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# VIRTUAL VISITS: INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE RECLAMATION DURING A PANDEMIC

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How long has it been since you had a neighbour over for tea, sat around a table with friends, or let your kids visit their grandparents? One of the most pervasive and widely shared losses of the COVID-19 pandemic is the experience of visiting with relatives and friends. In pre-pandemic times, visiting was a routine part of our social lives. Now, the pandemic has taken many of those small social moments away, and we all miss them. Casually stopping by, sharing a meal, bringing a gift: those are life-sustaining activities -- except when they also bring a risk of infection with COVID-19.

For Indigenous communities, not being able to visit is a profound loss. Threads of relation, belonging and connection in Indigenous community are maintained through visiting. Indigenous communities in North America have borne some of the greatest burdens of this pandemic. In the U.S., where infection and transmission is rampant, Native Americans in the U.S. have suffered the highest death rate from COVID-19, nearly twice the rate of White Americans. First Nations Reserves in Canada report 40% higher rates of infection. Canadian government surveys indicate disproportionate impacts on the economic well-being and mental health of Indigenous people. Jodi Archambault described the devastating loss of her uncle Jesse Taken Alive, a speaker and champion of Lakota and Dakota, to COVID-19, along with his wife Cheryl and three more speakers who helped teach the language: Paulette High Elk, Delores Taken Alive, and Richard Ramsay. As Jesse and Cheryl's oldest son Ira Taken Alive said, "It takes your breath away. The amount of knowledge they held, and connection to their past."

Communities are reeling from these vast losses, and are focused on preventing further pain. Thankfully, health services to US tribes have now prioritized Elder speakers of Indigenous languages for vaccination; while Canada has only prioritized Elders on some First Nations Reserves. But aside from the direct threat of COVID-19, the pandemic introduced another danger to the hundreds of Indigenous languages spoken in Native North America: Indigenous Language Revitalization programs rely on *visiting* in many forms to do their work.

The pandemic, with its requirement that visits be on a computer, rather than in each others' living rooms, inhibits connections with Elders who do not have wi-fi or know how to use a computer. Nevertheless, those involved in Indigenous language revitalization programs have carried on and found innovative ways to continue visiting safely. Here are several ways in which new approaches have expanded horizons for language revitalization in the present and future.

## Pandemic Challenges

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As Marianne Ignace says of her work with both Secwepemcín and Haida, “There is nothing in my mind that compares to being able to sit with Elders in person as we do language work.” Robin Rosborough and Michelle Hinatsu, two teachers tasked with recording with Elders and creating language curriculum for the Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw Elementary School, used spend hours each week recording with Bak’wamk’ala speakers. Elders made daily visits to classrooms to visit with each other and share language with the children and teachers. But they haven’t been able to visit the school since March 2020, and they express profound sadness about not being able to be with the children at the school. Where the school used to be a place where conversations and laughter could be heard in Bak’wamk’ala, it is much less so these days. Children and teachers miss hearing the language during their school day. Language teachers and learners feel keenly the loss at not being able to be physically present with their Elders, who are also beloved relatives.

Although possible, recording at a distance introduces multiple challenges. Operating a recording device and ensuring good audio is infinitely easier to do in person than remotely. Also, technology can fail: internet access may be limited or unreliable; Elder speakers may not have devices and may be unfamiliar with how they are used or uninterested in learning; and sound quality depends on the software settings, the location of a microphone, or the strength of a connection. Language revitalization programs have had to draw on strategies of resilience to maintain their hard-won momentum and center the work of documenting, teaching and learning Indigenous language as a community priority.

### **Bagwansapáns laxa Zoom (‘We visit with each other on Zoom’): Virtual Collaboration**

Remote communication has become an essential tool for many of us in working from home, and language programs are no different. When the pandemic began, the Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw Language Revitalization Program, in partnership with the Kwakwaka’wakw Language Advocacy Foundation, had just secured funding to start their first full-time cohort of Adult Immersion Learners of Bak’wamk’ala on Northern Vancouver Island. Like so many others, teachers and learners in this program pivoted to Zoom for their program meetings, their work with Elder speakers, their curriculum development, and their community language classes. Where necessary, program coordinators and school administrators purchased devices for Elders, coordinated with relatives in Elders’ homes to facilitate connectivity, and continue to troubleshoot technical challenges.

Holding language classes online has expanded access to a diaspora of community members living far from home. Lucy Hemphill, GN Language Program Coordinator, says she and the program team live their lives online right now and while it is exhausting it is also rewarding and productive. A Secwepemc language group also used Zoom for weekly meetings to record new documentation and translate archival material, beginning with phrases related to the pandemic. Facilitating participation sometimes required Dr. Ignace to go to Elders’ homes, masked, physically distanced and sanitized, to reset tablets, connect them to wifi, and hand them back before returning to her own home half a mile down the road to begin the work session.

**@ktunaxapride and #KeepOurLanguagesStrong: Using social media to stay connected and share language.**

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Everyone misses being able to learn together in person, but virtual and digital tools and platforms have allowed language learning to be shared more broadly with community members living elsewhere. Prior to the pandemic, social media was already an active space for gathering and sharing language through Facebook pages and groups, Twitter feeds and hashtags, Instagram accounts and videos posted to TikTok and YouTube to promote language use in the home, share lessons, and nurture humour and joy in the process of learning. The NE7OLNEW Research Partnership at the University of Victoria found a 64% increase in use of social media among Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) programs resulting from the pandemic, and identified hashtags such as #KeepOurLanguagesStrong, created by Raymond Braveowl to build solidarity and support among those focused on language revitalization.

Just among teachers, learners, and programs focused on revitalizing Kwak'wala and Bak'wamk'ala, at least a dozen new groups and pages have mobilized over the past year to share calendars, words of the day, videos of families learning together outdoors and indoors, pronunciation practice, seasonal phrases for Christmas and Valentine's Day, and even labels with audio-embedded QR codes for posting around the house. The K'wala Language Program instagram account shares glimpses of their online process of language learning with Elders. Videos and audio shared through Instagram, TikTok and Youtube help learners with pronunciation, showcase creativity with puppets, animation, and storytelling, and provide inspiration and care for fellow learners. The @ktunaxapride account on Instagram created by Aiyana Twigg, a UBC student in the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program, shares her Ktunaxa language with the diaspora of learners living on both sides of the US-Canada border which splits her territory. Ferrin Yola Willie, a PhD student, Kwak'wala learner, and mother of three, who began creating and sharing videos on Facebook, noted that spending more time at home and with family prompted her to move her language learning into her home and with her family, and that this is where language is meant to live.

### **Kangaxtolan's awi'nagwis (Knowing our land): Outdoor and land-based learning**

The pandemic began just as we were emerging from winter in the Northern hemisphere. For many Indigenous communities living in their territories, traditional activities of gathering, harvesting, and processing food begin in the spring and take precedence over other activities through the summer and fall. Last March, as Indigenous communities across Canada closed their borders and turned inward to protect themselves, they also turned their attention to the land. Like many involved in language revitalization, Hemphill shifted her focus toward food sovereignty, planting community gardens and sharing cultural practices of gathering and processing food and medicine from the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw territories.

As weeks wore on into months, and as we began to understand more about the virus and the lower risk of transmission outdoors, many language workers identified opportunities to integrate language 'hunting' with other activities out on land and water, and documented this with videos shared on social media. Masked and socially-distanced, learners and elders picked berries on forest walks, dug clams on beaches, and built land-based language lessons for children at the elementary school and adults in the immersion program. This language program and many others were already poised to focus on

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outdoor learning because of the close relationship between language and land, and the powerful connection community members feel to language and land together: their language comes from their land and is uniquely suited to describe the features of their territory. For Elders who attended residential school, Bak'wamk'wala can be difficult to access within the four walls of a classroom, but easier to recall on a beach or in a forest. Land-based learning is not a new mode for language revitalization, but where community programs have been able to safely implement outdoor visiting, and where Elders were able to participate, the past year expanded everyone's ability and experience in these methods.

### **Wiga'xan's 'wi'la yakantala san's yakandas (Let us all speak our language!)**

Much depends on practicalities that may seem quotidian: access to reliable internet, devices and tools, technical proficiency and comfort with new technologies. It has been crucial for funding agencies such as First Peoples' Cultural Council to understand and permit reallocation of funding to meet new needs such as purchasing devices for Elders and facilitating connectivity. However, the pandemic has shone a spotlight on a persistent digital divide in Canada, and highlights a need for internet access to be treated as a fundamental utility and basic right, like power and potable water.

By limiting safe options for language learning, the pandemic forced language programs to move learning online and outdoors. As a result, teachers, learners, and speakers increased their fluency in the tools, technologies, and strategies that can facilitate and strengthen language use and nurture relationships through remote communication. Several of the Kwak'wala and Bak'wamk'ala language workers I know have expressed appreciation for the ways the pandemic prompted them draw on their community's existing resilience to innovate creative strategies for continuing their work.

And yet, while Indigenous language revitalization programs have expanded toolkits and capacities, communities grieve the losses of this past year, especially their beloved kin and the joy of shared physical presence. Several Kwakwaka'wakw communities await a vaccination plan and language teachers and learners urgently hope for the day when they can safely visit with Elders in person and press 'record'. The work of language revitalization asks community learners and teachers for a daily commitment to incremental, iterative progress, even as they are sustained by the thread of connection to past and future. For non-Indigenous Canadians, these languages, their vital importance, and the connection to territory, may seem remote. I suggest finding out about the Indigenous languages which belong to the places where you live. Look for Indigenous names for the places you know best. See if you learn how to say a greeting. If there is a revitalization program, perhaps you can contribute towards their work. Wherever you are, you can acknowledge the living languages, the lands they come from, and the stewards who carry their languages forward for future generations.

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