In his opening address to students and staff at the University of Toronto, September 1958, President Claude Bissell declared:

In all the conferences that are being held on higher education these days, it is tempting to get lost in theoretical schemes and utopian visions, and to forget what is after all the basic fact: that in universities we are concerned with young men and women.

I sometimes get the impression after I have been at an educational conference that it is considered a little indelicate, perhaps even a trifle vulgar, to refer to students at great length.

I have heard the opinion expressed, humorously, it is true but with more than a slight suggestion or seriousness, that universities would be fine places were it not for the presence of students. — I assure you, that at this university, students are indispensable. (Bissell 1968)

For faculty members at Lakehead University who are involved in the teaching of Algonquian languages, Claude Bissell’s dilemma takes some curious twists. Certainly students are indispensable. They are indispensable for one thing at least, as data sources. It is important and occasionally difficult to work through a possible conflict of interest between our perception of "data source" and "student". (On more than one occasion during my years as an elementary school teacher in a northern community enthusiastic neophyte anthropologists expressed disappointment that I had taught some specific item to my students, thus spoiling their research results.)

But more important, Algonquian students are indispensable as students in at least two ways. First, they are students in their own right, individuals with personal goals and problems and talents, and
this must never be forgotten. Secondly, however, as students they have come to university, often as the cream of the crop from their home communities, and on them are pinned community hopes and dreams for the future. And since one of the important goals of many northern communities is the retention and revitalization of their native language, students who come to university fluent in their native language, and who are prepared to study that native language in the university setting, present us with a unique challenge and a sensitive, demanding task.

In 1981, Lakehead began to take up the challenge by separating its native language offerings into three streams: first, a series of courses in Ojibwa (and Cree) for non-speakers; second, a series of courses for fluent speakers of one of the Algonquian languages; and third, a bank of courses for students who have successfully completed either of the first two groups. While many of the calendared courses thus set forth have still to realize their full potential, the series for fluent speakers has been well utilized, and it is about this group that the following comments are made.

Who Takes These Courses?

Fluent speakers of any Algonquian language are admissible, but most of our students come from Ontario communities north of the CNR line. For students entering the Native Language Instructors’ Programme, 4 courses are mandatory; those entering the Native Teacher Education Programme must take at least 2. No other programmes make any of these courses a requirement, but we have had students from a variety of disciplines (social work, forestry, nursing, general arts) take one or more as electives. The courses are offered by the Department of Languages, and carry language credit.

What is the Course Content?

Essentially, the courses have two main thrusts. First, the student is guided toward the regularization of his or her own orthography, both Roman and syllabic, and when this has been mastered to a satisfactory degree, the student is introduced to systems used in related dialects, with the goal of developing the ability to read Algonquian material from as wide an area as possible. Second, the student is guided by an inductive process to analyze the structure of his own
language for himself. When this is accomplished, he may begin to compare and contrast the studies of his own language and dialect with those of fellow classmates.

What Results have been Observed?

There are two broad categories of students taking these courses. The first category consists of older monolinguals who have come to the university to work toward their diploma in the Native Language Instructors' Programme. Among these students there is, initially, mild to serious objection to making changes in an orthography made personal over the years. Instructors try not to take a hard line in this case, and usually by the end of the first course the students have demonstrated to one another through writing and reading of each other's work the benefits of regularization. A few of the more elderly students do not seem to be completely capable of making changes (a fact I can appreciate as I struggle to spell all the words correctly for this paper).

Most of the older students are interested in structural analysis, and a task they often set themselves is to work toward a standardization of native language structural terms (e.g., the Ojibwa terms for "animate", "conjunct", "reciprocal", etc.). They seem most keenly interested in lexical implications, and love compiling long and thought-provoking lists of words that illustrate a particular structural point.

The second category of student is the youthful to middle-aged bilingual from any programme. Typically, this group is pleased to see that regularization of orthography is possible, and that text can look "just like a real language!" Mastery of the orthography seems to depend on the amount of text material available in that orthography — alas, there is never enough! It is in the analysis of structure, however, that this group takes wings. When they first begin to see how their language works, a sense of growing pride and excitement becomes evident in the group. This affective set has never failed to develop in any beginning class, and it is a joy to watch. (Some students become so excited they sit up half the night trying new combinations of words, looking for new ideas, and explaining their discoveries to anyone who will listen.) John Nichols has helpfully observed that an Algonquian speaker's own language provides excel-
lent raw material for him to use in developing his analytic skills, skills which a university education requires and for which he may have less background knowledge in traditional university subject matter than his non-native fellow students.

Challenges and Possible Directions

While the work to date in the Algonquian course offerings has met with some success, we are becoming increasingly aware that we have not yet "arrived". Our "indispensable students" are also the northern communities' "indispensable students". The younger group of bilingual students return to their communities as leaders and trend setters. What are their educational needs as far as the native language is concerned? We have no precedents, but I believe our students, in their enthusiastic application of what they are learning, are pointing in two possible directions:

1) Instead of merely teaching orthographic regularity, we must provide opportunities for its use, to the point that it becomes an unconscious, rather than a conscious skill. (Implication: since there are simply not enough text materials in print to provide a viable university reading programme, the students will have to produce their own texts through writers' workshops. Opportunities for publication of the best manuscripts should encourage excellence.)

2) Other creative uses of the language should be encouraged. We have begun moving in this direction by producing native language dramas, both on stage and on video tape. (One native activist commented publically following a short stage play that "This group of students has done more for native language tonight than we have done in years of politicking.") However, what we have done here experimentally needs to become part of a regular and growing program. Other creative channels, such as song writing, oratory festivals, etc. deserve exploration and encouragement.

Recently I devoted one Algonquian class hour to an experiment. The class was just becoming familiar with the standard orthographies for their own dialects of Ojibwa, and were struggling along as brand new literates. At the beginning of the class, I asked them all to write a short (half page) story about a real or imagined event in their childhood. As they got underway with this task, I took each student, one at a time, off to a corner of the room where he told (i.e., did not read) the same story he was writing to the tape recorder. At about the same time the recordings were complete, the writers were
also finished. The class listened as each student told his story (on tape) and then read his written version. When we had worked our way through all the stories in this fashion, the class was invited to comment about the differences between written and told stories. Student contributions combined to form a classic paradigm (see Smith 1982) of what scholars indicate the differences ought to be!

Not only had the students, through their own creativity and analysis, discovered some very interesting features of style, they also went on to apply what they had just learned by making this observation: "What few texts we do have to read in our language are usually transcriptions of spoken language, when what we should be reading is written language!"

That class, and others in which similar discoveries have been made by all of us together, continually challenge us to search for paths towards excellence of curriculum planning in university-level education for fluent Algonquian speakers. To this end, we invite suggestions from the group gathered here. I believe that the development of vital, challenging, significant course content will play a considerable part in the future of native languages in the north.

In their helpful paper on "Tokenism Versus Cultural Autonomy", Clarke and Mackenzie (1980) list seven criteria for successful native language programmes in elementary schools. Their criteria are as follows:

(1) Community and parental involvement; (2) Flexibility and choice in curriculum and model of learning; (3) Use of specialists in programme design and initial implementation; (4) Curriculum availability; (5) Localization of schools within Indian communities; (6) The necessity of support from sympathetic non-native teachers and administrators; (7) Adequate long-term funding.

While I strongly endorse all seven of these criteria, my work in the field of Native Language Instructor Education has convinced me that there is an eighth, and perhaps key point: a young adult population of fluent speakers who feel proud and excited about their language, and know themselves to be competent in its use as a living language through a wide range of language skills.

To this end, we continue to search for the best paths.
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