

***Shaped by the Landscape:
Communities and Classrooms***

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I visited Alaska for the first time almost a decade ago, for a special session on teacher research in Anchorage. I'd heard about the Alaska teacher research network for a long time, and I was a little anxious about meeting teachers who were supporting each other's research in many ways but most notably, in my view, by staying in touch electronically, because of the distances between them, and meeting face to face on every possible occasion, in spite of the distances. About fifty teachers were at the teacher research session, and I was struck by their familiarity, if not intimacy, with each other's places and practices. Very different from the common knowledge that teachers from other states might have at the same kind of meeting. I guess I had an idea that the numbers of English teachers in Alaska was as vast as the land itself. What I found was a relatively small number of teachers, widely separated but with significant shared knowledge of each other's histories, relationships and circumstances.

Over the years, I learned more about the numbers as I met teachers whose districts covered 80,000 square miles and teachers who lived and taught on small islands. From my perspective, having known so many rural communities where schools are only instructional sites, it seemed to me that many Alaska schools were centers of social and communal life. I gradually became aware in the most limited way of some bits of the natural history of the state and of the difficult balance between modern and traditional ways. I gradually came to understand that in Alaska the land has shaped unique teacher communities where individuality is constituted by membership, by coming together — from vast distances and also from the close quarters of island and village life.

With my colleagues at the Bread Loaf School of English, especially Jim Maddox and Rocky Gooch, I have learned many lessons from Alaska teachers about forming and sustaining professional networks that draw on individual needs and talents and that rely

on teachers' resourcefulness and expertise, networks that acknowledge the power of relationships established over time and across many boundaries. Networks shaped by the land. The Bread Loaf Teacher Network, whose members are from ten states and from a hundred communities with dramatically different landscapes, histories, and cultures, has itself been shaped and enriched by Alaska teachers — and their students. Teacher communities shaped by the land.

A hundred images of the Alaska landscape are in my mind to stay, surely mythicized and transformed in memory. In fact, I feel a certain uneasy kinship with tourists and other casual visitors to Alaska. But I must confess that what Alaska teachers and young people have written about the landscape and the substance and value of their lives is especially important to me. I say this with the vivid memory of my friend Pauline Evon's warning that I should recognize that written words are less powerful and often less reliable than lived experience. "Be quiet," she said. "Listen. Look. Don't read so much, and if you do, don't believe that literacy is always a good indication of integrity and wisdom." I know Pauline is right, but I want to close by mentioning how my imagination and — I hope — my teaching and research, has been shaped indirectly by the Alaska landscape by means of what teachers and young people have written. I'll give just one example from many, many instances.

Sheri Skelton, who teaches in Shishmaref, has added a compelling new dimension to teacher research and, I believe, to issues of multicultural education that cluster around teaching other people's children. A teacher for nineteen years, Sheri and her family have come to Bread Loaf-Vermont for a number of summers. In "Watching and listening in and outside of the classroom" (Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Magazine, Summer 1998), Sheri writes about how she became aware of how much children learn when they are not in school: "My Inupiaq students are engaged in learning that is integrated with a world view that is familiar, namely, their local natural environment. The knowledge they acquire is not gleaned from textbooks but from observation and actual participation . . . I believe that my increased understanding of how subsistence defines knowledge for the Inupiaq can only enhance the learning possibilities in my classroom." There are different ways of defining knowledge, some of them powerfully shaped by the landscape. Sheri

describes the complex process by which observing, listening to elders and young people, and applying skills and knowledge to new situations have informed an approach to teaching that connects ways of learning outside the classroom with academic study. Sheri's practice is shaped by the landscape, physical and cultural, of Shishmaref; her commitment to observing, listening, and learning is a survival skill in the classroom as surely as harvesting seals is a survival skill in the village.

The Alaska landscape, as I've experienced it in a limited way firsthand and through the eyes of teachers and young people, has shaped my understanding of teacher communities, of networks of support and cooperation, of relationships between schools and communities, and of the necessity of connecting what happens in the classroom with the landscape (broadly defined) outside.

Note: I must admit that my views of the Alaska landscape come mostly from the back seat of a car, the deck of a boat, an easy-to-reach observation site, the view from a porch or a classroom window. Spectacular, but I wish I were a hiker, an explorer, a camper. I've been teaching at Bread Loaf for about 20 years, and I haven't climbed Bread Loaf Mountain yet.

[Dixie Goswami](#) has been a member of the faculty of the [Bread Loaf School of English](#) for many years, where she coordinates the Bread Loaf Teacher Network, of which she is an active and devoted member. Dixie is especially interested in teacher research as a resource for local schools and communities as well as for other teachers and researchers. She is a member of the [Literacy and Community Services Networks Team](#) at Clemson University and director of [Write To Change](#), a non-profit organization that promotes action research, writing and publishing partnerships that involve young people in community development