

Perspectives

NEWSLETTER

Jason and Walter's Excellent Arctic Adventure

Jason Young and Walter O'Toole had been stranded on Arctic ice for nearly an hour, unable to find a safe path back to shore, when an Inuit woman observing from her kitchen dispatched her 13-year-old son to guide them to safety. It was one of many humbling moments for the UW students during a visit to the Canadian Arctic through a Canadian Studies **Foreign Language Area and Studies (FLAS) Fellowship**.

"Yeah, we totally got stuck," laughs O'Toole. "It's almost like a maze out there. In certain places there are chunks of ice with cracks in them or space between them. We didn't really know how to jump over cracks and which ones were safe to jump over. When the boy came out, he knew just what to do. It's pretty incredible how well they know the ice."

Young and O'Toole had traveled to the Arctic for intensive study of Inuktitut, the Inuit language, which they had been studying in Seattle prior to the trip. Young, a PhD student in **geography**, is interested in how indigenous communities use technology to engage in environmental activism. He decided to focus on the Inuit community after taking a graduate seminar on Arctic issues, and felt that familiarity with the Inuktitut language would strengthen his research.



Jason Young strikes a pose on the Arctic ice near the town of Igloolik in northern Canada. Photo by Walter O'Toole.

O'Toole, an undergraduate majoring in **creative writing**, happened upon Inuktitut in the UW course catalog. "My dad worked in the Arctic for many years and told me stories about his time up there, so I've always had this fascination with the ice and Inuit culture," he says. "Even though Inuktitut might not be the most practical language outside of the Arctic, it intrigued me." O'Toole has since added an **Arctic studies minor**, through which he has taken courses on the Arctic Ocean, marine policy, and climate change. "Through the minor, I've been able to do some policy analysis and research," he says. "It's really expanded my skill set."

Inuktitut language classes at the UW have been held mostly online, with instructors Mick Mallon and Alexina Kublu teaching via Skype from their home on Vancouver Island. "There are no other programs in the U.S. that offer Inuktitut and there aren't many teachers of Inuktitut, so this has been an awesome opportunity," says Young, "even if the Skype connection is sometimes a little buggy."

Still, nothing beats learning language through immersion. Through their FLAS fellowships, Young and O'Toole were able to travel to Igloolik, an Inuit town in remote northern Canada, to study Inuktitut where it is actually

spoken. “Igloolik is definitely the Arctic,” says Young. “The landscape is barren with no trees. At the beginning of our trip, the ocean was pretty much a solid sheet of ice. Toward the end, it started to break up a bit.”



UW students Walter O'Toole (left) and Jason Young with Inuktitut language instructor Alexina Kublu during a camping trip in the Arctic.

There were many opportunities to explore that ice, but first came daily language lessons lasting up to six hours. Kublu, born and raised in Igloolik, returned to lead the daily sessions in person. Dozens of her relatives shared other aspects of Inuit culture with the UW students. They welcomed them to Canada Day and Nunavut Day festivities—the latter celebrating the establishment of Canada's newest territory, governed primarily by Inuit. The relatives also invited Young and O'Toole on a camping trip.

The journey to the remote campsite was a highlight of their stay. The destination was an island reached by a large sled, or *qamutiik*, pulled by a snowmobile. To envision the *qamutiik*, imagine a convertible car on gliders, minus a car's comfort. Passengers sit on top of supplies and hold on for dear life.

Sometimes they must jump off to help turn the sled on rough ice. The trip to the island took about six hours, involving tricky navigation around melting ice. “It wasn't a sleigh ride to grandma's house, that's for sure,” quips O'Toole. “We were exhausted. It was a workout.”

Young and O'Toole found that having an intimate experience with the Arctic landscape and Inuit culture led to a better understanding of the language. “The language really is a part of the land,” says Young, who offers the treatment of pronouns an example. While English speakers use “it” to refer to an object like their phone, Inuktitut speakers alter the pronoun to indicate whether the phone is directly in front of them, up high in front of them, down low in front of them, or out of sight. “As an English speaker, we think, ‘It's still my phone. Why do I have to use a different word for it each time?’” says Young. “But being out there it makes more sense. They are a hunting culture out on this flat land. They have to see really far ahead and communicate very precisely where a certain animal is, whether it is moving or not, whether it is up high or down low.”



Traveling to a remote island by sled, across the frozen Arctic Ocean, “wasn't a sleigh ride to grandma's house, that's for sure,” says Walter O'Toole. But both he and Jason Young consider that journey a highlight of their visit to Igloolik. Photo by Walter O'Toole.

Back on the UW campus, Young and O'Toole are continuing their language studies (along with UW law student Caitlyn Evans, who was unable to make the trip to Igloolik). Young is planning his dissertation, which will explore Inuit use of social media and other Internet technologies for activism around Arctic-related political issues. O'Toole, who graduates at the end of autumn quarter, hopes to eventually pursue a master's degree in English.

"I'd like to look at Inuit literature and be able to do criticism on that, especially if I get to the point where I can read it sufficiently well," he says. "There needs to be more focus on works of art that the Inuit are producing."

Both students hope to get back to Igloolik sooner rather than later. They promise that next time they'll steer clear of melting ice.



To read more about Jason Young and Walter O'Toole's Igloolik experiences, check out their [first-person accounts](#) in the [Canadian Studies newsletter](#).

For more about Inuktitut courses or the [Arctic Studies minor](#) (the latter offered jointly by the Jackson School of International Studies and the School of Oceanography), visit the [Canadian Studies website](#) or contact the Arctic Studies Minor Coordinator, Monick Keo, at canada@uw.edu or (206) 221-6374.

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