



Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement assistant director Richard Britz '87, MPA'02, Chehalis language teacher and tribal language and culture program manager Marla DuPuis Conwell '98, MPA (Tribal) '06, Northwest Indian Applied Research Institute research associate Cheree Potts '98, MIT'00, and Evergreen Center director Magda Costantino are collaborating with Chehalis Tribe elders and the Oakville School District to create a brand new curriculum covering local history from the Native perspective.

# Transforming Teaching & Learning

From rewriting history to making science come alive,  
the Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement  
is helping Washington learn by Dee Anne Finken

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arla DuPuis Conwell '98, MPA (Tribal) '06, recalls growing up south of the Puget Sound and hearing teachers talk about Indians who wore war paint or lived in teepees, impractical housing for the rainy Pacific Northwest. The stories were a painful illustration of how little about her Native heritage people knew or understood, even those who were supposed to be wise.

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During the 30 years he taught elementary school in Olympia, Rich Kalman remembers uninspiring approaches he regularly encountered among those teaching the wonders of science. "Traditionally, you'd give the students a list of vocabulary terms, have them read a text book, and, then, if they were good, watch a video," he says. "Very rarely would they go out in the real world and really experience the science."

Uninformed lessons such as these clearly subtract more than they add to a youngster's classroom experience. Inaccurate teaching or teaching that fails to consider a child's ability to comprehend often leads to students acting out, turning off and regularly dropping out. But through the work of the Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement, teachers in the South Puget Sound area are gaining access to lessons and methods for teaching reading, history and science that are more accurate, effective – and culturally and developmentally appropriate.

Hand in hand with The Evergreen State College commitment to public service, the center continues to make real differences in the lives and education of thousands of area young people, an effort begun 13 years ago. "We're involved in major transformations about how teaching and learning have traditionally happened and how teaching and learning could best be practiced, based on the latest research," explains Magda Costantino, director of the center, which collaborates with school districts, professional organizations and government agencies. The center, one of the college's six public service centers – was created by the state Legislature in 1993.

Currently, two efforts are the main focus – one dealing with local Native history and culture and another with innovations in teaching a systems approach to science.

The push is a timely one, given Governor Chris Gregoire's *Washington Learns* initiative – the state's framework to improve and reform education. The programs also reflect the growing reputation the center and The Evergreen State College enjoy as national leaders in educational innovation, as researchers from elsewhere turn to both for input. For material to be valuable to students, it must be culturally relevant to them, says Costantino, who, along with highly regarded Native educator Denny Hurtado (Skokomish), co-authored a research-based supplemental reading curriculum for Native students in kindergarten through second grade in Washington.



Marla DuPuis Conwell wants to be sure modern Chehalis children, as well as their non-Native classmates, are taught accurate information about their culture and heritage.



“Science should be inquiry based,” says Richard Britz, who also serves as assistant director of the South Sound LASER Alliance to improve science education. “Kids learn better when they go out and discover information rather than reading about it in a book.”

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“The official dropout rate among Native Americans is 38 percent,” Costantino says. “But if you talk with any tribal person, they will tell you the drop-out rate, from kindergarten on, is 80 to 90 percent.” The reason? “School is irrelevant and tends to ignore their community or them,” she explains.

But working with leaders of the Chehalis tribe, in partnership with the Oakville School District, center officials are crafting a curriculum to tell the real history of the people who first inhabited the area, an effort educators believe will go a long way toward capturing the interest of Native students and others. It differs from previous efforts to write early American history because it is community-based and truly the result of work by community members themselves, says Costantino. “At this point, we have concluded initial work with the tribe and collected primary and secondary documents, developed a framework for the curriculum and created lesson plans for the teachers,” she explains. “Now, the tribe is reading and reviewing it.”

Conwell, a language teacher and a language and culture program manager with the Chehalis, says the new curriculum will be a welcome change from what she experienced as a child growing up in the 1980s. “In school, we studied the white man’s culture,” she remembers. “People would look at us and ask: ‘You’re Indians? I thought Indians were all gone.’ I felt like such an outsider.”

It was at home, Conwell says, where she and others could find the truth. “We always had the tribal history and history of my family.” It’s that history from home – and the tribe – that forms the basis of the new curriculum. “We are teaching history from the Native perspective,” explains Costantino. “The voice of the Chehalis is added to the voice of the United States.”

She emphasizes the curriculum is the result of meaningful relationships built between center officials and members and leaders of the Chehalis. “We had several meetings with the tribe,” says Costantino. “We asked them: ‘What do you want your children to know about the Chehalis tribe?’ We talked and we talked and we transcribed until we had enough information from the tribe to create an inquiry-based framework and a set of essential questions.”

The inquiry-based format also makes this curriculum noteworthy. Instead of simply handing over to the students details about the lives of Native people – their housing, their food, their lifestyles and where and how they traveled – the curriculum sets up a framework from which the youngsters can explore. “We deliver the primary documents so the children themselves can create the picture of how life was,” says Costantino. “That’s the transformative piece of this. The children learn to create the picture of how life was – with involvement from the Chehalis.”

That inquiry-based approach to learning is also behind the science innovation efforts in which Rich Kalman is involved. Kalman, who retired recently after teaching for 30 years in Olympia, says the best learning – particularly in the sciences – happens when students become keen observers and have an opportunity to make sense of what is new to them through hands-on experience. The worst approach and unfortunately, more common, is the abstract approach, when a youngster is asked to read about an idea or item he never may have seen, touched or heard of. “Even adults have difficulty doing that,” says Kalman.

But with assistance from the Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement, and under the leadership of Washington LASER (Leadership and Assistance for Science Education Reform), nine school districts working together as the South Sound LASER Alliance are actively learning more effective approaches to teaching science.

Richard Britz '87, MPA '02, the center's assistant director, says more than a thousand area teachers are learning to move from a lecture- and lab-based learning approach to one that is hands-on. “It's where the students are asking questions and discovering answers themselves,” he says.

For instance, rather than the past practice of lecturing to students about geological land forms, teachers are learning it is more valuable for students to dig in to various soils and materials that replicate a hillside. “We use these trays with sand and clay mixtures that students mix together to form the mixture of soils we have in this region,” explains Britz. “We can put these trays on a slope, add a water source with different sized holes to represent different amounts of rainfall and then ask the students to predict what they think will happen as water washes down through the clay mixture.”

This more effective approach lets the students make predictions based on the knowledge they already have. It reinforces the idea of building on that knowledge or helping the student to change his or her thinking if the knowledge isn't correct.

The LASER project is a statewide effort, now in its fourth year in the South Puget Sound area. But earlier this year, the state legislature approved a sizable increase in funding, a move Britz says will mean a significant expansion for the future. “The Legislature, the governor and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction all agree this work is valuable in increasing students' understanding of science.”



Chehalis tribal elders Kathrine Barr and Curtis DuPuis added their experience and knowledge to the new history curriculum. Interviews like this one with numerous elders were also preserved on video as an oral and visual history of the tribe.