

Academic Writing about Literature at Alaska Christian College

May 9, 2013 (Soldotna, AK): Academic Writing about Literature at Alaska Christian College

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Research has shown that students who achieve high levels of reading literacy usually like to read for their own enjoyment and come from families where their parents spend a lot of time on reading. Alaska Natives follow a more verbal approach to storytelling in their culture. Parents are often not engaged in reading for themselves and likely do not have very much reading material in the homes. Educators in Alaska are doing more to introduce picture books and other culturally-relevant reading materials, parenting and family education, etc. Meanwhile, Native students from the bush villages of Western Alaska arrive at Alaska Christian College reluctant to read for any reason: personal enjoyment or academic assignment.

At the beginning of the Spring 2013 semester, students in Jennifer Scotts' literature class, Academic Writing about Literature (GEN211) shared that they didn't like to read. In fact, one student expressed her strong hatred of reading. Several students remarked that they would not read anything beyond emails, text messages, and Facebook postings if reading was not required by their classes.

This literature course (required for the new Associate of Arts degrees at ACC) challenged students with more reading than most had ever done during their entire lives! This particular class required a lot of reading: short stories, dramas, poetry, legends, and myths. Students were introduced to writings that are considered English classics as well as writings by Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Athabascan, and Tlingit authors.

The reading assignment, "Two Old Women: An Alaskan Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival" by Velma Wallis (1993), drew students into lively discussions on the themes of hardship, starvation (spiritual and physical), abandonment, loneliness, survival, companionship, and faithfulness. Students expressed their excitement as they explored the book. "We had many conversations about some of the metaphorical elements: how real-life situations, biblical principles, and elders' teachings could be applied to the events and characters within the text." At the end of the semester, students shared that they were sad that the discussions were concluded.

Jennifer had ignited a new perspective among the eight students who completed the

class. Reading was no longer just "class work" or "an assignment;" reading was also for ENJOYMENT! In fact, the student who said she HATED to read now said that she anticipated the next book, "Bird Girl and the Man Who Followed the Sun: An Athabaskan Indian Legend from Alaska," also by Velma Wallis (1996). Furthermore, this group of students achieved a grade point average of 3.0 (or a B) in this course.

(from Jennifer Scott, Instructor)