alaska. This aspect of the course sets the stage for turning to the history of English in Alaska, makes connections between the long histories of English and Alaskan contexts, and builds students’ analytic repertoires. These initial accounts of the history of English introduce students to the grand narrative of English while also complicating that narrative and contextualizing Alaska in the story, thus priming students for later critique. In a sense, the first part of the course is quite traditional, but it provides a shared backdrop for the subsequent interrogation of history.

Second, Jennifer has developed a unit that highlights the historical struggles, events, periods, and people that have shaped English in Alaska. The unit emphasizes that English is a historical newcomer to Alaska, examines historical legacies of language ideology in Alaska, and unpacks how these ideologies continue to affect people today. This history is not of English alone, but of English in relation to the

myriad Alaska Native languages that have been spoken in the area for thousands of years as well as to many languages that have come to Alaska with immigrants and refugees from around the world. The unit introduces students to Alaskan texts that challenge the grand narrative of English, such as Dauenhauer's historical comparison between the religious and educational language policies of Russian Orthodox and American Presbyterian missions in the 1800s (1997) and Twitchell's closing address for the 2013 Alaska Federation of Natives where he advocated for adding Alaska Native languages as official languages of the state. The unit asks students to critique and even "unlearn" the grand narrative of English while considering their own impact as English speakers in Alaska.

Third, Jennifer has incorporated an undergraduate research project where students investigate English-language artifacts that are somehow related to Alaska. The research project unfolds throughout the course, starting with Jennifer modeling her own inquiry into a photograph from St. Mary's Mission that was taken in 1914 where a group of students sits in front of a sign that reads, "Please, Do Not Speak Eskimo." Students then choose artifacts of their own that they find compelling; their selections have included literary works, historical documents, government texts, cookbooks, speeches, video games, and Facebook posts. Many students have selected texts that highlight the relationship between English and Alaska Native languages. They then examine their artifacts from historical and linguistic perspectives, culminating with a public showcase of their research. As a whole, the student research projects explore the complexity of English in Alaska, ranging from celebrating great English-language literature that has been inspired by the unique Alaskan landscape to exposing the destructive educational, religious, and government practices that continue to threaten many of the indigenous languages and cultures of Alaska. This project invites students to produce new knowledge about Alaska, engages students critically with the history of English in Alaska, and asks students to unpack their own positionalities in relation to language in Alaska.

After thinking about the calls for responsivity described above and discussing Jennifer's course revisions, Heather was encouraged to make Alaska Native rhetorics an integral part of her approach to teaching History of Rhetoric. The official curriculum description of the course foregrounds "study of significant Western rhetorical theories and practices from ancient Greece to contemporary culture" that puts "emphasis on the evolution of rhetorical knowledge and on the historical relationships between rhetoric and culture." Heather found herself asking the following questions in relation to this description: (1) Why are only Western rhetorical theories part of this course? (2) Why is this history configured as an "evolution" that suggests progress over time? (3) What is meant by the word "culture" (singular) in this definition? (4) What experiences, practices, and epistemologies that are relevant to contemporary Alaskan peoples--especially Alaska Native peoples--have been excluded from this description? And (5) How

might this course be more responsive to UAA students?

Heather sought to bring inquiry-as-intellectual-discovery more fully to bear on the delivery of the course and thus shifted the course goal from a statement (Learn about major contributions to the evolving rhetorical tradition) to a question (How do Alaska Native ways of knowing encourage rethinking the history of rhetoric?). Also in the spirit of inquiry, a hallmark of the course was a student-led inquiry project in which Heather asked students to create questions and work in dyads to interview self-identified Alaska Native students. The interviews, which the class came to refer to as “conversations” were meant to allow each dyad to reflect upon what “rhetoric” and “rhetorical practices” look like among Alaska Native peoples and, just as importantly, to open up a discussion space between students and participants. From the start, the shifts from survey to inquiry and from lecture to student-led discovery encouraged students to learn experientially and thus move toward delinking. The student interviews were a way to listen to Alaska Native perspectives and to put those perspectives into conversation with Western narratives of rhetoric. In other words, Heather’s approach was more about process than product. The class’s reading of Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012) in preparation for student-participant conversations compelled students to question the move toward labeling and claiming expertise that is so central to the typical university classroom.

Additionally, Heather relinquished “space” (on the course reading schedule, during class time, and in relation to student writing projects) that would have otherwise been devoted to traditional rhetorical study in order to encourage learning about decoloniality as a habit of mind and epistemic practice. For example, in addition to reading Smith’s book, students read and discussed “Different Knowings and the Indigenous Humanities” (Coleman with Battiste, Henderson, Findlay, & Findlay, 2012) and selections from the proceedings of the 2013 Alaska Native Studies Conference. These readings and subsequent discussions helped the students understand rhetoric and rhetoric’s history *in relation to* educational practices that dismiss or purposefully engage with questions of indigeneity, thus widening the range of purposes the course could serve for those enrolled. In their final projects, students reflected less on what “facts” they learned about rhetorical history and instead focused more on making a persuasive case for why rethinking the history of rhetoric in relation to Alaska Native ways of knowing is a worthwhile endeavor in the English classroom.

Heather attempted to infuse the classroom with collaboration meant to embrace what Mignolo (2007) describes as “build[ing] structures of knowledge that emerge from the *experience* [ . . . ] of marginalization that have been and continue to be enacted through colonial thinking” (p. 492; emphasis added). Toward that end, during the course planning stage, Heather sought feedback from Maria Shaa Tláa Williams, head of the UAA Native Studies Department, and participated in on-



campus professional development related to decolonized methodologies. She also collaborated with Loren Anderson, Cultural Programs Manager at the Alaska Native Heritage Center, in order to devote two class sessions to what Anderson refers to as “cultural training” that helped to prepare students for recognizing that all people have culture even when that culture (e.g., Whiteness) seems invisible. These sites of collaboration have served as building blocks toward cross-cultural understanding, a project that Heather recognizes she will need to work on throughout her career. In other words, collaboration in this instance is not meant to ensure Heather’s mastery over “new” course content, but rather serves as an opportunity to practice deep listening to the perspectives and stories of others and to model how that listening can be a valuable practice in the post-secondary classroom. Such a stance can result in less coverage of course topics as well as less closure (and more questions) by the end of a semester; Heather considers these “sacrifices” to be worthwhile in pursuing alternate approaches to English Studies courses that are responsive to student/local communities’ needs and, thus, serve as potential sites of healing.

### **An Alaskan Approach to English Studies: Student Perspectives**

During the roundtable discussion, Jennifer and Heather posed four questions for students to consider: (1) What was different about taking this class as compared to other English classes that you have taken? (2) From a student perspective, what is one example of place-based or indigenous pedagogies being used in the class(es) that stood out to you? (3) What is one way in which this class was challenging for you, given its local focus? (4) How could you take your learning from these classes into your future personal, school, and/or work lives? Based on the students’ responses to these questions, Jennifer and Heather identified three major themes about the impact of place-based and indigenous pedagogies on students’ learning: gaining critical perspectives, building new knowledge through undergraduate research, and experiencing personal and professional transformations that led to advocacy.

### **Gaining Critical Perspectives**

First, the students shared that this pedagogy helped them to gain critical perspectives about English Studies that destabilized their sense of what they knew. Each of the students identified specific course experiences that challenged and shaped their understanding of English Studies in Alaska, including open dialogue, informal check-ins, and specific curricular materials. Arlo highlighted the format of discussions as central to his learning process. As he stated, in order to have discussions around difficult topics, such as the violence inflicted by the dominant white male Christian culture on women and non-white people globally, the class needed a forum that allowed for conflicting views, unexpected ideas, and equitable allocation of time. Heather created such an environment, which was the most unique aspect of the class design. Arlo also remembered getting pretty stirred up in

class at some points when the group was designing the interview. It was challenging for him to integrate these new feelings, thoughts, and perspectives with his cultural identity. He remembers that he got quiet in class for a while, unsure of how to navigate a newfound validity. Heather noticed and checked in with him, and, according to Arlo, her encouragement helped him. Additionally, several students pointed to curricular materials that supported their learning. For instance, Tayler shared that in *History of English*, the students watched an address by Lance Twitchell that really stood out to her. The format of the speech tied in to the class well, since oral tradition is often a major part of communication in indigenous cultures. The most meaningful part of Twitchell's speech was when he stressed the importance of valuing culture and language and of not getting discouraged and giving up hope. Samantha also observed that one example of place-based pedagogy that was used in *History of English* was the examination of English language in Alaska. The class read several articles about the history of English in Alaska, how different groups used it as a colonial language, and how English has had a harmful effect upon the Native languages in Alaska. She reflected that it was really interesting to actually explore English in the location in which the students were speaking it. In short, practices such as organizing effective discussions, checking in with students, and selecting meaningful curricular materials created opportunities for students to engage with multiple perspectives on the histories of English and rhetoric in Alaska.

Several students specifically described the significance of including Alaska and Alaska Native issues into the classes. As Hailey stated, in most English classes, Alaska really isn't on the radar. Most English classes do not require students to engage in material by Alaskan writers or about Alaska. She found it strange to take classes that felt so relevant, so pertinent to her existence here and now, in her hometown of Anchorage. It was different to realize that, though she had lived in Alaska all her life, she had never really seen Alaska. She never realized how many rich cultures and languages exist in Alaska and how many of those languages and cultures have been decimated by a lack of understanding and compassion for different ways of living, thinking, and knowing. Samantha also observed that the main difference between Jennifer's *History of English Language* class and other English classes that she had taken throughout her time in college is that *History of English* focused on Alaska and the indigenous peoples there. Until she took the class, other than Dr. Breinig's classes on Alaska Native and American Indian literatures, she had never taken a college-level English class that privileged Alaska in any way, either in the course readings or class discussions. Jennifer structured the class so that her students both read scholarship about the presence of English in Alaska and also discussed the harmful effects of English in Alaska as a colonial language. English studies has historically tended to value the canon, and to reject study of any non-canonical texts. However, the *History of English* class did exactly the opposite; the class studied several texts that were extra canonical and discussed the fallacies in

the historical privileging of the canon. As these observations from Hailey and Samantha illustrate, place-based and indigenous pedagogies positioned students' local contexts at the center of the curriculum, which allowed them to see Alaska in new ways. The shift in curriculum simultaneously illuminated the diversity of languages, cultures, and rhetorical and literary traditions in Alaska, while also exposing the difficult historical relationships between Western and Alaska Native worldviews.

Several students also pointed out how the shifts in curriculum let them see their own positions in relation to course content in new ways. As the students described, these new understandings involved emotional, not just intellectual, experiences. As Arlo pointed out, he had already been trained in the classical arts of Western rhetoric through debate and a literary theory class. When the History of Rhetoric class learned about the Sophists and Aspasia, he began to see the powerful influence men had on the creation of "traditional rhetorical techniques" and the sexist gender relations involved. Then the class moved beyond traditional Western rhetoric and introduced indigenous perspectives. Arlo began to see his own Alaskan Native, indigenous, Eskimo, Iñupiaq cultural relationship to "rhetoric" as valid, albeit drastically different from the Western tradition. This perspective was enabled through readings about the New Zealand Maori people and the hypertextuality of wampum belts, as well as in-class discussions. Tayler also described the deeply emotional impact of her experience in the History of English class. As she shared, she became aware of the often devastating effects of English on indigenous cultures and languages. It was difficult to learn how certain policies of the past continue to affect multiple aspects of Alaska Native peoples in the present. As Arlo and Tayler's experiences illustrate, the shifts in curriculum created spaces for students to see their relationship to English Studies from multiple perspectives. Arlo was able to see the value of his Alaska Native and Iñupiaq rhetorical traditions in new ways; Tayler was able to build a critical awareness about how historical relationships have affected and continue to affect Alaska Native people.

### **Generating New Knowledge**

Undergraduate research was a major component of each course's place-based and indigenous approach to English Studies. In the roundtable discussion, each student identified ways that an Alaska-specific approach to English Studies resulted in knowledge building and useful research struggles. Several students discussed the importance of engaging in research to produce new knowledge as central to their learning. Here "new" is used in contrast to traditional approaches to each course; indeed, "new knowledge" might include the reclamation of traditional knowledge systems or the critique of Western assumptions. Arlo, for example, described the interviews he conducted for History of Rhetoric. As he said, the whole process was an illuminating experience, particularly the in-class discussions about

how to structure the questions and the interview itself. He stated that it felt like students were kind of breaking ground with the research project. Class discussions became significant to Arlo because of the combination of these transformative feelings, the studies of the Western rhetorical tradition with all its implicit biases, and his process of seeing his own cultural identity in a different light. Whereas the History of Rhetoric class engaged students in interview-based research, Tayler and Hailey's History of the English Language class focused on archival and text-based research. As Tayler observed, this course was different from other English classes because students chose the focus of their research. This personal choice made the research meaningful to students. Tayler chose her artifact (a poem) because of the emotional response she had when she first read it in another class on Alaska Native literatures. Students also were able to research an area that lacks scholarship, which made Tayler feel that this work was meaningful outside of the classroom. Hailey added that the material students had to sift through to create a meaningful and well-researched project was difficult but valuable--it forced students to hunt through material that was relevant to them as Alaskans and pushed them to uncover history about their home that they may have otherwise overlooked. Together, Arlo, Tayler, and Hailey's reflections highlight the centrality of undergraduate research to their engagement with course content. Each pointed to the relevance of the research projects to their personal interests and identities, their other coursework, and their local context as significant aspects of the projects. They also pointed to the importance of producing new knowledge as an aspect of the projects that shaped their understanding of English Studies in Alaska.

All of the students described productive struggles that they faced while conducting their research projects. Several students pointed out how difficult it was to locate sources and reliable information about their research topics. Hailey shared that it was astounding to see how little information and, paradoxically, how much conflicting information existed on many Alaska Native subjects. When she was researching her final project on the Tlingit "Raven Creation Myth," information was scarce both on the myth and on the Tlingit people. The class was also challenging in that there was not much scholarship on these texts in the first place and very few experts to consult on these matters. It was difficult for Hailey to feel she had authority on these subjects when no one else did. While Hailey emphasized her struggles with finding sources, locating accurate information, and wondering about her own authority to write about her topic, Samantha focused on how she used general scholarship to make a locally based research argument. Like Hailey, the most challenging aspect of History of the English Language was trying to find relevant Alaskan scholarship about the artifact she chose to examine: the 1991 *King Cove Women's Cookbook*. Ultimately, Samantha ended up using more general research on community cookbooks and related that scholarship back to her specific artifact. As Hailey and Samantha's insights highlight, unlike many undergraduate courses that ask students to rehash old arguments in their course projects, the

undergraduate research projects in each of these courses challenged students to engage with Alaska-specific topics. As such, students had to conduct original research that pushed them to create new knowledge with few existing resources.

Hailey also described how she was productively challenged by her multimedia project in History of Rhetoric because the assignment asked students to articulate a rationale for including Alaska Native perspectives and epistemologies into the study of rhetoric. The beauty of diversity became a mantra for Hailey and for her final project. This project forced Hailey to carefully examine why she thought Alaska Native ways of thinking and knowing should be included in the class. For Hailey, making students ruminate on very deep and difficult questions like those introduced by this assignment is the kind of work that changes students. The multimedia project, then, was a pivotal part of her learning. Hailey's experience illustrates engagement with a different sort of knowledge production in which she had to reflect on her own beliefs and argue for the importance of indigenous epistemologies as rhetorical knowledge.

Additionally, Arlo noted the emotional struggle that the research projects raised for many of the students in both classes. Arlo stated that he, along with his class partner (who had been through much of the same sort of Western indoctrination as Arlo had), interviewed a student who self-identified as Alaska Native. It turned out to be more of an emotional experience than the students had anticipated. Arlo was unsure whether that emotion showed up in the transcripts of the interview, though. He knew the interviewee when they were children in rural Alaska and also knows their family, so he knew a little of the history surrounding the answers to some of the questions. Arlo remembered that some of the questions were about how family members communicate. The interview questions were valid enough, but what students of History of Rhetoric had not foreseen when writing the question were the emotions that would get stirred up in the interview. As Arlo's experience shows, the research projects were not only intellectual exercises, but were also deeply personal and emotional experiences that do not neatly fit into Western traditions of research.

### **Taking These Perspectives Forward**

Each of the students expressed an interest in advocating for others to recognize and appreciate the perspectives and knowledge they have gained through these courses. Hailey, for instance, recounted the impact of both classes on her personal relationships, saying that she has already taken what she learned from these classes and applied it in her own life. As Hailey explained, she has probably driven a few friends crazy unpacking their culturally forged ideas about people and place. She sees herself as a better person, a more compassionate person, for having taken these eye-opening courses. She feels privileged to be an advocate for understanding and to be able to have these emotionally charged conversations with

people she loves so that hopefully they can become advocates for changes in perception as well.

Although Arlo's community-based activities did not entirely result from his experiences in History of Rhetoric, he described how his participation in the course influenced two recent projects. First, Arlo described how he used rhetorical insights in his bid for the 2016 NANA Regional Corporation At-Large Board of Directors seat. As he explained, an election publication is sent out to all the corporate stakeholders providing a biography and personal statement for each candidate. His personal statement went out to 8,000 residents of the Northwest Arctic Borough, most of whom are Iñupiaq and many of whom know him and his family personally and professionally. Arlo thus connected this persuasive, rhetorical writing to what he learned in Heather's course. Arlo also reflected on how his thinking about rhetoric influenced a volunteer opportunity that he spearheaded. As Arlo explained, he pulled together a small group of Alaska Native students from UAA to offer a workshop at the 2015 Elders and Youth Conference. The workshop demonstrated the value of debate as a medium for the free and equal exchange of ideas, even when ideas are in conflict. Although Arlo's experience with the UAA Debate Team was a large factor in his leadership of this community project, Arlo connected the value of his initiative with the interventionist and local approach to learning about rhetoric taken in Heather's class, where students grappled with why rhetorical thinking might be relevant to Alaska's diverse residents.

Both Samantha and Tayler saw their learning in History of the English Language as a valuable tool in becoming culturally responsive and ethical future teachers. Samantha explained that learning how to have conversations about the presence of English in Alaska with people from varying backgrounds and with different viewpoints is an incredibly important skill to have, especially for those planning on becoming educators. Taking classes that do not exclusively privilege English, but rather take into account the history of English as it relates to other non-dominant languages, is an important part of studying the language. She believes that it is absolutely necessary to privilege all languages and cultures equally. Understanding that English is not the only beautiful or important language, despite its status as the global *lingua franca*, is one positive step towards being an equal-opportunity educator. As such, she thinks that taking into account the history of language--both the positive and negative histories--when she teaches or learns about English is going to be one major part of History of the English Language that she is going to take into her future. Tayler agreed with this position, adding that she believes that all English Studies courses should challenge their students to view the world from multiple perspectives. She plans on teaching in the future, and the course will definitely affect how she teaches the English language to her students. This course also gave her a new perspective on Alaska Native people and cultures and made her realize how important it is to continue with the revitalization

movement. The level of understanding she gained through this course will affect how she uses language and how she interacts with others. She has gained a new respect and interest for indigenous cultures and all languages.

While Hailey spoke mostly about how her participation in both courses has influenced her interpersonal connections, Arlo connected his thinking about rhetoric in Heather's course to experiences where he can continue to work at the intersection of his Western training and Alaska Native-specific opportunities. Both Samantha and Tayler were able to reconsider their roles as future teachers of English in Alaska because of the experiences they had in Jennifer's course. In sum, all four of these students have expressed concrete ways in which the perspectives they cultivated in the classes have and will continue to shape their personal and professional lives.

### **Conclusion: English Studies as a Site for Healing**

Sharing these course revisions enabled Jennifer, Heather, Hailey, Tayler, Samantha, and Arlo to reflect upon the challenging and rewarding experiences in taking a more responsive, place-based, and delinked approach to two cornerstone courses in English Studies. This essay does not outline a perfect method for course revision, and Jennifer's and Heather's distinct approaches illustrate two methods that each have benefits and limitations. By discussing these pedagogical decisions, Jennifer and Heather were able to ask themselves what is preferable: to achieve a level of expertise in Alaska Native epistemologies *before* revising a course or to address the exigence of a locally responsive curriculum before determining *the best* way to take on such a revision? They concluded that neither option is necessarily superior to the other; instead, they focused on ways to support one another in ethically, mindfully, and respectfully bringing Alaska-specific questions to bear on their courses. Their collaborations (with each other and with community and institutional stakeholders) also helped them imagine how more faculty from across the university might be encouraged to take on such course adaptations with mentorship and professional development.

All four students agreed that English Studies can be--and should be--a site for healing that can begin within a course and can extend beyond the classroom. Both Tayler and Arlo came to view English Studies as a site for recognition, understanding, and perspective-building. Tayler concluded that learning about all aspects of the English language--the positive as well as the negative effects--allows students to realize how valuable and important indigenous languages are. As she said, language is an integral part of a person's identity; she believes that when language is valued, the individual's culture is valued, as well. For Arlo, English Studies is central to the goals of higher education because studying English is not at all about the study of commas and semicolons. He commented that the true focus of the discipline is on the content of words, their form and function, their exigence, and

their effects on societies. English Studies has helped Arlo understand the history and motivations, both unconscious and conscious, of the English-centric cultures that have produced literature. This awareness puts Western civilization in a clearer perspective and helps Arlo juxtapose it with his Alaska Native heritage. This awareness has empowered him through greater understanding of himself, his state, and his world.

Hailey and Samantha both came to value English Studies as a site for healing based on their experiences as English majors who have been exposed to the various ways people use language and to what ends this language use is put. Hailey concluded that many English courses expose students to stories, people, and lives different from their own. In this way, courses promote thought-provoking discussion and, when things are going well, an understanding of worlds and lives that are different from those students grow up knowing. Samantha came to realize that English Studies takes into account histories, places, philosophies, truths, fictions, and other manners of communication. Because English Studies is a place where all of these things converge, it is only right that it then is the place where these things can be deconstructed in such a way that “outsiders” would be able to examine the cause of their historical exclusion from English Studies.

Both Arlo and Hailey developed awareness of how the study of language can make apparent other sites for healing and can point to shared responsibilities for pursuing such repair. Arlo’s reflection on rhetoric’s relationship to power helped him to rethink the healing power of any form of post-secondary education. He now contends that because the University of Alaska has certain powers it therefore is obligated to empower those that enter its classrooms as students. The ivory tower is not all-powerful, but its power to shape students’ understanding of themselves and the world must be acknowledged and addressed responsibly. This can lead to healing of the trauma suffered by people who have lived, sustained, thrived, and learned how to self-govern despite the violence of colonization. According to Arlo, the ability for a people to thrive, live sustainably, and live in reciprocity with not just their own species but with the plants and animals for this amount of time should be proof enough of the significance of Alaska Native culture. Hailey learned that healing happens when there is compassion, and compassion cannot truly exist without understanding. From her perspective, English Studies is the perfect venue for students to learn and begin to understand because, at its core, English Studies is about human beings--our differences, our similarities, our extremities, and our conventions. English Studies has the potential to promote compassion through examining and understanding differences and, therefore, arms students with the tools to promote healing wherever they journey.

Students’ insights about these course revisions along with the research projects they produced in both classes will continue to inform Jennifer and Heather as they take on new iterations of culturally responsive and culturally sustaining



pedagogy. Additionally, both instructors remain open to making changes to their pedagogies and course designs as they seek out opportunities to listen and learn from the many individuals who can help them deepen their awareness of Alaska Native epistemologies, values, needs, and desires.

Finally, both Jennifer and Heather agreed that English educators should not and cannot, ethically, remain neutral bystanders in perpetuating traditions of language study that tacitly condone colonial practices that continue to have devastating effects on the people living in this region of the world. Simply put, English educators are implicated in histories of language and their influences in Alaska. To not engage in these difficult topics is to remain complicit with colonial histories of language. Framing English Studies as a site for healing attempts to disrupt historical knowledge, language practices, and habits of mind that uphold intellectual colonization. By taking such steps, English educators can gradually begin to re-envision English Studies in ways that can continue to unlock its healing potential.

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**Dr. Heather Brook Adams**, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Alaska Anchorage, specializes in rhetoric and writing studies. Heather's feminist research explores rhetorics of shame, reproduction, and motherhood in women's recent history and contemporary culture. Heather teaches various rhetoric and writing courses and writes about feminist pedagogy. Born in Ohio, Heather first came to Alaska as a student of Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English. She worked at a nonprofit in Anchorage before earning her doctoral degree at Pennsylvania State University. Having returned to Alaska, Heather enjoys exploring how place and culture can inform her teaching.

**Tayler Snoddy** is a recent graduate of the University of Alaska Anchorage, where she studied English with a concentration on Secondary Education. She plans to pursue a Masters of Arts in Teaching at UAA. As a born-and-raised Alaskan, she plans to stay in the area and teach at the high school level. Outside of the classroom, Tayler enjoys reading, hiking, and fishing.

**Samantha Mack** is Unangax Aleut, from King Cove, Alaska. She recently graduated from the University of Alaska Anchorage with a double major in English and Political Science and a minor in Alaska Native Studies. During her undergraduate studies Samantha completed her two senior theses: "Signs and Sounds of Maldon: The Semiotics of Translation in The Battle of Maldon" for English and "The Five Civilized Tribes in the United States Civil War" for Political Science. Samantha is pursuing a Master of Arts in English and working as a Teaching Assistant.

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**Arlo Nasruk Davis** holds a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in dance from the University of Alaska Anchorage. He recently spent time living in his home village of Selawik, Alaska with his Iñupiaq grandparents studying the Iñupiaq language and fighting wildland fires. In his spare time he is bringing the men of his community together to address the current living conditions in rural Alaska. Arlo has traveled to nineteen countries and many states. He currently attends the Arctic and Northern Studies Master's program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.