

Innovative Training Opportunities: The NSF/AILDI Collaboration for Indigenous Language Documentation

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The American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) is a place where the air is filled with enthusiasm, encouragement, shared concerns, shared experiences, and shared hopes and dreams for struggling languages. This is the environment that invited the specialized training in support of Indigenous languages through language documentation and grant writing.

During the academic year of 2005-6, Dr. Ofelia Zepeda (AILDI Director) and Dr. Susan Penfield (AILDI faculty) applied to the NSF/NEH Documenting Endangered Language program for a Small Grant for Exploratory Research¹. While AILDI, from its inception, has been focused on the revitalization of Indigenous languages, it has also always responded to significant changes in the field of linguistics. The rapid rise of a new field, language documentation, as distinct from traditional linguistics and as a response to the rapid loss of languages world-wide, caught the attention of AILDI organizers. Language documentation is a rising discipline resulting largely from the technological forces which allow for more careful electronic recording and archiving of endangered languages. The inclusion of language documentation into AILDI built on these changes in the field of linguistics and also on a trend at AILDI toward technology training. Therefore, in the summer of 2006, with support from funding from NSF (grant #0549189), a unique training opportunity was offered at AILDI through fellowships aimed at language documentation and grant writing.

The challenge in developing this proposal was to contextualize language documentation within the larger goals of revitalization, staying consistent with the purpose of AILDI. The intent was to provide training in both the skills needed for responsible language documentation and also in grant writing to support this particular type of work. The face of federal funding for Indigenous languages is still sharply divided between language documentation (supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) program titled “Documenting Endangered Languages”) and the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) which is more clearly aimed at the revitalization of US Indigenous languages.

One main goal of AILDI’s efforts was to train community members in federal grant writing to make the DEL grants offered by NSF/NEH more accessible. The underlying premise in this effort was the recognition that understanding language documentation, from a number of perspectives, is an integral part of the larger picture of language revitalization. Included in this perspective is the need to make community members aware of 1) existing documentation for their heritage languages 2) how, when, where that documentation was collected, stored and can be put to present use 3) what is involved in documenting a language and 4) new technologies relevant to the documenting and archiving of endangered languages.

Implementing the project

The NSF/AILDI collaborative project supported twenty fellows, selected through application from some of the most endangered languages in the United States, and entailed a commitment to spend a month at AILDI taking two intensive courses. The focused training would 1) provide the basics of language documentation, a field of study which has been fairly recently defined and which differs from traditional descriptive linguistics in a number of ways and 2) grant writing aimed at helping Indigenous community members become more competitive in the federal grant arena, specifically targeting grants through NSF’s program for Documenting Endangered Languages.

Through an application process, 20 fellows were selected to participate in this innovative and experimental training. The fellows who were selected represented a broad range of Indigenous communities and

language families. There were eleven different groups represented: Oneida, Northern Cheyenne, Tohono O'odham, Akimel O'odham, Okanagan, Blackfeet, Yakima, Laguna, Coshatta (Koasati), Southern Ute and Ho-Chunk. For each language, two fellows were asked to participate. Based on past experience, the AILDI staff recommended that bringing a team to the institute translates into better support and progress in the community when students return home².

AILDI has a history of serving non-traditional students. This proposed course of study was innovative in that the challenges of both documenting language and grant writing for federal-level grants were being aimed at a population often out-of-the loop for both of these endeavors. This meant that the goals entailed bridging the academic/federal world with community-based participants in AILDI. To the instructors for the two courses, this fact spoke to a careful articulation of materials, building concepts clearly and sequentially so that in the four weeks of AILDI basic training could be accomplished.

The course of study was intense. Grant writing was selected for the morning class leaving the Language Documentation course, which was designed to be more 'hands-on', for the long afternoon session. Both classes were 3½ hours long so much of the time was given to actual practice or group work. Both classes were also integrated to the extent that the goals of language documentation, and the knowledge of how language(s) can be documented given a particular community context, were reflected in the individual grant proposals which were developed by the fellows in the morning grant-writing class. Both classes were supported by an online system Desire2Learn (D2L) which was a University of Arizona web-access class management system. The NSF Fellows in the AILDI course(s) were able to post their work for others in the class to see and comment on daily. Class assignments were also posted on this site as were the instructor(s) comments on class work.

The class for grant writing was divided into units which addressed:

- How to present a written argument
- How to respond to the 'authorizing' language in the 'request for proposals' or solicitation' offered by the funding agency.
- How to research previous work done with the language
- How to prepare a literature review with appropriate academic documentation
- How to find appropriate consultants or collaborators from universities
- How to prepare a work plan
- How to adjust the work plan and budget
- How to present and justify budget information
- How to create credibility as a community intellectual.
- How to specify and focus efforts on documentation.

With these elements in place, students were assigned the task of actually drafting a proposal – start to finish -- including learning to use FastLane (NSF's electronic submission system). Drafts were reviewed by other students and the instructors and shared for comments on a weekly basis.

The afternoon class in Language Documentation was organized around the following issues:

- a) *Data collection techniques*
 - An overview of the recent technology used to video and audio record endangered language (with opportunities to use and experiment with selected equipment and software).
 - Discussion of filming priorities in video-documentation
 - Demonstrations and practical experience on how these recordings may be digitized and prepared for archiving.
 - How to involve and support community elders/remaining speakers
- b) *Issues in linguistic description*
 - An overview of the needs for language documentation.
 - Understanding the approaches to transcription of data
 - Basic elements of descriptive linguistics
 - Issues in appropriate glossing
- c) *Overview of digital archiving strategies and repositories*
 - Issues of how and where collected data should be stored

- Importance of what can be shared
 - Issues of public access
 - Establishing protocols for public use and community control.
- d) *Consultants/guest speakers*: The program was augmented by inviting the participation of consultants, which included guest speakers (from other Indigenous communities and from NSF, for example) and from the Learning Technologies Center, which is center offers technological support to university faculty and students.

Before arriving at AILDI, the Fellows were encouraged to consider what to bring with them that might inform their work at AILDI. A letter sent to them prior to their arrival asked, “*It would be most helpful, for both classes, if you could bring anything you know about what has already been documented for your language (either a list of sources or collections, maybe a dictionary or grammar), older recordings which you could learn to digitize, equipment you are used to working with, ...*” (Spring 2006)

The course of study was rigorous: two 3 ½ hour classes, back-to-back. The instructors were Dr. Susan Penfield, faculty in the University of Arizona’s English department and a linguistic anthropologist by training and Philip Cash Cash, University of Arizona who was ABD in linguistic anthropology and a specialist in film documentation. Both Phil and Susan had previously collaborated on developing technology courses for AILDI (2003-2005) and had developed an introductory text book for these courses³. The Fellows were advised in advance of their arrival at AILDI as follows in a letter from Susan and Phil:

In the morning, from 7:45-11:30, you will be taking a grant writing course from Susan. The focus of this course will be on learning to write for the NSF DEL grants specifically, but also on the broader scope of writing for any language-related grants. Your class project will be to draft a DEL (Documenting Endangered Languages grant). These are challenging to do but, if you can do one of these, you can do anything!! You do not need prior grant writing experience for this class – we will start with real basics. However, if you have written grants before, and are willing to share your examples or expertise, that would be great! All input is welcomed! We will have computers in the class some of the time and will also be close to the main library for any research we might have to do.

In the afternoon, from 1:00-4:30, Phil will be your instructor for the language documentation course. Phil is a recipient of an NSF-DEL Fellowship and has been in his home community for the past few months actively engaged in language documentation. His course will be very ‘hands-on’ and will give you some great ideas about the range of things included in language documentation. Both instructors will work closely together to make sure that what you are learning in Phil’s class can feed into what you might want to propose in your grant.

And so the summer began....

In addition to the regular courses, the Fellows were also brought together with other AILDI participants that summer through a number of out-of-class activities. The Fellows offered a workshop on what they were learning to other participants; they also attended and participated in a number of regular AILDI activities (guest lectures, micro-teaching). Perhaps the most significant event was the poster session created by the Fellows, with an open invitation to all UA faculty and students (Figures 1 and 2).

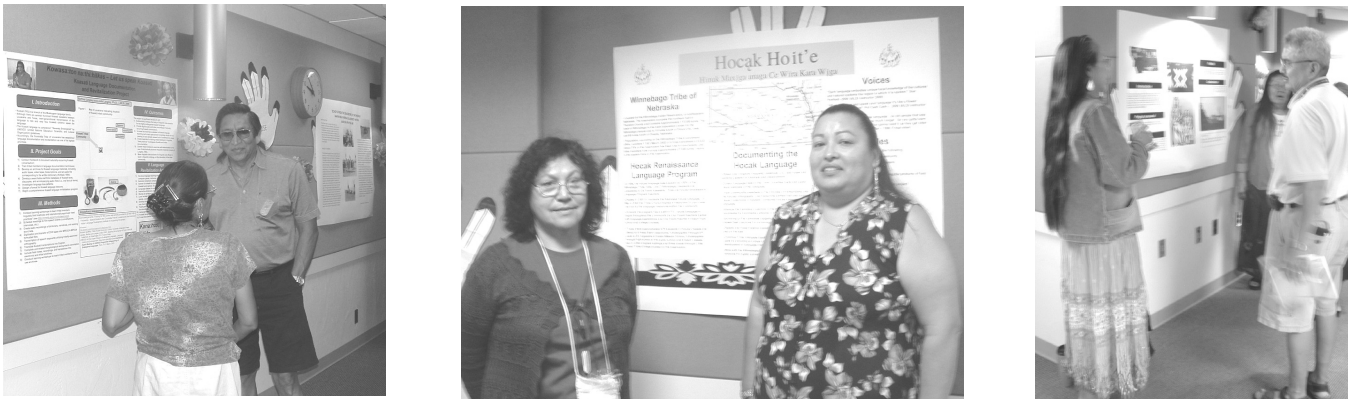


Figure 1. Left: Bertney Langley (Coushatta) talking with Fern Seaton (Diné), Center: Helene Lincoln and Caroline Frenchman (Ho-Chunk), Right: Adeline Spotted Elk and Marie Sanchez (Northern Cheyenne) talking with Roland Kelewood (Diné)



Figure 2. Left: Phil Cash Cash (Instructor, Nez Perce/Cayuse) and Marie Sanchez (Northern Cheyenne), Center: Susan Penfield (Instructor) with Arizona tribes, Tohono O'odham and Akimel O'odham (L-R): Danny Lopez, Phillip Miguel, Susan Penfield, Gwen Paul, Mary Pablo, Right: Virginia Beavert and Roger Jacob (Sahaptin/Yakima)

The outcomes

The most tangible evidence of success was the submission of four proposals to the NSF DEL competition in the fall of 2006, immediately following the summer NSF/AILDI course of study. Of those four proposals, two were funded by NSF (Coushatta for roughly \$450,000 and Oneida for roughly \$100,000). Another participant (from Southern Ute) was asked to revise and resubmit (an excellent outcome for a first time grant writer to a federal agency). The declined proposal was a reflection of the proposed work on a language which already had some significant documentation (Ho-Chunk), a reminder of how extremely competitive federal programs are. This still adds up to a 50% success rate for submitted proposals and an encouraging sign for all the Fellows in this project.

From the annual report submitted to NSF by PI Ofelia Zepeda:

Our findings at this point indicate that the structure and effectiveness of the two courses; grant writing and language documentation and its reception among the participating tribal communities is what is indeed needed in order to transform Native Americans from objects of study to scholars in an area where they have special competence. Based on the success of two proposals (Coushatta and Oneida) to the DEL program in the 2006 competition it is clear that our courses were successful. The two successful proposals were initiated, developed with further support provided by Susan Penfield via email to the P.I.s clearly indicated that this type of training is what is needed in order to increase the competitiveness of proposals originating in tribal communities. This project has sent a strong signal to Native American communities that the NSF-NEH Partnership for Documenting Endangered Languages is committed to increasing the participation of tribal members in this critical effort. It is our hope the DEL program is prepared to sustain such training on an annual basis as a part of its outreach activities.

Language documentation began at AILDI in 2006 and in the summer of 2009 was revisited, again with the help of an NSF proposal for a special symposium. The aim of these follow-up activities was to bring back the Fellows for a reunion and also to introduce a new set of fellows to language documentation. The special symposium took place in June during AILDI 2009. This follow-up to the 2006 AILDI was divided into two parts: a three week course for the new AILDI fellows on film documentation for Indigenous languages and a one and one half day culminating symposium, complete with visits from the 2006 AILDI fellows and a series of guest speakers and workshops. Once again, with support from the NSF/NEH DEL program, AILDI charted new ground, introduced new language practitioners to new field of linguistics, new technology and new ways of thinking about language revitalization.

Increasingly, language documentation grows as a field of study vital to the life, revitalization and sustainability of endangered languages. AILDI has served as a place to explore how this field of documentation dovetails with revitalization, to assert that documenting a language is a natural part of the bigger picture of revitalization and often provides much of the raw data and information needed to make revitalization a success. These are not disconnected activities, as might be assumed from the division in between these evident in the stance of varying funding agencies (large and small). Clearly, documentation is a vital piece of almost any revitalization project – oral or written.

AILDI continues to generate an atmosphere of exploration-- a safe space for learning new skills, for challenging traditional approaches, and for providing specialized training which bridges research practice and methods with practical community goals.

Notes

¹ With special thanks to Dr. Joan Maling, NSF Linguistics Program Director, for her support of this project. The ‘Small Grants for Exploratory Research –SGER’ do not exist at NSF in the same form today. They have been replaced by RAPID and EAGER grants. Details are in the Grant Proposal Guide available from NSF at http://www.nsf.gov/publications/pub_summ.jsp?ods_key=gpg.

² Two tribes were only able to send one participant.

³ *Technology-Enhanced Language Revitalization* is in its second edition, revised by AILDI instructors. Penfield, S., Cash, P., Galla, C. K., Williams, T., & ShadowWalker, D. (Eds.) *Technology-Enhanced Language Revitalization*. 2nd Edition. Tucson, AZ: Arizona Board of Regents.