

Fall 2022

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Recommended Citation

Uluak Itchuaqiyag, Cana (2022) "No, I won't introduce you to my mama: Boundary Spanners, Access, and Accountability to Indigenous Communities," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: 10.25148/CLJ.17.1.010653

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol17/iss1/9>

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No, I won't introduce you to my mama: Boundary Spanners, Access, and Accountability to Indigenous Communities

Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaaq

There exists an added pressure that Indigenous scholars and other marginalized scholars face as boundary spanners: marginalized scholars are asked to spend their personal social capital on other scholars' professional needs. I define boundary spanners as individuals who occupy both academic spaces and marginalized community spaces and who are called on to act as mediators between the two. This piece discusses my own navigation across these spaces and the nuances of relationship that I must recognize and respond to as an additional component of my professional and communal practice. I will also share about the difference between credibility and accountability and how that important distinction is often overlooked.

Briefly, boundary spanners link together systems of people, communities, institutions, and knowledges through their belonging to and expertise with both systems. As an Iñupiaq from an Alaska Native community in the Arctic, I have cultural and community expertise and connections from being part of that system. As a technical communication and rhetoric scholar and professor at an R1 institution, I have another set of expertise and connections from being part of that system. The boundary spanning I try to do is in the service of helping my Inuit community in Alaska with claiming and accessing institutional resources from academia.

The use of the word "claiming" above is intentional. My goal as a scholar is to help my people—Alaska Natives—who are severely underrepresented in academia claim the space they need to thrive in—or even just graduate—college. The term "Alaska Native" describes the Indigenous people who are part of the 229 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. For context, there are currently 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States. According to the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, the first known Alaska Native to earn a PhD was an Athabaskan named James Simpson in 1970 in Education. The first known Iñupiaq to earn a PhD was Paul A. Goodwin in 1979 in Physics. By the end of 2010—40 years after the first Alaska Native earned their doctorate—there were 62 PhDs. By 2015, the number had increased to 90. And, as of March 2022, the number has increased to 127 Alaska Native PhDs.

Of these 127 PhDs, there are 29 Iñupiat; I am #28.

Iñupiat homelands are located in the Alaskan Arctic and are roughly the same size as the state of New Mexico. I mention these statistics to make a specific point: while there are numerous Iñupiat who have research skills, there are just 29 who have that magic title—PhD—that can gain them entry as research faculty in academia. And, as I will discuss, that title means that others may consider these 29 scholars as entry points themselves to Iñupiat communities in the Arctic.

Iñupiaq PhD candidate Margaret Anamaq Rudolf's scholar bio states that "Boundary spanners facilitate research projects between Alaska Native communities and research institutes. Boundary spanning is one way to accomplish co-production of knowledge, which may be key in the context of working with Alaska Native communities" (Rudolf para 3). In terms of being a boundary spanner, I am called to use my personal social capital for my professional endeavors. This gets even more complicated when people—usually scholars with more institutional and disciplinary power than me who are seeking local Arctic partners in fulfillment of the increasing coproduction of knowledge requirements in grants—ask me to introduce them to people in my Alaska Native community.

Let's unpack what asking me to make introductions in my community means. What I'm really being asked to do is use my personal relationships that I've spent a lifetime building and rebuilding for their academic research needs. They are asking me to vouch for them to my people, my community, my friends, and my family. These askers think that their outsider-perspective research agenda is a big opportunity to my people and are shocked when I don't jump up enthusiastically, call my mama, and book them a spot on her couch. The funniest part is that sometimes I don't even know the people who are doing the asking. In other words, literal strangers are asking me to set them up with my family and community. That's some bullshit.

Why do they feel comfortable with this ask? Beyond entitlement, one reason may be a belief that our profession links us in a special way, and perhaps it does. However, let's not forget the ongoing history of harmful and extractive research practice in academia. I'm sorry, but I am not going to help rando scholars inflict their rando research agenda on my people. I will not risk the potential harm of that kind of setup. Put another way, I'm an insider to my own Alaska Native community yet I am still very cautious about approaching my own people regarding my research. I don't assume that because I'm from the community that my people will welcome or need or want the research I might propose. In fact, it took me two years of careful discussions and small-scale collaborations to convince my big sister—literally someone who helped raise me and who knows that I come to my work with a good heart, meaning my motivations are centered in our people's wellbeing and needs rather than my own personal and professional ambitions—to partner with me on a project creating an online archive for Inuit users for our tribe. And, once we agreed on the project and the partnership, we then approached our tribal organization to make sure that the idea we had, an idea sparked from community needs, was welcome and wanted.

Respectful research in Indigenous communities requires that research problems and research questions related to Indigenous land and peoples must come from these communities themselves. As scholars, we need to respect community sovereignty and be humble enough to take the time to build local relationships and listen to local needs and wants and pivot our existing research and restructure new research questions to help fulfill those needs. For example, I am not a digital archivist but that's what my community needed. But as a scholar, a.k.a. a professional learner, I can learn about digital archives and combine it with what I know about technical communication and UX. Furthermore, as a boundary spanner, I can help enlist others with

complementary skills to help. Keeping an open mind about what and how you might contribute to a community's self-determined needs is important. Sometimes conducting a research project isn't the right course of action for the community in fulfilling its needs. Sometimes a community might want to do the research themselves without you. Being in good relations with a community partner, such as acting with care for the community by supporting and upholding their needs and their boundaries, should not be conducted with a "what's in it for me" attitude. For generations, Indigenous communities have been promised that academic research in their communities would ultimately benefit their people. We have extended our trust and given access to our people and our lands even when the benefits to us were unclear or, sadly, unfulfilled. Perhaps it's time for academia to extend trust back to us, FFS.

This is where the distinction between credibility and accountability comes in. I might have the credibility to do research in my community based on my fancy degrees, position, and identity—but that credibility don't mean shit if I don't hold myself accountable to the self-determination and the sovereignty of my people. What does that accountability mean? It means caring more about the needs and safety of my community more than my own professional needs. Simply, it means putting my community first—in the position of power—when I choose to engage with them in my professional capacity. You see, as a scholar, I have a choice about what I study and therefore can, in essence, self-define my research goals. My community should also have these same choices. My goal as a scholar—to help my people—means that I am accountable to my people first, not my university. Affiliations to universities come and go, affiliations to communities should not.

When working with an Indigenous community, it's important to position accountability to that community and its needs as the primary factor of your work. Because Indigenous communities likely don't give a fuck about your title or your CV when it comes to your research ideas, they care about your heart.