

Nuk'wantwal': Collaborative and Community-Centred Approaches to Language Vitalization from an Indigenous Perspective

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Abstract

The people working to keep their languages thriving need the help, wisdom, support and expertise of a broad range of communities – government, organizations, institutions, citizens and funders – as well as the expertise and wisdom found in their own language communities and organizations. This paper will describe the collaborative relationships built between language communities and governments, universities, institutions, and provincial organizations to work together to support language vitalization in British Columbia. The challenges and opportunities when working with a diverse set of languages and dialects and a broad range of levels of language vitality will be highlighted.

Résumé

Ceux et celles qui travaillent pour conserver la prospérité de leurs langues ont besoin de l'aide, de la sagesse, du soutien et de l'expertise d'un éventail de communautés: gouvernement, organismes, institutions et citoyens, entre autres. Il leur faut des sources de financement ainsi que l'expertise et la sagesse qui se trouvent dans leurs propres organismes et communautés linguistiques. Cet article décrit les relations de collaboration établies entre des communautés linguistiques et les gouvernements, les universités, les institutions et les organismes provinciaux pour travailler ensemble afin d'appuyer la vitalité linguistique en Colombie-Britannique. Nous soulignerons les défis et les opportunités qui se présentent dans le travail avec divers langues et dialectes et différents niveaux de vitalité linguistique.

Efforts to keep languages thriving require collaborative partnerships at the local, regional, national and international spheres. This paper will describe how a group of language advocates, organizations and institutions joined together to support communities in their work to keep their languages alive. I will strive to respond to the questions addressed in this conference by drawing on examples from our experience. The story will cover about a 15-year time span. Years of work in the communities, institutions and governments took place before this story began. There are times when synergies are right and they need to be taken advantage of and this time period was one such period.

In the Indigenous world, stories are used to store the history of the people and the land. Stories are told to share changes to family, land, individuals and community. When an individual returns from a journey they tell stories about what they witnessed. Listeners learn from the stories and the stories help to direct decisions needed to care for the land and the people. This is a story of the developments and advancement of language work through collaboration and partnerships in British Columbia told from my perspective, from my observations and understandings as one of the active participants in the story.

Geographically, British Columbia is vast, with the densest population located in the south and along the coast. It is home to 7 language families (there are 10 in Canada), 32 First Nations languages, 61 dialects, 3 sleeping languages (fpcc.ca); in addition, Michif, the language of the Métis is found there and there are three Cree-speaking communities in the northeast. As is the case worldwide, indigenous languages worldwide can be found in the urban areas. In total, there are 203 First

Nations communities, where the languages are taught in both public schools and First Nations schools.

Partnerships were forged with First Nations organizations: First Nations Steering Committee (FNESC), a committee developed by the First Nations Summit, which is a political organization serving First Nations member communities; First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) a sister organization to FNESC, serving all the federally funded, community led schools, and Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA), serving programs for post-secondary adults (fnesc.ca); provincial government – the Ministry of Education: Aboriginal Enhancements Branch and curriculum and assessment services, Ministry of Advanced Education, and Ministry of Aboriginal Relations. A significant member of the partnership was the unique crown agency First Peoples Culture Council (FPCC) (formerly the First Peoples Heritage, Language and Culture Council (FPHLCC)) and First Voices, whose focus is on community based language vitalization, archiving and documentation. BC College of Teachers (now the Teachers Regulation Branch) and Early Childhood organizations and services participated, although these groups were not very active in language revitalization; and for a time, the Regional offices of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development; Universities – individuals from the University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, Simon Fraser University and Fraser Valley University, and the Association for BC Deans of Education.

Some Challenges that Impacted Collaboration and Partnerships

Jurisdiction – federal policies exist and funds and resources are distributed based on whether an Indigenous person is on reserve or off reserve, status or non-status First Nations. Public education is a provincial responsibility with no jurisdiction on reserves.

Attitudes such as “you can’t tell me what to do”, habits of mind – “this is the way we do it”, “it works for us, why do we need to change”, “this is the policy, or timetable, or the plan – we can’t change it”.

Who should be part of the partnership? Who is the language community? Is it a dialect or language? Who makes the decision? What is the name of this language? Linguists, anthropologists and governments with little if any input by the First Nations drew language names and boundaries. Communities were relocated, displaced and migrated due to government orders to make land available for settlers or due to catastrophes such as floods.

Lack of knowledge of one another. On the side of the institutions or government, unless there are First Nations people working inside, they have little knowledge of First Nations people other than what they might have learned on their own or at university. On the part of First Nations, few have knowledge of the internal structures of government or institutions. And both have little appreciation of the cultural protocols of the other. The one who calls the meeting controls the space, time and agenda for dialogue. Often the institution or government body holds the resources so they control the conversation.

Some Key Activities that Contributed to Learning to Collaborate and Partner

Some of the activities by partners that contributed to collaborations will be highlighted here; many activities will not be listed due to the limited space for this paper and they will not be listed chronologically.

The language sub-committee of FNEC and FPCC worked together over a few years to develop a 10-year strategic plan for First Nations languages. Although the strategic plan wasn’t formally ratified, it served to raise the challenges and issues faced by language communities to revitalize their languages, such as: Do we work with languages and/or dialects – who decides? Standardization – which writing system should be supported – who decides? Pronunciation and coining new words – who participates? How many speakers and how old are the speakers in each language? Who is doing language revitalization, what is being done and how effective are they? Do we include or how do we include the urban population? Who is teaching the language and where are they doing the teaching – what is happening in public schools, First Nations schools, early childhood programs, colleges and universities? Who are the teachers and how do we recruit and prepare the next generation of teachers? It meant identifying

what communities could do – locally and internally; what institutions, organizations and governments could do to support language revitalization. These led to on-going talks in a roundtable on Indigenous language revitalization to keep current with what all engaged in First Nations languages were doing and how to best use the resources available to meet the overall goal of supporting language vitality. The strategic language planning meetings led to activate community based strategic language planning.

The Developmental Standard Term Certificate (DSTC).

FNEC along with the BC College of Teachers and the Stölo speaking language communities developed a framework for the DSTC. They used an old unused template from a chefs’ training program and modified it to suit First Nations language instructors, proposing to universities, colleges and communities to locally design a certificate program for language teachers. Graduates would be set on the Teachers Qualification scale at a step 3. This led the way to engage a working partnership between language communities and colleges to offer pre-university qualifying courses in English, Mathematics and Sciences. The Ministry of Advanced Education was to open the way for post-secondary engagement, with universities finding partnerships between faculties of education, teacher education programs and linguistics departments. A review of the program was conducted with a broad range of recommendations for improving the preparation of First Nations language teachers.

BC First Nations Languages Map

FPCC worked with First Nations communities over several years to develop a map of their languages and dialects. This meant communities needed to re-establish the boundaries of their language and dialects and to re-establish the original names of their languages. Again it was working within communities, between communities and among communities; the work was done collectively. At each annual general meeting of FPCC and other conferences the map was displayed with new developments and a request for revisions, edits or additions.

BC Premier’s conference on First Nations Languages

A day-long focus on First Nations languages was attended by Members of the Legislature, in government and the opposition; Deputy Ministers; Chiefs and the educational and social leaders and their organizations; First Nations organizations; School superintendents; College of Teachers; Colleges; university deans and faculty and other key stakeholders. The day was organized with 3 keynote speakers. The first was a Nisga’a elder who spoke about the importance of his language. He spoke in Nisga’a and it was simultaneously translated. It was an electrifying way to begin the day. The next speaker outlined the work being done in the province to support language revitalization and a clear outline of what needed to be done to support

the efforts of language communities and organizations to revitalize languages. The third presentation focused on the role of post-secondary institutions and what they need to do to support Indigenous languages. The rest of the day was spent in workshops on a range of issues related to saving and revitalizing BC First Nations languages. This day served to educate and to rally everyone to work together on saving First Nations languages. Did what was learned that day direct the goals and activities of key organizations and ministries?

The **publication of BC First Nations language status report** by FPCC gave a wakeup call to the dire situation of BC First Nations languages. The **FNSA/FNESC research on the resource and curriculum** needs of First Nations language teachers served to develop a long-term multifaceted plan for teacher education and recruitment.

What did we learn about collaboration?

1. Dialogue and Commitment

Creating multiple opportunities and spaces that are safe for dialogue, conversations and learning to listen across cultural differences. Learning to reach beyond a habitual colonialist relationship to listen to one another and to be able to say what needed to be said to clarify the need and the commitment to languages. Learning to use resistance to stop, talk and find common ground. Leaders need to model a commitment to the vision and communicate what that vision looks like and how each partner will contribute to the vision. The leaders need to maintain the commitment as people learn and change habits of behaviour.

2. Acting on Your Own; Acting Together

A First Nations way of working together is to respect individual expertise and action; each individual knows the best way they can help and the group works together as one to achieve the reason for working together. Each institution and organization created the changes that were required to support languages and used the information, learning and new understanding from the dialogues to inform their decisions. Each partner needs

to trust the other to carry out the changes within their own organization to carry out the agreed upon direction of change.

3. Learning to Talk, Learning to Listen, Learning to Push, Learning to Hold Still

When people are coming together where there has been an adversarial relationship and where certain groups have higher status, power, and hold resources over others it sets the tone for the dialogue. Individuals need to reflect on and monitor their behavior. Time needs to be built in for those who have been silenced to voice and express all that has been silenced and to express the anger and frustration of disempowerment in a safe container, to be heard and listened to without fear of retaliation. All participants need to know that there are learning opportunities for everyone.

4. Cultural Interpreters and Mediators

When the relationship has been either non-existent or contentious, it is necessary to have two people – one on each side of the relationship – support the new partnership toward a new way of communicating. Two people who can communicate and interpret misunderstandings and misinterpretations to each other and then mediate and communicate the new understanding to their respective groups is a critical role.

5. Learning Together is Key

Learning together is the foundation of the partnership. Forging new understandings, finding the points of alignment and the points of disagreement help the conversation. Acting on the new understandings by modifying practices, policy interpretations, and programs to better support language revitalization has served to continue to foster trust and commitment.

References

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