Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned: 21 Years in the Trenches of Indigenous Language Revitalization

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"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."
Leonardo da Vinci

The first steps taken by me to learn my tribal language took place in l983. They were reluctant and tentative, akin to a schoolboy distraction on a beautiful summer day. In retrospect, the language embraced me and whenever I experienced an apostasy revealed its power to me. My Blackfoot language is thousands of years old, the conduit of uncountable years of interaction between my people and the Creator. It is not composed of mere words, but instead embodies everything about us to the beginning of Blackfoot time. Today, I am content with the knowledge, insights and privileges it has provided to me. I have become friends with countless people I may have never met otherwise because of it. Knowing people contributing to revitalization of tribal languages blesses my memories, and enlightens my heart. Today is an example of the beauty of sharing our mutual love for our tribal languages. I greet you, honor you and embrace you in the fellowship of our cause.

Today my wish is to encourage those seeking to revitalize their tribal language and to share what I have come to know over the past 20 years. I acknowledge the power of the few to do what many have failed, or refused, to do. I acknowledge the ageless human concept that within every tribe are the few who possess courage to find reason within chaos. I acknowledge the obstacles to revitalize a tribal language are profound, but also understand accepting the challenge is the only way to banish defeat. The tribal language revitalization movement was late in coming into our awareness, yet it attracted the good in good people with its promise of reconciliation. Although, tribal language revitalization programs possess a reality imbedded in all of us there is a deep and haunting question lurking in the shadows of the movement. The question is when a tribe's language is irrevocably gone will it matter?

David Treuer (2008), an Ojibwe translator and author, provides a slice of the answer in his *Washington Post* article, "If They're Lost, Who Are We?" His concern is what the loss of tribal languages can bring to tribes. He writes, "at some point (and no one is too anxious to identify it exactly), a culture ceases to be a culture and becomes an ethnicity–that is, it changes from a life system that develops it own terms into one that borrows, almost completely, someone else's." Since I firmly believe culture emanates from language, I find myself agreeing with his premise.

It is not my intention to question any group's plans to keep their tribal language viable and dynamic. I am familiar with the spectrum of methods, intents and logistics in place throughout our universities, schools and communities. I speak only about what we did when the haunting question loomed in our midst 20 years ago. First, we accepted the premise the most sophisticated approach to

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revitalizing a tribal language is simplicity. Yes, we retrieved every dictionary, grammar, study and document about our language. Yes, we use electronic devices, have reviewed countless textbooks and methodologies related to our work and consulted with linguists. Yes, we staunchly recommend and use the Total Physical Response (TPR) methods of Dr. James Asher (2000) as the paramount teaching format in our classrooms. True, we despair on many an occasion when it seems nothing seems to be going our way. Yet, no matter what we do, aspire to do or fail to do, we remain steadfast and loyal to one rule, one rule only: teach our children to speak the Blackfoot language. It is our holy mantra, the sacred counsel of all our actions, planning and thinking. Teach our children to speak the Blackfoot language, because the transference of our language to our children must have precedent over everything else. Without children speaking your tribal language fluently nothing else will ultimately matter. The most sophisticated computer program cannot mimic the genius of a child speaking their tribal language. True tribal language revitalization ultimately rests with our children's ability to fill the abyss of language loss today in our tribal communities.

One of the most effective ways to teach children to speak our languages in my humble experience is in a full day immersion school or classroom. An immersion school's sophistication and effectiveness are also found in its simplicity. The quintessential immersion program is one room and a fluent speaker teaching children in a day-long interchange. The optimal model requires a private school, or a school within a school, designed exclusively for full day immersion. Unfortunately, this means the immersion classroom likely will not have full access to funds because of stringent regulations involved with federal, state and tribal funding sources. Despite this shortcoming, a private day-long immersion school possesses the valuable asset of freedom to teach children throughout the school day and school year their tribal language. As simple as the model is, many communities cannot meet the minimum requirements owing to lack of resources, or, stranger yet, because of preordained accreditation or certification requirements.

A full day tribal language immersion classroom in a public school system is exceptionally rare except in the most enlightened district. May I further illustrate my insistence on promoting full day immersion schooling as the ideal? In l994, the generous people of 'Aha Pūnano Leo of Hawaii (see http://www.ahapunana-leo.org/), the foremost indigenous language program in the nation, invited the Piegan Institute's founders to visit their language program. We were brought to a one-classroom school where an older woman in an easy chair was speaking the Hawaiian language to a group of children sitting around her on the floor. The beautiful sounds of the language resounded with seemingly every child speaking at once to the teacher. Off to the side in a tiny kitchen was a middle-aged man preparing lunch in a large wok. He whispered to us it was his turn to provide the meal; an honor he said, since his child attended the school and it was the least he could do. His strong masculine bearing and humble pride in his task were striking in the feeling of completeness in the school. The important male role is part of the fabric of immersion schools. Our students' fathers, uncles, brothers

and grandfathers daily presence in our school makes for a graceful balance. The school visit reminded me of my years in a one-room reservation school and the beauty of the learning environment came back in an instant: "School at Gramma's house."

This is the basic formula, a mantra: a room, a teacher and some children. Many of the attributes of our tribal languages are unspoken, but learned in the same manner as words. A large part of our communication is nonverbal. Interactive skills such as turn-taking, nonverbal confirmations and body cues must be included in the transfer of our languages to children, and immersion schools excel in this aspect. They provide the environment conducive to transfer of the nonverbal components of our language, as well as the sociolinguistic techniques in politeness, humor, compliment, empathy, anger and the spectrum of emotions expressed daily in our languages. One of the most powerful rationales for language revitalization is understanding the dangers facing Indian children disconnected, or disenfranchised, from their tribal heritage. I remain adamant the basic foundation for teaching our languages in the fullest manner possible is an all day immersion classroom. I can't tell you what to do, but only what we did while in an extreme situation.

In 1994, when we chose to follow the path of the Hawaiians with a full day immersion school, we possessed no funds, no teachers and no classrooms. We raised funds from friends, patrons and private foundations. We bought land to build a one-room school with the knowledge there was not a Blackfoot language teacher available to teach in it. We went ahead anyway trusting we would find a teacher once it was completed. In l995, a master teacher of the Blackfoot language, Shirlee Crow Shoe, from our relative tribe in Canada, arrived in the nick of time to teach in the newly built school. Apun'ake, a young woman in our tribe, so much wanting to learn to speak our language joined as a volunteer, then as an understudy in the classroom. Today, she is a Blackfoot language teacher in our school. This fall, a young woman recently graduated from college will understudy to learn the language and ultimately teach. Whatever needs to be done can be accomplished. When parents wanted their children to stay in the school program, we built another school, then consolidated into one facility supported exclusively by a community of patrons and friends. We could not meet the basic requirements of the model when we started, and even today in many ways we continue to live in a paper house. Despite a yearly waiting list of applications, everything depends on the success of an annual fund drive to continue another year. At present, we find a lack of teachers our greatest challenge. Without fluent speakers of our language under the age of seventy we are dependent on our ability and resources to train replacements via the mentor-apprentice approach (see Hinton, Vera & Steele, 2002). Our most tentative hope is the day our graduates return to save the day. Tribal communities who have fluent speaking teachers of their tribal language available have an opportunity to go directly, and immediately, into day-long immersion schooling of their children. They are in an enviable position, but rue the day if they do not take advantage of their current situation.

They risk becoming like us, forced to rely on the mentor-apprentice format, TPR and every other available means to keep our fragile programs going.

Focusing on the basic rule of teaching our children our language despite obstacles remains our treasured accomplishment. Today, 14 years later, our school is a modern multi-room facility with a kitchen and dining room. The grounds are landscaped and spacious. It is a long way from the one room school we built in l995 in the simplistic style and purpose of the one we visited in Hawaii. It is easy to get distracted when sorting out what a language revitalization program should consist of.

Strange as it sounds, an unbending dedication to a traditional school model will only hinder those designing effective tribal language learning environments. May I suggest putting aside the temptation to pontificate in the educational jargon of the day and procrastinating until grant awards are secured. Instead, embrace the adage "show, don't tell," or risk a bureaucratic skid into wasteful confusion (Kipp, 2000). I encourage those with tribal language programs to determine if schedules, budgets, meetings and paperwork are taking time away from actually teaching your children their tribal language. In the quiet of the day, clear your mind of the clutter of technology and tiresome fallacy and determine if the distinctive mantra of teaching children to speak your language is still foremost in the program. Conducting a tribal language program is never easy, and operating a full day immersion school is exceptionally demanding. It is not cut out for the tribal program hitchhiker, the insincere or, most of all, the troublemaker. The constant search for financial support and dearth of qualified teachers and instructional materials are challenge enough without dealing with the negative rabble lurking at the periphery. Never pay attention to the armchair quarterbacks denouncing the academic and linguistic promise of the school, or questioning qualifications and purpose. Successful immersion schools will always be subject to skeptical and maladjusted mudslingers incensed about one thing or another. This is why I stand by the warning that immersion schools demand a strong protective form of sanctuary. A sanctum, a place free from intrusion, is crucial–regardless of promises of nonintervention. Without a special or protected status, immersion schools are subject to the same pressures as any tribal or public program. Over the years I have been saddened by telephone calls from tribal language programs caught up in community politics, funding cutbacks and, most distressing, threats from public school officials. Such reports, dismal as they are, support the wisdom of our decision to go the private school route, although it made us an orphan amidst a large family of federal, state and tribal programs. Our parent organization, the Piegan Institute, founded in l987, was chartered as a private, nonprofit entity beholden only to itself and our language revitalization effort. Our charter states we are dedicated to *"Researching, Promoting, and Preserving Native American Languages."* The board of directors is composed of three people and, with the exception of a replacement for the oldest member who retired, remains strong and cohesive. Although located on a reservation we are not part of tribal government, the tribal college or the public school system.

We are an entity onto ourselves although we maintain pleasant relations with all the institutions of the area. As a result, we develop our programs along lines we deem effective, and although there were times it would have been nice to have the financial support of the various institutions, in retrospect, it would have compromised our work. Instead, the Institute obtains operational funds in the same manner as most nonprofit organizations. We pay professional salaries to our staff, and by the way, the fluent speakers of our language assisting us, regardless if they have a college degree or not, are paid at the top of our pay scale. It is a shame when the most important members of a tribal language staff, the fluent speakers, are relegated to accepting low status job titles and pay because of rigid certification or accreditation regulations. Another factor, which may seem odd to many, is the Institute does not allow formal governing or advisory boards in its operations. There is no school board, parent committee or student council. This does not mean parents, students and community members do not have a voice in the organization. In fact, they provide the needed consensus and mutual support to the school program whenever needed. Our avoidance of formal boards and committees is on purpose. Large boards of directors on our reservation remain popular governing formats. Unfortunately, despite their best intentions, many boards end up in disarray and in disputes capable of damaging even the most well-intentioned community initiatives. We avoid the format because an election of officers would introduce competition into our organizational structure and therein lays the rub.

Competition is a form of violence. It is difficult enough to maintain a cooperative atmosphere in any organization and open competition amongst a communal group is an invitation to discord. In our school every student, staff and volunteer is equal above and beyond anything else. Each child is learning the tribal language at their optimal pace, and introducing competition can become a serious distraction to the positive learning environment in the school. To illustrate, some students arrive at the language school with a prowess for their language; others less so, but in the world of language revitalization all are equal in importance. We avoid hierarchal concepts requiring choosing one child over another child. Our students do not compete against each other for ranking, instead they are encouraged to improve on previous accomplishments. Our school has no royalty, students of the week, teachers pets or punitive designations of failure. We do not issue grades or report cards, instead four times a year teachers send letters home based on daily observation logs.

These letters include ample lines of praise, since every child in our immersion school deserves our utmost praise just for being there. Our classrooms are similar in appearances as those in any elementary school. It is the content and context of what is being taught that is radically different. We teach academic subjects in the Blackfoot language because we accept multiple language acquisition skill building is a superior form of learning. We accept that learned knowledge will be transferred to English, or for that matter to any language the students are ultimately engaged in. Conservatively speaking at least 50 tribal delegations have visited our school over the past twelve years. The experience

of being with students speaking our language always has an emotional impact on them in the same fashion of my own deep feelings in the Hawaiian classroom years ago. Visitors often comment on how obvious the methodology of day-long immersion is to them and seem to understand the promise is in mastering the model first then expanding the concept.

In the past 20 years, I have witnessed an enormous expansion of awareness to the importance of revitalizing tribal languages. The days of being ridiculed for expressing an interest in learning and teaching the language thankfully are over when reluctance and, in some instances, overt hostility, shadowed our fragile beginnings. The history of tribal language oppression is well documented, but what is not given enough credence is the effectiveness of the eradication processes used. In our tribe, the negative conditioning was so successfully ingrained that the taboo against speaking our language remained fresh in the minds of even second and third generation non-speakers of the Blackfoot language. An important facet of language revitalization is to de-program this ingrained conditioning for no other reason than to eliminate one more reason for hating ourselves for being Indian. In our Blackfoot language, the word *maani'ta'piwa* originally carried the nurturing meaning "our children." At the turn of the century with the advent of schools and technology another dimension the endearing "our children" took on a detached definition as "new" or "young" people in meaning. Betty Bastien (2004) in her excellent study of the Blackfoot people, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, quotes a grandparent saying, "We do not understand the young people, Maani'ta'piwa, the new people..." The inference, and too often the fact of the day, is many of our children have disconnected from their tribal heritage to the extent they no longer know us, or most distressing, claim us. As David Treuer (2008) explains they derive their ethnicity from the tribe, but not their cultural heritage.

I believe until we fully embrace our languages as adults we too risk similar separation from our heritage as adults. In those communities where the language is seriously weakened this is often a difficult task, but nevertheless one of the most important aspects of language revitalization. We must also begin our journey back to the language homeland of our people if we expect the same from our children. It is accepted we must document our past, but not be incapacitated by it. It is not a sign of disrespect to reconcile our past with promises of the future.

The promise tribal language revitalization offers is reconciliation; a renegotiation of reality and a restoration of an intellectual beauty possible in the ocean of tomorrows. We must work to regain what never should have been taken away without permission by providing an opportunity for children to learn their tribal language in nurturing learning environments.

Were the wrong decisions, or choices, made when tribal history and cultural elements were finally incorporated into school curriculums, but tribal languages left out except as a recent afterthought? After years of studying history and language I realize they are not the same. Our languages, unlike our histories, are dynamic and adaptive. Our tribal languages represent who we really are. They are our interior essence of tribal reality and our spiritual blueprints. They are alive within us; we are alive within them. Our languages are adaptive, incorporating

all we know since the beginning of our time. Think of how they describe our worlds; when our tribes first saw the horse, automobile and airplane. Think how our language stays with us no matter what inventions we encounter. It is only when we stop using them do they become inflexible and static. If we keep our language alive in our children, it will stay with them well past I-Pod, bio-fuel, MTV and the million other innovations coming towards them. Our languages can serve us to the end of time, because they were with us in the beginning of time. Our histories, on the other hand, are locked in the past, and although we carry their lessons, they slip further away with each new generation. Although our histories date far back beyond 1492, history books present a version of our existence seldom reflected in what our stories, told in our languages, tell us.

My tribe's written history, beginning in 1754, is nothing more than a cruel saga of how my tribe was denigrated into near destruction. Yet, our Blackfoot language chronicles a homeland existence of thousands of years of dynamic and pristine record. Which is more preferable to teach to our children? Drastic changes still confront us, but tribal members must take the initiative to control, at least to a conscious degree, what we seek to keep, and what we allow to become obsolete. Tribal groups who incorporate intelligent selections will enjoy a more healthy future than those engulfed by onrushing uncertainty. We must place our histories in perspective, and reconcile those changes that were of no use to us.

In the best of tribal language programs despite the ultimate rewards, there are only small, but exceedingly powerful consolations. It is wrong to expect instant success, or an utopian ideal embraced by everyone in the tribal community. Remember all the other stressful conditions in our communities yanking and pushing each and every one of us to and fro? They may go away someday, but in the meantime it is important to keep them away from our language programs. Our experience taught us to maintain a safe distance from the brawling around us. Stay away from the turmoil and instead embrace the teachings your tribal language can provide for you. Save your energy for the good work of language revitalization, and let the rest be. Never beg on behalf of your language for anything from anyone. Explain what is needed, speak from the heart and reasonable people will assist you. Do not denigrate your language with argument or allow even the mildest form of violence around it. The many forms of discord witnessed in a community are especially dangerous when allowed in a language revitalization setting. It is Gramma's house; treat it with the utmost respect.

Piegan Institute, although blessed with many supporters over the years, was founded by three people interested in researching the status quo of the Blackfeet language. One of the incentives can be traced, as they say, to seeing the writing on the wall. In l985, a tribal language survey speculated approximately a thousand speakers of the Blackfoot language, all sixty years of age or older, remained out of fifteen thousand tribal members. In 2000, an Institute follow-up survey indicated a further, and significant, decline in the number of speakers. In 2007 less than ten speakers, all in their eighties, were able to accept an invitation to an Institute language gathering. A conservative estimate indicates students and

graduates of the Piegan Institute's day-long immersion school program may now outnumber the remaining speakers on our reservation.

Although, it is difficult to completely enumerate how many speakers remain in our tribe, it is clear the number is now down to a precious few. Fortunately, the Institute had an extensive archive of historical and contemporary language materials and in-depth insights regarding the survey findings, so the introduction of the immersion school in l995 became our most tangible means of addressing the findings of the surveys. Today, approximately 100 children have attended our day-long immersion school at least three years, and 15 have graduated after nine years in the program. At the end of the 2007-08 school year, 24 proficient level speaking students will complete their studies with one graduating on to a public high school. Importantly, the students achieve academically in all subjects as well as, or better than, their public school peers when they enter public schools or are given standardized tests. Yet, there remains an erroneous perception immersion schools lack academic validity. This fallacy exists despite student achievement statistics in Montana ranking reservation public schools at the bottom with 60% of their students unable to complete high school. We support the stance that our school is an exemplary learning environment in comparison to any school program. In l999, a tribal member conducted in-depth research of our school for a graduate degree in psychology at the University of Montana. Her honor thesis showed near significant higher test scores for our students in a reservation and non-Indian classroom comparison. In 2004, a professor of curriculum from the University of Montana completed an extensive evaluation of our K-8 program with an exemplary assessment powerful beyond its scope with insights as to the merits of the school program. The director of Blackfeet Nation Higher Education recently wrote about the graduates of the immersion school:

> I have seen these students transition to the public school systems on the Blackfeet Reservation and excel in academics. These students have earned membership in the National Honor Society, competed in state science fairs, participated in debate and drama, and successfully played in individual and team sports.

I could go on and include a decade plus review of extensive and positive media reporting on the school program, but wouldn't it be debate in a fashion? Can't I say immersion schools are powerful places for Indian children and leave it at that? Wouldn't it be better if you started one yourself and discovered what we did? A day-long immersion school, as simple as the one I described, can do wonderful things for your children, our children and our tribal languages. I say this after spending 20 plus years seeking ways to transfer our languages to another generation fully intact in the spirit of the countless first speakers who have gone before us.

Most of all and closest to the heart of the immersion school purpose is to know our students are the ones now sending our Blackfoot language prayers to the Creator at tribal ceremonies, gatherings and openings. Now that most of our

first speakers are in their eighth decade and mostly homebound, our students, the newest generation of speakers of the Blackfoot language, are taking their places in the living heritage of the tribe. They are respected and contributing; new people who again have become "maanitapiwa," "our children," in the truest sense of the original meaning of the word. They will grow up knowledgeable of our tribe, and most of all leave our school with the language in their hearts, mind and spirit. I know this too, without the immersion school in our tribe I would be telling you a different kind of story today.

In summary, I share this reality with you. In l994, none of the children in our tribe could speak the Blackfoot language and now there are those who can.

My work with the Piegan Institute is rewarding and certainly challenging. Still, I have learned to deal with our work on a daily basis. Those days when it appears everyone has gotten out of bed on the wrong side or when approached by a parent withdrawing their child because they are moving away to attend college or take a job in another town, I momentarily cringe. Then I remember it is a real world we live in, and most things are beyond my control. Still, I measure their child's attendance at our school as an accomplishment and move on.

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