# Editorial / Ask the Natives

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The men of the Corps of Discovery had moved upstream on the great eastward-flowing Missouri and its tributaries through the months of spring and summer. Now, in September 1805, they camped in a valley after crossing a steep pass into the massive range of mountains that stretched roughly north and south as far as the men could see. The craggy peaks of the great mountains touched the clouds. Soon, fresh snow flurries would announce the coming of a bitter, frigid winter. The mountains blocked the westward progress of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their small company of explorers. The men found little consolation in their realization that the myth of a Northwest Passage was dead. Their reality was bleak. They had left the vast plains and their herds of buffalo and other game. The men needed new sources of food. Most of all, however, they needed a sure way through the apparently impenetrable mountain barrier so they might reach their goal, the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Their maps had been useless for weeks; they were traveling in an uncharted land. What should they do? Should they blindly push into the mountains? Should they turn back toward the East and abandon their goal? As this expedition teetered precariously on the ledge of failure, Lewis and Clark and the men of the Corps of Discovery rested. As a team, they considered their options. They quickly decided on a daring course of action. They asked the natives for help.[1]

This particular band of natives, the Salish, lived on the western side of the mountains. Annually, they traveled to the eastern foothills to trade and then returned home. They and generations before them had navigated the twists and upheavals and rock slides and rushing streams amidst the mountains; they knew the torturous paths, and they knew which roots and berries to eat. After a round of negotiations, the natives agreed to the explorers' requests.

This decision by Lewis and Clark was not simplistic, nor was it without risk. After all, the men of the Corps of Discovery were United States soldiers on a presidential mission. They possessed modern weapons; they simply lacked a useful map. Moreover, they understood the natives to be savages, simple beings in a universe that included the United States among its newer masters. Consequently, the explorers might have wondered if the natives would honor the bargain to guide them through the treacherous mountain passes, if they would share their food, if they would steal their instruments and supplies, and, of course, if they would harm them. In fact, the bargain was kept. The natives safely guided the explorers through the mountains. In addition, they provided them with valuable information about the land that lay between the mountains and the western ocean.

To ask the natives reasonably represented a decision of deliberation, planning with others for the solution of a practical problem. With all its complexity and incipient danger, the problem was one that Captain Lewis could not have anticipated as he originally planned and outfitted the expedition.

Even the best preparations cannot "plan out" failure. With great care, on the other hand, preparations may *reduce* the prospects of a failed enterprise. However, even with planned redundancy and unrestricted access to resources, the prospect of failure is a constant companion of ventures into the unknown, in physical explorations

as well as in school reforms. In addition, careful, systematic preparations cannot "plan in" success. Good planning, by itself, contains no guarantees.

Meriwether Lewis, to be sure, prepared meticulously and extensively for the expedition of the Corps of Discovery. For the times, he prepared as well as possible for the long and hazardous overland journey to the Pacific Ocean. His planning included the acquisition of numerous supplies, including foodstuffs, modern scientific instruments, and rifles. Nevertheless, his planning was not a once and forever event. It also featured his requests for time spent before departure to acquire information and skills—to be able, for example, to estimate longitude, to treat ills and wounds, and to recognize unique flora and fauna. In a sense, he was accustomed to asking for help on matters about which he knew too little. He was prepared, consequently, to invite the counsel of knowledgeable companions, including his subordinates and, in the case of the North American natives, his perceived social inferiors.

A century later, Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott prepared to lead their national expeditions in a race to the South Pole. The story of their preparations and consideration of possible analogues for educational planning are the subject of a major analysis and a carefully reasoned commentary in this issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*.[2] In a parallel with Lewis and Clark's experience of their desperate need for direction in the Rocky Mountains, only the Norwegian Amundsen recognized the importance of "asking the natives" as he prepared for his polar journey. He studied and accepted, for example, the wisdom of the Inuits' reliance on dog teams, caribou hide clothing, and snow igloos. "Asking the natives," for both Lewis and Clark and for Amundsen, was something more than requesting information.

Certainly, it was not *the* key element of the planning of these explorers. All planning, more times than not, encounters the unknown, the ambiguous, the uncertain. Also, planning almost always considers a multitude of factors, any one of which after the fact may be acknowledged as especially critical to success or as a modest shortcoming or a catastrophic loss. Without a doubt, in both these major expeditions, "asking the natives" simply was *one*, not *the*, point on which the success of the enterprises turned. "Asking the natives," nevertheless, was a dramatically significant feature of their success.

When the commanders of the expeditions requested information, they clearly understood that they *needed* something precious that they *lacked*. Moreover, their request publicly admitted that others' experience, judgment, and wisdom *exceeded* and also *had more relevance* to the particular situation than did their own. Command and authority, for them, included unembarrassed admission of personal inadequacy. Thus, these leaders eagerly sought assistance from the natives, individuals who were living out their lives in places and in situations that they knew more intimately and understood more practically than did the expedition leaders.

Asking the natives, a special feature of these renowned expeditions, can be recognized as a profound analogue for educational planning. Its potential for value, on the other hand, confronts several formidable obstacles. At least two critically important dimensions of awareness appear to be necessary. Educational leaders must realize that they need a great variety of help as they plan both before *and* during the process of reform. Also, they must know who the natives are.

Of course, almost always in matters of schooling, teachers are the natives. Who else might be included? The too easy answer is different people in different situations. Able leadership in education, whatever the case, recognizes teachers among whoever else may be natives, acknowledges their assets, and enlists their help. The

consequences of arrogant even if well-intentioned leadership that ignores or deprecates or marginalizes these natives, on the other hand, are obvious. They constitute much of the wreckage of failed and frequently forgotten school reform initiatives.[3]

The American public rightly expects much from its schools and leaders. As these leaders seek to stimulate and guide appropriate initiatives for school reforms, they fruitfully may recognize in both the Lewis and Clark and the Amundsen expeditions several impressive guides to practice. One is simplicity itself. In planning for the unknown, in advance of and in the process of change, ask the natives.

## Endnotes

[1] This account has been constructed from two excellent, recent books; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), and Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns, *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

[2] David Pratt, "Planning in a Cold Climate," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 14 (Winter 1999): 109-125; Maurice Holt, "Scott and Amundsen: Another Interpretation," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 14 (Winter 1999):126-135.

[3] See, for example, David B. Tyack and Larry S. Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).