

Revitalizing Indigenous Language Using Picture Books

Jean Anne Clyde and Mark W.F. Condon, *Unite for Literacy*



The book cycle begins

Can children's picture books become a viable part of indigenous language revitalization efforts? As two of the facilitators for the June 7-9, 2011 First One Hundred Institute (<http://firstonehundred.org>) held in Albuquerque, NM, we believe they certainly could. In Albuquerque, 60 participants from five states representing nine American Indian language groups gathered to learn how they could.

Organized and led by William Mehojah (Kaw), former director of education for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Institute was designed to leverage literacy in support of existing language revitalization efforts. The Institute offered two key components:

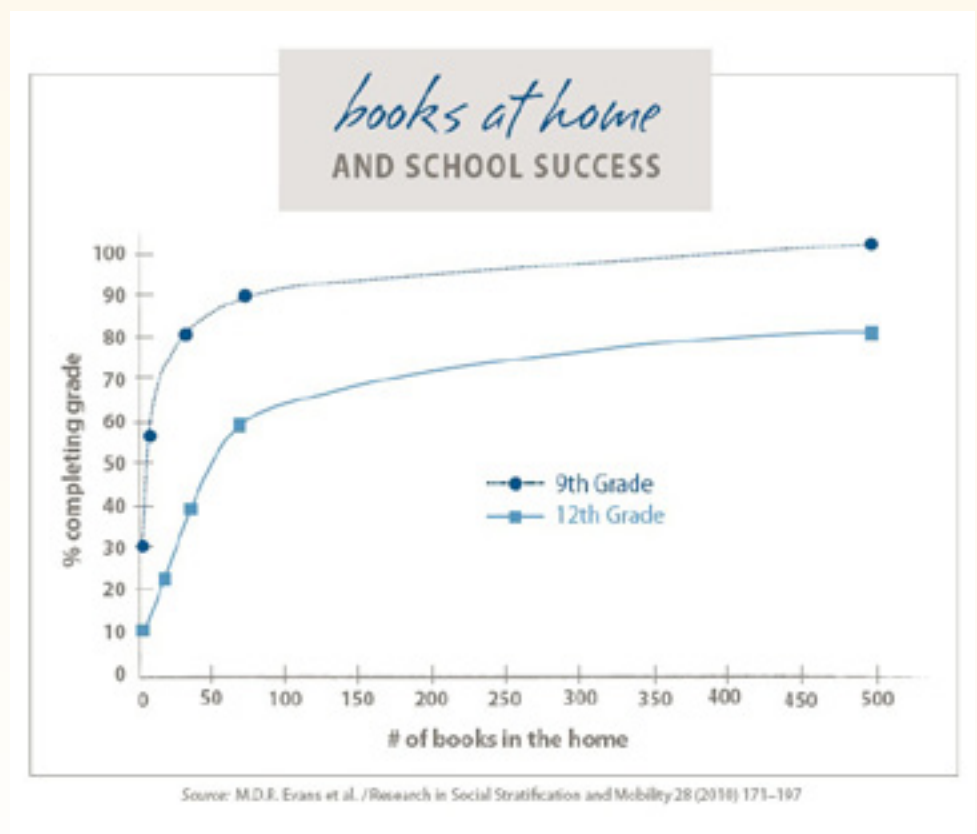
1. Bookmaking - where participants created books using self-selected or created images and then wrote in their own languages; and
2. Project Planning - to help them expand the bookmaking process into Book Cycle projects when they returned to their communities. Book Cycle refers to the repeating sequence of *reading books, creating books and sharing books*, typical of literate families and communities.

The Institute was cosponsored by Unite for Literacy (<http://uniteforliteracy.com>), specializing in establishing "book abundance" through the local creation of digital publications, and ABC Music and Me (<http://abcmusicandme>), offering music, materials and activities to support musical and literacy development. It also featured special speakers, including University of New Mexico Professor Christine Sims (Acoma) who addressed issues confronting

and supporting language preservation and revitalization, and Gloria Sly (Cherokee) who shared insights about the successes of her Nation's Cherokee language immersion school. However, the majority of the two and a half day Institute was devoted to hands-on workshop sessions introducing strategies for helping native peoples preserve and revitalize quickly disappearing languages using some of the newest (and some of the oldest) technologies available.

Why "The First One Hundred?"

In a study that surveyed 27 countries, researchers discovered that homes with one hundred books that are enjoyed and discussed are homes where children experience success in school and beyond (Evans, Kelley, Sikora & Treiman, 2010). This Institute was dedicated to putting into place mechanisms for getting those 100 books into American Indian homes, with special focus on indigenous culture and language revitalization.



Book Abundance is Like Food Abundance, But for the Mind

We liken book abundance to food abundance. *Book abundance* is simply easy access to many, culturally and linguistically appropriate books for families and children. In addition to boosting both language and culture revitalization efforts, we believe abundant books are the key solution to the intellectual and academic “health” of a community. By using digital cameras, desktop printers and book creation software, book abundance becomes a real possibility for any family, classroom or language community. Central to our mission is our use of RealeWriter, picture book making software that enables even those new to bookmaking to create interesting and engaging picture books.¹

Our goal is to help young children (and other novice language speakers) not only to fall in love with books, but through those books to celebrate their language and culture. Access to personally relevant books that feature familiar faces, places and experiences inspires readers of all ages to read more. Children are “more motivated to read... and do so with greater comprehension when reading materials they find interesting” (Moss & Young, 2010, p.16). That in turn develops stronger vocabulary, better mastery of complex sentences, improved spelling and better writing (Krashen, 2004). Lifelong readers are lifelong learners; and lifelong learners can be lifelong contributors to their families and communities.

Reading Good Books Leads to Making Good Books

To support our new adult authors, we provided the participants with a collection of relevant, child-friendly and predictable books that served as examples of the kinds of books they could create in their own communities. Predictable books repeat word patterns and use rhyme and clear images, which make them easier for beginning readers to understand. Participants worked in groups to identify qualities that made the books both predictable and engaging. Attendees also received digital versions of this collection, redesigned for new authors who needed additional support. Some of these digital books contained all the words and images and some had words or images only. By substituting different language or images, participants could then easily transform them into highly personal,

culturally relevant books, likely to capture the attention of their novice language users, young and old.

We also encouraged participants to try making songbooks of familiar songs from their cultures. Kelli Taggart, a music educator from ABC Music & Me, offered engaging opportunities for participants to explore the connections between music and literacy. When books feature such songs, their melodies and lyrics combine to make them highly predictable for readers. Plus, sharing songs that are a part of a child’s heritage can expand their understanding of that culture, while forming a closer personal bond with the person with whom they are reading the songbook.

Writing Books on Their Own

When it came time to write, nearly everyone settled in with an idea. One person made a humorous book featuring her dog. Nixon Martinez created an impressive collection of illustrations for *The Bug Race*, a traditional Navajo tale he retold with a friend. After completing their first books, several individuals browsed the sample collection further for ideas, generating lists of titles and topics for books they intend to write later. Some authors realized they lacked photos they wanted to include, so they set aside their computers and used a two-column table, a “storyboard,” to plan their books. For each book page, these participants wrote a description of a desired image on the left and the text to go with it on the right.

Now, Record the Book

Unique to this book creation event was the challenge of adding appropriate fonts for each of the language groups. In addition, the digital books that were being created invited the input of sound, with native speakers speaking or singing the words for new readers to hear and enjoy. Those recordings, which are a part of the digital book files, are powerful tools for supporting the language fluency of novices. Additional support for voice recording will be provided on the First One Hundred Group section of the <http://UniteforLiteracy.net>

Storyboard	
	Hush Little Baby A Traditional Lullaby
(mockingbird)	Hush little baby don't say a word, Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird.
(diamond ring)	If that mockingbird don't sing, Mama's going to buy you a diamond ring.
Chang hold mirror)	If that diamond ring turns brass, Mama's going to buy you a looking glass
(goat)	If that looking glass gets broke, Mama's going to buy you a billy goat.

“community” web site, which also will be a vehicle for sharing the progress of projects begun at this First One Hundred launch.

With drafts completed, we offered guidelines for refining them, and invited participants to find partners and review their books. Many who could speak their indigenous languages had rarely written them. So, the room was abuzz as new friends helped one another polish and refine their first books. As the finishing touches were added, the printing began, and participants waited eagerly to see their first books. There was much celebration as each book came off the printer and was assembled.

Planning Book Cycle Projects

Michael McGuffee and Holly Hartman from Unite for Literacy provided action-oriented sessions to prepare participants to initiate Book Cycle projects in their



Artwork supports language

Our goal is to help young children (and other novice language speakers) not only to fall in love with books, but through those books to celebrate their language and culture.

communities. To create a plan specific to local needs, participants gathered in language groups. They hunkered down over timelines, identifying their desired long-term impacts, brainstorming potential barriers to reaching those ends, charting specific activities to get the job done, and posting them. All participants were dedicated to the creation of a “First 100” collection of books in their local languages.

Stepping Back: Lessons Learned from the First 100 InSTITUTE

As the conference drew to a close, attendees were invited to share what they had learned through the experience. They found the software to be “an excellent tool for keeping the language alive. Even without words, you can use the sound to help kids and families hear the language.” And because digital books can be personalized so easily and inexpensively, every community’s dialect can be published affordably.

Participants talked of the importance

of identifying the long term impacts from their language revitalization efforts. They also understood that successful projects would require approaching their communities in an organized way. Parents new to their indigenous languages will need support in reading and writing. They will need to devise plans for getting books into homes—in rural and urban areas, and for training others to use the software. Further, it will be essential to work with communities to determine what aspects of their language and culture they are willing to share.

In the end, participants recognized that this effort to revitalize the language “is very possible.” “The new media can help us really bring the language to parents and children, building bridges between the community, between the school and the families.” As one participant explained, “If you show families you can personalize bookmaking, families will be excited and will get involved.” One challenge will be motivating others to participate. However, the effort does not require a lot of money. “With people and commitment you can get this done.”

Most of the books created during the Institute were designed for beginners. A planned online library, where English versions of the books will eventually reside for everyone to

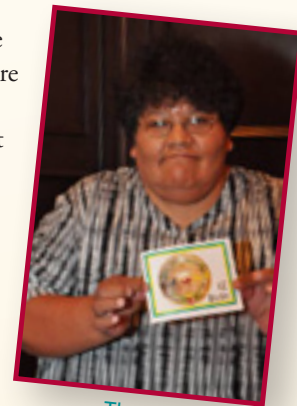
read and enjoy, will be expanded to reach more advanced readers. The library will ensure that readers from all tribes have access to colorful books that can simply be read or listened to, further translated to reflect local dialects, or otherwise more fully adapted for their local communities. Thanks to these new authors, we are feeling one step closer to the goal of creating book abundance in all of these communities.

Note

1. For a free download of this software go to <http://realewriter.com>

References

- Evans, M.D.R., Kelley, J., Sikora J., and Treiman, D. (2010). Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28, 171–197.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M., Kennedy, A.M. and Foy, P. (2007). *PIRLS 2006 International Report: IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in Primary Schools in 40 Countries*. Boston: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.
- Krashen, S. (2004). *The Power of Reading 2nd ed.*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Moss, B. and Young, T.S. (2010). *Creating Lifelong Readers through Independent Reading*. Newark, DE: IRA.



The First One, Only 99 to go!



Book Cycle planning takes shape