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# Where Is the Pinnacle?

Brendan McGrath

*“Memory should not be called knowledge. Many have original Minds  
who do not think — they are led away by Custom.”*

—From a letter by John Keats to J. H. Reynolds, February 19, 1818

A crowd of some two hundred strangers erupts in cheers, and the students’ faces are beaming with smiles. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian had just honored twelve of these native Alaskan students from Aleknagik, Alaska, for their achievements in writing within the past two years by allowing them to read pieces of their poetry and passages from their self-published book, *The Aleknagik Way: Alaskan Style*.

Standing there, staring at the heroic students who looked out at the crowd whose population was larger than that of their village, I knew that the moment was magical. The four-thousand mile trip for most of the students had been one of many firsts: first time on a jet plane, first subway ride, first public bus ride. For many it was the first time out of the state. For most of the boys, it was the first time they had worn a tie!

That early morning in late April, 2005, I stood in disbelief, thinking about where our two-year journey had taken us. How did we get here? What will this lead to in the future? What might be the impetus that will lead my students to write with such passion once again? And then my reflections turned to a sure truth: the power of writing is that it is a generative, limitless process. The opportunities it creates are infinite.

## **New Inspiration at Bread Loaf**

In the summer of 2005, I had the opportunity to take Dixie Goswami's Writing to Make a Difference class

at the Bread Loaf campus in Vermont. During the six-week class, teachers from Alaska to Kenya sought innovative ways to break free of “custom” in their classrooms and communities—to lead students to use their critical thinking skills and to discover how having purpose for their writing techniques can help them produce more sophisticated language. The intent of our inquiry was not about having students master purposeful five-minute quick writes in class; it was about providing opportunities for students to break free of unproductive habits and to develop writing as a tool to bring about change in their lives and environments.

For much of our work in this class, we devised ways to use the electronic portfolio. As a literacy teacher, I began to see that this was another way to generate writing and to give students multiple ways of looking at themselves and their peers as writers. This was the stimulus that would open up audience, drive reflection, and foster ownership. This was what I needed to take my own students to a creative, individualized way of writing!

Ideas began spinning as I thought about possibilities of having my students use the electronic portfolio. We could use exchanges with schools, within and outside of Alaska, and post our communication online. We could create iMovies that would reflect the culture, explain literary terms, or re-create a scene in a book. We could add audio to writings posted on our Web pages so that audiences could listen to the students read their work. The possibilities seemed limitless.

When the school year started that fall, I began by sharing with students the Web pages that our Bread Loaf class had developed over the summer. The students were able to listen to my peers read their own poetry and see them as they introduced their Web pages. Hearing my colleagues’ expressive voices convinced the students that they could complete a similar

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project. Another selling point was that the students were able to see themselves reading their poetry at the Smithsonian ceremony. Before school started, I had added video and audio of each student's reading on my Web page. Now, seeing their performances, they suddenly felt famous! There was a true sense of pride in the ones who were there and envy in the ones who were new to the class.

I knew the students were already thinking, "When can we get started?" First, though, I wanted them to transcribe accounts of how they became readers and writers. We had done this activity in Dixie's class in Vermont, and our stories were among those that I shared on those first days of school. These were teachers writing about themselves as learners, sharing stories of how they became readers and writers. My students were surprised to find that many of these adults had encountered obstacles along the way.

I then wanted to know about the trials and tribulations of becoming literate in *Aleknagik*, within a culture that is known more for its storytellers than its authors. Having the students publish *The Aleknagik Way* two years before was one way of demonstrating what they could produce and the success that might follow their writing. That one project would not be enough though—it would soon be a memory, another story to be told. What I needed was yet another way to get the students' writing out of their folders and into a place where the work would be accessible to wider audiences.

The electronic portfolio (EP) proved to be the answer I was looking for, the perfect way to tap into students' natural needs. It would no longer be just the teacher and the class of fifteen, in the school of thirty-four, and in the village of two hundred that would be interested in their work; this was the means to expand our audience, to go far beyond our classroom,



Nichole Chuckwuk, who joined the class at the start of the school year in 2005, shares her traditional Yup'ik story with the class before she presents her iDVD.

even to other continents.

In order for the technology piece to work, I wanted to use Segue's Web-design program, developed by Shel Sax, director of educational technology for Middlebury College. I knew that I could call on Tom McKenna, Bread Loaf's technology director at the time, to help make the arrangements to host the students' portfolio pages online. The previous summer I had worked with Tom when he assisted Dixie Goswami with her Writing to Make a Difference class in Vermont. Now, as he did then, Tom offered his expert advice and assistance—exactly what we needed to make sure that

our electronic portfolio project would be a success.

### **Bradley's Story**

When I first started teaching in Aleknagik, I had students in fifth through eighth grades in a single class. One of my students, Bradley, was in the fifth grade when I first met the group. That year was our book-project year, when we published *The Aleknagik Way*. In sixth grade, he was part of the group of students invited to the Smithsonian to share their poetry.

Now in seventh grade, Bradley's progress in writing was noticeable. Once the computers were lit up and the LCD projector was flashing images of the Smithsonian project, Bradley was immediately turned on too—this was his style of writing and discovery. Bradley had seen the benefits of writing with an audience in mind, and a few months into the year, when he started writing a poem for the electronic portfolio, it was apparent that he was aiming to please, thinking that someone who was not in our class would read his poem.

Bradley spent several weeks writing the poem that follows. Each day he brought the paper in, looking for suggestions, and then took it home for further

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revision. In the end he created a poem that shows his command of imagery, diction, and perspective:

Sword  
Jeweled with gold,  
diamonds and pearls.  
Its magic unfolds.  
It can kill many with its powerful swirls.  
  
The armies line.  
Coming out of its sheath  
it had a shiny, silvery spine  
and sharp silver teeth.  
  
The clashing of swords  
sparking in battle,  
to tag the enemy's hordes.  
Many swords fell with a rattle.  
  
Until the aged sword  
met a new sword  
battling fiercely they soared.  
The clashing told that none outscored.  
  
Helping its master  
the old sword tried,  
but the young sword was faster  
and the old master died.  
  
Left alone on the field  
feeling happy with the blood it shown  
leaving wounds unhealed  
men lie with a mortal moan.

The electronic portfolio was inspiring many other forms of writing too. For example, I had each student use iMovie to produce a short video introduction for the electronic portfolio. Some included a simple welcome, but others chose elaborate outpourings of their love for writing and poetry. I was no longer seeing reflections of their thinking only on paper, though. I could see their thoughts reflected on their faces, on video and through sound, and they were filled with purpose.

The students soon posed another question: "Hey, can we make a movie and put it online?" Why not? Students began coming up with their own ideas. They started scripting and then storyboarding. This strategy led to introducing the students to iMovie and its potential, but it was also a way for them to discover and exercise their own voices.

The movie projects began with having students examine various scripts that I had downloaded to help them learn the terminology and to better understand the work ahead. From this point, we began watching

movie clips and talking about how the scenes might "look" on paper. Then, with a movie version in mind, we would take a book we were reading, select a scene from a chapter the students liked, and describe the scene in writing. The students then created their own storyboards.

After a brief overview of iMovie in a class lesson, the students were off in their small groups, making plans for their own movies. In my mind, though, this was still all experimental. I had no idea how this project would turn out, but I soon found that students were already on the way to remarkable achievements.

The students began by making short films that ranged from anti-smoking campaigns to scary movies, and these short clips were a perfect start. The students were letting their voices be heard! Then we started our own Sundance Film Festivalessque, a viewing day once each quarter when students showed their movies to other students and staff members at the school. By now the students were hooked. They wanted nothing more than to make top-secret films in class and present them to their peers.

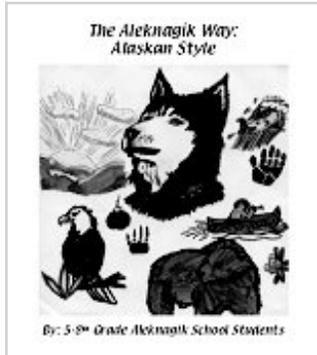
Throughout the year, students found more purpose for their movie productions. They made movies that reflected major themes in our reading, defined literary terms, or recreated scenes from books we had read. Every movie we produced was better than the one before. The work was becoming more organized, and the students were beginning to look beyond the literal and consider stories from different perspectives.



The Aleknagik students are all smiles after ceremonies at the Smithsonian. Front row, from left: Donovan Andrews, Brendon Ramey, Bradley Ramey, Danielle Togiak, Adrian Tugatuck. Back row: Daniel Tugatuck, Michael Andrew, Patrick Andrews, Patrick Togiak, Brendan McGrath, Anton Andrews, Tyrone Andrews.

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Our final project took us full circle—back to the students’ Yup’ik culture. I had asked our school’s Yup’ik language teacher, Melody Noden, to pull out some traditional stories that she uses to teach the



Aleknagik students in Brendan’s class published their own book about the Aleknagik’s way of life and traditions. To view the students’ work, go to <http://www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/aleknagik.pdf>.

younger students in our school. The idea was to take those stories that had always been told orally and bring a visual life to them, using a medium that would go beyond adding illustrations and audio narrations. Instead, students would use the iDVD application to record their own performances of the stories. DVDs of the student productions could be used as a complement to

instruction when the stories are taught in the future.

Once the stories were selected, the students were off, following the usual steps: write a script, start a storyboard, gain teacher approval of the script, and then reserve a camera for filming. The first day, students dissected the story. The second day, they began writing and playing with ideas. The script then led to discussions about assigning roles and creating props.

Once the filming was completed, the editing began. The students had spent the year working with the program and had seen how other students worked with sound and effects. They had moved away from wanting to use their favorite pop song as the background; many groups now were making their own music and sounds to use in the presentations.

When the final projects were complete, the entire school filed into the classroom. Each group stood in front of the projection screen, introduced their story, and then read it to the audience. Finally we watched the feature film. The students were sold. The laughter and applause from their peers, brothers, sisters, cousins, and teachers was all the validation they needed. I believe, too, that they began to see the generative process of writing. They saw the connection these movies have to becoming writers.

Three years ago I walked into the classroom and did not have any idea what was ahead, but every year

has provided opportunities that have led my students to view their literacy as a tool for betterment. Bradley Ramey, author of “Sword,” wrote about his experiences: “I’ve learned new ways of writing. . . . I’ve learned to make an electronic portfolio, figured out what Kenya was like [by participating in a BreadNet exchange], made stories into movies, and just plain wrote on paper. From this I learned that sometimes writing can be a key that unlocks doors.”

Thinking now of how my students and I arrived at this point in our work, I notice that every year we focused on audience and environment. In their introduction to *Between Sacred Mountains*, a book written by Navajo students, the authors tell how we need “to encourage readers, no matter what their culture, to go out and actively seek many truths from the land and the people around them.” Every year my students have sought these truths— as they continue their journey toward the pinnacle.

**B**rendan McGrath was the third through eighth grade literacy teacher in Aleknagik for three of his four years in Alaska. Prior to that he was completing his student teaching in Clark’s Point, Alaska.

It was during this time that he learned about the Bread Loaf program—when Marty Rutherford, a Bread Loaf scholar and researcher, visited Aleknagik to work with Principal Doug Gray

on developing ways to improve student writing. Marty’s work with the Clark’s Point students led to their publication of a book about their village and inspired Brendan’s later work with students in Aleknagik. Brendan currently teaches Literacy and



Rhetoric at the Uphams Corner Charter School in South Boston to sixth and eighth-grade students. He recently received results of his Aleknagik students’ state benchmark tests for last year: 90% of his students passed the test—up from 68% the year before and from approximately 40% the year before that.