

# "Two tribal school teachers" reach out to the world

By Jeremy Simon / Editorial Sponsorship

English-speaking people can scarcely imagine losing their language, but many people around the world are facing this disturbing prospect. Regional languages spoken by relatively small population groups, including Aboriginal peoples, risk extinction within a few generations as young people leave them behind.

But what if you could use the same communications technology that threatens aboriginal languages to preserve and teach them? This possibility was not lost on Peter Brand, a 55 year-old Australian-born teacher and advocate of Aboriginal culture. Peter settled on Vancouver Island where he taught for the Saanich Indian School Board for 11 years.

In 1999, Peter was teaching Grade One at LAU-WELNEW Tribal School in Brentwood Bay. A computer lab upgrade to 25 networked iMacs enabled the school to experiment with simple indigenous language teaching tools using iMovie. "We had a Saanich language font created for the Mac, started shooting video of plants and wildlife, and subtitled the footage with Saanich words," says Brand, who worked with John Elliott, son of David Elliott, developer of the Saanich writing system.

## Pretty cool little tool

Brand spent the next spring break working with John Elliott and Ken Foster, technology coordinator for the local public school



district. The project was an alphabet book for the Saanich language. Working in HyperStudio, they developed video, sound and text for each of the 40 Saanich alphabet characters. "Then we found a pretty cool little tool," recalls Brand, "a piece of Mac shareware called Vocab. At that time Vocab was a text-only word study application."

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Vocab became particularly useful at the tribal school after its developer, Angus Gratton, added a sound feature. Many of the students used Vocab to test themselves in the Saanich language. The ensuing months saw the development of Vocab LanguageLab, a multimedia authoring suite as a companion to the original Vocab application. "By this time the kids were using iMovie to create rich media they could import into Vocab LanguageLab along with sounds, pictures and video."

As Brand explains: "Many Aboriginal people are very visual learners. We found that our Apple equipment enabled students to do things quickly and easily with digital video. Our students began creating media-rich learning resources for their fellow students, written in their own unique orthography, or written language style." Academically, Vocab LanguageLab helped to raise the children's language proficiency by encouraging them to spend more time working on language-related activities.

In March 2001, Simon Robinson, the head of the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, walked into their computer lab. He said he had heard good things, and asked

for a demonstration. Brand and Elliott gave him the full show, including their vision to make the multimedia language tools Web-accessible.

## Final tweaking of the Web application

Under Robinson's leadership at the foundation, the dream became a reality. "The project has taken on a life of its own," Brand elaborates. "Significant investment has been made to bring it to its current form. We're going through a final tweaking of the Web application after beta-testing this year, and we expect it to be in full operation by early 2003."

FirstVoices is an easy-to-use, secure, cost-effective Web-based tool that enables any language group to develop its own authentic and authoritative archiving and language reference resource from within its own community. Text, sound and video can be uploaded to the FirstVoices online database to establish rich language resources.

Says Brand, who lauds Apple for its enthusiastic support in Canada, the US and Australia: "I never imagined that two tribal school teachers plugging away at something could ultimately reach out to the world in this way. Now that FirstVoices is supported by a team of committed language revitalization advocates, it can develop into a very important resource for Aboriginal languages."

Brand encourages people to check out the site at [www.firstvoices.com](http://www.firstvoices.com). ☺

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