

# Being Cree in the 21st Century Through Language, Literacy, and Culture: *Iyiniwoskinikiskwewak* (Young Women) Take on the Challenges

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## Abstract

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century in western Canada, the Cree Language faces the risk of obsolescence (Canada, 1996, 2002). Few children learn the language as their mother tongue; some schools offer Cree classes but primarily as a core second-language class, and children are not becoming fluent speakers. The development of immersion models is central to the retention of the Cree language if it is to survive through this century. This study is about *Iyiniwoskinikiskwewak* (young women) who are taking on their own journeys as language warriors (Alfred, 2005) with the assistance of Elders and fluent speakers at the Alliance Pipeline's Young Women's Circle of Leadership (APYWCL) summer camp. In this short eight-day program at the University of Alberta, young Aboriginal women explore the Cree language, traditional values, women's roles and leadership, and contemporary skills, such as in drama and digital technology. In this paper we will illustrate how this summer program and the women who work in it assist the young women in their fight to regenerate themselves and their people culturally and linguistically.

## Résumé

Au 21<sup>e</sup> siècle dans l'Ouest du Canada, la langue crie est confrontée au risque d'obsolescence (Canada, 1996, 2002). Rares sont les enfants qui apprennent le vernaculaire comme langue maternelle; il y a des écoles qui offrent des cours de cri mais principalement comme cours de langue seconde, et les enfants n'arrivent pas à parler la langue couramment. Le développement des modèles d'immersion est essentiel à la rétention de la langue crie si on veut assurer sa survie jusqu'à la fin du siècle présent. Dans cette étude, il s'agit des *Iyiniwoskinikiskwewak* (jeunes femmes) qui font leurs propres parcours comme guerrières de langue (Alfred, 2005) grâce à l'aide des Anciens et des locuteurs qui parlent la langue couramment au camp d'été appelé Alliance Pipeline's Young Women's Circle of Leadership (APYWCL). Pendant ce court programme de huit jours à l'Université de l'Alberta, de jeunes femmes autochtones explorent la langue crie, les valeurs traditionnelles, les rôles des femmes et le leadership ainsi que des compétences contemporaines telles que le théâtre et les technologies numériques. Dans ce papier nous illustrerons comment ce programme d'été et les femmes qui y travaillent aident les jeunes femmes dans leur lutte à se régénérer et à régénérer leur peuple culturellement et linguistiquement.

## Introduction: Tanisi kawi'itweya

“Adventurous,” “awesome,” “fun,” “fantastic,” “original” were some of the words the young women participants used to describe the eight-day Cree immersion camp. Shelby LaFramboise-Helgeson, the 2013 Program Coordinator, stated that despite the challenges that these youth faced, they grew tremendously during the APYWCL program, and many shared the experiences they gained from the camp as follows:

- I had never rock climbed before. I was scared, but when I looked down and saw my friends, this encouraged me.
- I didn't know about the Belly Button teachings before; this was new to me.

- I didn't know how to introduce myself before in the Cree language.
- I now know that every Cree nation has a different way of speaking Cree.
- It is so much fun. It is not hard work; making bags and beading can be so much fun.
- I didn't know I could make new friends.

Canada's Aboriginal languages are many and diverse. The current 50 languages of Canada's Aboriginal people belong to 11 major language families or isolates—10 First Nations and Inuktitut—and many include several dialects within each language (Canada, 2002). Children speak practically none of the endangered Aboriginal languages at home; therefore, it is reasonable to expect

these languages to be close to extinction within a generation (Canada, 2002). Blair et al. (2011) suggested:

Indigenous languages have all taken tolls against the seemingly more powerful languages... English and French have invaded the First languages spaces. Through the horrendous processes of colonization, Indigenous languages have been beaten back to the recesses, to the reserves, to some homes, still carefully guarded by the Elders but with few young, healthy speakers left to fight. These languages are currently undergoing severe obsolescence and are at serious risk of being wiped out (p. 90).

These losses have been well documented worldwide (Crawford, 1998; Fettes, 1998; Hinton, 1994; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

In support of Indigenous language revitalization, the Canadian Indigenous Language and Literacy Educational Studies (CILLES) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta offers a strong academic program with authentic and practical learning opportunities. It is an educational study program with courses in language education for Indigenous language teachers and First Nation communities. We recognize the need for a program that includes languages, language education curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, research, and technology in teaching and research. The inclusion of Elders and cultural components is essential to our program. We are the education part of the tri-Faculty Canadian Indigenous Language and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) initiative at the University of Alberta, which involves the Faculties of Arts, Education, and Native Studies. The APYWCL is a part of CILLES that serves predominantly the children of students who come to the University of Alberta for three weeks in July annually to undertake a variety of studies to support Aboriginal community language revitalization efforts. Hence, together, we create an intergenerational language-learning environment for young Aboriginal women.

In traditional Aboriginal societies women played as significant a role as did men. Aboriginal women were held in high regard; as mothers and grandmothers, they were understood to be spiritually connected and, in this sense, more powerful than men. The effects of colonization have eroded women's voices and roles. Many female Elders believe that now is the time to reclaim a voice and vision for Aboriginal people. The intent of the 'women's space' in the APYWCL is not exclusion, but rather the creation of a place where these young women's voices are valued and made primary. By honing the leadership skills of these young girls and opening avenues for language learning, we endeavour to reclaim the central roles that women have played in Aboriginal communities.

APYWCL is focused on developing young Aboriginal women's sense of self through the learning of Aboriginal traditions and knowledge (Brant Castellano, 2000) using the Cree language. In an intensive immersion summer program of Cree language, creative

theatre, storytelling, traditional and contemporary arts, digital technology, and woodworking, these youth learn new ways of being Indigenous. The objectives of the program, developed with the young women during the program's first offering and discussed by Blair et al. (2011) incorporate the following belief statement: Young Aboriginal Women/*Iyiniwoskinikiskwewak* are Fun: *môcikihtâ!* Cooperative: *wîcihtâso!* Caring: *kisewâtisi!* Respectful: *kisteyihtâ!* Responsible: *nâkateyihtâ!* Strong: *sohkeyimo!* Talented: *nakacihtâ!*

This paper includes a "warrior" framework for the development of this quasi-immersion Cree language program (Taiaiake Alfred, 2005), observations of the day-to-day program activities and promising immersion practices, reflections from yearly reports, and interviews with students, instructors, Elders, and coordinators. The more than 50 young women who have participated in the program over five years are very proud of their accomplishments and have eagerly demonstrated their new linguistic expertise through oral stories, creative theatre, songs, and digital texts. We believe that these young women have gained grounding in both traditional and contemporary worlds and have found new ways to be proud of their language and culture. These young women (*Iyiniwoskinikiskwewak*) are future contributing members of their communities (*Mâmwî-owîcihtâsowin*), are proud of their culture, and stand confidently as they lead others in cultural and linguistic revitalization.

### A Warrior (*Okichita*)

Leadership requires courage—courage to try something new, courage to take risks, and courage to step forward and encourage others to follow. The APYWCL is designed to provide young women with many opportunities to be courageous. Taiaiake Alfred (2005) reminded us that a huge battle needs to be fought and that Indigenous warriors need to be equipped with many tools and strengths for this time ahead: "The battle is for the reclamation of an Onkwehonwe spirit, mentality, and way of being in the world. In this context, our survival as peoples is dependent upon the survival and revitalization of Indigenous languages" (247). In the spirit of Alfred's reclamation for the revitalization of Indigenous languages and through our endeavour to reclaim Aboriginal women's traditional roles in contemporary society, we established the goals for the APYWCL (*Tanisi kawi'isicikyak*), which give the girls opportunities:

- to be warriors in this battle to reclaim language and culture;
- to gain strength in their ancestral, cultural, and linguistic worlds;
- to develop some expertise and confidence in contemporary practical and digital worlds;
- to develop their leadership skills in a fun, cooperative, and caring environment;
- to be strong and courageous;

- to have opportunities to learn from Elders;
- to practice the values of respect and responsibility in a culturally affirming manner;
- to learn Cree and see many ways to be proud of the language and people in today's world;
- to realize and nurture their many strengths and talents by exploring the Cree language, creative theatre, storytelling, traditional and contemporary arts, and computers; and
- to learn how to utilize these strengths to benefit themselves and others.

### **The Young Indigenous Women (*Iyiniwoskinîkiskwewak*)**

The girls who attend the APYWCL program are brave young women, most coming for the first time to a big university for two weeks, willing to try out and take on some very new experiences. They do not know what to expect or what challenges or rewards they might encounter. They sacrifice part of their summer holiday. Will it be hard? Will they like these other girls? Will their leaders be kind? What will they have to do? Why are they here? The young women are told that they are coming to this camp at the University of Alberta to learn Cree and how to be Indigenous. They are told that Cree people are losing their language and that it is important to keep it alive. What would this all mean?

- Over five summers, more than 50 girls ranging in age from 9 to 18 participated in the APYWCL.
- They came from communities in Western Canada, from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories, and from any other communities where they might have spoken an Indigenous language but not necessarily Cree.
- Their mothers or grandmothers are language teachers and advocates.
- These girls are our future leaders.
- They will become mothers, sisters, aunties, and *kokums* and will have a great influence on the next generation.
- They might become doctors, lawyers, artists, engineers, language teachers, or professors in the future.

### **Role of Elders**

The Elders teach the young women how to make traditional and contemporary artwork by using a range of mediums such as leather, fabric, paint, beads, and string. While constructing these cultural items with the girls, the Elders build relationships of trust and guidance with them, model their actions and, in a traditional manner, tell stories (*Acimowina*) to the girls. Hare (2005: 257) stressed the importance of storytelling: "Stories are passed down from one generation to another, telling us who we are, identifying our places in

this world, and directing us how to live in a respectful way". The Elders incorporate the medicine wheel, sacred colours, symbols, directions, and underlying belief systems into their teaching and storytelling. Brant Castellano (2000) explained that the medicine wheel is one of the most powerful instruments currently used to convey the holistic character of Aboriginal knowledge and experience (30).

### **Reflections on Three Summer Programs**

This section includes reflections from three summer APYWCL camp reports (2011, 2012, 2013). These latter three years of the program have demonstrated consistency and continuity of staff and programming, which enables us to deliver our program to a reliable standard from year to year. The three authors were involved in the program for each of the three years. Blair and Gardner provided administration and direction for the program, and LaFramboise-Helgeson coordinated the planning of day-to-day activities. We were able to attract and maintain an excellent team of instructors with individual expertise in Cree language and culture and/or digital technologies. The reflections from each of the following years depict a dynamic, holistic blend of ancient Indigenous knowledge and traditions with new 21<sup>st</sup>-century skill development for the young women.

### **Summer 2011**

The Cree language/leadership instructors were Ivy Houle and Audrey MacDonald. The Elder, Margaret Cardinal, was an integral part of the APYWCL program. Not only did the instructors and Elder teach basic conversational Cree and traditional values each morning, but they also spent lunch hours and afternoons with the young women. They integrated the Cree language into lunch-hour conversations, as well as into the drama, swimming, and computer-technology sessions in the afternoons. The digital workshops offered the young women experience with audio, video, and text to build slideshows through Animoto and Voice Threads. They also had an opportunity to use digital cameras to capture moments that were important to them and learned how to import images from other programs into their projects. The Cree immersion teachers assisted the girls in translating their thoughts into Cree. All of the instructors worked collaboratively to integrate the content that was the primary focus: Cree language and communication. The cultural knowledge and lived experiences of the Cree language/leadership instructors and Elder imparted a richness and authenticity to the APYWCL that are not always accessible in this day and age. They are exceptionally knowledgeable women who hold their language and culture high and are fully committed to passing it on to the next generations.

Specifically, our program focused on developing the young women's self-esteem, pride, and respect for self and others by acknowledging and learning Cree cultural values using the language. Their daily use of the Cree

language gave the young women opportunities to encourage and inspire one another to recognize and acknowledge their own abilities and newly learned language and cultural skills. They were able to become self-confident, respected members of this community and begin their journeys toward future success within today's society. All of the young women who have participated in the APYWCL are of Aboriginal descent and from families who value their traditional spirituality. This phenomenon is likely a result of the fact that the CILLDI students (who are close relations of the young women) choose to attend CILLDI because they appreciate the authentic cultural component that the initiative offers. The instructors talked to the girls about the transition to adulthood by exploring the Belly Button Teachings and Moss Bag Teachings. Elder Margaret Cardinal explored Thirteen Moons on a Turtle's Back/Teachings with the students, and they incorporated them into their fabric, leather, and bead artwork. Throughout the eight days it was evident that language and culture cannot exist alone, as the teachers demonstrated through whom and what they represented and shared with their students.

Although the participants did not leave the eight-day APYWCL program speaking fluent Cree, they were exposed to an atmosphere in which their peers and instructors were excited about the Cree language and instilled in them pride and value for their ancestral languages. The instructors and Elders who continually conveyed the importance of Indigenous languages and the need to keep these languages alive positively influenced the young women, most of whom belong to families and communities in which an Indigenous language is still spoken to some degree. Having developed an appreciation for the importance of Indigenous languages by attending the APYWCL, the young women will likely make a more overt effort to continue learning their own Indigenous language in the years ahead. Many students shared this goal in the video interviews conducted on the last two days of the program.

The many activities in which the young women participated helped to achieve the leadership objectives of the APYWCL. The experience of the Cree language sessions, swimming, drama, and computer technologies gave them opportunities to be courageous and try new things. Every morning began with a prayer/sharing circle, followed by music and song to encourage the natural flow of language. Ivy Houle and Audrey MacDonald played guitar and sang Cree songs with the girls and encouraged them to use their voices to hear their own language and words. As well, each young woman received a CD with Cree songs written and sung by Brian MacDonald, Audrey and Ivy's brother. They appeared very confident with their new songs when they performed to an audience of 100 people at the language festival event at the end of the program that was organized by CILLDI for all of the CILLDI/CILLES participants.

On three afternoons the group took on the task of exploring ways to share digital stories. The students were encouraged to share stories using tools such as a digital camera in collaboration with programs such as Animoto and Voice Thread and the creation of avatars. They also wrote a blog where their parents could see their work. Each student created an avatar, a digital character that represented their identity as an online user. The digital technology instructors encouraged the girls not to share their pictures online for safety reasons, which made the use of an avatar necessary. The young women were loaned digital cameras to capture moments on campus or during class time, such as sewing, beading, crafts, and daily experiences, to use in collaboration with their digital Cree immersion story. On the last day of the computer workshop the students were encouraged to share their digital work. They were excited and produced numerous short Animator presentations. It was delightful to see a small finished product created in only three afternoon sessions.

The drama classes gave the young women opportunities for team building, trust exercises, theatre games, demonstration of their acting skills, story collection, and actual classroom presentations. The workshops also focused on building the young women's self-esteem and self-confidence. Creative theatre is a powerful teaching tool, especially for young Aboriginal women. They also received information related to taking control of their lives and being responsible for their own actions. Maureen Belanger, the Cree/English bilingual drama instructor, encouraged the girls to integrate the Cree songs they learned in the morning sessions into a drama presentation, which they performed at the Faculty Club on Wednesday, July 13, 2011, during the Indigenous languages festival. The students developed a story about how language and culture is important to them, and how it will make a difference in the future. It was fascinating that this small group of girls was able to share the importance of a monumental dilemma in Indigenous language revitalization with all in attendance.

As program developers we were reminded that these young women and girls will all soon be going to high school and hopefully university, and that their participation in this APYWCL program on a large university campus provided them with a new-found confidence. Their excitement about being here was evident. These youth had a chance to be physically present at the University of Alberta and were able to imagine themselves in this place and/or at another institute of higher learning.

### **Summer 2012**

The Cree language/leadership instructors were again Ivy Houle and Audrey MacDonald. The Elder, Margaret Cardinal, who was an integral part of the APYWCL program, returned. They continued to integrate the Cree language into lunch-hour conversations and beading, drama, swimming, hoop dancing, poetry, and computer-technology sessions in the afternoons. On three afternoons the group once again took on the task of

focusing on 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy skills through digital stories. The students were encouraged to share stories using tools such as a digital camera in collaboration with programs such as Animoto and other Web 2.0 tools to assist in the creation of avatars. They had an opportunity to create a few slideshows using Animoto and to record their voices for a voice thread/group work with translation assistance from the Cree immersion teachers. On the last day of the computer workshop the students were encouraged to share their Animoto presentation. They were excited and produced numerous short Animoto presentations.

Delvin Kennedy, a hoop dancer, worked with the girls, and they explored the idea of using five hoops in dancing. Although our time with Mr. Kennedy was brief, the young women had an opportunity to explore physical activity in what was once only a man's domain. Today this has changed, although it can vary from culture to culture. Mr. Kennedy taught hoop dancing using immersion methods to many youth and adults in many schools. His animated teaching skills helped the participants to understand the concepts of physical movement that they were being taught while they added one hoop at a time. Our coordinator, Shelby, joined in the process, which she "was able to recall from my youth." The body and mind do not forget.

Adrian Jacobs, a Mohawk poet and writer, also shared his thoughts on learning the language. He candidly spoke about his frustration in the greater society and explained that walking over the hills in urban Edmonton to a local coffee shop was a meditational practice for him. Writing, walking, and journaling have helped him to process anger. Adrian told the girls that his young son is a writer and encouraged them to journal and write regularly. He shared a sacred clown story and a creation story from his people in southern Ontario. He believes that although we are all from different places, we are all the same.

The girls also had an opportunity to work with our returning elder, Margaret Cardinal. She talked about her work with the International Council of Grandmothers, and told the historic story of the "trail of tears." Although the girls might not have fully understood the implications of the "trail of tears" in this very powerful story, they might understand in the years to come.

Maureen Belanger, drama instructor, encouraged the girls to integrate the Cree version of 'O Canada' into their drama presentation. They performed in a drama presentation at the Faculty Club on Wednesday, July 18, 2012, after the supper. The resulting collaboration with the Cree teachers was beautiful. The students used an improvisational format in collaboration with their drama instructor. Cree humour, jigging, and music were the overarching themes in the presentation.

### **Summer 2013**

During this program the landscape of the University of Alberta once again provided a place to explore basic Cree using simple concepts such as numbers and colours

and everyday language such as in introductory greetings. This summer the girls were predominantly from the greater Edmonton area—local First Nations communities, small commuter communities, and urban Edmonton. They were registered as either daughters, granddaughters of CILLDI participants, or students from greater Edmonton elementary or high schools with no affiliation with CILLDI. We extended invitations to young girls in local communities who might benefit from our program. Thus, we encountered a somewhat different dynamic.

Approximately 50% of the participants arrived with some knowledge and understanding of the Cree language; the other 50% had little to none. One participant reported that no Cree at all was used on a daily basis in the home. However, the majority seemed to have some knowledge and understanding of basic words, but lacked conversational Cree. The participants received a half hour of direct instruction daily at the beginning of the class. For the remainder of the day the instructors naturally infused the Cree language into the daily activities of camp life, such as beading moccasins and making gauntlets and mini-tie wraps with our Elder, Margaret Cardinal, during her three half-day workshops. Margaret switched between English and Cree when she told stories (*Acimowina*) of her own youth and that of her sister Pauline, who accompanied her. While the girls continued to bead and work diligently on their independent projects, she spoke about their adventures as children, hunting and setting traps.

The Cree immersion teachers Ivy Houle and Donna MacDonald used a team-teaching approach, switching between their areas of expertise. Ivy explored with the girls women's traditional roles and cultural teachings, as well as the Sage Kit teachings in the Indigenous Garden on the third floor, where the girls could see buffalo sage and yarrow plants growing in containers in the outdoor garden. Other teachings included the Belly Button and Rainbow Teachings; coincidentally, many of the participants saw a double rainbow during that week! Ivy continually encouraged the girls to consider the loss of language and the loss of culture. She stated, "You will be the leaders and will be here one day, teaching the young women."

Donna MacDonald, a full-time Cree immersion teacher during the school year, taught the greetings and basic Cree language through direct-immersion instruction. She also taught interesting Cree games, which were the students' favourites, and which nurtured the students' understanding of the Cree language. They involved action—stopping and restarting—while they walked and danced around the room and learned the numbers. This is an example of a teaching strategy called Total Physical Response, or TPR, which is an effective language-immersion technique. Donna was also a strong leader in the digital technology/drama portion of the program. She combined the short video clips that the drama instructor directed into a short five-to-seven-minute video production.

Lissa Davies and Kelly Reiersen conducted a three-day workshop in which they explored comic strip writing, Animoto video production, and book writing through Storybird.com. Although these instructors are non-Indigenous, they worked collaboratively with the instructors and referred to a Cree online dictionary that the girls could use. After the first workshop, one girl exclaimed, "That was awesome." This reminded us of the interface between digital technology and Cree literacy. What could be better than bridging language and contemporary ways of knowing and being? This digital workshop served as a window through which the girls could look into the past and consider how they see themselves today compared with the possibilities tomorrow. They were clearly excited to share their creative works, especially the music videos, in their presentation to a broader audience that included their parents and other guests.

The drama workshop that Maureen Belanger directed took a new turn this year, with an emphasis on video production. The girls created a short movie with multiple scenes that they organized and acted out with their Cree immersion teachers. This story, a traditional rainbow teachings/story, showed how the main character gave her gift of the teachings to a new rainbow being that symbolically represented the young women. It demonstrates that the old is important, but that to learn new ways, we must hold on to the old stories and the language that is intertwined in these teachings. To culminate this workshop, the students shared with the public on Wednesday, July 17, at 4:30 p.m., the story (*Acimowina*) of their Rainbow Teaching and what it meant to them today. The clip finished with the young women dancing in the hallways of the university in their traditional dress.

### Conclusion

Many young Aboriginal women today, through no fault of their own, have been stripped of the traditional roles of Indigenous women, stripped of their traditional language and culture, and are ambivalent about how to conduct themselves in society. The disintegration of Indigenous languages and cultures through the process of colonization has left many Aboriginal young people in cultural dissonance, unsure of the role of their Indigeneity in our contemporary world. We are confident that the APYWCL summer camp prepares young Aboriginal women to become the language and culture warriors of the future, which is most often the role of women in traditional Indigenous societies. The state of Aboriginal languages today requires an aggressive intention to uphold and strengthen these languages for future generations. The strength of our APYWCL program is the placement of the Cree language as the central organizing feature of all that the young girls experience during the short eight-day program. The girls are challenged to take many risks: in physical activity such as rock climbing, in presenting their digital work and drama performances to a public audience, in learning their Cree language and

demonstrating their learning, in participating in cultural practices, and in learning and living Cree cultural values through interacting with one another. As we stated earlier, leadership requires courage, and the young women in our program have been courageous. The blending of Cree language and cultural practices with contemporary digital technology skills fuses together what it means to be Cree in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The enthusiasm and dedication that the young Aboriginal women in our program exhibited give us hope for the revitalization of Indigenous languages. We were delighted to work with these young women.

Our program attracted some media attention as a unique program for Aboriginal girls, and you may wish to visit the audio, video, and print coverage at the websites below. Enjoy these examples of the experience in the words of the participants!

<http://news.ualberta.ca/newsarticles/2013/july/summer-school-immerses-young-aboriginal-women-in-cree-culture>

<http://beditionmagazine.com/alliance-pipeline-young-womens-circle-of-leadership/>

<https://soundcloud.com/cbc-edmonton>

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