

Elders in the Classroom

by Roby Littlefield

Elders Do Not Preserve Culture, They Live It

All students can benefit from inter-generational contacts. In Alaska Native cultures, grandparents [are] held in high regard as they contributed to the community by passing on knowledge and skills. Children learned by [watching and] listening to Elders and often didn't realize they were in training. Bringing grandparents in to share personal knowledge when studying subjects like nutrition, customs, plants, biology, and history can benefit the entire class.

To begin, first look to your class members. Send home a note or survey expressing your desire to include parents, grandparents, and Elders in your lessons. Get referrals for possible speakers from organizations that work with [Alaska Native peoples] and/or the elderly.

The way to ask Native American Elders for help is different from Western customs. Initial and subsequent contact should be subtle. Visit with them, allowing time for the conversation to wander. Allow for extended pauses, giving them time to think and decide. If their hearing is poor, sit on the side of their better ear and make sure your lips can be seen. Direct eye contact should be limited. Standing or sitting at an angle can increase an Elder's comfort level. Keep your questions basic and specific.

Begin the request by telling a little about your class and how the Elder could help. If you are not sure if the Elder is interested, hint strongly that you would like to have [her/his] help and ask if she/he knows of someone who might be willing to participate. Custom teaches that it is rude to give someone a frank "no" to a request for help, so you need to recognize that a noncommittal response might mean "no," or it might mean that the request is being considered. If at some point the Elder changes the subject more than once while you are explaining your request, you should be aware that she/he might be trying to say "no." Don't force a response; if it is clearly not a "yes," let it go, or suggest [the Elder] contact you after [she/he] has thought about it.

It is important to ask before a meeting for permission to make audio or video recordings. Don't show up with the equipment because you may force consent and cause bad feelings. Permission to listen to or tape a story or lecture does not give you any right to re-broadcast or write the story with you as author.