

Language Revitalization Using Multimedia

Peter Brand, John Elliott, Ken Foster

At Lau, Welnew Tribal School, students are blending new technology with ancient traditions as they discover exciting ways to revitalize their Saanich language and culture. Using iMac computers and Apple iMovie digital video editing software, students and teachers are producing multimedia instructional materials on a wide variety of subjects relating to their Native heritage.

Situated on Saanich Inlet, just one kilometre from the world famous Butchart Gardens, Lau, Welnew Tribal School caters to two hundred students from four bands on the Saanich Peninsula, 15 kilometres north of Victoria, British Columbia.

Until 1976, Sencoten (pronounced Sunchothun), the language of the Saanich People, was preserved only in oral form. Largely through the efforts of one remarkable man, the late Dave Elliott, a unique orthography was developed, and the language was recorded in written form. In April 2001, the Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network aired a video documentary account of Dave Elliott's work as the finale to a thirteen part series entitled "Finding Our Talk" (See The Dave Elliott Alphabet below).

Today, Dave Elliott's son John is following his father's lead, seeking creative ways to use technology to guarantee the revitalization of the Sencoten language and, with it, the culture of the Saanich People. John is working in partnership with Peter Brand, a computer teacher with the Saanich Indian School Board, in the development of software that enables students to create multimedia presentations using text, audio, and video.

Using a digital video camera, students interview their grandparents and other Elders in their homes. The students then edit the videotapes using iMac DV computers. The edited videos are used as teaching resources in the classroom. They can also be copied and taken home by students as home study projects.

Lau, Welnew students are also using *Vocab*, an easy to use shareware application that enables them to build lists of words in two languages and quiz themselves regularly using their shared lists. A free 30-day trial of this excellent program can be downloaded at <www.cabsoft.com>. To date, students and community members have contributed to the data entry with the compilation of over 190 word lists from all aspects of the Sencoten language.

John and Peter, in association with Cabsoft, recently launched *Vocab LanguageLab*, a multimedia authoring suite that combines the vocabulary database of *Vocab* with an easy to use multimedia presentation suite. Designed for use by learners of any language, this program enables students to combine their own text, video, images, and audio files into instructional presentations to be shared on school computer networks and via the Internet. You can download a free trial at www.cabsoft.com/vll.html.

The Dave Elliott Alphabet

The Sencoten alphabet was devised by the late Dave Elliott. Dave was born on the Wjolelp (Tsartlip) reserve in June 1910. Like many Saanich families of

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the day, he fished and travelled throughout the historical homeland of the Saanich People. His family knew all of the places by their original Sencoten names. Dave once said, “I saw how our old people lived before our own speaking system was broken down. Our people were the wealthiest on earth. We needed nothing. We lived in a virtual paradise.”

Then in the 1920s came regulations forbidding the Saanich People from fishing, hunting, and gathering food in their traditional lands. Government policies of the day dictated that the families who were struggling to survive had their children taken away to residential schools. There, the Saanich children began to experience denial of the Sencoten language and culture. Over the years, this created a communication gap between those who were still at home speaking Sencoten and those who had begun to be educated and assimilated into the white education system.

In the early 1960s, Dave Elliott became a janitor at the Tsartlip Indian Day School, which was attended by most of the Saanich children. Dave observed a rapid decline in their use of Sencoten and in their knowledge of the language and culture. During the 1960s, the late Phillip Paul led an initiative to establish the Saanich Indian School Board. The Sencoten language was immediately offered as part of the curriculum of the band operated school.

Realizing that, without a method of recording the language, it would eventually be lost, Dave began to write down Sencoten words phonetically. He soon discovered that, upon returning to read previously recorded words, he could not understand what he had written. Dave studied with a linguist and learned the International Phonetic Alphabet and other orthographies. However, there were problems with these writing systems. The main difficulty was that some of the complex sounds of the Sencoten language required numerous symbols to be represented, resulting in long and complicated words.

Dave decided to devise his own alphabet using only one letter to denote each sound. He purchased a used typewriter for \$30 and set out to make a Sencoten writing system accessible to his people. During the winter of 1977, the Dave Elliott Sencoten Alphabet was created. In 1978, the Saanich Indian School Board adopted the Dave Elliott Alphabet to help preserve the Sencoten language and history.

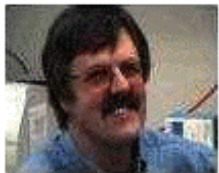
Dave Elliott’s legacy is a remarkable revitalization of the Sencoten language. Today, Apple iMac computers with a TrueType Sencoten font are used extensively in the teaching of the language, both at Lau, Welnew Tribal School, where it all began, and throughout the surrounding public schools of Saanich School District 63. The BC Education Ministry is advocating similar applications for technology in the fight to revitalize indigenous languages before they are lost.



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Saanich Language Revitalization Project

**From Oral Traditions
To
Multimedia**



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