

# ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGES GO DIGITAL



Tunucillek-llu irluni kelugkat akulitnun. Aatam  
arnam-llu ivarluku tunucillek eveggiit akulitni.  
Arnam nallekluku tunucillek irumauralria.  
Taugaam aatani qanrutevkenaku.



Page illustration from the *Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu* digital book

# ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGES GO DIGITAL

## How Digital Publishing Empowers Teachers, Connects Native Students To Their Culture, and Supercharges Language Immersion Programs

By Steve Nelson

During the final days of the 2014 session, the Alaska Legislature enacted House Bill 216, which designated twenty Alaska Native languages as official languages of the state.

In addition to English, Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yup'ik, Alutiiq, Unanga, Dena'ina, Deg Xinag, Holikachuk, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Gwich'in, Tanana, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, Hän, Ahtna, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian are now officially recognized Alaska languages.

This legislative action was profoundly significant to the Alaska Native population.

### Language Revitalization

All languages are fluid and ever-changing, requiring new speakers to perpetuate their evolution. It is estimated that some Alaska languages have fewer than 100 fluent speakers left, most elderly, placing them at risk of being lost. This urgency has sparked statewide efforts to preserve Native languages and make them more accessible to younger generations.

Each of Alaska's indigenous languages are direct reflections of the people who speak them, and serve as a kind of verbal encyclopedia of regional information. Words, phrasing and descriptive nuances convey a depth of knowledge about the area where a language is spoken, as well as the collective experiences of those who have inhabited it for many generations.

As a Native elder once told me, "Our language IS our culture."

Regional stories and legends, passed orally from adults to youth, were designed to teach important lessons about cultural traditions, beliefs, and survival skills. In this way, indigenous languages have long played an important role in the education of Alaska Native children.

## **Connecting Students To Their Culture**

Today, school-based strategies, including Native language immersion programs, are increasingly being utilized to strengthen connections between Native youth and their culture, to help improve their academic success and well-being.

New digital publishing tools have put the power to integrate Native languages into curriculum in the hands of classroom teachers, allowing them to create materials that can effectively engage today's generation of technologically adept learners.

## **Language Immersion, Chevak Style**

One example of a successful language immersion effort is underway at Chevak school in Kashunamiut school district. Over the past few years, AASB's Consortium for Digital Learning has worked intensively with the district to facilitate the production of interactive digital materials to support their elementary-level Cup'ik language immersion program.

To date, fifteen Cup'ik language digital story books featuring interactive multimedia elements have been created and are available free online. Another digital book based on the local story, Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu (The Young Lady and the Loon), is currently in production. Making these books has been a collaborative effort between the school leadership, students, teachers, AASB, and an app developer.

With 15 Cup'ik language digital books completed, the focus of Kashunamiut's immersion program has turned to building self-sufficiency among the teaching staff. So far this year CDL has delivered four days of inservice workshops to over 20 Chevak school teachers on how to produce interactive books and classroom materials that incorporate written and spoken Cup'ik language.



*Chevak teachers use an iPad to gather content for a digital book.*



*In-service workshop participants learn to use digital publishing tools to make instructional materials that incorporate Cup'ik text and spoken language.*

Workshop topics have included digital book pre-production, design, layout, integration of multimedia elements, and audio/video production techniques. Mastering these skills are enabling Chevak teachers to produce instructional materials that can deliver powerful and engaging new learning experiences to their Cup'ik immersion students.



*Chevak teachers work on book projects during a digital publishing in-service workshop.*

## Empowering Teachers

The Kashunamiut teaching staff now has the ability to create their own classroom materials that include Cup'ik language text and audio, as well as incorporate digital publishing into student assignments, and involve family and community members in the digital book creation process.

Some teacher-initiated projects currently underway include interactive Cup'ik word books for young immersion program students, illustrated local legends,

and an atlas that documents the geography and history of the Chevok area as told by local residents.

The district IT department is providing high-level project support to the teaching staff, furnishing laptops, iPads, technology assistance, and configuring the school network to facilitate book file storage and sharing. Once produced, all digital instructional content will be archived on a school server and accessible over the network for access by staff and students.

### Arnaq Tunucillek-llu



Qissunamiut Quliraat



*A team of Cup'ik speakers work on translating part of the *Arnaq Tunucillek-llu* book for digital publication.*

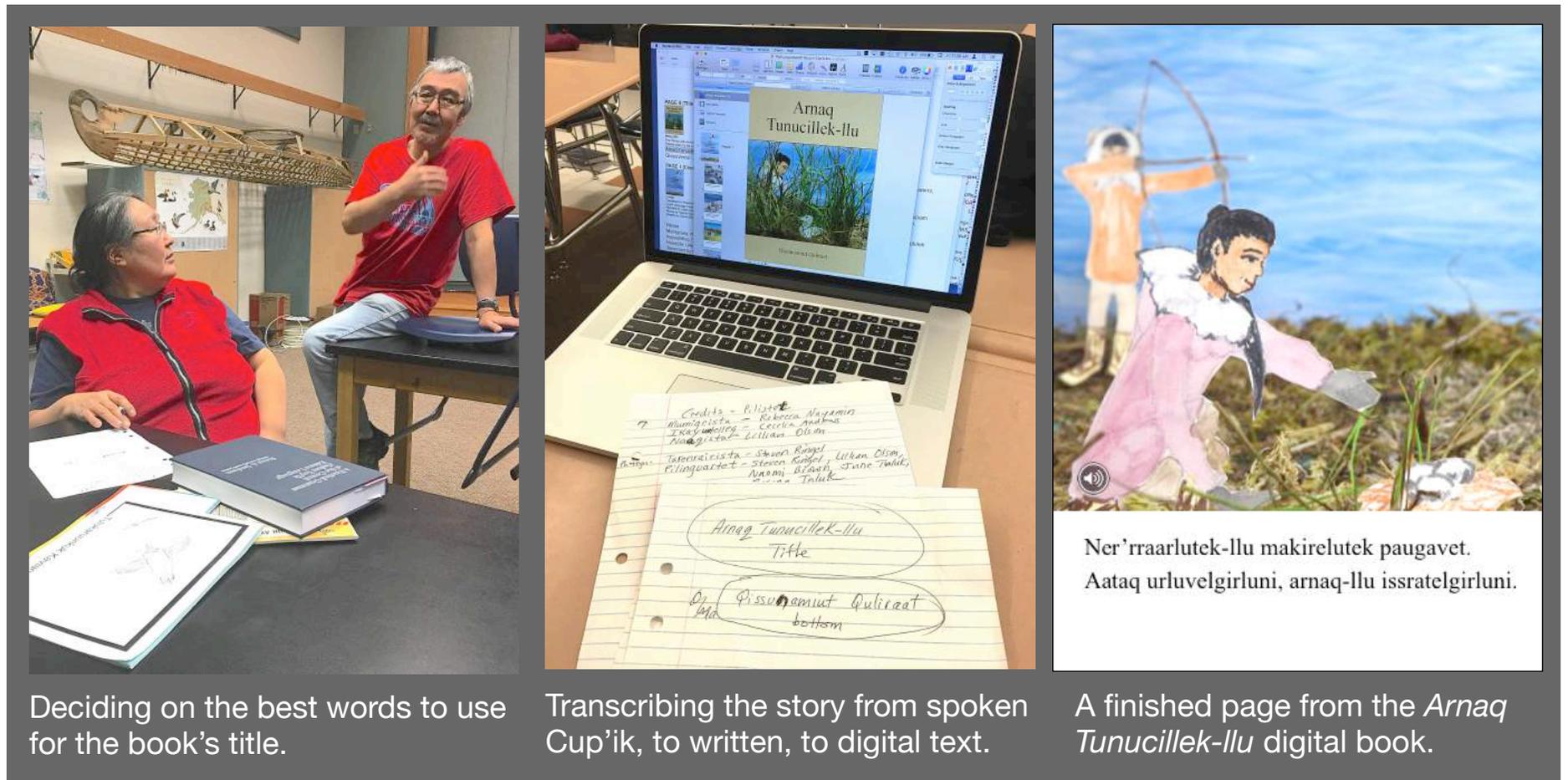
## Making A Spoken Language Digital

Accurately transcribing a traditional story that until recently had only been passed on orally, requires a dedicated team of fluent speakers. As a non-speaker of Cup'ik, it was a fascinating process to observe.

For the production of the *Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu* (The Young Lady and the Loon), translating the oral story to text and audio for the digital book required the participation of a Cup'ik linguist, an elder fluent in Cup'ik, a narrator fluent in Cup'ik, and a focus group of five Cup'ik speakers to review the final text for precision and correctness.

Spirited debate ensued about the nuances of specific words. Books containing written Cup'ik language were consulted for usage guidance. Phone calls were made. Eventually, consensus was reached.

The responsibility for ensuring that the digital book text accurately conveys the spirit and meaning of the story was taken very seriously by each team member. This complex review process placed the weight of an entire culture on the participants' shoulders. Being on the front lines of transitioning their ancestral language from oral to written form required getting it right, not just for themselves, but for the benefit of previous, current and future generations of Cup'ik people.



Deciding on the best words to use for the book's title.

Transcribing the story from spoken Cup'ik, to written, to digital text.

A finished page from the *Arnaq Tunucillek-Illu* digital book.

## Improving Student Success

A stated goal of the Association of Alaska School Boards is empowering local boards to increase the academic success and graduation rates of Alaska Native students. AASB supports language revitalization efforts, and believe that grounding Alaska Native students in their cultural identity, and offering culturally responsive personalized learning, teaching practices,

and school environments for Alaska Native students, are important elements of success. We actively work to assist local school boards in understanding their role in creating learning environments that are conducive to the learning styles of Alaska Native students in the various regions and diverse cultures of our state.

Interested in digital publishing in-service workshops?  
 Please contact us for details and scheduling information.  
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