Teaching the North:
The Curious Business of Being Inside-Out

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Preface

On good days, northerners like to think of themselves as being tucked away in the North, "inside" as it were, or, since they didn't actually use that word, at least separate and separated from the world "Outside." They were in "the North," a fuzzy sort of space that was as much an imaginary construct as geographical region. It was, nevertheless, a real place and the people who inhabited it were "northerners." If it was hard to say what was North, northern, or "inside," it was very easy to identify what was Outside. Everything briefcase-toting, 24-hour, dress-code abiding and poncy was Outside. It awaited one at the southern hub airports if one flew and lurked somewhere south of the zone of sporadic highway lodges on the north-flowing highways. "We don't give a d--- how they do it Outside" ran the mantra.

We see and hear less of that region-centric attitude these days, at least of the kind that went to a dark place. Without doing some SSHRC-funded deep digging, one can't be certain, but the Internet probably contributed to the lowering of the barriers and the suspicions. My sense is, too, that the many and various changes wrought by land claims implementation have contributed. As the North acquired the jurisdiction, the right and the capacity to be effectively self-determining, there was less to fear from the guys with the briefcases and the PowerPoints. Increasingly, they were us. Nowadays, there are remaining pockets of this sort of inside-Outside thinking and the word is easy shorthand: "Did you go Out this summer?" "I was Out on medical." "She's going to university Outside." It's still there because old habits die hard and because the distinction still matters. A perk of being a peripheral region is that it has pretty clear boundaries.

This sort of thinking worked well enough when the Us–Them dichotomy was North-here and Outside-there. It's been getting complicated since the late 1980s. The North isn't just "the North" anymore, more and more it's the "Arctic" and it's not our North, it's the world's "circumpolar North." We've been supersized. The North-here is now also the North-there and Outside isn't something we can hope to ignore.

Today's North—the international Arctic—needs citizens with a broad grasp of the circumpolar picture, who understand its common problems and who share a basic orientation and vocabulary. In the old days this was usually understood as having the capacity to participate in northern development—by which it was usually meant that there would be northerners who could be hired to drive the trucks. These days the idea of who and what we need to participate in "sustainable development" is so much broader, so much more diverse. The capable northern citizen is emerging from the region itself, from northern institutions that are self-consciously nurturing and educating their region's peoples for a life lived with choice and by choice in the region. Where northern institutions might have begun by external fiat as deliberate agents of development (see Graham, 1997), northern institutions today have achieved a kind of devolution of their institutional world view and are more and more able to take their own region's pulse and respond to their own region's needs.

From its inception, the Northern Studies program at Yukon College has aimed to be relevant and useful, not just to the students in the courses it teaches but to the wider community in the graduates it produces. In effect, it was thirty years ahead of its time. When it actually opened its doors to students, though, it was a modest affair but one committed to competent graduates. As events unfolded in the Arctic, the Northern Studies program adjusted and broadened its scope and content. In recent years, the Yukon College calendar has come to distinguish Northern Studies from Circumpolar Studies but that distinction is historic and probably no longer that useful. What was inside has, like some society debutante, come out: the Canadian North is part of the global Arctic and of the circumpolar world. It's not so much a matter of geography but of scale.

Just over twenty years ago, the Soviet Union ceased to be. The loss was a gain for the Arctic. It made it possible for the circumpolar countries think about protecting the Arctic as an eco- and geo-region. The Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy cooperation (begun in June 1991) led, in due course, to the creation of the Arctic Council at a meeting in Iqaluit in 1996. A year later, Canada and Sweden jointly sponsored a proposal for a University of the Arctic as an Arctic Council "deliverable." The Arctic Council commissioned a small group to do a quick study on how to assess the viability of the idea. That report recommended that the Circumpolar Universities Association be asked to prepare the more substantial feasibility study and it submitted its report, "With Shared Voices—Launching the University of the Arctic," in September 1998. That got the go-ahead and several work teams began establishing the interlocked programs that are the UArctic's main activities.

These elements—Northern Studies, study of the North and University of the Arctic programming—have fused become a core element of Yukon College's educational project and a key to its service to community today. In the paragraphs that follow, I would like to talk about what happened, how we came to be inside out and how we are contributing to a new New North.

Northern Studies, or What to Make of the North

When the Yukon College Ayamdigut Campus opened in Whitehorse in 1988, it was momentous. Vision had met a construction crew on the road and put together a building that sat on the top of a hill, looked competent and luxuriated in room to grow. The parking lots optimistically expected hundreds of cars and classrooms expected 20s and 30s of students.

In 1994, the late Aron Senkpiel, founding dean of the Yukon College University Transfer Division (later Arts and Science) wrote an account of the first thirty years of post-secondary education in the Yukon for a special issue of *The Northern Review* on northern education. If we use 1963 as the starting point, he said, the year the Whitehorse Vocational Training School opened, post-secondary education in Yukon is about thirty years old. What is astonishing, he mused, is how quickly it all developed. The vocational school (which had expanded to include professional programs) and a packaged University of British Columbia (UBC) Yukon Teacher Education Program (B.Ed.) were wedded in March 1983 (Senkpiel, 1994, p. 98). The new college building design was approved by Cabinet in 1985. In 1986, a consultant, hired to develop a plan for education in the territory, recommended that the government give Yukoners the "option to stay" for post-secondary education and training (Orlikow, 1986). It did so by supporting further development of Yukon College and its community campuses as a community college. The Ayamdigut campus was nearing completion when the government passed a new *College Act* (18 May 1988) that set a goal of the college becoming an independent institution by 1 January 1990. At the same time that the college fabric and governance were being squared away, college officials were, we learn from Senkpiel, working on "the third side of the triangle: programming" (1994, p. 101).

With the move to the fabulous new building, went the reasoning, expectations would be raised in the community for fabulous new programming. The UBC program had been transferred to the college and the Arts and Science Division had "become the North's first autonomous university-level academic program" (Senkpiel, 1994, p. 101). The division's faculty proposed a brand-new suite of integrated diploma programs in Native Studies, Northern Science, and Northern Outdoor and Environmental Studies, collectively referred to as Northern Studies (a program in Northern Justice and Criminology

would be added later). It would be, the proposal they presented said, the "first comprehensive, university-level northern studies program in Canada." It would "allow Northerners to do what people from other regions of the country could do: learn about their region while living in it" (Senkpiel, 1994, pp. 101-102). They got the funding and government support.

The new college building was officially opened on 1 October 1988. The place was decked with bunting and the dignitaries spoke. The Government gave the college a $1 million gift to seed a permanent Northern Studies Research Fund. Tagish Elder Angela Sydney's gift was a story, *The Story of Kaax'achgook*, which imbued the campus name she had bestowed, Ayamdigut, Tagish for "the house that moved," with special significance. The Arts and Science Division had Northern Studies (NOST) students in first-year classes. They'd start taking their Northern Studies courses in 1989. The first graduates could be expected in 1990.

The Northern Studies Native Studies diploma was novel because it was areal and multidisciplinary. People had been studying the North and engaged in study of the North for generations and had been more or less officially calling it "Northern Studies" for a decade or so (the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies was founded in 1977 to "advance Northern scholarship through education, professional and scientific training and research" (Lloyd, 1988, p.3)), but there was no comparable program to provide a model at the time.

Some years later, around 1993 or 1994, historian Kenneth Coates considered the state of Northern Studies as a field. He thought that academics engaged in the field needed to think hard about what they were doing and how they were explaining their findings if northern studies was going to provide *northern* insight into and to offer suitable solutions to northern problems. Coates pointed out that the North was "very much a conceptual wasteland." Northern scholarship was being done, to its detriment, from "within the conceptual frameworks and intellectual paradigms of the Southern, or 'outside,' world" (Coates, 1994, p. 15). Northern studies, he was saying, was going for the shiny gold bits and the charismatic megafauna. The questions and the interpretations had to come from within to give the findings necessary relevance. (This is a discussion that continues today: the parties are Indigenous peoples and academic researchers but the conversation is familiar.) We were doing Northern Studies and we were rather inventing the field as we went. This is what Northern Studies looks like when it is done here, in this part of the North, at this stage of the college's history, at this level of post-secondary education capacity. It looked pretty good. We seemed to be on the right track.

The following year, in 1995, Geoffrey Weller, founding president of University of Northern British Columbia, speaking at the 4th Circumpolar Universities Association conference at the not-entirely-finished UNBC, said that Northern Studies, while still very much in its infancy, had "much to offer and [was] only beginning to have influence" on how the North speaks to other parts of the North and to the rest of the world (Weller, 1998, p. 4). Northern Studies itself, he said, was still in the process of "coming into its own as an important and respected field" (Weller, 1998, p. 4). The trick, as the Yukon College program designers had discovered a decade before, was to construct a program before the field had been subjected to a critique. How does one create an areal focus, a northern studies, from disparate disciplinary and geographic perspectives (from studies of the North)? That was part of the challenge. There was another.

In building its new Northern Studies diplomas, the Arts and Science faculty, led by Aron Senkpiel, had to balance two opposing needs. The first was a need for good, solid, disciplinary courses, in such fine, upstanding fields as Anthropology, History, Geography or Biology, that would be relatively uncomplicated to transfer to universities in British Columbia and Alaska. In this regard, novelty is most assuredly not your friend. The second was the need for genuine multi-disciplinarity, for courses in Northern Studies that embraced multiple disciplinary lenses to understand the region, its lands and its peoples in all their wonderful complexity. These courses would likely create transfer headaches because they were novel. No one else had them.

Curriculum for several of the new Northern Studies (we came to call it "NOST" after its course code) courses was commissioned and other courses, the multidisciplinary ones in particular, were developed in-house with advice from professors and other content experts. The program proposal envisaged a two-year, 66-credit program, with four core courses (Technical Writing, Statistics, Research in the North, and Natural History of the North (for social sciences students) or Social History of the North (for natural science students)). Northern Studies and Liberal Arts courses filled the remaining 54 credits. The first disciplinary Northern Studies courses were in History, Geography, Political Science, Anthropology and Economics: History of the Canadian North, Circumpolar Geography, Constitutional Development of the North, Subarctic Ethnology, Archaeology, Oral Traditions and Mythology, Regional Economies of the North. For the most part, the "North" of the title referred to the Canadian North.

Being multidisciplinary was particularly tricky, since it was not often taught at universities. As a proxy for teaching students to be capable of multidisciplinary thinking, the NOST programs aimed to have

graduates become multi-disciplined by layering disciplinary knowledge on the multidisciplinary core. While the instructors of the courses were disciplinary experts, the students, through the experience of taking the intensive program, would emerge with a more multidisciplinary perspective on issues than their teachers. The graduates of the program would be the first of a new kind of northerner, one who appreciated the complexity of northern issues and society and who had the ability to understand and speak the languages of a good cross-section of the North's experts, from First Nations leaders (though the first graduates emerged before the Yukon Umbrella Final Agreement was signed and the "First Four" First Nations governments were created) to social and natural scientists who might have roles to play in the public sphere. The NOST grad was an informed northerner.

The Problem with Information

In the first years of the Yukon College NOST program, it was a challenge to teach the North and particularly the North beyond Canadian borders. The biggest problem was a lack of good-quality and recent information. The Yukon College library had only limited holdings in the field, though it was actively developing its collection. There were relevant journals: for example, *Arctic*, the journal of the Arctic Institute of North America ("unique multidisciplinary vehicle for a wide range of northern topics" (Harrison and Hodgson, 1987)), *Arctic Anthropology* from University of Wisconsin, *Musk-Ox* from University of Saskatchewan and *Polar Record*, the journal of the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge University. Journals like *Fram* and *Acta Borealia* were less well known and hard to locate. Parks Canada had a library in town and the Yukon Archives was collecting Yukon material. The reality was that information, like pretty much everything else, had to come up the highway or by air and then, as now, budgets were tight. There were other reasons for the difficulty of securing information. The Cold War kept a great deal of Soviet information out of the public domain entirely and language made other material inaccessible. In academic journals there was uneven coverage of relevant Indigenous, social, economic and political topics. For faculty and students, getting reliable information about any given topic was often a struggle. The Yukon College library could and often did request interlibrary loans from UBC (the catalogue was sent to the college on microfiche). The Internet and online catalogues were still a decade in the future.

Part of the solution was to create and publish our own scholarship. It was clear to two of the Northern Studies faculty (N. Alexander Easton and Aron Senkpiel) that there was a niche for another northern journal. In their inaugural editorial article, "New Bearings on Northern Scholarship," Senkpiel and

Easton (1988) explained why they felt it was the right moment to launch a new journal. They were enthused by the expansion of research North of 60 since the 1970s in Canada occasioned by the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, the Alaska Highway pipeline, devolution, land claims negotiations, and were delighted by the creation of the two northern colleges that they thought would serve as centres of production, consumption and distribution of northern knowledge.

They conceived of and launched *The Northern Review* as a vehicle "to elucidate, as broadly as possible, human thought about and action in the North" (Senkpiel and Easton, 1988, p. 14). They wanted the journal to be a place where northern residents could engage in "the critical discussion of such issues as northern economic development" (Senkpiel and Easton, 1988, p. 15). The North they meant was "Alaska, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and the northern extremities of the provinces." Their North, in 1988, was North American.

The founding editors had four reasons for *The Northern Review*. First, the journals already out there were publishing a fraction of the submissions they received, which reduced the chance that work by long-time Northerners would be published, especially if they lacked formal institutional affiliation. Second, none of the extant journals focused on "looking broadly at human thought about and activity in the North" (p.22) and the editors suspected that *Arctic* would likely continue publishing primarily hard science papers, despite a fortieth anniversary effort to include a broader range of disciplines. Third, there was no scholarly journal being published in the territories and none "whose stated purpose is to develop what we call 'indigenous northern scholarship'" (Senkpiel and Easton, 1988, p. 22). The last reason they gave for starting the journal was the enormous distance between the northern scholarly community (the southern academics) and its "subject of study" had led them to be "relatively ineffectual in developing the scholarly potential of northerners" (Senkpiel and Easton, 1988, p. 23). The journal launched with a print run of 500 and a Ted Harrison painting reproduced on the cover. It was, they offered, "the fragile beginning of a new expedition of sorts, an attempt to map the bewildering topography of this place here" (Senkpiel and Easton, 1988, p. 25).

That fragile beginning has had its ups and downs but *The Northern Review* published its 36th issue in December 2013. Its scope has broadened to include the circumpolar North. It has become available online, has been open access for a year or more and has, over the years, dipped its toes into a broad range of disciplines. It is no longer the only journal of human-oriented northern studies, though it is, I believe, still the only one published North of 60 in Canada.

The information landscape *The Northern Review*, and the Northern Studies program, now inhabits is different. It would be the work of many pages to mention the sources and collaborations that have contributed so much to the discourse and the discovery of the circumpolar world in the past twenty years. I would be remiss, however, if I were to fail to mention the Fourth International Polar Year, 2007-2008. The International Association of Arctic Social Scientists had ensured that the IPY IV would include the human dimension. As a result, the science, results and outreach, the knowledge generated from that two-year-long year of science will be of consequence to a broad range of users for some time. That information landscape, then, is bumpier, bushier and more varied. The challenge now is to know enough about what is going on in the Circumpolar North that one can find the likely repository. This happy state of affairs has developed from those important international Arctic events I've mentioned here, but most notably, perhaps, through the creation of the Arctic Council and one of its projects, the University of the Arctic.

The U Arctic 'R Us

The idea of a University of the Arctic surfaced soon after the Arctic Council was established in 1996. Canada and Sweden submitted a proposal for "International Education and Training in the Arctic: A University of the Arctic" that was accepted. Peter Johnson, president of the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies in 1999 wrote an editorial about the UArctic for *Arctic*. In it, he explained that early in 1997, "following informal discussions, the Arctic Council asked the Circumpolar Universities Association (CUA) to appoint a task force to report on the concept of a circumpolar university" (Johnson, 1999, p. iii).

The preliminary report of October 1997 articulated a vision for the UArctic that was academic and developmental: "a higher education institution, focused on the environmental, cultural and economic integrity of Arctic regions. The University, through circumpolar cooperation, would "address the fundamental understanding of sustainable development" (Heal, Langlais, and Snellman, 1997, [p. 1]). The preliminary report was accepted and the CUA was asked to form a working group to undertake the fuller feasibility study. That "With Shared Voices" report was presented to the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in 1998. The Working Group was named the interim council of the University of the Arctic, a network to be made up of circumpolar educational institutions and agencies of various sorts who supported the goals of the UArctic.

The undergraduate Circumpolar Studies program would be the UArctic "flagship or signature program" (Poelzer, 2007, p. 31). It was the focus of UArctic programmatic efforts for the first few years. It was

significant, largely because proposals for northern post-secondary development had aimed at the graduate level. The original Canada-Sweden UArctic proposal was for "collaboration between Universities and other institutions of the Arctic member and observer states to [enhance] training, education and research, initially at the graduate level, in science and humanities relevant to Arctic regions" (Stone, 1997). The proposal for a graduate-level focus to start struck a nerve. The need in the north, at least in Canada, was not for graduate research but for undergraduate teaching that would help build resident academic expertise. The graduate-school-first thinking was probably familiar to the Canadians involved in the development of UArctic. In 1977, the Science Council of Canada had recommended creating an "unorthodox" northern university that would consist of a graduate school and an extensions department "to provide a focus for the development of northern research activity explicitly designed to solve northern problems" (p. 56). The unorthodox university might later "stimulate the creation of a northern polytechnical college" (p. 58). The Canadian North had moved past that with the Yukon College Northern Studies program. We wanted more options to do it ourselves.

The educational program of the UArctic was, therefore, of particular importance to Yukon College. Aron Senkpiel had been championing a vision of accessible university options for Yukon and northern residents since he'd arrived in the Yukon in 1980 (see Graham, 2007). He was a tireless advocate for expanding the North's capacity to teach, learn, and enquire. "In the North, for the North and by the North," he'd say. That's what was important. The University of the Arctic offered the possibility of the leading northern institutions world-wide sharing their expertise and curriculum with Yukon College and its students. The UArctic was, and arguably continues to be, "one of the most ambitious attempts to address [the] challenge of creating access to university education in remote, northern communities" (Poelzer, 2007, p. 28). By being a member of this group, the hope was, Yukon College students, wherever they were, would be able to take courses online from any other UArctic-member institution. UArctic membership would require that courses shared would be treated as domestic for any degree residency requirements. That was the plan, and it is coming in spite of the fact that it has taken a long time to operationalize and we're not quite there. Four or five courses have been offered to the UArctic "family" over the past seven or so years, developed by one institution and offered online to all UArctic-member students, that might be seen as proof-of-concept. We can hope for more in the future.

The circumpolar studies program of the UArctic continues to be of great importance to Yukon College and its Northern Studies programs. The seven-course core is shared curriculum that any student may take, in their home institutions or in international online sections. The first introduces the circumpolar

world and establishes a common vocabulary and a common framework for advanced study in three multidisciplinary areas: lands and environments, peoples and cultures, and finally, contemporary issues. Six third-year (half) courses offer year-long study of each of the three topics. The curriculum of the seven courses is supported by materials published by organizations like the Arctic Council Working Groups, and, more and more, by programs of the University of the Arctic (e.g., Northern Research Forum) and related projects (Arctic Year Book, for example). Northern studies has benefitted enormously from nearly two decades of data, information and critical study of the North, from the North, for the North and for the world. We're awash in information and daily we have new ways to find it, access it, share it and teach it.

Residents of the region now have more opportunities to connect than were dreamt of twenty or so years ago. The Internet has made communication and information dissemination easier (so much easier than the fax machine) and the proliferation of organizations offers unprecedented opportunities for networking and best-practices-sharing. Circumpolar cooperation is national and international but it is also personal and interpersonal. We are less isolated because we have bandwidth. We are less isolated because we have more friends.

I have perhaps not said enough about all the projects of the University of the Arctic because I do not wish to imply by omission they are not important. They are; vitally so. The UArctic programs are the points of engagement for the member institutions and the 130-odd members can each pick the ones that are most useful to them. Yukon College, for example, is a founding member of the UArctic, is involved with the north2north Student Mobility program and contributes teaching to the Circumpolar Studies Program. We have sent representatives to Northern Research Forum meetings, a Yukon College president has been Council Chair and another has attended the Rectors' Forum. We've been involved in the Course Catalogue and the Digital Library initiative. *The Northern Review* is friends with the UArctic Press. Our connections are broad and longstanding. The benefits are breadth and depth in our Northern Studies programs.

The Curious Business: Conclusion

Teaching Northern Studies has been something of a curious business. When I have a pensive moment, I wonder whether it is, in fact, possible to teach Northern Studies. Perhaps what I am really doing is creating space for students to "multidiscipline" themselves. I can imagine my Northern Studies experience as a journey from a narrow mountain valley to a broad plain. I have no way of knowing, of course, if my

experiences resonate with anyone else. I do think, though, that there has been an evolution in what we mean when we say Northern Studies.

In 1988, Northern Studies at Yukon College was all about us. It was, at its grand debut, a northerner's opportunity to study the north as if it mattered, as a homeland, as Thomas Berger termed it, and not as a frontier. It was an exciting opportunity to turn the map upside down, to turn the normal order of education inside out, and put the periphery at the centre of things in our classrooms. At the college, too, we embarked on a journey of contributing to the common pool of knowledge about life in the North with *The Northern Review*. We, and others in the field at the time, put a lot of effort into deciding where to put the fences and what kind of patio furniture we wanted. In time, though, the burning need to define who and what was Northern and who and what was Outside faded somewhat. Northernists started looking more closely at what was going on and, as Kenneth Coates had urged us, began spending more time thinking about good ways to explain what we were seeing. We were able to do that in part because the Cold War ended and the Arctic stopped being its playground, the Internet came along and slowly filled up with massive amounts of incredibly useful data and information, eight nations agreed to talk about Arctic issues and agreed to have Indigenous people in on the conversation, we got into the habit of trying to coordinating Arctic science and we had a network of northern universities and others to contribute to the work, talk about it, disseminate it and teach it.

Teaching Northern Studies is, indeed, a curious business, one I would not trade for anything. Northern Studies at Yukon College today is still about us, but it's an "us" that lives in a wider region. The fences are down and the posts have been moved out a great distance. My Northern Studies today is circumpolar, multinational, multilingual, multiethnic, and multidisciplinary. So are my students and so are their questions. My Northern Studies are Circumpolar Studies. The distinction doesn't seem at all necessary to me. My homeland has become more inclusive. My world has become more diverse. My work has become more challenging. And my students will become more. Just more.

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