

Wa7 szum'in'stum' ti nqweleutenlhkalha
Technology Help and Hindrance in Indigenous Language Revitalization
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Abstract

We hold our languages close to our hearts, they are precious to us, that is the closest translation of the words expressed in my language in the title. This article will give some illustrations of how technology helps and also hinders keeping Indigenous languages thriving. It is an opportunity to keep every language born of the land living and thriving.

Wa7 szum'inum' ti nqweleutenlhkalha. Huz kan qwelutentumulh eltsa kwa maysneml kwa nukw'uns ti nqwelutenlhkalha ti teknoatsihas. Wa7 ka nukw'cala, wa7 muta xelilcs t'aqmens. Tuxlhoamas ka nuk'anems ti nqwelutens ti tmicwkalha.

This is the story of people, ucwalmicw, revitalizing their languages and the opportunities and challenges faced with technologies. Indigenous peoples have always used the technologies as they developed in the world. For example people in the north used radio to connect over long distances or within their communities to tell their stories and share news like they did in their community circles. People who thought that they no longer had songs from their ancestors found samples of their songs and stories on wax cylinders in far off places and brought them home.

2019 was designated the United Nations Year of Indigenous Languages, there are few days left, the designation has helped with focusing attention on Indigenous Languages around the world. In Canada there is finally a Federal Indigenous Languages Act intended to support the reclamation, revitalization, maintaining and strengthening Indigenous languages in Canada. The Act received Royal Assent on June 21st, 2019. Both levels of governments made a commitment to respond to both the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recommendations to address the revitalization and reclamation of Indigenous Languages. In B.C. the UNDRIP bill was tabled in the legislature on 24 October 2019 and passed in November 2019. Carrying out this new mandate requires intense and extensive planning at every level; as every institution in the current government structure has had a part in the demise of Indigenous languages. It means developing new policies; revising and amending

existing policies; establishing functioning spaces in all institutions for Indigenous languages, and shifting ingrained habits of thinking, beliefs and practices regarding Indigenous languages and Indigenous knowledge. The task in 2019 and beyond is to reverse the shift from a state of decline to one of vitality and active language use.

As residents of these lands, where all Indigenous languages were born, the challenge is to turn and face the effects of colonial history honestly, with courage and resolve to take the path towards renewal. Canada is not alone in tackling language and culture shift. Language annihilation has been a key to taking over land and asserting power over Indigenous peoples the world over. Indigenous languages have been under threat from the beginning of the arrival of explorers, fur traders, gold miners, Christian missionaries and settlers. The most powerful force in the eradication of Indigenous languages was education, especially the Residential schools, but the Federal Indian Day Schools had the same policies of not permitting Indigenous languages to be spoken. Until very recently there has been no support to keep the Indigenous language thriving. Those that continue do so are due to the efforts of the Indigenous peoples of the language communities and the assistance of some allies in the linguistics community. See First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) website for the Status of Indigenous Languages reports ([*Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages 2018*](#)). Language is power—it carries the histories, knowledge and wisdom of a people; language establishes identity and a sense of place and belonging.

British Columbia is unique in Canada for its multiplicity and diversity of Indigenous languages; there are eight (8) language families with 34 distinct languages, and 62 dialects. Each language has developed an orthography for its language. In addition, due to population dislocation, relocation, and dispersal, BC is also home to people from across Turtle Island representing their own languages. Due to lack of access to resources each of the languages is in a different state of development; some have had many years of documentation, research, and protection while others have been limited in development due to limited human resources and inadequate financial support. Indigenous language experts have had to develop new strategies, knowledge and practices in recovering, revitalizing, and reclaiming their languages in a world dominated by the second language learning of colonial languages.

We are in a new colonial era, the new colonizers are those that are covering and infiltrating the world community with their vision of human connectivity. We the Indigenous peoples of the world can help give voice to understanding the experience of being colonized. Let me illustrate with some stories.

Our languages were mainly oral languages until the late 1960's. My story comes from that time, as my community wanted to teach our language in the school. At the time we used the typewriter, that technology drove how we designed our orthography. In our part of the country it is mainly the English language. With the introduction of the IBM Selectric typewriter our world changed when we found someone who could take the font ball and modify it – scrape off letters and symbols and add our letters, we could then type and produce our curriculum and story books in our language, we could record data and learn about our way of understanding the world. We could record and share with our community our knowledge of the plants, animals and the land, we could remember and share our ancestral stories. When computers came along we could no longer use that technology to do any of that work because our writing systems were not compatible. It took two 17 year olds, one in Ontario and another in Australia who figured out how our languages could access the new technology. It enabled First Voices to archive Indigenous languages, produce on line dictionaries, phrases, word games, and APPS. They created computer keyboards for every First Nations language in Canada, including syllabics,

all the languages in Australia and the languages of the USA who chose to write their language, there are Indigenous peoples who refuse to shift their language from an oral language to literacy, as it changes the language and relationships. The downloadable keyboards enabled our people to communicate in our languages on line. Our languages nearly disappeared because it was promoted that in order to live in this world we had to only work in the colonizers languages. Technology today is still following that pattern.

One of the most powerful ways of eradicating the use of Indigenous languages, silencing the knowledge and wisdom of the people, breaking the intimate relationship with the earth, the lands and all that live there, was to remove people from their homelands and communities. It was accomplished by every one of the settler institutions – Education being the strongest force, removing children from their parents and grandparents, aunties and uncles their primary teachers to be educated away from their homes and communities, schooled in the settler languages; Social and family services, removing children from their families and communities to be raised outside of their communities away from their homelands and languages, note more Canadian Indigenous children are separated from their families than during the Residential school era; legal system, Indigenous men and women outnumber any other population in incarceration; family breakdown and violence results in women and children needing to leave their communities to find shelter, support, employment away from their home communities, As a result Indigenous people live away from their home communities often in large urban areas, some are not even in Canada, but in countries around the world. Technology would be the greatest tool to connect people to their languages but due to lack of technical expertise, connectivity, planned obsolescence and incompatibility of hardware and programming it is a challenge for Indigenous people in their language homelands to serve both those within their communities and those who live away.

Another example of the use of technology to reconcile Indigenous peoples knowledge system is in the area of mapping. When Indigenous peoples view maps either they don't exist or often they have been named by others – neighbouring Indigenous peoples, anthropologists, linguists, settler governments,

explorers and ethnographers. Names, boundaries and spelling are not the names, boundaries and spelling by the Indigenous people themselves. The tools people now have are enabling them to map their territories, include the songs and stories associated with each place, information about the histories of the location, what plants and animals thrived there and the unique words that were born in that place.

In a recent Environmental Scan survey of Indigenous language education in provincial schools showed that public school districts have the hardware and internet access even in remote areas but only one region of the province used technology for access to learning an Indigenous language. And in that one district they reported that students preferred face to face class learning

of their Indigenous language and didn't find learning through technology helpful. In that region there are fewer Indigenous students enrolled and they speak many different Indigenous languages. More effort needs to be made to developing and implementing Indigenous language teaching and learning using distance technology.

It is only through working together in a respectful, collaborative way, in mutuality that we can help to keep Indigenous languages, thoughts, wisdom and nurturing relationships in this world and in our memory. It is our collective responsibility to keep our human communities healthy, to care for the earth, the water, the plants and animals. What is the role of technology in that care?

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