Indigenous Educators as Change Agents
Case Studies of Two Language Institutes

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In the summer of 1978, 18 parents and elders representing Diegueño, Havasupai, Hualapai, Mohave, and Yavapai language communities traveled to San Diego State University for the first Yuman Language Institute. There, they worked with academic linguists and bilingual educators who shared their interest in the written forms of Yuman languages, and who were committed to using linguistic knowledge to improve education for indigenous students. What has come to be known as the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) began with this small group of people. The institute’s influence would eventually reach far beyond the Yuman language family. In June of 1999, AILDI prepared to usher in the new millennium by celebrating its 20th anniversary with participants from around the world.

Conceived by Hualapai educator Lucille Watahomigie, academic linguist Leanne Hinton, and the late John Rouillard (Sioux) of San Diego State University, the first institute enrolled 18 native speakers of five Yuman languages. The only program requirement was that participants be native speakers interested in working with their respective languages (Hinton et al. 1982, 22).

The focus of that institute was “Historical/Comparative Linguistics: Syntax and Orthography of Yuman Languages.” The following year, joined by the late Milo Kaleketca (Hopi), then director of the Bilingual Education Service Center at Arizona State University, and linguists Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O’odham) and Akira Y. Yamamoto, the institute teamed academic linguists with 50 native speakers in an intensive four-week program. During this time institute participants examined their languages, developed practical writing systems, designed curriculum, and created native-language teaching materials. The title of this second institute, which included Tohono O’odham (formerly called Papago) and Akimel O’odham (Pima), was “Orthography, Phonetics, Phonology, and Curriculum Development.”

Since its inception in San Diego, the institute has been hosted by Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Southwest Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque, Arizona State University in Tempe, and the University of Arizona in Tucson. Each year AILDI faculty had to renegotiate institute summer sites. Since 1990, however, AILDI has been permanently housed at the University of Arizona.

During a three-year period beginning in 1992, a sister organization held summer institutes in Oklahoma. This was the Oklahoma Native American Language Development Institute (ONALDI), whose education functions, like those of AILDI, were in principle continuous. Under its new name, Oklahoma Native Language Association Workshops (ONLA), the work of ONALDI did in fact continue beyond the original three years, using a new format and scheduling structure better suited to the needs of Oklahoma native communities.

In the first section below, certain essential features of AILDI are presented. In the next two sections, ONALDI and ONLA are discussed. The discussion of ONALDI includes the basic organizational and philosophical background of the organization and an example of course content in the form of a language research activity for participants. Although AILDI, ONALDI, and ONLA are unique in many ways, they also represent cases which can be examined for their implications and applicability to other linguistic and sociocultural contexts. We therefore include “lessons learned” from each case, and we conclude with more gen-
eral recommendations for indigenous community-based language maintenance and revitalization.

**THE AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE**

Since it began in 1978, AILDI has seen its participants grow in number and diversity. In recent years the institute has enrolled approximately 100 participants each year, representing language groups throughout the United States and Canada and from as far away as Venezuela, Brazil, and Taiwan. Altogether the institute has prepared over 1,000 parents and school-based educators to work as researchers, curriculum developers, and advocates for the conservation and development of indigenous languages and cultures. Most participants are native speakers of an indigenous language, but AILDI welcomes participants from all backgrounds who are concerned with the maintenance of indigenous languages and the application of linguistic and cultural knowledge to classroom practice.

**AILDI Goals and Pedagogy**

"I used to wonder why the students would just sit there when the teacher gave them all these verbal directions. I know now that it was because they did not understand. I used to wonder why, when the teacher would ask the student to write a story about a city or an unfamiliar place, they would only write one or two sentences. . . . They were only trying to tell us that there was not anything of meaning to them. This will give you an idea of what I've learned at the institute."

—Bilingual teacher assistant and AILDI participant

AILDI's overarching goal is to incorporate indigenous linguistic and cultural knowledge into school curricula in ways that affirm indigenous students' identities, support their academic achievement, and promote the retention of their languages and cultures. The statistics on Native American students' school performance are well documented: Indigenous students are significantly overrepresented in low-ability, skill-and-drill tracks, and they experience the highest school dropout rates in the nation (U.S. Department of Education 1991). Equally well documented are the school-based causes underlying these outcomes: curriculum "presented from a purely Western [European] perspective," low educator expectations, loss of "the wisdom of the older generations," and a "lack of opportunity for parents and communities to develop a real sense of participation" (U.S. Department of Education 1991, 7–8).

Our hope is that through their involvement in the institute, participants will return to their home communities with the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to challenge the English-only, deficit-driven pedagogies that have historically characterized American Indian education and debilitated indigenous students academically. Just as important, we seek to heighten awareness about the preciousness of indigenous languages and assist participants in maintaining their heritage languages and identities. Finally, we aim to prepare academic professionals such as ourselves to engage in mutually beneficial research and teaching activities in indigenous communities.

With these goals in mind, AILDI holds this basic view of language teaching:

Language is not taught by mere word lists and grammatical drills. And native literature is not fully appreciated by pupils if it is presented in translation. Language and literature can be taught most effectively by teachers who are native speakers of the language and are trained to teach in elementary and secondary schools with language materials and literature produced by native speakers. (Watahomigie and Yamamoto 1992, 12)

AILDI emphasizes bilingual and bicultural education within a whole language paradigm (Goodman 1986; Fox 1992), experiential and interactive teaching strategies, alternative assessment such as literacy portfolios (Tierney et al. 1991), and what Jim Cummins (1989, 1992) has called "empowerment pedagogies." Over the course of four weeks, institute participants engage in collaborative research, dialogue, critique, and bilingual and bicultural materials development—the same types of learning processes in which they might engage their own learners at home. "My learning experiences at AILDI were very relevant to what is happening in real classrooms," one participant reports. "I learned skills that I can use in whatever I may do in the future."

Sharing and cooperative work are central to institute coursework. A recent participant recalls "sharing our creative writing in class, laughing and crying. . . . We had fun learning together." Frequently participants from the same school district or language group work on joint projects. When AILDI funds have permitted, elders have been invited to work with participants from their communities on language teaching projects. Participants also observe, practice, and coach each other in microteaching learning centers (discussed below), a forum for piloting the methods and materials developed over the course of four weeks.

In these ways, AILDI has adapted Cummins's (1989, 1992) framework of fourfold empowerment, as illustrated in Figure 29.1:

1. **An additive/enrichment approach:** Schooling for indigenous children should add to and enrich—not replace—the cultural and linguistic resources children bring to school.

2. **Local education control:** Indigenous communities have great knowledge of their language and culture which should be the foundation of children's learning in school. The community should have input into and control over the school curriculum.