



Talking story with vital voices: Making knowledge with Indigenous language

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Abstract

This paper describes our research practice using Indigenous languages to access and articulate the Indigenous knowledge systems and understandings of wellbeing from Indigenous language speakers. This research demonstrates community-engaged language revitalization practices involving (a) linguistic and cultural oversight in all forms of interpretation (b) the Rs of Indigenous education (Carjuzza & Fenimore-Smith, 2010; Galla, Kawai‘ae‘a & Nicholas, 2014; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991), (c) Storywork principles (Archibald, 2008) and (d) language reclamation and documentation that will thrive in digital media. Our premise asserts that Indigenous language revitalizes us, not the other way around. If we take care of our language, it will take care of us. This is our wellbeing.

Keywords: Wellbeing; Indigenous languages, revitalization, reclamation, survivance, documentation, Storywork, Indigenous methodology.

Introduction

Indigenous groups have experienced and continue to endure intentional ruptures of intergenerational linguistic and cultural transmissions (TRC Canada, 2015). Nearly 59.04% of fluent speakers (3,002) of First Nations languages in British Columbia are 65 years of age and older. Whereas, 77.98% of language learners (8,897) are between the ages of birth through 24 years of age (FPCC, 2014). Although fluent Indigenous language speakers are typically an aging and shrinking pool (Statistics Canada, 2011) some languages such as Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut are still spoken and transmitted to children in Canada (Westman & Schreyer, 2014). In Hawai‘i, there is a growing number of speakers, particularly children who are first language speakers due to Hawaiian language medium education opportunities that include infant toddler programs, language nest preschools, K-12 education, and university undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The imposition of colonial languages, foreign ideologies, and the dislocation of Indigenous

peoples have not extinguished the dynamic interactions among Indigenous speech communities. Indigenous concepts that teach about the diverse ways in which wellbeing shows up are written about in health research (Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde, 2007; Manitowabi & Shawande, 2011; Nez Henderson, Jacobsen & Beals, 2005; Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan & Toth, 2014; Whalen, Moss, & Baldwin, 2016) but less available in scholarship that foregrounds Indigenous language use. This paper seeks to extend these dynamic interactions and outlines our procedures for engaging with diverse Indigenous language speakers using Storywork principles as described by Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jo-Ann Archibald (2008).

Background

One of the most enduring colonial destructions is the purposeful devaluation of Indigenous languages and their extending belief systems (Russell, 2002). In the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada (2015), it was determined that Canada committed cultural genocide:

Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. In its dealing with Aboriginal¹ people, Canada did all these things. (p.1)

The TRC generated 94 calls to action, many of which are direct responses to language loss due to cultural genocide. Our work is commensurate with the goals and objectives of Indigenous revitalization as stated in these recommendations, including but not limited to the TRC calling upon

the Canadian government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles: (a) Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them, (b) Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties, (c) The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation, (d) The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities, and (e) Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.

In our work, we strive to engage these principles in our aim to document and articulate the embedded Indigenous knowledge systems, life meanings, and understandings of wellbeing from the perspectives of two Indigenous language speakers from our ancestral homelands (Hawai'i and Treaty 1 territory, Canada). This paper reflects the preliminary stages of Indigenous Storywork documentation and language survivance with our respective language speaking communities, with a primary focus on Indigenous methodology. Results from our research study will be in a forthcoming paper.

Positionality

As Indigenous scholars who are situated in an academic setting away from our traditional homelands, it is of importance that we maintain our physical and spiritual connection to our cultural and linguistic heritage especially in institutions that are new to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. We are Kanaka Maoli² (Galla) and Anishinaabekwe³ (Goodwill) and citizens of our respective ancestral lands of Hawai'i and Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation. We are both assistant professors in our academies at the University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education Department of Language and Literacy Education (Galla) and Simon Fraser University,

¹Aboriginal is a term used in the Canadian Constitution which reflects First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. For the purposes of this paper, we extend our use of the term "Indigenous" to include this definition, as well as Native Hawaiian, Alaska Native, and American Indian peoples.

² Kanaka Maoli means Native Hawaiian.

³ Anishinaabe is an Ojibway word for human being; -kwe means woman.

Faculty of Education Counselling Psychology program (Goodwill). We are both wellbeing practitioners in hula⁴ (Galla) and psychotherapy (Goodwill) and have mutual interests in Indigenous language revitalization and education, as we are both active learners and speakers of our Indigenous languages - ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i⁵ and Anishinaabemowin⁶ - respectively. This collaboration builds upon the expertise of our research areas and contributes to the dearth of studies on the connection between Indigenous languages and wellbeing.

Method

Storywork Procedures

We worked with two plurilingual speakers (Hawaiian-English and Anishinaabemowin-English) in our Storywork practices, engaging a young man who learned Hawaiian as a preschooler in a language nest, and an elder Anishinaabekwe who acquired her language in her family home setting. Both speakers shared through oral tradition – speech and story, examples of wellbeing in their Indigenous languages and then transformed their story to English to ensure that the “content and meaning from one language to another...maintain the spirit of the oral tradition” (Archibald, 2008, p. 30). This practice allowed the speakers to convey their interpretation and reflection without interference from outside sources. It is important to note that a word-for-word or direct translation from the Indigenous language to English was not pursued and practiced, but rather a rendition of the story was expressed through English. Video documentation of language in context captures “gestures, tone, rhythm, and personality” (p. 17) which are essential to the survivance of Indigenous languages, as language does not only exist for a literate world, but for an oral one. We used Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) principles because it is an Indigenous research methodology that privileges story in its many forms as a site of knowledge. We wove these principles into our listening practices and our community-engaged language revitalization practices involving (a) linguistic and cultural

oversight in all forms of interpretation – meaning making and knowledge translation – with speakers, (b) the Rs of Indigenous education research – respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, relationships, resiliency, and (c) language documentation – oral and written language – that will survive and thrive in digital medial designed for community access and control. The digital narratives drew on the connections to land, family, and community, and knowledge relationships which were shaped by the teachings we carry from our respective homelands.

Storywork is used as a framework to honour our stories that are told in our Indigenous languages. The Storywork conversations created an opportunity for the Storytellers to be intimate with their ancestral languages and to share the significance of their stories while maintaining control of the meaning making. The Storytellers provided the cultural and linguistic oversight to ensure that the gift of these ancient languages were not reduced to mere translations. Figure 1 shows the general process we followed with our Storytellers.

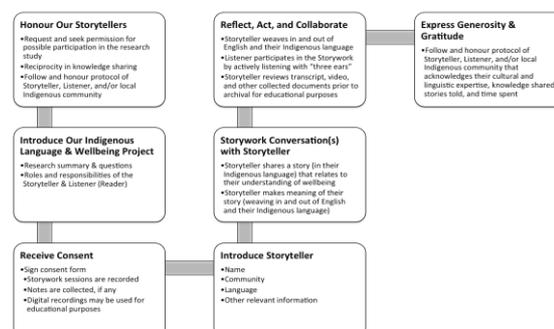


Figure 1: Procedures & Process

Stories were not translated into English, and therefore this approach prizes all language abilities of the Listener – from novice to proficient language speaker. This approach may be used without the requirement for or dependence upon cultural and linguistic outsiders – thus building community capacity and ownership of intellectual property from within.

⁴ Hula is a Hawaiian performative art that is rooted in the language.

⁵ ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i means Hawaiian language.

⁶ Anishinaabemowin means Ojibway language.

Indigenous Research Terminology

As we continue to carve out space in Western academia for Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, it was paramount that we use Indigenous concepts in our research practice and teach these using some parallel and more widely understood research terms. Table 1 orients the reader to our research terminology used in this paper.

Table 1: *Code-switching between research languages*

Indigenous Concepts in Research Practice	Widely Used Terms in Research Design
Indigenous language speaker / Storyteller	Participant
Listener / Reader	Researcher
Unedited Storywork audio & video data files	Raw data
Stories	Data
Storywork conversation	Research interview
Storytelling	Narrative interview
Meaning making	Data analysis
Reflection, action, & collaboration	Knowledge synthesis, translation, & mobilization
Sharing	
Synergizing the Rs	Validity

Meaning Making Approaches

In this work, we collaborated with Storytellers in a process they shaped and defined while we remained in our listening roles. Unique to our approach were the Hawaiian-Hawaiian and Anishinaabe-Anishinaabe dyads, which facilitated shared cultural and linguistic understandings throughout the Storywork sessions. Stories told in the Indigenous language of the speaker were followed by English/Indigenous language interpretations and meaning-making conversations where Storytellers retain oversight over the cultural interpretations of the story(ies) they shared with Listeners (Researchers) in a mutual cultural background. We adhered to the principles of Storywork while also remaining fully present and attuned to the Storyteller. Abiding by the work of Archibald (2008) who writes,

First Nations storytellers say that we have ‘three ears to listen with, two on the sides of our head and one in our heart.’ Bringing heart and mind together for story listening was necessary if one was to make meaning from a story because often one was not explicitly told what the story’s meanings were. Linking what we feel to what we know is an important pedagogy. (Leon in Archibald, 2008, p. 76)

This approach also involved taking care of the speaker by demonstrating our own signs of listening. We video recorded the Storywork conversations, refrained from interrupting our speakers, followed the Storyteller’s process of meaning making, interpretations, and teachings about the story and/or embedded stories they told about wellbeing. The Storytellers retained cultural oversight over the oral and textual representation of their story(ies) (one Storyteller generated and supplied her own field notes, see Figure 2). We turned off the video recorder whenever the Storyteller instructed us to do so, and engaged our own learning throughout the process by listening with our “three ears”.

In addition to listening in the context of the Storywork conversations, we underwent multiple listenings and viewings of the videos. In our first set of listenings, we aligned our hearts and minds in order to link our thoughts and feelings to learn from the story. The content, instruction, and process of the meaning making sessions directed our efforts in terms of the textual representations of the Storywork conversations. The meanings attached to the stories were taught to us by the Storytellers, and the culmination of our efforts are described in the following section.

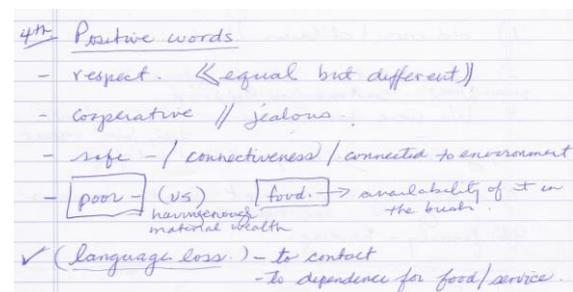


Figure 2. *Field Notes*

The practices listed above may appear commensurate with some of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) practices for evaluative criteria of qualitative research (i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability). However, we wish to articulate our own practices of self-reflection and Storywork process evaluation using the Rs of Indigenous education described in the next section (Table 2).

The Rs of Indigenous Education Research

The Rs of Indigenous Education Research – respect, relationality, relevance, responsibility,

reciprocity, and resiliency – form the knowledge philosophy and epistemological basis for our research approach to validate Indigenous precepts of knowledge making. The Rs are used to check that our research and our findings engage the meaning making process. There are seven principles that Archibald (2008) uses which create a Stó:lō and Coast Salish theoretical framework for using and meaning making from First Nations stories which include: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. The weaving in Figure 3 incorporates the principles of reverence that is observed and celebrated through language when undertaking cultural work and practices, and synergy and holism that are critical in making the knowledge basket strong.

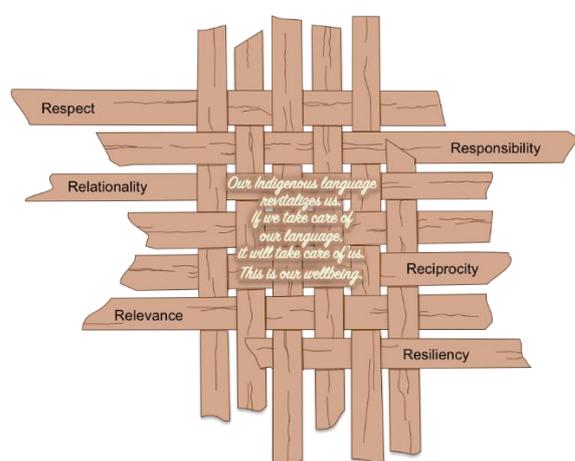


Figure 3: Weaving the Rs of Indigenous Education

Respect

Respect is enacted in our work through our caring connection to our communities and the pedagogies that we use in language work, and our accountability to these greater collectives. For example, Anishinaabe teachings about the seven gifts are actions to be used synergistically to generate truth. One of these teachings is *omanaajitoon*, a word that is used to represent the gift of respect. The buffalo was the first teacher of *omanaajitoon*, a word with a verb root that loosely translates to “to take care of it”. As community members, it is our responsibility to take care of our languages as many of our people believe it is a traditional, Creator given language. We take care of the language and knowledge by practicing from responsibility-based roles instead of as privilege-based academics. Grande (2008) wrote a “historically turbulent relationship stems

from centuries of use and abuse at the hands of Whitestream prospectors (read: academics), mining dark bodies of indigenous peoples – either out of self-interest or self-hatred” (p. 233). We take care of the knowledge transmitted by the Storytellers in the manner set out by their directions, not the other way around. We view ourselves as helpers and Listeners to be guided in this work, while also being responsive to our own internal work as language learners. By engaging with our ancestral languages, we are respecting our own need to grow and nurture our connections to our culture and homelands.

Relationality

Our languages encode a knowledge system and perspective that are unique to our Indigenous communities and express particular concepts and experiences that may not be easily understood or represented through colonial languages or by non-community members. Language is an expression of our thoughts and through the meaning making process, we ensure that the Storyteller’s communication is captured via their voice, body language, gesture, and cultural nuances. A conscious decision was made to begin our research on a foundation that is culturally and linguistically comfortable – with those who spoke our heritage language. Our common understanding of the culture and language created a space where little background or history was required to help situate the context, thus shaping a relational dyad that honors our cultural protocols.

The process that we followed honored our relations by acknowledging that each Storyteller had full control of what was shared and how it was shared (within the language and in English) as “Indigenous stories have lost much educational and social value due to colonization, which resulted in weak translations from Aboriginal languages to English” (Archibald, 2008, p. 7). The meaning making process changes the narrative of traditional Indigenous language work of documentation, transcription and translation by the Listener to storytelling and meaning making by the Storyteller. As Archibald (2008) indicates, “translations lose much of the original humour and meaning and are misinterpreted and/or appropriated by those who don’t understand the story connections and cultural teachings” (p. 7) and we did not want to

lose any culturally and linguistically relevant pieces. Our Indigenous languages have a place within the “academic and educational milieu” (p. 7) alongside colonial languages that have been imposed upon us.

Relevance

Knowledge making can be informal or with strict protocols and laws, humorous or solemn, occur during routine activities or sacred acts, spontaneous or planful, emerge introspectively, socially, or spiritually. For our purposes, Storywork was planned, social, humorous and solemn, and incredibly fulfilling. We pursued stories about wellbeing while listening to the rhythm, tone, and messages in Hawaiian and Anishinaabemowin. While these languages may appear foreign to one another, they are relevant to the work of language reclamation because each has something to teach us about wellbeing in the context of settler-colonial predicaments. Archibald (2008) writes,

Some stories remind us about being whole and healthy and remind us of traditional teachings that have relevance to our lives. Stories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together. When we lose a part of ourselves, we lose balance and harmony, and we may feel like Coyote with the mismatched eyes. Only when our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together do we truly have Indigenous education. (p. 12)

What worked well for us was to engage Storytellers in language in a natural way and to ignore language comprehension barriers. By attending to body language, gestures, sounds, emotion-linked vocalizations, we relied on our “three ears” as well as our own intuitive knowledge to understand what we were meant to learn. It was enjoyable to attune to the Storytellers and track the progression of a story without the pressure of translating language for literal meanings. Listening to language and prizing the culturally-infused communication inherent in storytelling was important to the “live” language experience. Each Storyteller determined what was relevant for us to understand in our English language conversations together, using this trader’s language to maintain oversight and leadership in our textual representations of their stories. One Storyteller created her own field

notes and data trail, while the other provided a video recorded documentation of his English-language message from the story. Another way that relevance showed up in our work was in the opportunity the Storywork sessions created for wellbeing, which is revealed on the parts of the Storytellers, as well as ourselves.

Responsibility

We began and worked with our own familiar languages as it is our *keuleana* (burden and responsibility) in the Hawaiian culture to give back to our respective communities. Working with our own languages away from our ancestral homeland is a way of “calling our spirit back” (We Matter, 2016), healing ourselves and others with our language, culture, and traditions.

Our Storywork sessions created language opportunities and language occasions for both the Storyteller and Listener. Each Storyteller had control over what they shared with us and shaped how they understood the concept of wellbeing. As the Listeners, we are jointly responsible for taking care of the cultural and linguistic knowledge that we were presented with. Our collective understanding of cultural context allowed each of us as Listeners to have a grounded and profound understanding of each of our Storytellers due to our similar linguistic and cultural foundation. This method helped us to assure that we would find what would work best in our own contexts before engaging with other local traditional knowledge holders and language speakers. Archibald (2008) writes about this process:

Sometimes Indigenous perspectives are presented without explicit comment – in accordance with the oral tradition of letting the Listener, now Reader, make meaning from someone’s words and stories without direction from the storyteller. Whenever Indigenous oral tradition is presented in textual form, the text limits the level of understanding because it cannot portray the storyteller’s gestures, tone, rhythm, and personality. (p. 17)

We learned to improve our methods and practices, wrote about what we learned, and shared them with the wider language reclamation audience. In future cross-cultural Indigenous Storywork conversations about wellbeing, we carry a set of practices that have guided our own

hearts and minds, and the responsibility to continue to serve and learn from other language communities with the mutually shared interest that Vizenor (2008) termed “survivance”. Reclaiming an active presence in the ongoing suppression of Indigenous languages is responsibility-based.

Reciprocity

A‘o, the Hawaiian word for an “exchange of expertise and wisdom as a shared cyclical experience” (Galla, Kawai‘ae‘a & Nicholas, 2014) illustrates the principle of reciprocity of teaching and learning as an exchange between the *kumu* (teacher) and *baumāna* (student) or in this case the exchange of knowledge between the Storyteller and the Listener. Through this shared responsibility of perpetuating our language and culture, we engage with knowledge and stories in a good way by employing Indigenous practices of gift giving, generosity, listening with an open mind and full heart, and constant reflection. The knowledge that is shared is not just for us as Listeners, but for the legacy of the Storytellers and those that will come after us. The stories and its meaning nurtures us to tell our own stories.

Resiliency

Acknowledging that our languages and cultures have been in a paralyzed state due to colonizing powers, we wanted to highlight that despite the daunting statistics, our Indigenous languages are still being spoken and are being reclaimed and revitalized in our respective communities. The stories and meaning making process increased opportunities for knowledge to be shared both within the language and in English, in this case, by the Storyteller. Our engagement with the Storytellers allowed us as Listeners to hear the language, live through a “snapshot” of yesterday, and immerse ourselves in the culture even if it’s for a brief moment. “It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing ... and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations” (Smith, 1999, p. 1). The Storyteller retained authority over what was shared – thus remaining autonomous in our abilities to transmit our own knowledge. Although many disruptions have plagued us as

Indigenous peoples – we remain resilient and look towards our language to heal ourselves.

Table 2: Indigenous Language Work Evaluation Tool

The Rs of Indigenous Education Research	Storywork Actions	Research Evaluative Criteria
Relevance	Protect the cultural integrity of the wellbeing stories to ensure that Storytellers maintain cultural oversight over the meaning making and interpretation of story messages.	Credibility (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking)
Reciprocity	Provide opportunities to engage with knowledge and Storytellers in a good way, while employing Indigenous practices of gift giving, generosity, listening without interrupting, and constant reflection.	Transferability (thick description)
Responsibility	Ensure that the Storywork practices and meaning making sessions are shaped by the needs and practices of the storytellers. Being responsive to storytellers’ gestures, tone, rhythm, and personalities.	Dependability (inquiry audit)
Respect	Storyteller retains cultural oversight, shapes the interpretation and literal representations, and has the benefit of community accountability.	Confirmability (audit trail, triangulation, reflexivity)
Relationality	Storyteller and Listener have a common understanding of language reclamation and revitalization contexts, thus shaping a relational dyad that honors our cultural protocols.	Considerations of emic vs. etic perspectives
Resiliency	We are Storytellers and Listeners continuously contributing to the expansion of our own knowledges. We remain autonomous in our abilities to transmit knowledge.	Academic merit (publish or perish)

Conclusion

This paper describes our Indigenous research practice using our ancestral languages to access and articulate the worldviews and understandings of wellbeing from Indigenous language speakers. Our research demonstrates community-engaged language revitalization practices as dually located Indigenous community member/scholars with the intersecting predicaments of serving two masters: the academy, and our ancestral responsibilities to take care of our languages. Storywork principles were used in our research practice to decolonize narrative and qualitative Indigenous language research. Additionally, to decolonize our methods, we invoked a new thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, and academic hierarchies play in the important work of community-based research, social change, and shifting the colonial mindset of the academy (Smith, 1999).

Our knowledge, histories, stories, and cultural practices are not limited to what has been documented, but rather in the living languages that are spoken today by our people. Through our language, we are reconnecting and honoring the ancestral past, solidifying the relationships of today, and ensuring that the generations that come after us have their mother tongue to experience the world. As Listeners, we continuously (re)immerse our physical body,

mind, and spirit in our ancestral language so that we can live a well balanced life. If we take care of our languages, it will take care of us.

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