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## Readers' Theatre: An Organic Inquiry in Alaska Awakening Possibilities in a Living Spiral of Understanding

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**Abstract:** Organic Inquiry, as the qualitative research design method, provided for a richness of data to more fully appreciate how 24 diverse adult learners in Alaska described their experience with Readers' Theatre as cancer education both during a workshop and over time that allowed for reflection and contemplation.

*We don't talk about it (cancer)—the Big C—that's how we walked around our family, "Oh, she's got the Big C." But you know we whispered it and stuff. – Participant*

Cancer among Alaska Native people is often not talked about, keeping a shroud of silence intact, reinforcing the ways in which health disparities and social injustices remain invisible. Sorrow ... silence ... fear ... anger ... death ... weigh heavily among Alaska Native people. As shared anonymously on a cancer education course evaluation, "My sister died of denial of cancer. If only we had talked sooner... my sister may still be alive today," lingers loudly, haunting my mind, and piercing my heart.

Could Readers' Theatre serve as a culturally respectful way to bridge the often difficult conversation of cancer? Might Readers' Theatre as scripted stories, serve as a springboard for cross-cultural dialogue, freeing imagination for the hopeful discovery of possibilities?

*The C-word, it's a deadly word to some people. I lost my parents to cancer. My daughter—just recently my daughter was diagnosed. Even coming from the village, you are a family. Whether there are 800 people or 300 people; that's your family.*

*– Participant.*

A single cancer diagnosis affects the entire community. Cancer, considered a rare disease among Alaska Native people as recently as the 1950s (Brown et al., 1952), is currently the leading cause of mortality. Cancer rates for Alaska Native people are among the highest of any ethnic group in the US and rates are increasing (Lanier et al., 2006). The numbers of new Alaska Native people diagnosed with cancer each year increased nearly four-fold over a 35-year-period (1969-2003). Cancer death rates for Alaska Native people during 1998-2002 were 30% higher than rates in the US White population, while cancer survival rates were 17% lower than US White people. There is a need to speak out if all the health disparities and isms are to become extinct ... racism ... sexism ... ageism ... if we are to become whole as people.

Alaska Native people have a rich storytelling tradition grounded in a dynamic, experientially based, oral culture. Warner (2003) contrasts western and indigenous cultural understandings, describing how the written word is "...dead and dry, interrupting the process of listening, seeing and understanding with the heart. Speech, however, is alive and moist, carried outward on the breath" (p. 15). Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley

(2006) described his Yupik oral orientation, “Hearing stories being told allowed the hearers to savor the words and visualize the events, becoming part of the story. The modern written word is useful for many things but it removes the reader from the human interaction element” (p. 16). Readers’ Theatre as story embraces the oral tradition as a viable means of knowing, indigenous to many cultures.

As adult educators, it is important to explore pathways for learning and teaching that span cultures to connect people with diverse worldviews, values, and belief systems, including being attentive to the interconnectedness of the human, natural, and spiritual worlds as reflected in indigenous cultures. It is crucial to expand understanding beyond the confines of a literate tradition to include an oral tradition. Culturally respectful adult education blends traditional ways of knowing with new understandings to illuminate possibilities and choices. By increasing awareness of another way of experiencing the world, an opportunity exists to add depth and dimension to the learning environment.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Many diverse interpretations and spellings of Readers’ Theatre exist. I have chosen the plural form of Readers, which supports my belief that learning and understanding happen in community. Coupled with Readers’ is Theatre, which I prefer over Theater as a more globally inclusive spelling to respect people from diverse backgrounds. Linked to Readers’ as a possessive is Theatre, which belongs to the people; it is theirs to create and use in meaningful ways. Readers’ Theatre as an adult learning modality invites both the readers and listeners to become active participants from the comfort of a tangible, hand-held, non-memorized script. The focus shifts from performance to engagement. Readers are situated among the listeners in a talking circle. Harold Napoleon (1996) in his book *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* discussed the ‘Talking Circle’ as a place where the “truth can be spoken about all things...to share oneself, and one’s experiences, feelings and thoughts” (p. 28). Active engagement in the process of Readers’ Theatre taps into the circuits of consciousness that arouse imagination and invite connections. It is the reading aloud and simultaneous listening of a script by two or more people as a vehicle to open our hearts and minds.

Readers’ Theatre as story embraces a wholistic, interconnected process of living and learning as participants actively engage in creating meaning both individually and collectively through reflection and conversation. Freire’s theory of pedagogy (1992) highlighted dialogue and collaborative activity as essential to the learning process. Cajete (1994) shared, “Through story we explain and come to understand ourselves. Story in creative combination with encounters, experiences, image making, ritual, play, imagination, dream and modeling, forms the basic foundation of all human learning and teaching” (p. 68).

### **Research Design**

#### *Methodology*

Culturally respectful ways of inquiry were paramount to this study. Through the use of Organic Inquiry (Clements et al, 1999) this study endeavored to bridge the limitations of traditional research methodologies as articulated by Cajete (1994), “Objectivist research has contributed a dimension of insight, but it has substantial limitations in the multidimensional, holistic, and relational reality of Indigenous people”

(p. 20). Organic Inquiry as a research design method encompasses many pathways for making meaning.

Organic Inquiry took root in 1994 growing out of transpersonal psychology, feminist theory, and spirituality. Learning is viewed as a dynamic, interconnected journey that requires being attentive to spiritual, visceral, affective, cognitive, and physical elements. The five guiding principles of Organic Inquiry respect diverse ways of knowing and being: the sacred, the personal, the chthonic, the relational, and the transformative. Curry and Wells (2003) added a sixth principle, numinous, as the balance to the chthonic, which was not included in the original model of Organic Inquiry. **Sacred** acknowledges the interconnectedness of living and learning. When we engage in authentic dialogue we enter a sacred place where care and reverence are essential. As an adult educator, I am entrusted with people's stories, words, and experiences, which lay bare vulnerabilities. The **personal** was shared in the naming of who I am and who I am becoming as a researcher, respectfully sharing this journey to learn with and from participants. **Chthonic** is described in Organic Inquiry as the place of unrest where we grapple with our fears, insecurities, and doubts. Challenged by the discomfort of the chthonic we are invited to grow and learn in new ways. The principle of the **numinous** balances the chthonic as a guiding source of inspiration or way of direct knowing, often revealed in ah-ha moments of understanding. The **relational** invites interconnected ways of knowing and supports an equality in power, manifest as research 'with'. The **transformative** invites growth or change, subtle or dramatic in the researcher's, participants', and you, the readers', understanding or behavior. Change may be individual or part of a collective experience with action being manifest internally and/or externally. The principles of Organic Inquiry created a wholistic inquiry.

### *Research Questions*

Through the experience of 24 diverse adult learners in Alaska, this Organic Inquiry discovered how Readers' Theatre created a respectful environment for both readers and listeners to engage in meaningful conversations that invited critical questioning, explored diverse perspectives, celebrated intuitive, affective, and cognitive ways of knowing, awakened individual possibility, and embraced the work of co-creating meaning. *Understanding* the 45-minute cancer education Readers' Theatre script used in this study grew out of Alaskan's experiences and concerns related to cancer. The following research questions guided this journey of discovery.

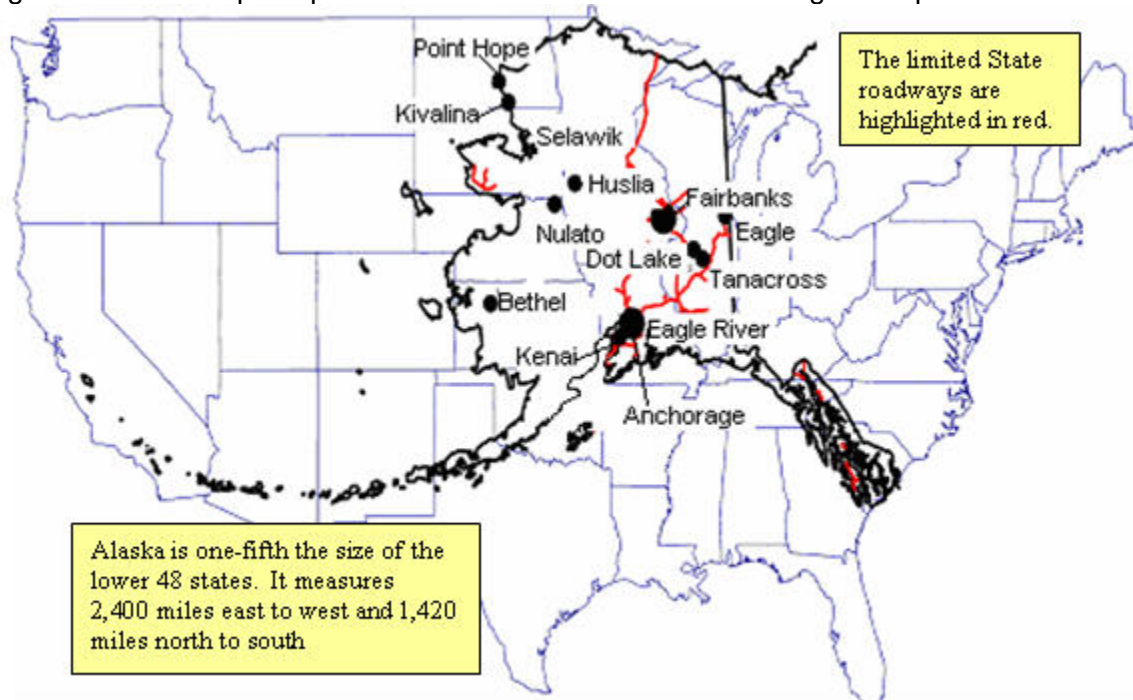
1. What effect does Readers' Theatre have on both the readers and listeners?
2. How do participants describe their Readers' Theatre experience?
3. How is Readers' Theatre described as a culturally respectful way to facilitate learning?
4. How does the experience of Readers' Theatre awaken possibility in conversation with others leading to praxis?

### *Modes of Data Collection and Participant Demographics*

Understanding, as experienced through the visceral, affective, cognitive, and spiritual domains, emerged from two Readers' Theatre workshops with a post-reading written reflection and discussion and a follow-up interview conversation two to three months later along with journaling and field notes. The first three hour workshop was audio recorded and part of a week-long cancer education course held in Fairbanks for

Community Health Practitioners, the village based primary providers of health care in rural Alaska. Five Athabascan women and one Caucasian woman from small, remote villages participated. The second two and one-half hour workshop was video recorded and held in Anchorage as part of the annual Alaska Health Summit. There were 18 participants, 16 women and two men. Ethnicity varied among participants; six people were Alaska Native including: Tlingit, Inupiat, Yupik, and Aleut; one person was Chippewa; one person was Asian; one person was Hispanic; and nine people were Caucasian. The age range for all participants was 25 to 63 years. Additionally, to allow for reflection, contemplation, and shifts in how participants' think, feel, or act, a semi-structured interview conversation ranging from 30 minutes to 2 ½ hours was conducted two to three months after the Readers' Theatre workshops; 14 by telephone, due to Alaska's vastness, and 9 in person. One participant was unable to be reached for an interview. Throughout this study, participants were invited to comment about how I shared their words and shaped the presentation of findings. I sought participant guidance to affirm that I was respectful in honoring the sacredness of all that I was entrusted with, to wholistically communicate with future readers.

Figure 1: Alaska Superimposed over the Continental US showing Participant Locations



Readers' Theatre workshops were held in Fairbanks and Anchorage (the two large black dots). The 24 diverse adult learners were from the named communities as shown on the map (smaller black dots): Anchorage (10 participants), Bethel (2 participants), Dot Lake, Eagle, Eagle River, Fairbanks (2 participants), Huslia, Kenai, Kivalina, Nulato, Point Hope, Selawik, and Tanacross.

### *Means of Analysis*

Data analysis was a wholistic, interconnected journey embracing all the sources of data available to this study, both independently and collectively, for unique responses and

thematic content. The uniqueness of each participant's story added a deeper understanding of the complexity of a learning experience. Emergent themes wove the fabric of commonality connecting the experience of diverse adult learners.

The process of Organic Inquiry guided me to avail myself of all my senses. Meditative critical reflection invited me to absorb the data. Extended time was an important step in data analysis, which provided an opportunity to live with the words, stories, and experiences as shared by participants for the layers of understanding to be revealed.

Organic Inquiry also uses a 'Resonance Panel' as a sounding board for clarifying ideas and verifying interpretations. This was influenced by Rosemarie Anderson's (1998) application of the concept 'sympathetic resonance' (p. 73) to the field of human sciences research. The principle of sympathetic resonance is used by Anderson as "a validation procedure for the researcher's particular insights and syntheses" (p. 73). I utilized resonance participants to explore themes and ideas to safeguard against perpetuating my hidden bias.

### **Findings and Conclusions: Pathways for Practice**

As participants described how Readers' Theatre supported their learning, seven expressive threads emerged which provide the living fabric for Readers' Theatre as a pathway for adult education: feelings, learning, laughter, story, communication, power, and transformation. The Readers' Theatre experience held a place for people to experience different perspectives, learn new information, create fresh understandings, and feel and express in a variety of ways. Participants also expressed a sense of renewal and affirmation. Laughter was experienced as a natural response to conversation and was described as a source of nourishment, strength, and healing that supported learning and enhanced memory retention. In the words of a participant, "*If you don't have fun while you are learning than everything you are learning is just not going to stick.*" Through story, participants engaged in a multisensory learning journey, which invited interconnected ways of knowing and understanding. Listeners and readers alike became time travelers, reliving past memories as well as considering future options, the vicarious trying on of another's garments of experiences and perceptions. Thus the Readers' Theatre script became woven into the lives of each participant, tugging, challenging, and affirming. Readers' Theatre connected with participants affectively to discover deeper understanding. "*I felt it really speaks to people inside. I saw or sensed much more internalization of messages because it touches people's feelings. It bypasses the whole cognitive rational mindset and goes straight to people's hearts where our wisdom really lies.*" Participants described shifts in meaning perspectives as they gained new insight in conversation with others. As shared by a participant,

*I think for me the thing that changed or shifted was realizing the importance of talking about cancer and that is something we don't do. I think Readers' Theatre makes it easier to talk about more difficult conversations. We don't talk about cancer in the village. Nobody talks about my Aunt's cancer and we don't talk about my Uncle's death. Nobody talks about it and I think you should. It is really important it can help us begin to heal.*

Readers' Theatre was described as a culturally respectful pathway for learning. Everyone was invited to enter into the conversation through story, facilitating participants' active engagement in their learning journey. By giving voice through scripted conversations, topics often difficult to discuss are made audible, no longer destined to

remain at the fringe of our subconscious or haunting the depths of our conscious unable to filter into accepted conversations. The strength of Readers' Theatre lies in the transformational journey of each participant as she or he engages in conversation, reflection, and action in community with others. Readers' Theatre created a place for participants to courageously enter the challenging conversation of cancer. *"There are always difficult conversations and this to me is like the ultimate ice breaker."* The script also provided words for participants to begin to talk,

*For me, Readers' Theatre has helped out a lot, just reading the words of Margie (a character in the play). I can tell people now that I have had breast cancer and I don't cry. Reading that part made me realize that cancer is not something you should deal with on your own but it is something you should share and get out, instead of holding it in.*

Readers' Theatre entered the silence of cancer, reflecting hope.

### **Implications for Adult Education: Expanding the Spiral**

Readers' Theatre as a learning modality for adult education nurtured healing, renewal, affirmation, and shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, which empowered action. Participants described being actively engaged in their learning journey. Adult education includes pathways for bringing people together to create a place for genuine communication of diverse ideas and perspectives, enriched through respectful active listening and reflective talking, both roles embraced through Readers' Theatre as expressed by participants. "I was a listener so for me it was an opportunity to just be present for each other...doesn't happen much in a person's day." "As a listener, Readers' Theatre allowed an opportunity to be introspective ...created an opportunity for critical reflection." In the words of a participant who read a character role aloud, "I think it is a great tool because the spoken word allows you to verbalize and I think we get things by speaking them. I value spoken word and that process. Strong oral story traditions resonate with our community, the community I grew up in and that's very typical of Alaska Communities, but that is also cross cultural."

To collaboratively expand the world of possibility is at the heart of adult education. It is worthy to facilitate learning environments, which foster creativity and nurture one's potential in new dimensions. Knowledge is often not enough to elicit personal growth through shifts in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors however the stories shared through Readers' Theatre brought diverse adult learners together in a community where people laughed, cried, expressed, and discussed meaningful topics. Participants left renewed or pondering possibilities.

As adult educators, it is vital to embrace learning pathways that support the potential of diverse adult learners to move beyond existing understandings to discover and explore other perspectives and knowledge claims. Readers' Theatre created a respectful environment for adult learners from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in Alaska to engage in meaningful conversations that awakened possibilities in a living spiral of understanding.

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