

# AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES at Lane Community College: When Old and New Converge

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Start with students, students who want to study their ancestral language but have little or no knowledge of it, students who are proficient in an American Indian language but cannot earn academic credit, and students who hunger to satisfy their interest in Native languages and cultures.

Imagine a course of study that honors these desires. Imagine the spark and continuing inspiration these desires have provided for close to ten years. And imagine interactive technology joining four campuses to help realize these students' yearnings.

From Fall 2000 to now has been a remarkable journey for American Indian Languages (AIL) at Lane Community College and for the state of Oregon. It began when Jerry Hall (biology and Native Circles instructor) raised his hand at a Learning Communities meeting and asked who would like to help develop a course teaching Native languages and cultures. Some people joined right then, others flowed through, some stayed, some came later. The "some" has been greater than the parts, for through the years the AIL committee has welcomed new and returning participants from student, faculty, community, and administration sectors, advocates as well as nay-sayers. The most numerous and consistent have been faculty members, but all have provided insights and energy to reach our current landmark. *We have needed all of us.*

## THE BIG NEWS FIRST

The first major result of these dreams and efforts is that Lane is in its third year of offering AIL 101-103. Further, the successful completion of the first two terms satisfies Oregon universities' admission requirement for one year of a second language.

This 2008-2009 year we have added AIL 201-203, which satisfies Oregon universities' graduation requirement for two years of a second language. To our knowledge, Lane is the first non-tribal community college in the country to offer an American Indian language course of study!

Before we tell about our choice of Chinuk Wawa as the first language offering and the innovation of teaching language to a four-campus community through distributed learning, here is more of our history.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR AIL COURSES

Early on, to clarify our own mission and to fulfill a college requirement, we articulated the American Indian Languages' core values and goals as the following:

- Work collectively and by consensus.
- Offer empowerment and promote self-esteem among learners of Native languages.
- Provide a sense of identity and hope for the broader community.
- Help to revitalize and/or maintain Native languages and cultures.
- Teach language and culture as inextricably connected.
- Get state approval for American Indian Languages at the college level.

In order to fulfill these principles, we committed ourselves to

- Listening to Native community concerns
- Earning trust
- Gaining credibility
- Creating a curriculum appropriate to and respectful of Native American values
- Meeting traditional and institutional needs
- Looking for the right language
- Modifying the face-to-face teaching paradigm
- Overcoming scarcity of instructors and helping them optimize their time and energy
- Enrolling adequate numbers of students.

## THE STEPS ALONG THE WAY

AIL originally adopted two criteria for choosing which language(s) to teach, but the decision was not an easy one, given that well over 500 different American Indian languages existed when Europeans arrived in North America and hundreds of independent Native languages are in use today.

Ultimately, we decided to focus on (a)languages of interest to the students enrolled at Lane and (b)languages representative of Oregon or the Pacific Northwest.

In addition, we were determined that any language we chose would be taught within the context of, and in cooperation with, a recognized Indian tribe or an existing Indian community. Through questionnaires and surveys at Lane, local pow wows, and conferences that we attended and where we sometimes presented, we found the greatest student interest was in Siouan and Cherokee languages (nationally spoken and studied, with some speakers in the NW region). However, the outcome of our discussions with local Native elders and educators was that we should focus on

languages of the tribes of Oregon. Several Oregon tribes were creating language programs. Which would be best for our course of study? Which would accept us as participants?

Our next big step came in the summer of 2001 when Lane sponsored five AIL faculty members (Pam Dane, Jerry Hall, Jeff Harrison, Don Macnaughtan and Carol Watt) to the University of Oregon's Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI). We learned about pedagogical methods for teaching Native languages and about the articulation of tribal and state benchmarks. We also met great people, two of whom, unbeknownst to us then, would become key figures in AIL's future: the director, Janne Underrinner, and the participant who was developing a language program at Grand Ronde, Tony Johnson.



For two years AIL worked on developing the curriculum for AIL 101-103. We created a thematic structure that would anchor the content of language study in the speakers' culture. Themes such as Welcoming and Naturescapes were to be recursively introduced, reviewed and expanded during the three AIL terms.

Within the lessons on vocabulary and linguistics rest cultural insights. For example, one Native language has at least six forms of *we* (not counting case) to designate proximity and the inclusion and exclusion of varying numbers (Janne Underrinner, NILI lecture, Summer 2001). Another example is that the deictic center in some Native languages is not based on the speaker being the

locus of *here* and *there*, but on a natural feature, such as a river or mountain (Don Addison, AIL 100 lecture Winter 2004).

The other reason for a thematic structure was that AIL could teach several languages at once. We hoped to hire an instructor who would coordinate the existing computer-based language programs and the visits between students and their language mentors. Rather than a tower of Babel, we envisioned cross-lingual and cross-cultural interchanges among students and teachers.

Even though we hit snags and eddies while developing this ambitious course of study, we did gain Curriculum approval for AIL 101-103 by 2003. One difficulty is that we lacked a department to call home. Michael Sámano, Director of Ethnic Studies, took us in. Subsequently we were adopted by Social Sciences, with our final destination being the Division of English, Foreign Languages, and Speech (EFLS), which has since retitled itself Language, Literature & Communication, solving several problems, among them naming Spanish, French, and American Indian languages as “foreign.”

#### AIL’S FIRST MAJOR SUCCESS

In the meantime, we also created and gained Curriculum approval for what would become our first course offering, Foundations for the Study of American Indian Languages. Taught by multilingual, multicultural Don Addison (anthropology instructor), the class was a big success, starting in the winter of 2004 as Ethnic Studies 199 and later as AIL 100.

#### OUR NEXT BIG CHANCE

In 2004, Lane was given a generous and anonymous endowment for a continuing Visiting Scholar position (then called an Endowed Chair). We worked hard to apply for and secure the first award, which we did. The next step was to contact Native communities and academic circles to invite applicants. We sent over one hundred letters and advertised in tribal and local media. We then reviewed the applications, short-listed, and interviewed. The choice was clear: Janne Underrinner, NILI director and a recognized linguist who had dedicated her professional career to the preservation and renewal of Native languages. Because of her work and her ways, she also had connections with many Northwest Native communities.

By 2005, while Janne was working on the AIL 101-103 curriculum, another part of the dream materialized: Tony Johnson agreed to co-teach Chinuk Wawa with Janne at Lane. He was already the Language Director at Grand Ronde, the reservation west of Salem, where he had created and was successfully running a Chinuk Wawa program, daytime for preschoolers and evening for adults. Over

the span of many months, Susan Carkin, Dean of Language, Literature, and Communication, negotiated a contract between Lane and the Confederated Tribes of the Grande Ronde Community. Through the careful language of the contract, Lane and Grande Ronde established shared intellectual property rights, both a major cultural shift for an academic institution and an act of trust by the Tribes. Now we had the expertise and the go-ahead to teach a Native American language at Lane.

## THE HISTORY OF CHINUK WAWA, THE FIRST AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGE TO BE TAUGHT AT LANE

Chinuk Wawa's history made it a good choice. It was a trade language developed long before the arrival of non-Indian fur trappers or settlers. It was spoken over a broad area, from northern British Columbia to northern California, and as far east as Idaho. It was based on the Chinuk language, an ancient and well-developed Indian language, spoken along the lower Columbia River, which was a major trade center. It accreted elements from a variety of other Indian languages and continued to add elements of English, French, Hawaiian and Russian in historic times. The early reservation years in Oregon and Washington brought people together from different cultures and different languages. This mixing, as well as intermarriage, meant that many reservation people used Chinuk Wawa at home and in their communities, and for at least thirty years it was spoken as a first language by a new generation of children. (Tony Johnson, AIL class lecture, Winter 2005.)

We chose this language because it is of wide interest in the Pacific Northwest and because it has a good chance of flourishing for many generations. And Lane can be an important part of that success by offering young Chinuk Wawa learners an incentive to keep using the language that they learned at home and in their early grades: college credit for proficiency in the language.

## IT'S ARRIVED, THE FIRST YEAR OF A NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE AT LANE!

In the school year of 2006-2007, Janne and Tony smoothly co-taught the first AIL 101-103. Student response was strong, and the courses met state and tribal criteria. Some challenges emerged, however:

### 1. *Testing and formalizing the syllabus, the packets, the exams:*

The polishing of the syllabus and written materials came gradually, as it always does when starting a new course. One challenge was completed this last summer: Tony and Janne finished the textbook for the first year! Now they are testing as they go the materials they developed for the second-year sequence.

## *2. Increasing student enrollment:*

One incentive for students to study a second language is that it is required for college entrance and graduation. As of last year, Chinuk Wawa is recognized by the Oregon Board of Education as an academic language course of study (AIL even earned a state prefix). The successful completion of 101-102 satisfies the entrance requirements of Oregon's secondary institutions, and successful completion of the second year fulfills the graduation requirement for a second language at the colleges and universities in Oregon.

This accreditation signifies that Native studies can be as complex, demanding, useful, and rewarding as courses centered on the dominant culture. In AIL context, Native American languages are as important and respected as those originating in Europe.

The hard work of Janne and Tony on the textbooks was taking care of the first issue, and the accreditation certainly was a great accomplishment and helping to draw students, but AIL was still faced with modest enrollment and two other problems:

## *3. Integrating Chinuk Wawa mentors when Tony could not be at Lane because of his demanding schedule;*

*4. Protecting a scarce and vital resource, Tony Johnson, a Tribally Certified Native Language speaker, against burnout. The round-trip drive of three to four hours was taking its toll.*

This is where technology enters the scene.

## THE FOUR-CAMPUS DISTANCE-LEARNING INNOVATION: ITS HISTORY AND CURRENT FORM

Here is the recounting of Multimedia and Video Specialist, Dean Middleton, about how he became involved with AIL and helped develop delivery of its courses using the internet.

In the fall of 2004 an old friend, Jerry Hall, approached me about using videoconferencing in the teaching of Native languages. I knew Jerry from the days my kids and his attended the 4J Natives program. I had heard he was one of the movers and shakers in a new project at Lane called AIL. He said that he was working on the teaching of Native American languages and, because there are so few speakers, he wanted to know if we could connect to the Warm Springs area. He knew of an elder who spoke a Native language and was thinking that the elder could present the class from Warm Springs instead of having to drive 100 miles in bad winter weather. I checked, and there was a

conference unit at the tribal office. I tested the connection. At that time it was the farthest we had gone with our video conference equipment.

Today we connect Grande Ronde, Portland Community College, Chemeketa Community College, and Lane Community College every Monday and Wednesday. The video conferencing is built so that the participants at each location can view those at the other locations. The connection goes through Lane Educational Service District (ESD) to the State of Oregon, Department of Administrative Services' Video Conferencing Center, and then to the distant sites. This technology allows us to build to any location that has video conferencing equipment.

This truly is a blend of the old (Chinuk Wawa language) and the new (video conferencing over the web). Conventional wisdom held that languages could not be taught through distance technology. As the AIL classes have evolved, though, teachers and students have become comfortable with the medium. People can be seen to interact freely over these distances after only a few class periods. In fact, students in the classroom have learned to steer the camera and turn the microphone on and off as needed.

Dean's observations about the students adapting to using the classroom interactive equipment answers one of the concerns we had while the new format was evolving. Of course, there were the usual distance-learning issues about difficulty in booking wired rooms, finding adequate late afternoon support staff at four campuses, and avoiding or reconnecting failed hook-ups.

However, we were also worried about the less tangible issues in the language-learning setting that we were proposing. Would students and teachers, looking at others and themselves on TV, experience alienation, performance anxiety, and/or reduced spontaneity? Further, would the distance-learning format limit or eliminate cultural lessons because of the medium's impersonality and the potential co-opting by a public institution or non-tribal participants? In spite of these concerns we moved ahead. It was heart-easing to hear from Tony at an AIL meeting last year that his worst fears had not been met and that he thought the set-up was working well.

#### STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON TAKING AIL COURSES

The thoughts of two students also answer many of the above concerns. Jerome Viles, undergraduate student dually enrolled at Lane Community College and the University of Oregon, and Drew Viles, English instructor, share how these AIL classes enrich students' lives.

Chinuk Wawa has been, for me, a life-changing experience. Learning an ancestral Oregon language has inspired me to study linguistics so I can become involved in the revival of Native languages. Everyone in the program has been a huge inspiration in their commitment to and their methods of revitalizing Chinuk Wawa.

The most rewarding part of learning Chinuk Wawa has been the enhanced connection I feel with the area I live in. It feels right to know the place names that have been used for hundreds of years to describe the area, and it gives one an understanding and respect for the land and original inhabitants that is normally lacking. It is a healthy thing to learn about how people lived in this area for thousands of years, and the most effective way of glimpsing into their worldview is by studying their language. I am glad to have made Chinuk Wawa a part of my life, and I hope that many people both Native and non-Native decide to make the same choice.

Learning a language rooted firmly to the soil—that’s something a student of languages typically experiences via travel to Spain or Italy or France. Here, now students have had that unique experience in Eugene, Oregon, as we study Chinuk Wawa.

To learn any language as an adult forces recognition of the obvious: language enacts culture. It’s not a surprise that we become like conduits for any number of intellectual operations when we speak a language. The surprise is when we catch ourselves enacting a particular way of seeing the world. The study of Chinuk Wawa has allowed students to learn the culture inside out, so to speak. Instead of learning about the culture, students have occasion to learn culture through language.

Once, for example, we worked to translate a story that described a camas skin as big as a person’s kneecap. People have eaten camas bulbs for millennia in this land. And the thought of a prodigiously big camas bulb not only brought delight to our imagination but also brought home the very serious moral of the tale that we were studying, one that stressed the importance of sharing food. Now, when we students of Chinuk Wawa drive by a sign announcing any of the places named after “camas” (like the one standing on I-5 between Eugene and Cottage Grove), we will remember that particular camas skin, as large as a person’s knee and the cultural imperative to share that goes with such abundance.

Likewise, what’s up and what’s down in Chinuk Wawa depends, we learned, on water. To speak Chinuk Wawa, we have to wrap our minds around water and the way water flows at a particular place. To a large extent, water determines human orientation.

The effect of learning a language of this land has resonated most strongly when we have learned cultural practices through our study of the language. Some of us often catch ourselves humming a gambling song that Tony Johnson shared with us during Chinuk Wawa class. Maybe this song has roots nearly as deep as the use of camas as a food source in this land. Whether by song or story, we have gained greater connection to a rich cultural inheritance by learning this language in this land. This language in this land has a joyful sound.

#### ON THE HORIZON

We still have much to do, but the goals are very close to being met. One area still not completed is which funding model Lane and the other campuses will use. Susan Carkin, a steady champion for AIL, has been working on variations on host-provider arrangements with CCC and PSU. The host-provider model of Distributed Learning helps share the cost of providing a class to the students who want it. The host colleges, Chemeketa Community College and Portland State University, receive tuition, fees, and FTE for each enrolled student. They then send the tuition and fees to Lane Community College, the class provider. Both schools then have enrollment for the class and receive income for the class; the costs are defrayed amongst the participating schools. And to have a win, win, win, the students at Grand Ronde may either take the class as Continuing Education or enroll as a Lane student to earn college credit. Lane gains FTE, and the students have choice.

From one raised hand inviting interested participants to AIL's fully fledged two-year offerings, we have come a long way. Now, our next goal is to join with Lane's other courses and programs that focus on American Indian interests in order to create a formal course of study, possibly as a major or minor or a certificate in Native American Studies. AIL adds to Lane's already rich array of multicultural offerings and affirms the college's commitment to diversity. American Indian Languages is indeed part of a new direction that gives Lane Community College a sense of pride and, we hope, offers inspiration.