

CENTERING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES IN LINGUISTICS COURSE DESIGN*

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1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to reflect on our experiences and the outcomes of a collaborative project to develop an undergraduate linguistics course focused on Indigenous languages in Canada. Following protocols rooted in Indigenist research methodologies (e.g., Wilson 2008, 2012; Smith 2012), we will begin by introducing ourselves. This act of self-location is a way to acknowledge the people, places, and experiences that have shaped our ideas and our collaboration.

Kathleen: taanishi kiyawaw, Kathleen Anderson dizhnikaashon, lii Michif niya ekwa Lorette, Manitoba dooschiin. I am a Michif/Anishinaabe undergraduate student at Simon Fraser University completing a Joint Major in Linguistics and Indigenous Studies. I grew up in Southern Manitoba in a traditional Métis community in Treaty 1 territory and have additional ancestral and communal ties to Treaty 2. My research focuses on Indigenous language revitalization, specifically pertaining to my traditional languages in the Algonquian language family and is continually growing. I am the first Indigenous language learner in my family and am working on returning the languages to my family and communities. nimiigwechiwendam to Heather, my kinship, community and aanikoobijiganag for their endless support and for guiding me towards and through this work.

Heather: I come to this work as a non-Indigenous linguist living and working in the traditional and unceded territories of the hanq'aminəm-speaking peoples. I was born and raised in Mohkingsstsis (Calgary, Alberta) and I am the granddaughter of Scottish and British immigrants. I am an alumnus of the University of Calgary (BA Honours, 2003; MA 2005) and the University of British Columbia (PhD, 2013), and a former postdoctoral fellow at the University of Victoria (SSHRC 2014-16; Banting 2016-18). My research focuses primarily on issues around Indigenous language documentation and revitalization, and it stems from long-standing collaborative relationships with Blackfoot-speaking members of the Siksika and Kainai Nations of Southern Alberta. I am a Lecturer at Simon Fraser University, and an Adjunct Professor at the University of British Columbia and the University of Calgary. I am grateful to my many teachers and mentors, and to Kathleen and other students who have and continue to expand my understanding and shape my perspective.

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We see this paper as an opportunity to reflect on our collaboration, and specifically how our individual experiences were leveraged and combined to create an effective team for course development. The paper proceeds as follows: section 2 provides relevant background on the project and additional context to motivate our collaboration, section 3 outlines our process, section 4 details the outcomes of the project, and section 5 concludes.

2. Background

This paper centers around our experiences collaborating to develop content for an undergraduate course offered within the Linguistics Department at Simon Fraser University (SFU). Although SFU Linguistics has strong reputation for supporting Indigenous language learning and revitalization, this is mostly centered around the Indigenous Languages Program (INLP), a division within Linguistics that offers cohort-based and customized programming to Indigenous students in their communities. Courses in the INLP are often reserved for students specifically admitted to this program. Aside from the INLP, there is one upper-division course entitled “Aboriginal languages of the Americas,” but it is rarely offered, and until recently there has been no lower-division course centered on Indigenous languages. There is LING 280 “Linguistics in the Real World,” which features different topics each semester and can be taken multiple time for credit. In Spring 2019, the topic of Indigenous languages in Canada was the focus of this course for the first time, and it was in this course that the authors first met, with Heather teaching and Kathleen participating as a student.

Since that time, the course has been offered one additional time with this same topic, and there are plans for the Department of Linguistics to introduce a new course, LING 230, that is specifically listed with the “Indigenous languages in Canada.” The primary objective of this course (under both the LING 280 and LING 230 listings) is to explore the diversity of Indigenous languages with a focus on community-based language activism. A common theme throughout the course is the role of linguistics in language revitalization. The student audience for the course is diverse, as there are no pre-requisites for this course, and the course attracts a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with varying degrees of linguistics training. Our hope is that the course will serve two purposes: (i) it will serve as a springboard for students interested in pursuing linguistic studies in Indigenous languages, and (ii) it will attract students from across the university looking to educate themselves about Indigenous language issues as an act of reconciliation.

Following Kathleen’s success in the Spring 2019 offering of LING 280 (as well as subsequent Linguistics courses taught by Heather), we were motivated to collaborate on the development of new course materials. This decision seemed a natural choice, as it was clear to us that combining our two perspectives would enrich the course in new and innovative ways. However, when seeking models of effective student-instructor collaborations in course development, we were surprised to learn that undergraduate students are rarely asked to actively collaborate in course development, despite principles of learner-centered pedagogy and student engagement being seen as important trademarks of postsecondary education (Dunlop 2012).

Although instructors are typically the ones responsible for planning content, structuring delivery, and designing assignments, a lack of student consultation in course design can result in students feeling disengaged. Moreover, Indigenous students are at a heightened risk for feeling unsupported or alienated in postsecondary learning environments (Gallop & Bastien 2016). Particularly in courses with Indigenous content, there is a danger of Indigenous students experiencing trauma or cultural harm (McDonald 2016). However, when postsecondary educators foster positive and supportive relationships with Indigenous students, they can play an important role in the development of inclusive and engaging programming (Black & Hachkowski 2019).

Particularly within the field of linguistics, there is growing interest in decolonizing research and pedagogy (Czaykowska-Higgins et al. 2017; Leonard 2017) and encouraging Indigenous students' involvement in linguistics (Gerds 2017; Sumida Huaman & Stokes 2011). With this background in mind, we focused on the question of how we could collaborate to develop a course that would draw on our collective experiences and knowledge to create space for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to learn and reflect on the critical issues around Indigenous languages in Canada and how the field of linguistics can support community-based language revitalization.

3. Methods

This project was funded through a “Reconciling Curriculum” grant available through the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Simon Fraser University. The grant’s primary objective is to create “constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies and the work of reconciliation.” Our project goals included the creation of new course content and assessment materials that are grounded in Indigenous methodologies and student perspectives. With this in mind, we developed the following: (i) an annotated bibliography of background materials and course readings, (ii) a media library with videos, audio content, and interactive web spaces, and (iii) an assessment bank with quiz questions, problem sets, and journal prompts.

Having both a student and instructor perspective allowed for our experiential knowledge to collaborate and create what we believe to be suitable material for the course using judgement factors. This collaboration was achieved through biweekly meetings to discuss work and findings and a shared online space to access materials.

When developing the course materials, judgement factors were used to determine its acceptability and appropriateness. These factors included the centering of Indigenous perspectives and creators, in addition to the sensibility of the content for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Other factors used for sorting through materials included the use of terminology featured and its appropriateness, the relevancy of content to weekly course topics, as well as ensuring a diversity of perspectives to represent the diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada. As a result of previous experiences with insensitive and inappropriate course material informing our work, this content was designed with the intention of establishing culturally respectful material to benefit all students. Overall, culturally respectful material was found more often than disrespectful or insensitive material. However, topics pertaining to language endangerment and language revitalization

efforts often faced challenges with their presentation and articulation which made for a difficult read or watch. Therefore, if the material under review was determined to be insensitive regarding Indigenous languages and had potential to cause students harm, it was not included.

One example that highlights our methodology is the use of reflexive journaling. Students are provided with a weekly prompt and are tasked with discussing the weekly topic in their online journal entry. In addition, the journals are intended to contribute to peer interaction and engagement by allowing students to ask questions and include media when relevant. Rather than creating dialogue around Indigenous languages exclusive to class hours, students are instead invited to take home their findings and give thought to prompts regarding language and wellness, language diversity and classification, language and land, and so forth. For instance, a prompt created for language diversity and classification seeks to contribute to students' awareness of the range of Indigenous languages in Canada by asking the following: "Considering previous discussions, why do differences in the number of Indigenous languages in Canada exist? In other words, what are the reason(s) for the inconsistencies of number? Who is responsible for deciding whether a language is a language or dialect? Is it the local community, Indigenous nation, government or someone else? How may this impact the support a language receives? Further, is the type of language classification system being used clear? How so?". This allows for students to reflect on materials covered in class as well as in readings.

Students are not expected to respond to all parts of the question, rather the goal is to allow for creative contributions regarding the diversity of Indigenous languages across Canada. The journal topic was created with the specific intention to allow students to understand the course material while refraining from creating potential harm with the topic. The questions allow for both students with or without familiarity and experience to the topic and Indigenous languages to contribute personal remarks and encounters. Additionally, students are introduced to topics within sociolinguistics regarding varieties and dialects, languages and codes, as well as national and official languages. Therefore, this allows for students to reflect on Indigenous languages in addition to linguistic topics which displays the collaboration of our knowledge systems.

4. Outcomes

The most obvious and tangible outcome of this collaboration was the development of rich and informed course content for the lower-division Indigenous languages course in the Department of Linguistics at SFU. Since we began our work together, the course has already been offered once, in Fall 2020. Data from student experience surveys indicates that our work together generated a successful course; 100% of students reported that the course components helped them learn and were connected to each other, and 97% of students reported that the course materials improved their understanding, and that assessments allowed them to demonstrate their understanding. Comments from students included: "*one of my favourite classes I have ever taken, so informative and engaging!*" and "*the topic is extremely important and I am glad that this course is offered at SFU.*"

We take this feedback to signal that the readings, multimedia, activities, and assessment materials that we co-created supported and engaged students successfully.

Beyond the course itself, the authors also benefited from this collaboration. Just as we began this paper by individually situating ourselves in the context of this research, we would like to conclude this section by individually sharing how this project has impacted our growth as scholars and linguists engaged in Indigenous language research and education.

Kathleen: I believe our collaboration and creation of materials has really demonstrated the importance of and need for multiple perspectives in academia. In course work I often prefer to complete assignments and tasks individually, which is such a contrast to the way language learning, teaching, and revitalization actually occurs. By the same token, this is a contrast to the community that I understand as necessary to ignite growth and learning from my traditional perspectives. Thankfully, the combination of both professor and student was further broadened by feedback from students and the course TA, which created a community out of a classroom. This is one part of my journey, and I am eternally grateful for the words from other students and the opportunity to represent Indigenous students in academia. Having guidance and mentorship from Heather is something I will hold forever and was incredibly necessary for me to know what and how to design course content. nimiigwechiwendam to all those who shared guidance and feedback.

Heather: I think it will take me some time to completely understand the impacts of this collaboration on my personal and professional development. I have been engaged in Indigenous language research and revitalization throughout much of my career, and I have taught numerous courses with Indigenous language content. I am continually learning and re-calibrating my understanding of what my role should be in this work, and in my striving to be a responsible and respectful ally, I hope to amplify Indigenous perspectives and to support and create spaces for Indigenous people leading language revitalization work. Teaching LING 280/230 is one way I can help to grow support and momentum for Indigenous language revitalization and collaborating with Kathleen has allowed me to truly center and prioritize Indigenous perspectives in the course. I also cannot overemphasize how useful it has been to have a student perspective in designing this course. Kathleen's input on how to structure and timeline activities and assessments to best serve student interests was enlightening and informative. My gratitude towards Kathleen for our work and time together is immeasurable.

5. Conclusions

This paper highlights the experiences and results from a collaborative project in linguistics course design at Simon Fraser University. Student and professor perspectives combined to create resources for an Indigenous languages in Canada course. Further, this collaboration was executed to address the heightened risk for Indigenous students to feel unsupported or excluded in post-secondary learning environments (Gallop & Bastien 2016) and the lack of undergraduate students present in course development, despite learner-centered pedagogy highlighted as important in postsecondary education (Dunlop 2012).

The resources created include an annotated bibliography with reviewed background materials and course readings, a media library containing videos, audio content, and interactive websites to use in weekly topics, as well as an assessment bank with quiz questions, problem sets for assignments, and prompts for weekly journal entries. The majority of content design and inclusion utilized judgement factors to determine the suitability of materials. These factors focus on centering Indigenous perspectives and creators in addition to recognizing the potential impact of course material on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In other words, materials were excluded if they were found to cause or incite potential harm for students, ensuring a safer classroom environment for all to benefit from.

Both authors and student feedback determine the collaboration as crucial to fulfill learner centered pedagogy and contribute to the support and well-being of Indigenous students in academia. We hope this will inspire other linguists and professors to consider including multiple perspectives, such as undergraduate and professor experiences and Indigenous and non-Indigenous positionalities in their course design. This community of viewpoints improves student learning and expands student representation in academia.

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