By Margery Ginsberg and Anthony Craig

One way to approach the improvement of instruction is for educators to learn from student interactions in cultural events that fully engage students’ motivation and curiosity. In such a context, educators get to know students in new ways and to connect student strengths to classroom instruction. This can be especially powerful when the learning context is a shared and collaborative experience among educators.

Two elementary school staffs came together to learn from the interactions of American Indian students and families through participation in the Tulalip Tribes’ Salmon Ceremony. Such cultural events in communities throughout the United States have the potential to stimulate new ideas for teachers to create more inclusive, relevant, and engaging learning environments.

Although we are cautious about educators making hasty conclusions about entire groups of people from limited interactions, we believe that, with knowledgeable community members and elders as guides, significant community events provide educators with opportunities to understand expectations and interactions in ways that might not be possible otherwise. The implications for teaching and learning in schools are profound.

BACKGROUND

As is true for many school districts, the teachers in Marysville School District in Washington state, most of European-American descent, teach students from communities where the process of socialization generally differs from educators’ own childhood experiences. With this in mind, Marysville School District has focused a portion of teachers’ professional learning on ways to create greater congruence between the strengths that students exhibit in their communities and opportunities to learn in the more formal context of school. The importance of connecting the culture of the community to the culture of the classroom has
A well-established legacy in educational research (Vygotsky, 1978; Mohatt & Erikson, 1981; Heath, 1983; Au & Kawakami, 1985; Zeichner, 1995; Gay, 2000). In addition to the potential of such connections for democratic pluralism, scholars and practitioners commonly agree that helping students to bridge the participation structures in their homes and communities with the structures found in most classrooms is foundational to academic success.

As authors, we also believe that collaborative learning among teachers in a shared context can build a collective

An elder drums at a Salmon Ceremony of the Tulalip Tribes in Washington state.

Drumbeats begin the annual Salmon Ceremony of the Tulalip Tribes of Washington state.

Educators from two elementary schools in Marysville, Wash., studied and attended the ceremony to learn from traditions that serve children well.
commitment to instructional innovation. One of us has been an educator in American Indian communities and one is American Indian and currently teaches in an Indian community. Ultimately, our hope is to encourage pedagogical imagination without reducing children and community members to static lists of presumed characteristics and learning styles.

To guide the process of bridging community-school interests, Marysville School District, which serves the indigenous communities of the Tulalip Tribes, has established a district-level RESPECT committee. The goal of this committee is to strengthen the districts’ commitment to equitable student performance. With a focus on teaching and learning that is inclusive, relevant, engaging, and valuable to learners and families, the committee recognizes that content-focused instruction is insufficient without a fundamental awareness of and respect for learner diversity and motivation. Marysville recognizes that opportunities for teachers to strengthen their cultural awareness require reaching outside of the usual context of professional development. In particular, community gatherings can be valuable occasions to learn from traditions that have historically served children well.

Here we describe one of several ways that schools and districts can develop a professional learning agenda focused on attending community events to build upon teachers’ understanding of children’s strengths. Although our example focuses on how and what teachers learned from attending a significant ceremonial event, the Tulalip experience sheds light on professional learning opportunities that exist in communities everywhere.

OrientATioN To A COMMUNITY GATHERING

To reach out to local educators, a member of the district’s RESPECT committee (one of the authors) drafted an invitation to educators in two elementary schools to attend the practice session for the Tulalip community’s annual Salmon Ceremony and the actual ceremony. The invitation set the stage for learning from students’ cultural context and stressed the importance of the Salmon Ceremony to the Tulalip community.

Educators from both elementary schools responded to the invitation with resounding interest. In nearly full attendance, teachers and school administrators gathered for a four-hour preliminary session to learn about the ceremony and to develop a focus to guide their own instructional understanding and imagination.

WHat aRe ThE ChiLDREn LEARNiNG?

To sharpen teachers’ focus on student strengths and knowledge, the initial learning agenda included a 10-minute video clip of a previous ceremony. As educators watched, they were asked to keep in mind the questions, “What can you tell about what the children are learning, and how? What are some of the strengths that children exhibit that might have implications for teaching and learning?” The videotaped ceremony stimulated discussion for participants.

This description captures elements of the videotaped ceremony practice.

As the familiar drumbeat of the Snohomish Welcome Song begins, 100 singers and drummers enter the Tulalip Longhouse.

As is traditional, three head women lead the procession, followed by the eldest male drummers beating their hand drums and raising their hands to greet and thank all visitors who have come to lend support as tribal members pay honor to the first returning King Salmon of the season.

Intermingled among these elder drummers, singers, and dancers, one sees dozens of young children ranging in age from toddler to teen joining in with a focused reverence. As the ceremony unfolds, not a single participant, adult or child, steps out of line. Each participant appears to feel a responsibility for this important work. Every song, dance, and story compels tribal members of all ages to sing and dance in order to conduct the ceremony as it has been for generations.

The beauty and power of ancient songs and dances come alive in the young children as they dance around the three sacred fires on the dirt floor of the longhouse. The importance of the youth in the survival of this culture is evident as this short video clip comes to a close.
# Inclusion

## RESPECT AND CONNECTEDNESS

### A TEACHING RUBRIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routines and rituals are present that contribute to respectful learning (e.g. norms are clear, cooperative learning).</th>
<th>Clear evidence</th>
<th>Possible evidence</th>
<th>No evidence at this time</th>
<th>Ideas/ questions</th>
<th>Connection to learning from community culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers comfortably and respectfully interact with each other for social and academic support (students support each other’s learning).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers share a relationship that may be subtle (e.g. students share thinking, humor used mutually).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher arranges activities to allow for closeness and independence.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher acknowledges students’ identities and membership in cultural groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### MORE TOOLS ONLINE

- Invitation for educators to the ceremony.
- Agenda for the initial learning experience.
- Rubrics
  - **Attitude:** Choice and personal/cultural relevance.
  - **Meaning:** Challenge and engagement.
  - **Competence:** Authenticity and effectiveness.

---

MoReTools ONLINE
www.nsdc.org/news/jsd/
Seeking to create for teachers the same conditions for learning that we seek for students, the goals for the initial teacher preparation session, participation in the Salmon Ceremony, and the follow-up debrief were to develop an understanding of Tulalip First Salmon Ceremony, establish common understanding regarding the potential of a community context as a site for learning, and experience a community gathering to learn more about cultural strengths, talents, and values to integrate with teaching and learning in classrooms.

The agenda for the initial professional learning clarified the purpose, what participants would be able to know and do as a result of the learning, and the resource materials available to inform their thinking. Among the materials was an article from Educational Leadership entitled “Lessons at the Kitchen Table,” (Ginsberg, 2007). The article served as an entry point into a discussion on what to look for at the Salmon Ceremony and the importance of a focus on community strengths or funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Awareness of such strengths can yield valuable clues for how teachers might further develop their own classroom expectations and learning interactions with students. For example, a strength that a teacher of young children might notice as part of the Salmon Ceremony are the clear norms of collaboration that are demonstrated by elders and youth for younger children who are learning ceremonial protocol. Teachers might also notice various forms of narration throughout the ceremony — for example, the use of story, song, and movement.

APPLYING INSIGHTS FROM CULTURAL EVENTS

During the initial learning, we asked teachers to list their observations and insights after seeing the practice ceremony video clip. After attending the practice ceremony in person, or, for some teachers, the actual ceremony, teachers replicated this in a personal journal or with a partner.

During the follow-up session, teachers were asked to list their learning, and experience a community gathering to learn more about cultural strengths, talents, and values to integrate with teaching and learning in classrooms.

The letter also included an approach for teachers who would attend the actual ceremony. Underscoring the privilege of going behind the scenes of this ancient ceremony, teachers were asked to focus on how children are taught and the high expectations that are held for them. They were also asked to record their thoughts after the ceremony to aid their collective memory for a follow-up discussion where participants would apply insights to instructional practice.

Setting the stage for educators to learn from a community gathering was, in some ways, easier than developing a follow-up session to make sense of and apply insights to classroom environments. Most teachers are willing to extend themselves beyond the boundaries of the schoolhouse if they believe there will be a way to use experiences to construct more effective classrooms. However, the easiest initial bridges to build after attending any event are often the superficial ones. Clearly, being an attentive witness does not necessarily translate into being a discerning interpreter. At the same time, with guidance from community members, thinking through some of the threads of a story can lead to understanding aspects of students’ potential that can be forgotten in the rush of a school day.

PRACTICE CEREMONY FOLLOW-UP

Following the practice for the Salmon Ceremony, one of the authors sent a letter thanking teachers for being present and showing their enthusiasm and love for students and the community. As several participants noted, it had been a great evening, full of learning and culture. The letter included comments from the families about their children's excitement to see their teachers: “They were so proud to tell anybody who would listen, ‘That’s my teacher!’ and ‘My teacher is here!’ ”

The letter also included an approach for teachers who would attend the actual ceremony. Underscoring the privilege of going behind the scenes of this ancient ceremony, teachers were asked to focus on how children are taught and the high expectations that are held for them. They were also asked to record their thoughts after the ceremony to aid their collective memory for a follow-up discussion where participants would apply insights to instructional practice.

We used this list and its insights to revise teaching rubrics based on generic ideas about supporting intrinsic motivation across student groups. Our goal was to assist teachers in providing instruction that is motivating and culturally responsive. Although classrooms may not elicit children’s intrinsic motivation in ways that are similar to a community’s deep collective memory and norms, they can approximate the conditions upon which children’s learning thrives.

We planned to take the revised rubrics to a concluding gathering with teachers, where we could apply the revised rubrics to...
a videotaped elementary school literacy lesson to apply the professional learning to ongoing instruction and reconsider classroom practices. One of the teachers had volunteered to have one of her lessons with students taped and to reflect with the group on the lesson. (See one example of a revised rubric on p. 39.)

“NOTICINGS” AND “WONDERS”

After watching the video of the classroom lesson and using the rubrics to assess the lesson, teachers offered feedback for each category. Their feedback was communicated as “noticings” and “wonders” on a two-column chart. “Noticings” are attributes of the lesson that clearly connect to student motivation. “Wonders” are probing questions that allow teachers to think more deeply about their practice.

Following the video, teachers noted the high student energy, concentration, and effort they saw during the lesson. Teachers believed that the revised rubrics were more congruent with the tribal communities’ values and norms. Changes within the rubric included new considerations regarding multiple opportunities for children to learn, based on observations of the ceremony that included repetition, learning from elders and older youth, singing, physical movement, various stories, and ways of developing collective memory. Another set of changes to the rubrics focused on expectations of success, based on observations such as clear demonstrations of expectations, use of approximation, lack of distinction among who belongs to whom, and the example of elders as committed learners.

EXTENDING NEW LEARNING WITHOUT A BLUEPRINT

Most teachers were able to watch the ceremony practice video, attend the practice for the ceremony, and attend the ceremony itself. Reflecting on the importance of these experiences as educators, they spoke of the potential of community learning to evoke memory, emotion, and new learning. They also indicated an interest in extending the use of the rubrics to their own professional practice. For example, several teachers mentioned that they would like to strengthen their knowledge of motivation and culture through collaborative lesson design, co-teaching, and peer-feedback with American Indian colleagues.

Educational researchers and theorists are clear about the importance of instruction on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Brophy, 2004; Gay, 2000). They are also clear that culture and motivation are inseparable from learning (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000). At a time when there are many frameworks and approaches to implement them, there are still no blueprints for understanding and improving upon the cultural nuance of classroom norms and interactions. Fortunately, there are communities willing to help us learn.

REFERENCES


Margery Ginsberg (ginsbm@u.washington.edu) is associate professor of education at the University of Washington-Seattle. Anthony Craig (acraig@u.washington.edu) is an instructional coach in the Marysville School District (Marysville, Wash.) and a member of the Tulalip Indian community.
Tradition becomes the teacher

Community events enrich educators’ professional learning

By Margery Ginsberg and Anthony Craig

Article published in August 2010 JSD by National Staff Development Council
Dear colleagues:

As an educator in the Tulalip community, I have heard many questions about how we might improve our teaching of Tulalip tribal students. How can we make our classrooms culturally relevant and appropriate? How can we bring culture into our schools? How can we get families more involved in their child’s learning? What can we do to help our students learn?

We ask these questions and many others as we make a genuine effort to improve the teaching and learning in our classrooms for our Tulalip students. There is not a one-dimensional answer for any of our questions. Many answers we seek lie in the tribal community. The tribal culture has survived and thrived for many generations. Through the teaching of customs and traditions, children have always been, and remain, critical to the survival of a people. So … how are Tulalip children taught in the community? How is it that they learn so much in these cultural contexts? How can we humbly become students of these traditional teachers and learners?

The Tulalip Tribes First Salmon Ceremony is an ancient tradition that has been passed down for generations from elder to child — surviving colonization to become one pillar of this tribal community’s identity and place in the world. While ancient, the ceremony is also a living example of how a tribe educates its members, even in our contemporary times. While there may be volumes written about the learning styles of American Indians and many published curricula targeted for our students, this is a learning opportunity that must be experienced. What we can learn together in our own community cannot be found in any book.

The Salmon Ceremony is open to the public. The Tulalip tribes welcome visitors to witness the arrival and celebration of the first king salmon of the year. Members of all ages join in this occasion. Our students and their families will be present. This is a great opportunity for us as educators to not only join them in celebration, but also to reflect on what makes tribal teaching and learning so uniquely powerful for the same children who sometimes leave us confused.

Let’s join together as learners to begin to answer some of our questions and seek to improve our instructional practice for our students. On June 11, 2009, we will gather at Tulalip Elementary and Tulalip Tribal Center to begin our discussion about how we can learn from this tradition. We will discuss attendance at the Salmon Ceremony on June 20, 2009, and plan how it will impact our instruction next year.

RSVP by Friday, June 5, 2009. Please join us. Your voice is important!

The following outline may be useful to educators in other communities who seek to structure learning experiences within a cultural context and whose preparation time is limited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>What do we want participants to know and be able to do?</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>What materials are needed?</th>
<th>What will they be able to do as a result?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 4:00-4:15  | There are many like-minded educators in our school district working to provide students with relevant and powerful education. | • Introductions and personal goal setting.  
• Quick write: What do you hope to learn or accomplish by the end of this work?  
• Quick write: What questions do you have about how to use cultural understanding in your instruction? | Quick write form.             | Develop a network of educators dedicated to culturally responsive instruction. Frame thinking around teaching in response to culture. |
| 4:15-4:20  | The Tulalip First Salmon Ceremony plays a vital role in perpetuating the Tulalip livelihood and way of being. There are many layers of teaching and learning required to carry on a traditional ceremony. | Reading of *The Story of the Salmon Ceremony* adapted from a story told by Bernie ‘kia-kia’ Gobin. | Recorded story.                        | Understand traditional and spiritual purpose of Salmon Ceremony. |
| 4:20-4:50  | Culturally relevant teaching can be developed from information gained from the cultures and lives of our students. We can learn from our students' strengths and talents and enrich our curriculum and pedagogy. | • Funds of knowledge; home/community visits.  
• Read article with idea of Salmon Ceremony in mind. What can we learn in a community context?  
What have learned that we’ll keep in mind as we experience the Salmon Ceremony? What questions will we carry? | Article: *Lessons at the Kitchen Table*, by Margery B. Ginsberg. | As educators, we can approach our experiences in traditional settings positively in order to learn about our students, their families, and traditions. We can use this approach to improve our classrooms/schools. |
| 4:50-5:10  | Everybody has a critical role in the Salmon Ceremony — today’s leaders/teachers were once learners. The young children are nurtured to be tomorrow’s leaders. Teaching is intentional because learning is critical. | • Show Salmon Ceremony video (10 min. segment).  
• What can you tell about what the children are learning, and how?  
• Create a funds of knowledge chart. | Video clip, chart paper. | Educators can create a funds of knowledge chart to help process notes and capture insights. |
| 5:15       | TRANSITION TO TRIBAL CENTER.                           |                                                                            |                            |                                          |
| 5:30-7:30  | Everybody has a critical role in the Salmon Ceremony — today’s leaders/teachers were once learners. The young children are nurtured to be tomorrow’s leaders. Teaching is intentional because learning is critical. | Participate/observe tribal gathering as community prepares for Salmon Ceremony. |                            | Educators will take field notes and focus on strengths and talents of students. |
| 7:30       | Tulalip students have many resources in their lives that could be reflected in our classrooms. | • Quick write: Take time to complete field notes.  
• Quick write (as an exit pass):  
Something you’ve learned or remember and something you are looking forward to learning. | Quick write form, chart paper. | Educators can create a funds of knowledge chart to help process notes and capture insights. |

## Inclusion

### RESPECT AND CONNECTEDNESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routines and rituals are present that contribute to respectful learning (e.g. norms are clear, cooperative learning).</th>
<th>Clear evidence</th>
<th>Possible evidence</th>
<th>No evidence at this time</th>
<th>Ideas/questions</th>
<th>Connection to learning from community culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers comfortably and respectfully interact with each other for social and academic support (students support each other’s learning).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers share a relationship that may be subtle (e.g. students share thinking, humor used mutually).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher arranges activities to allow for closeness and independence.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher acknowledges students’ identities and membership in cultural groups.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Attitude

### CHOICE AND PERSONAL/CULTURAL RELEVANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear evidence</th>
<th>Possible evidence</th>
<th>No evidence at this time</th>
<th>Ideas/questions</th>
<th>Connection to learning from community culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classes are taught with a clear structure for participation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students make choices related to learning that include experiences, values, needs, and strengths.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are able to participate in multiple ways.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher varies how students learn (discussion, music, personal interaction).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Marysville (Wash.) School District, adapted from Ginsberg (2003).
### Meaning

**CHALLENGE AND ENGAGEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear evidence</th>
<th>Possible evidence</th>
<th>No evidence at this time</th>
<th>Ideas/questions</th>
<th>Connection to learning from community culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students actively participate in challenging ways (e.g. movement, rhythm/voice, art, apprenticeship, inquiry, quiet moments for thought).</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher asks questions that go beyond facts and encourages students to learn from different points of view.</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher offers genuine support without “hovering” or forcing one way of thinking or participating.</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher respectfully encourages high-quality responses and encourages approximation.</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
<td>No evidence at this time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Marysville (Wash.) School District, adapted from Ginsberg (2003).
## Competence

**AUTHENTICITY AND EFFECTIVENESS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear evidence</th>
<th>Possible evidence</th>
<th>No evidence at this time</th>
<th>Ideas/ questions</th>
<th>Connection to learning from community culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher shares or develops with students clear criteria for success (e.g. rubrics, elders, and older students as examples).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading policies and assessment are consistent and predictable.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are performances and demonstrations that allow students to connect learning to their own cultural context.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment includes student values and opportunities to share knowledge with others.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher offers direct, constructive feedback considering economy of words.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Marysville (Wash.) School District, adapted from Ginsberg (2003).