Imagination and Common Sense: Making the Connection to the Natural World

Sheri Skelton
Shishmaref School
Shishmaref AK

Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray . . . The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white . . . But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hair-line trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a chechaquo, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination.

—Jack London, “To Build a Fire”

Jack London's words have fascinated me since I first read them as a high school student many years ago. His vivid images alert the senses, making the word-created landscapes come alive. The man's lack of imagination is intensified in the midst of London's detailed descriptions. Teaching American literature in Iowa, I frequently used London's story as a springboard for an imagination-centered discussion. As readers, my students and I could envision what the man faced and how he lacked imagination, how he lacked the ability to perceive and understand his place in the world, how he lacked vision.

Ironically, thirteen years ago when I moved to Shishmaref, a tiny Inupiaq Eskimo village in northwestern Alaska, I became the chechaquo in London's story, the newcomer without imagination. In my mind I had visualized what “unbroken white” looked like and had felt the “tremendous cold,” but I never realized how limited my vision was until I stood on what seemed like the edge of the world and looked out over a frozen landscape towards a horizon that blended into the snow. I now spend much of my year surrounded by “unbroken white” on a tiny island enveloped in a silent sea of white. Fortunately, I did not meet the same fate as the man in London's story.

In Shishmaref I experienced firsthand a landscape that I had previously only imagined, and my actual perceptions transcended anything I had ever pictured. The landscape is marked by vastness and solitude. Land fades into sky fades into sea. Mists and fogs frequently play tricks on the eyes, and shapeless forms emerge from the tundra and become men or animals. The hunter in his wolf-trimmed parka traveling across the tundra easily blends into the landscape.

This is a land of contrasts and extremes. For a few months in winter, darkness covers the land, and then an intense arctic sun, which seems never to leave the sky, illuminates the ground below. The whiteness of the landscape intensifies the brightness, and forms difficult to distinguish in the darkness become just as difficult to decipher in the piercing light.

The tundra definitely is a place of transformation, and it seemed only fitting that if I were to remain in the village, I should experience some sort of transformation myself. That transformation occurred in my classroom during an American literature class in a discussion of “To Build a Fire.” The story had a particular appeal to my students who quickly identified with the landscape London described. What differed from previous discussions was that my students did not perceive the man as lacking imagination but rather viewed him as someone without common sense. As one student said, “This guy had no common sense. He just kept making one mistake after another. If he had only used some common sense, he would have survived.”

What impressed me about the discussion was how my Inupiaq students living in an environment similar to the one in the story referenced themselves with the landscape, easily placing themselves into the story. Through their eyes I saw the connection between common sense and imagination. My students' impression of the
natural world is straightforward and practical. They maintain a relationship with their landscape that is grounded in survival. Yet at the same time, that relationship is imaginative, creative, and perceptive.

My students are very much in tune with their environment, with an awareness of their surroundings that comes with an almost uncanny ability to see. They can easily spot a ptarmigan on the tundra or a seal’s head bobbing in the ocean. Their environment is sense-enhancing. The northern lights dance overhead; the snow crunches; the wind howls and shrieks, surrounds the house like some wild creature, and slips through cracks in the walls. An angry ocean swallows chunks of land in the fall and then becomes a silent sea of frozen white in the winter.

The Inupiaq Eskimos themselves are a descriptive picture with their round faces and red cheeks, the result of a precarious encounter with dwarfs, according to an old story. The Inupiaq are a blend of practicality and creativity. They are artists and carvers, skilled in skin sewing and beading. They not only survive but thrive in an environment that appears indifferent and at times even hostile.

Landscape is significant in shaping who one is and in determining how and where one sees himself/herself in the world. That my students have a strong but intimate relationship with their environment enhances their educational potential. That I was able to make that connection between environment and education was a result of another transformation taking place within my classroom. Becoming a part of the Bread Loaf community introduced me to the concept of teacher research and the idea that best classroom practices arise from teachers’ observing and documenting what goes on in their classrooms and from that research drawing conclusions about how learning best occurs.

To create the optimum learning environment in my classroom, reference to the natural world is essential. My students use their knowledge of and relationship to their natural environment to strengthen their language arts skills, to make connections to literary texts, and to enhance their critical and creative thinking skills.

In a world literature class last fall, prior to reading the Thomas Hardy’s novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, I assigned students the following journal topic: Write about the natural world and your relationship to it. Responses showed both an enthusiasm and respect for nature.

*The combination of global warming and fall storms has created serious erosion problems for the village of Shishmaref.*
Annie Nayokpuk wrote:

I love being out in nature. You learn so much, especially if you are not with an experienced “guide.” You get to use all of what someone has told you before. I have so much pride and respect for the ocean. I learned to respect it ever since the day that we had to cross it when it melted so much on us . . . You should have lots of respect for nature. You learn to appreciate yourself and you learn to make tough decisions and reasonable ones too. You can’t just carelessly go out in the wild and expect to come home with everything you have okay including yourself.

JoAnne Pootoogooluk described the relationship she has with nature in the following way:

I’ve got a great respect for nature. I don’t know if I learned to respect it over the years or if I was born with it. I feel so relaxed and free when I’m out in the country. It’s the best feeling ever. I’m more comfortable being out there than being in town. Life slows down out there. It slows down so you can appreciate what nature has to offer and it gives me a chance to be thankful for all the things I have and be thankful for being put on this Earth.

There’s times when being out there is scary, but I think that’s because you have to have a little fear of what nature holds. If not, you get arrogant and you get stupid. That’s not how someone is supposed to feel when they’re out in the country. Accidents happen when you start feeling that way. One of these days I’m going to go out in the country on foot and canoe. I have this strong feeling inside that it’s something I need to do.

I’m so fascinated with what nature has to offer. Everything is so simple, yet so complex. I don’t want to see anything happen to my special place in the chaotic world.

There was this one time at camp at Arctic, I woke up really early and everyone was still asleep. I went outside to check the weather, and when I stepped outside, the silence engulfed me. I couldn’t do anything but soak in the silence and peacefulness. A thick layer of fog covered the ground; even the river was quiet. The birds weren’t chirping yet. Ducks weren’t flying by yet, and the mosquitoes were nowhere to be

(continued on next page)
Imagination and Common Sense  
(continued from previous page)

found. Everything was just peaceful, and experiencing that sight, that feeling burrowed into my heart and has been there ever since keeping me on the right track.

In addition to journal writing, students express their relationship to the natural world through poetry. Springtime is an especially active time in the village with the arrival of warm weather and extended daylight hours. A study of haiku yielded the following poems:

Longer sunshine days  
Kids play in puddles. Flowers become berries. Fun picking.  
—Susie Obruk

Warm weather, bright sun,  
Seal hunting, duck hunting, and  
Staying up all night.  
—Herb Nayokpuk

At times the natural world becomes a threatening entity. A combination of global warming and fall storms have resulted in massive erosion of the island, jeopardizing the very existence of the village. In the following free verse poem, Irene Ahgupuk explores the relationship of the village to the ocean and the erosion and remembers her father who died from cancer:

**I Asked the Ocean**

I asked the Ocean one question,  
“Could you stay calm instead of being greedy and taking land away?”

He sent his waves to shore  
and took some land,  
his way of laughing at my question.  
He told me,  
“If you were smart enough,  
you would start working on the seawall early instead of working while I’m starting the erosion.”

He was quiet for a while.  
“It’s been a while since someone talked to me.”

He whispered as if he didn’t want to show how he felt.  
I promised him that I would talk to him, if he would stay calm.  
In return he gave me seashells.  
“How do you know I collect them?”

“I saw you and your dad walking on the beach.  
You were collecting seashells.”

He stopped to whisper,  
“You were the only one who talked to me.  
Now, 11 years later . . . you’re here to ask me another question.”

It all starts with one question.

Irene’s poem demonstrates a deep and complex thinking. She not only comments on the erosion and the problem of constructing a seawall but describes the unique relationship she shared with her father in nature, ending her discourse with the observation that asking just one question opens the door to understanding.

After thirteen years of living in Shishmaref, I continue to be in awe of the wonders of nature when I step outside my home. One morning this winter on my way to school, I encountered a little boy who stood fascinated by the moon—a huge mandarin.
orange slice painted on a jet-black background. A few nights ago I stepped out my back door and was met by the “unbroken white” of the ocean as far as I could see. I watched as a bright red sun sitting on the edge of the horizon slipped into the ocean of white.

But as amazing as the landscape is, the people of Shishmaref are even more amazing. My students continue to be a source of inspiration with their common-sense creativity, their blend of imagination and practicality. I believe that education should teach people to live well in the places where they live. My students teach me about themselves and their land and how to live well in Shishmaref while I instruct them in the essentials required for them to be “successful” students.

Teacher turnover continues to be a critical issue in rural Alaska villages and is directly connected to the effectiveness of the educational system. My students and I have discussed how newcomers can become a part of the community without succumbing to the fate of the man in London’s story or simply packing up and leaving after a year or two, which is what the majority of teachers do. Annie Nayokpuk, offers the following insights into Eskimos:

Ten Things I Know about Eskimos

- Eskimos love the land and especially love snow.
- Eskimos get tanned easily.
- Eskimo babies have big cheeks.
- Eskimos have a problem with cabin fever.
- Eskimos use up what they have and try not to waste.
- Eskimos are generous and sharing.
- Eskimos change with the seasons.
- Eskimos do not see stars during the summer.
- Eskimos don’t need to sleep in the summertime.
- Eskimos like to laugh.

According to Annie Nayokpuk, being out in nature gives you an opportunity to make tough and reasonable decisions.

Sheri Skelton has been living and teaching in Shishmaref, Alaska, for the past 13 years. Prior to that she taught high school English for 11 years in Iowa. Sheri received her M.A. from the Bread Loaf School of English in 1997.