

Chapter 5.1

Culturally Negotiating the Meanings of Technology Use

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how the “meanings” of technology use are being culturally negotiated between Western educators and native Iñupiat Eskimo learners at schools across the Alaskan Arctic region, as part of a wider examination of the impact of the Western product and process technologies embodied by these schools upon the socio-cultural consciousness of the non-Western learners whose educational needs they seek to serve. There are two distinct aspects to this intercultural negotiation between educators and learners: (1) attempts of the former to reconcile their practices with the latter’s values, standards, and expectations; and (2) efforts of the latter to culturally appropriate the non-indigenous technologies being made available to them. It is expected that professionals work-

ing in a range of organizational contexts within our field may be able to gain insight from the remarkably universal nature of the problems and solutions involved in this extreme and instructive situation of socio-cultural tension.

INTRODUCTION

Our field has, in recent decades, witnessed vast populations of learners and performers in schools and workplaces across the planet being dramatically affected by the rapidly strengthening twin forces of globalization and human migration. On the one hand, the worldwide spread of Western capitalism is leading to the rapid infiltration of Western technology into far-flung areas wherein they were previously absent, thereby impacting formerly unaffected populations. On the other hand, rising mobility as a result of improved

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transportation links and growing international commerce is leading to increased demographic heterogeneity within hitherto comfortably homogenous societies. The increasing diversity of socio-cultural variables—including race, ethnicity, nationality, language, and religion—among learner and worker populations resulting from the aforementioned phenomena will undoubtedly mediate learning and performance across a wide range of educational and organizational settings (Powell, 1997a; Subramony, 2004).

Mainstream theory and practice in the field of educational technology, however, have not been very successful at evolving and adapting in light of these socioeconomic and demographic changes (Subramony, 2004, 2006). While dominant Western-originated ideas, tools, and procedures—in other words, product and process technologies—related to education, instruction, training, and performance are impacting the lives of more and more non-Western learners both within and outside the geographical boundaries of Western civilization, very little research is being done in our field to document and understand the dynamics of this cultural interchange, specifically in terms of the negotiation between Western and non-Western cultural groups of the sociological “meanings” of using these technologies—that is, what, if anything, are those agents promoting and implementing these technologies doing to make the latter more culturally relevant to the lives of Non-western learners; and how these technologies are being culturally appropriated or rejected by non-Western target populations.

In a modest attempt to steer the prevailing theoretical and practical discourse in our field towards considering questions and issues of the aforementioned kind, the author of this paper enlists the help of data from a particularly interesting and dramatic case involving the introduction of Western educational technologies into a culturally unique non-Western population. Very briefly, the geographical context of this cultural interaction is a vast expanse of Arctic tundra in northern Alaska

where the indigenous Iñupiat (Eskimo) population has, in recent decades, been impacted by unprecedented oil wealth. The area of particular interest to us, in this case, is the resultant provision of an environment that is exceptionally rich in Western technologies within the region’s schools, which, incidentally, happen to be run almost entirely by expatriate educators from the “lower 48” United States. Meanwhile, the majority of learners served by these schools come from traditional Iñupiat families that, until very recently, depended almost entirely upon subsistence hunting, whaling, and gathering for survival.

In this paper we will briefly examine the impact of the Western product and process technologies that are embodied by the Boreal Slope School District (BSSD) schools upon the socio-cultural consciousness of the native Iñupiat Eskimo learners whose educational needs are served by these schools. This documentation involves exploring how the meanings of technology use are being negotiated between the imported Western educators on the one hand and the native Iñupiat learners on the other. There are two distinct aspects to this negotiation, namely: (1) the attempts of the former to reconcile their practices with the values, standards, and expectations of Iñupiat learners; and (2) the efforts of the latter to culturally appropriate the non-indigenous technologies being made available to them. This author believes that professionals working in a range of organizational contexts within our field may be able to gain insight from the remarkably universal nature of the problems and solutions involved in this extreme and instructive situation of socio-cultural tension. As cultural anthropologist Norman Chance explains, “by seeing how events are intimately linked to comparable forces present in other settings (we can) come to appreciate the common themes of historical process along with the uniqueness of cultural difference . . . (since) though differentiated by culture, we are all united by history” (Chance, 1990, p. xvii).

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