

e-nohte-pîkiskwâtikoyahkok
They Want To Speak To Us: Teaching Nehiyawewin
To Youth Through Experiential Learning

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As Indigenous language instructors we find ourselves in an ever-changing and emotionally challenging environment that demands creative solutions in trying to respond to the needs of our students and those of the organizations and communities in which we work. We understand well the context that surrounds our students as they enter learning spaces—often second or additional language learners (L+), having little/no experience with the target language, but carrying a deep, identity-driven hunger to know the language and culture and to belong to their communities. They may also carry any number of the traumas and social issues that people can face coming from families in lower economic environments, whether on reserves or in other underserved urban and rural neighborhoods. This chapters authors, as teachers with the Young Indigenous Women’s Circle of Leadership (YIWCL) at the University of Alberta, and as nehiyawiskewak (Plains Cree women), want to help our students to welcome and navigate their nehiyawewin ekwa nehiyawiwîn kiskinohamâkosiwîn (Cree language and cultural learning) so that they may grow up to be healthy, balanced adults and skilled leaders and Knowledge Keepers for future generations. We have designed and led several culturally-based youth experiences, including a ten-day immersion/bilingual summer day camp in 2022 and virtual classes in Cree literacy in spring 2023. Highlighting our workshops and annual day camps for the YIWCL, we discuss theories and teaching methods we have found successful, including immersion and multi-sensory lessons. We also respond to the challenges in Indigenous language revitalization youth programs and in our language work. Central to our findings is that Indigenous learners of their heritage languages interpret language acquisition approaches much more personally, making it imperative that we consider the varied states of identity-building in learners, and that we ground our work in Indigenous spirituality.

As nehiyawak (Plains Cree people), it is customary for us to introduce ourselves when we begin to speak before an audience, with our relationships, our ties to the land, and our intentions for speaking to the group. We want to acknowledge that maintaining the practice of this formal introduction is also a strong way to show our commitment to nehiyawewin ekwa nehiyawiwîn (Cree language and culture) when we begin in our classroom teaching, as well as in our overall efforts for the revitalization of our languages and cultures:

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Roxanne: Dedicated to my late , dear, mama Evelyn. . . ikwa nipapa, I am who I am because of you . . . Kakikee kekaskimetin . . . I have a B. Ed in Secondary Education and a B.A. in Native Studies from the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I was raised in Northern Alberta, and I'm a registered member of Little Red River Cree Nation, at Fox Lake, Alberta. I'm the oldest of 9 children, and I was raised surrounded by Cree. I'm fluent in Cree, it was my first language. I can read and write in Cree. I have taught Social Studies and Aboriginal Studies in Southern Alberta and Northern Alberta, as well as teaching an introduction to historical and current issues in Cree language for the YIWCL summer day camp.

Marie: tân'si nitotemitik, mîyo kîsikânisik. askîwiskwew nitisîkason, maskwacîsihk ocih nîya. ninîkîkwak, Jerry Saddleback notawîy ekwa nikâwîy-pan Hilda Saddleback. niwîkin amiskwâciy-wâskayikanihk. kahkîyaw ninohtê atamiskawâwak kâh pê-itohhtëcik itôwêmwowin pimâcihitâw mâmawôpôwinihk êkwah nipiyaşeyimon tita âşôwi namâkêyân kîkwâyah kâkiskinaw eyihtamân. Hello my friends, it is a good day. My name is askîwiskwew, I am from Maskwacîs. My parents are Jerry Saddleback, my father, and my late mother was Hilda Saddleback. I live in Edmonton. I have a Bachelor of Education degree, and a Bachelor of Management degree also, and I have taught Cree language in the K-12 system and in college-level courses. I want to greet everyone who has come here to this conference, to revitalize our languages, I am grateful for and eager to share the things that I have learned about language.

Christina: niya nehiyawiskwew ohci akâmihk, maskwacîsihk. nikâwiy Sharon Ouellette-Buffalo ehisiyihkâsot, ohci mistawâsis nehiyawak. nohtâwiy Duane Buffalo ehisiyihkâsot, ohci akâmihk, maskwacîsihk. nohkowak ekwa nimosômwak otaspiyihkâsowak: Ledoux ekwa Ouellette, nikâwiy onîkîhikwak; ekwa Bruno ekwa Buffalo nohtâwiy onîkîhikwak. niwîkin ekwa ehatoskeyân amiskwâciy-wâskahikanihk; kiskinwahamâkew niya, ohci nehiyawewin ekwa science, ekwa mekwâc niya opimipayihcikew ohci Young Indigenous Women's Circle of Leadership. I am a Cree woman from across-the-river / Montana First Nation, the smallest of the four nations in Maskwacîs, Alberta. My mother is Sharon Ouellette-Buffalo, from Mistawâsis Nehiyawak Cree Nation in Saskatchewan, and my father is Duane Buffalo, also from Montana First Nation, in Maskwacîs. My grandparents' family names are Ledoux and Ouellette on my mother's side, and Bruno and Buffalo on my father's. I live and work in Edmonton, Alberta. I am an Alberta-certified teacher for Cree Language and for Science and am currently the program coordinator for the Young Indigenous Women's Circle of Leadership. I am also the first person on my mother's side of the family to earn a post-secondary degree, and one of very few degree holders on my father's side. I have a BSc. in Biology and Psychology, and a B. Ed in Science and Cree language. I am very grateful that I was not made to cede my rights and recognition as a Plains Cree woman in order to have those degrees.

We are certified teachers in the Alberta Education system, and we all initially were hired to work for the Young Indigenous Women's Circle of Leadership as Cree language instructors for the annual summer day camps, in 2021 and 2022.

Where Our Youth Are Coming From

Our classrooms today look very different from those of 30 years ago, or the 30 years before that. There is an openness today to showing emotion, and for the best classrooms, a welcome environment for students to explore and discover their identities as they learn and grow. We believe this less-restricted attitude is based on the gradual recovery from widespread and intergenerational traumas in our communities, and the reduced presence of oppression on our identities and cultures. Fewer youth today are growing up having to hide or feel ashamed about their language or spiritual and cultural practices—they are instead being celebrated. That growth has been slow, but we are now seeing youth that joyfully and actively seek out opportunities to teach themselves their heritage languages and engage in their cultural practices; willing to take up the Pipes and Bundles of their Elders, with far fewer worries than their parents about whether those acts have negative effects on their future livelihoods. There is an agreed-upon understanding among our generations that those experiences, skills and knowledges help our young people in their lives and in the lives of their loved ones; it is not based solely on hearsay, but on research, done by Indigenous scholars. We would not go so far as to say that “all” youth are now interested in reclaiming their Indigenous languages and cultures, or that the drive doesn’t ebb and flow, or that the ability and access to learning is readily available for everyone. There are also families that choose not to engage in their cultural traditions and languages, even when the resources are available. While there are challenges that all of our language programs and cultural communities face, there is also a sense of hope for the future which is reignited and stoked each time young people begin speaking their languages and reach out for resources to learn their cultural knowledges.

The Young Indigenous Women’s Circle of Leadership

The Young Indigenous Women’s Circle of Leadership (YIWCL) is a program that provides young Indigenous women (youth ages 10-19, typically) with experiential opportunities to learn Indigenous languages (primarily Plains Cree and sometimes Cree-Michif) and traditional cultural and arts-based skills. We believe that by giving youth these opportunities to learn they can build their self esteem and sense of efficacy in their families and communities, helping them to become stronger leaders.

All of our programming in YIWCL is informed by the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action (2015), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Indigenous Languages Act (2019), as well as Alberta Education curriculum, research in Indigenous Education and Native Studies/Indigenous Studies, and the protocols of the communities that we work with/in. A few core understandings taken from these sources, that we base our goals and program mission on, include:

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- Indigenous knowledge is embedded in the language;
- Indigenous knowledge is critical to an Indigenous person's ability to access guidance and strength, and further, provides direction in caring for oneself and others;
- Engaging in one's Indigenous language and culture is a strong protective factor for an Indigenous person's well-being;
- Cree is (and other Indigenous languages are) considered spiritual and alive.

Following these understandings and more, the YIWCL seeks to provide opportunities for spiritual connection in all its programming to learn about and learn through nehiyawewin and nehiyawiwini (Cree language and culture). We also strive to maintain a safe learning environment, where participants, our young people, are able to make mistakes and receive guidance and opportunities to try things again, to participate as they feel ready to, and to tell us who they are and what gifts they choose to share with us.

The words of our Elders are also a strong source of guidance, for educators as well as for youth. The following quotes from the Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, Common Curriculum Framework (2000), conveys some of the meaning that drives our planning:

We never force anybody because we are not supposed to do that. We just share and if that person wants to learn more, then that person just keeps coming back to Elders to find out the importance of spiritual identity. We have to try to be good all the time. – Walter Linklater, Anishinaabe, Thunderchild First Nation (p. 7, WnCP, 2000)

We came from a system of laws and relationships. The laws were the parameters of acceptable behavior within each relationship. Our lifestyles have changed a lot but the necessity to survive with integrity is still with me. We must elevate our discussion in a way that we can identify the principles. – Wes Fineday, Regina, SK (p. 10, WnCP, 2000)

Some of those who are intent on learning the language feel frustrated at the lack of opportunity to use it, and find that they are not able to progress past a certain point without the chance for more language immersion experiences. – Jan Hill, Mohawk (p. 12, WnCP, 2000)

YIWCL also provides youth participants with necessary learning materials and tools to build their own language and culture practice outside of our learning space; this can include, depending on the workshop, things like sewing or beading needles, pouches of beads, scissors, rulers, pliers, backpacks or pencil cases to hold their things in, as well as notebooks and writing utensils, children's books or reference materials in Cree or Michif and paper handouts.

Methods Employed for Teaching Cree Language

The main methods being used to provide Indigenous language input for youth programming have been immersion and bilingual teaching, English-as-a-medium instruction, and a variety of language acquisition theories/methods such as: Total Physical Response (TPR), Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), the Natural Approach and teaching grammar directly, informed by linguistics. Workshop content, similar to a unit plan, is generally created around focus topics of immersion, grammar teaching, sharing metacognitive strategies, sharing stories and teachings around cultural roles, and building self-esteem. In all of our planning, we ensure that all four aspects of our participants' selves are given a chance to be nourished.

nehiyawewin epikiskwâtiitoyahk—Speaking Cree language to one another: We often incorporate bursts of immersion in Cree for lesson activities, with transition time between to process, ask questions and visit in English. We've found it helpful for beginning learners to bridge their understanding and reduce stress, while still providing the benefits of immersion teaching. Some of our workshops have been delivered with concurrent bilingual lessons and some workshops use blocks of time between English and Cree, depending on the activities and strengths of the instructors, but we generally follow one or the other structure to make it easier to both: deliver comprehensible input; and create a comfortable, casual learning environment where youth can feel safe (not overwhelmed). We have seen cases where immersion for a long period of time was too much for youth, and some have, at times, 'shut down' or chose not to return the next day. Our answer to this challenge was to provide more support, be it emotionally (listening, hugs), mentally/grammatically (morpheme handouts, refreshing the basics), physically (food, rest, play), or spiritually (prayer, smudging, meditation).

nehiyawewin kiskinohamâkosiwin—Learning about Cree language: It is helpful to learn grammar rules of the language, the differences in sounds between nehiyawewin, English and Michif. We also share stories or histories about the language and culture, such as the multiple existing perspectives on the origins of cahkipehikana (Cree Syllabic writing). Learners use and are directed to a wide variety of resources, virtual or otherwise, and seeking further knowledge often requires that they have a pre-existing understanding about the language and culture, so they can be better equipped to choose appropriate resources.

Metacognitive strategies for learning nehiyawewin as an additional language: Strategies are used and discussed to strengthen learners' understanding in and about nehiyawewin, as well as to provide tools for them to use in other subject areas they may be learning (eg., thinking about what one already understands about the topic, diagramming it out, and then adding to the diagram with new things they've learned, post-lesson). These can also help learners to develop their perspectives ("lenses") as individuals on their own learning journeys and aid in retention as they move through content.

iskwewiwin, women's teachings, including nourishing foundations for self-worth, pride and respect for oneself, is a core aspect of the Young Indigenous

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Women's Circle of Leadership. It is the building up of young women's self-esteem and pride for their roots, through reclaiming and revitalizing their culture and language skills, knowledge and connections. This is done through open discussions (often in English and bilingual English-Cree) about: how Indigenous women's traditional and modern roles look, feel, sound; ways that our grandmothers taught us to take care of ourselves and our loved ones; historical and modern issues facing Indigenous peoples in North America (including about MMIWG2S) and much more. Instructors, Elders and youth also share stories about how and where they've been raised in the culture, legends, and other rich aspects of life. This is an aspect of our traditional mentorship as leaders and nehiyawiskewak that we are trying to bring back to our communities.

Learning traditional skills and arts: Learning skills that are traditionally part of life and livelihood as Indigenous peoples, (such as: hide tanning, setting up tipis, doing beadwork, making leather clothing, etc.) helps to build a sense of ability to contribute, a response-ability to engage with one's community as a 'capable' member. We share with participants that they all have valuable perspectives and gifts to share, even before they begin learning new skills, but it can still be a source of pride to know how to do and share these skills.

A Typical YIWCL Workshop Session

The themes of the language activities and cultural values is strongly dependent on the expertise and interests of the instructor leading that particular workshop or block of lessons. In the Summer, we build day camp activities based on a theme that we discuss ahead of time with our Elder and instructors (eg., miyo pimâtisiwin, living a good life), incorporating many lessons for particular skills that instructors would like to focus on (eg., learning to bead, or learning to hoop-dance). Weekend or evening workshops during the Fall, Winter and Spring months are generally planned around teaching one specific skill or activity (eg., traditional Indigenous games, or how to make rattles). We also tend to have quite a lot of time between workshops, spacing them so as to have one every other month, on average.

Once the activity is planned between the YIWCL Coordinator, Faculty Advisor and one or two Cree or Michif Instructors, an itinerary (including lesson plans) is arranged, and the YIWCL Coordinator works on booking space on campus for the workshop, catering plans, honoraria and potential travel plans, protocol and ceremonial plans, a plan for supplies and learning materials (including "swag" for participants), a budget for the overall workshop and plans to collect feedback for reporting, as well as any other workshop details. Once these plans are more or less finalized, a flyer and registration and permission forms are created so that participants can begin registering for the workshop. We have had anywhere from two to fifteen participants in a given workshop (in workshops held between 2021 and 2023), depending on factors such as the goings-on at local schools (since many of our participants are junior high and high school students in and around the Edmonton area), interest in the chosen topic, and the weather. Workshops

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have been typically run from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Saturday and Sunday, with continental-style breakfast snacks made available from the morning onwards, and catered lunches brought in around noon, so that all of our participants are fed well with healthy food options during our workshops.

Each of our sessions together begins with blessings; *nimiyahkasionân*, we ‘smudge’ ourselves, and an Elder (or the instructors) lead us in a brief prayer for the group with positive, loving intentions for our shared learning and gratitude for the day and our being safely gathered together. We then have the participants sit in a circle, and we typically use English or bilingual speech (translating between English and Cree) to introduce youth participants to the reasoning and background for that workshop or event, sharing stories, cultural knowledge, and the itinerary for our day. We then introduce ourselves to one another in our languages, moving from person to person, one at a time, in a clockwise direction. More experienced or fluent speakers of an Indigenous language tend to share a faster-paced, more rehearsed form of introduction, and they may include a story about their day in their language. Beginners to the language tend to introduce themselves based on modeling what they hear from their peers or instructors, or use greeting phrases and key words written on a whiteboard, flip chart, or handouts.

The group then moves into the first planned activity for that day, which varies quite a bit between workshops. It might be playing a language game (eg., tossing a ball across the circle, saying a word or phrase that comes to mind and isn’t the same as anyone else’s), or starting a craft (eg., bilingual Cree and English instructions, focusing on a handful of Cree vocabulary words associated with beading or sewing). Our Elder-in-Residence (present at most workshops) may at times use ‘translated’ or bilingual Cree-English speech or short bouts of solely Cree speech with the group, depending on her assessment of the group’s comfort level speaking and understanding the language. She usually assists the instructor for that day in sacred or cultural teachings involved in activities, and she shares stories of her own life experiences (moving from bilingual speech to English, with Cree vocabulary words dropped in) as participants transition between activities.

Participants are usually free to move about as they like, so that during the time participants have to do activities, they are free to eat snacks, drink water, make themselves tea (if it’s available), use the restroom, or explore the space (often a classroom or staff lounge). Some walk around looking at others’ artwork or writing and chat with friends they may only have the chance to see at one of our workshops, while others may focus more intently on their crafting or art (as many of our workshops involve some aspect of hands-on creativity). During lunch, participants are even more free to relax, chat in whatever language they’re most comfortable using (usually English), and to ask questions or get to know the instructors and Elder in a relaxed and casual setting.

Depending on the workshop, participants are then led into continuing their crafting or starting a new activity, which may be anything from going to a music/drama room on campus to learn traditional songs with rattles, or going to a gym or outdoors to dance or play a traditional sport (eg., double-ball). Instructions

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may be given to participants using more Cree language at this point, encouraging them to use a few words or phrases with one another during the activity (eg., *petâ ana asapâp*—pass that thread here).

Participants tend not to be pressured by instructors to use Cree while talking to one another or asking questions, though they are encouraged to do so if they have shown their language skill level or have learning scaffolds such as referring to notes from earlier lessons, or reference books and handouts. At the end of the workshop, we ask participants to help clean up the room/s that were in use, and invite them all to gather once again in a circle, *ekwa kihtwâm niimiyaḥkasiṣonân*—we ‘smudge’ ourselves once again—and we ask each person to share a bit about how they feel about what they’ve learned, or any thoughts that they’d like to share with the group. Being intentional about our pedagogy and methods, for all of our learning spaces, we’ve chosen to share the following examples to show how spirituality and cultural values are inherent parts of our practice, throughout our sessions:

The Talking Circle: We have students/participants sit in a talking circle in order to begin and end our sessions, which helps us to enact the protocols and values that are central to our cultural teachings, even if Cree language is not being fully used at that particular time. This circle technique involves holding a small object while speaking and passing it onto the next person on the speaker’s left (moving clockwise in the circle). The object signifies to the group who is speaking, and helps ‘ground’ the speaker as they compose their thoughts; it may be a small stone, feather, or other handheld object—but consideration needs to be taken into account for the sacred nature of the object used and the varied, ‘unknown’ energies within each person that will hold it (i.e., a stone belonging to the program or the Elder may be appropriate to pass from person to person, while a pencil case belonging to one of the students/participants is generally not).

We allow students the freedom to choose whether or not to participate, though all are gently encouraged to say anything that’s on their minds, to use whatever language they’re most comfortable using, and to speak for as long as they’re comfortable for. All are also reminded to quietly pay attention to the person speaking, to give each person the gift of not being interrupted, if we can’t give them our full attention. Part of the healing and teaching methods in the Circle includes modeling and experiencing traditional values too, such as: *natohtawewin* (listening), *kisteyimowin* (respect), *wâḥkohtowin* (relationships/community), *wîcihitowin* (assistance/sharing).

Traditional Songs: In our workshops and in our summer camps, we teach participants at least one song and sing it together a few times to help them remember it. Youth are directed to stand in a circle and to bring a rattle out to sing with, if they own one and have it with them (in many of our local communities, Plains Cree women are not drum holders, but rattle holders, so our program does not teach youth to use drums). The instructor sharing the song begins by telling everyone the story behind the song, including who it came to, how the song came to be,

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the story told within the song and the intended purpose for singing it (where it is appropriate and not appropriate to sing it). The instructor then sings to the group while everyone listens, and then participants learn the song in sections, practicing one part of the song at a time, always singing altogether as a group. Participants are invited to record the song on their cellphones as well, to allow them a chance to remember it over a long period of time away from the group. In this way of teaching, everyone is ‘gifted’ the song/s, meaning they each have the permission to sing it, perform it, and teach it to others using their own discretion.

We teach our participants that for many Indigenous Nations, songs have a sacred significance, and carry prayers with them for certain settings and activities (eg., blessing the water, or a journey); engaging in singing, prayer or giving protocol all require a gentle, meditative mindset while they are being done. Songs learned (given) in traditional ways out in the community, as opposed to during our workshops or camps, might be gifted to one individual at a time, after they have given a song-keeper sacred protocol and a gift.

Our youth might also become song-keepers themselves, after being recognized in their communities as singers and receiving new songs to perform and teach through personal quests, dreams, and creating them with other song-keepers. We teach our youth participants that they are entirely capable, right now as they are standing with us, of being someone who holds knowledge and who is able to teach others around them. We share with them the importance of protocol in our worldviews, and of taking sacred teachings seriously; we also encourage them to follow that path as far as they’d like to, and let them know that they each carry gifts within them and don’t have to go out of their way to “be sacred”, because each of them already is.

The Need for Spirituality and Healing Practices in Our Language Programming

Youth entering our language and culture learning spaces for the first time are often very shy and uneasy about opening themselves up about anything but the most superficial topics around their peers and with instructors and Elders—all members of their identity—communities whom they may have a great deal of respect for. They are more than just shy about looking foolish, they are afraid of having their identities rejected by their community. From within Indigenous links to community, youth can face any number of attacks on their identity, being seen as “too native,” “not native enough,” being from a favored or disfavored family on-reserve, having an accent that sounds “too rez” or “too urban” or “stupid” or “too good for everyone,” having teachers and authority figures judge them as being troublemakers or uneducated, or being seen by community members and extended family as being unfairly advantaged if they’re doing well in school or have access to extracurricular activities. All of that without mention of the typical issues that face teens overall (it’s no easy thing to be a teenager!), or of socioeconomic difficulties that disproportionately face Indigenous families, or racial issues that visibly Indigenous peoples grapple with in society.

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In some of our Indigenous spaces, and starting from an early age, we are also told that it's our individual responsibility to learn our languages and cultures, and that all of our traditional knowledges must be bought and dearly paid for; that a knowledgeable person put in a lot of money and hard work to get to where they are. That mindset is borrowed and silently integrated as "traditional" to our cultures, from a Western economics and colonial-based system; it is one of the many facets of intergenerational trauma in our communities, just as is lateral violence, and they often go hand-in-hand to push our relatives down and to continue to separate Indigenous peoples from our ways of life.

Just as we do in our classrooms, in our YIWCL day camps and workshops we also see youth coming in with a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, from both urban and rural communities, and with a wide variation in family situations. For our instructors, there is no predicting how much a student may or may not know about their languages and cultures, whether those students have support for their learning at home (eg., a parent that speaks the language), or even whether learning about the topics is welcomed in their families. For these reasons and more, we strive to provide our youth (whom we feel a relational duty to, through teachings like *wahkohtowin* (relatedness/community) and *miyo ohpikinawasowin* (good child-rearing)), with open and free access to the languages and teachings that would have been freely provided to them had they not been affected by colonization and intergenerational trauma, and had they grown up in their traditional communities and family structures. Just as in our communities, when there are teachings that require one to seek out specific ceremonies or learn from specific Elders, we let those students know that there is a barrier there that requires them to give someone protocol and go on a learning journey. We don't believe, however, in asking youth to "pay for" the basics of their languages, and guidance that is rightfully theirs.

Immersion Teaching Alongside Other Methods

In Chapter 18 of the *Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, Ken Hale (2001) discussed five levels of immersion: level one is the passing on of a language between young people and their families at home, as a first language learned; level two being a situation like children attending an immersion school, where the language is an additional language learned; level three is described as a 'master-apprentice' program, where an adult learner spends a great amount of time (up to a lifetime) learning from and speaking with a native speaker of the target language directly; level four is a "content course" style immersion, teaching a subject (like biology, math, philosophy) using the language, but not the language itself (like level two, but a shorter amount of time); level five is then learning similarly to level four, but with a more conversational focus.

One would assume that level five also involves some discussion about the language itself, while still teaching in the target language, but Hale does not state that directly. He does explain (using detailed examples from Miskitu and Navajo) that at the fifth or fourth levels of immersion, teachers must have stronger

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understanding and training in the grammar and other aspects of linguistics of the target language. Conversely, in level one, teachers need not even be consciously aware of the ‘rules’ of the language at all, because the amount of target language input, output and active use, he suggests, is inversely related to the amount of understanding, training and scaffolding needed from either the language teacher or language learner. Hale notes that especially in cases where students are not exposed to their target/Indigenous languages for more than three to four hours a week, that “direct, explicit grammatical instruction is necessary...” in order to “come to know the general principles for forming...” word forms and phrases in Indigenous languages that could not come up naturally in the amount of time that learners will spend with their languages (Hale, 2001).

Considering those levels of immersion suggested by Hale, we would place the workshops and summer day camps organized by YIWCL solidly in the level five category of immersion, when immersion teaching is used. As stated previously, we do use bilingual teaching as well as English-medium teaching to deliver some concepts (eg., grammar, or Cree values) and to have open, often Circle-based, discussions with the participant groups. The variation in method, again, is because we are not just limited in time with any one group, but we are also focused on multiple, complex goals.

Our ultimate goal is, without a doubt, to help youth connect with and begin to use Plains Cree (and then support them in learning their other Indigenous languages) to help revitalize our languages and cultures; however, we also understand a bit about who our young people are, and we realize that in order to take up their languages, our youth also need to heal their identities, even as they are being built. Time and again, we see that love of language alone is not enough motivation for students to continue learning their languages beyond their school years; we must also prioritize helping them to feel a sense of belonging, pride and self-efficacy, regarding their Indigenous heritage/s.

Roxanne Incorporates Cree into Social Studies and Aboriginal Studies Classes

In my Grade 9 to 12 Social Studies and Aboriginal studies classes, I incorporate Cree words daily, using different Cree words every day. Most of the words shared come with a story; a background historical context or a legendary stories. I am just starting out in teaching our Cree language, I am in search of more ways to include stories into my classes, with our words incorporated in. Contrasting the Cree language learning methods we’re seeing, how I learned the language growing up—I heard the words everyday. The majority of my students are not fluent speakers but it is important they hear the words flow, and in sentences, and I encourage them to speak along with me.

With the school calendar, how it is set up throughout the year, for example, Orange Shirt Day, Veteran’s Day, Aboriginal Day—we go through words that go with these days, to help provide context and an opportunity to share what they learn. Some students do not know what these days signify, historically,

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so we go through the meanings of these special days. I am finding more in my style of teaching, even though I am fluent, I like to tell the stories that go with our Cree words. Our Cree language is oral first, it is heard first, before it can be written down. I am always looking for new stories, and this is where our Elders are really valuable, where we can utilize their skills in the classroom. Every area and community has different stories; for example, the signing of Treaty six, tipahamaton niktowâsik, is a story told by elders. The story is one of pre-treaty signing, and parts of it are included in *100 Days of Cree*, by Neal McLeod with Arok Wolvengrey (2016). My students learn the context for this and other important events, hear and say important vocabulary words to understand along with the topics, and get to hear multiple sides of important historical events that impact their lives today.

On January 26, 2023, I hosted a Cree activity night (which we called pîkiskewewin) at kinokamâsihk kiskinahamâtokamik (Kehewin School) for young girls in grades 7 to 12. I went through the history of Cree syllabics, of the Charts as well as some words. After we went through the review lesson, the girls then did some arts and crafts (beading and constructing earrings) and we ended the evening with a meal. In our Cree culture, sharing meals together are important. We encouraged parents and guardians to attend this Cree Activity Night, and it was a great success. We had 21 girls come out and join us; though, unfortunately, we were not able to host another night. In this Cree activity night, as well as my own classroom, I share Cree words daily, I write my words on the board so that all my students will see them, and then we say them all together. I have found at the end of the year, with our Grade 12 graduates, the Cree words of the day are what they remember most about our classes.

Marie Uses a Wide Variety of Teaching Methods To Reach Students

When we talk about how we're trying to revitalize our language, there are so many different ways to do it—some teachers are great at using a lot of hands—on activities and being really engaging for an audience. I like to follow a routine, myself. For example, (in my classroom) we try to use a lot of visuals, i.e., the ASLA method (Accelerated Second Language Acquisition, Dr. Greymorning, 2012), that's audio-visual learning. We try to get students closer to understanding and try to gauge their interest. If I say a word in Cree, they can often interpret what I'm saying audibly, and orally—students see the visuals and hear the lesson orally. I try to cater to various means of learning the language, which includes: orally and audio-based; visually; hands-on; writing—because there are students who learn best using those methods, they need to see it there, in front of them.

I give students three forms of writing the language: our basic foundation is our syllabics, so the sound system is all in it. It's a must, and it's key. It's pertinent that I include that in my learning and teaching my students. Once they are introduced to syllabics, the SRO (Standard Roman Orthography) goes along with it, though I find that some students can get very confused when they try to learn how SRO differs from English. Because of the confusion with SRO,

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I've included the use of phonetics, so that students learn all three methods when learning to read and write in the language.

Another form is hands-on, just immersing students in the language. I arrange classroom activities, like making moccasins, maskisina. When I'm doing that, I get the vocabulary words that we need for that particular activity, and then actually talk them through, in the nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) language, i.e., "manisa ôma, omisi îsa ohi itôta." So I tell them, "Cut it this way, do it this way. Look at what I'm doing, and do it like so." They watch me intently, and when I give instructions, I'm pointing, using my hands, and including a lot of TPR as well. I use it in my lessons, especially in hands-on activities, as well as when using ASLA.

I see a big difference between the methods that folks are teaching on-reserve versus off-reserve, and I'm glad to have the opportunity to teach here (on-reserve). In my observations, while working off-reserve with French immersion students, I gave students many different forms of learning the language, and the French immersion students gravitated strongly toward TPR. They weren't even looking at the pictures when I'd point to them, they were watching me, learning my TPR! For instance, I would place a pointer finger on each cheek and twist back and forth on each syllable, "is-kwe-sis" (girl), and they interpret what I'm saying by what I'm doing, and the class shouts while watching me — "Girl! Girl!"—and they pick it up in a heartbeat. I get to see directly how the students are picking it up, and how quickly, using TPR.

Some students learn best using other methods though, everyone learns differently. So as instructors—in any subjects, not just in Cree language classrooms—we need to be creative in the way that we deliver our lessons, and the way we deliver language. Give students all sorts of opportunities to learn and pick it up, like hands-on, immersion, audio-based or written... all sorts of different ways, and we must be as creative as we can. For example, one learning strategy in my classroom is using games online, such as creating Cree language games using Blookit or Kahoot, or making a Jeopardy game—those kinds of games quickly get students engaged, and it shows you're trying to meet them where they're at and have some fun. Many of my students are very technology-literate, they already play games online, and it forces us, as the teachers, to learn and get to their level. I had to teach myself how to play Blookit, I had no idea what Blookit was. I didn't know how to create a game of Jeopardy to start either, but I learned. We do get some students who prefer to play games in the classroom without using technology, having more hands-on activities. For instance, there is a game where we throw balls into boxes, where I have pictures posted of various vocabulary words, posted right there on the box. I say a word or phrase and they throw balls into the boxes with the correct picture. In this way, I'm assessing their understanding, I'm 'testing' them. These are just some ways that I try to cater to all of my students' learning.

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Comparing the YIWCL Camp Experience with K-12 Classroom Teaching

During the 2022 YIWCL summer camp, I (Marie) co-taught many lessons with another instructor, and we taught hoop dancing all in Cree. She sang songs with the group, and also did TPR. The main difference between what we did at the camp was that we had them for just a small portion of the time, because they switched from instructor to instructor (depending on the scheduled activity), and so we really had to immerse them in the language. The time frame was short (about 4 days per group) and the schedule had us doing lots of hands-on activities with the students, delivering all the lessons in Cree, as opposed to a classroom setting where one has adequate time to present the language, in more varied approaches. That is not to say there weren't opportune times to deliver the language in different ways at camp, but you're with the group for far less time, which gives less flexibility in that aspect. For example, when we taught syllabics at the camp, we didn't have the time scheduled to scaffold lessons for them to actually progress in that skill to writing things out.. We went through the syllabics song several times, we went through using rote and repetition. Some of the participants were already remembering the song, based on how many times we sang it, but there wasn't the opportunity to do more with that lesson. We couldn't get them into writing full words and sentences, but they could begin to recognize the syllabics—that portion of the skill, writing in the language, was shortened.

The method really has to depend on your goals. In a camp setting (such as the day camp with YIWCL), if you're trying to get students to speak and understand the language, that setting is the most beneficial, because they're being immersed in the language. Participants have the opportunity there to hear multiple fluent Cree speakers conversing in the language—there were times when instructors would come together and converse in nehiyawewin, and the students got to hear that, and see what it is that we're trying to do. And hearing other instructors speaking in the language encouraged us all to speak more nehiyawewin. You learn the language through hearing it, that's what you want them to do. A long time ago, that's the way we all learned language, not in a classroom setting as a second or third language. I think if our camps were more than 2 weeks, and if we were to spend the entire time with all of the participants, you could probably get some students to definitely start to understand what's being said, and for some, maybe getting them to actually start to converse in the language. I agree 100% with total immersion. If you want fluent Cree speakers, immersion is the way to do it.

This other way (in a classroom), we get students every other day (eg., at a junior high level), and that might add up to maybe three hours a week, at the most, for one language class. You can't get students to fluency in that amount of time, you just can't. You're still creating resources for them, giving them different opportunities to learn the language; it's like slowly learning the foundational pieces—you're giving them the foundational blocks to learning the language, and putting them on the road of learning, trying to get them engaged and to continue on. The way language classes are scheduled however, in a regular school day, there's no way you could get a student to fluency.

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The camp on the other hand, you have them for the entire day, so you're giving them more language hours. And you're giving them all of these different activities at the same time, that all pertain to the culture. Learning the language with the culture, you're ensuring it's in context, and you can tie in ceremonial teachings, and oral traditional stories can be pulled in too. There's definitely a difference, between having classroom lessons and teaching at a cultural camp, most definitely, and you have to be prepared very differently in both cases, well-ahead of time. When doing cultural camps, you need to properly gauge your time, because you're getting the same group of students for a longer period of time in a day, and that plays into what types of activities you can arrange and schedule for them.

In the language classroom, students learn by topic area, and there's only so much we're able to bring in regarding culture—especially off-reserve. You never know with students and their families, as well as in each school, what will be accepted. I've had some students tell me, "We only attend church. We don't go to these ceremonies, we don't even do that or participate in that." or "I don't want my student participating in that ceremony you're having over there", or "I don't want my child going to a sweat" We still deal with those difficulties, even in schools on-reserve. As surprising as it seems, we're trying to give back to the young ones, and to our communities that have lost their identity, or that are in the process of losing it. We're trying to give things back to the youth, to re-teach our young people so they can have something when they're older. But so many students, when I've spoken about certain ceremonies—"Do you attend this?" A few hands will go up, but not everyone's. I've asked, "Your parents don't take you to these kinds of ceremonies?" and they say "No, we've never gone to those kinds of ceremonies. I don't even know what that is." So already we're at a place in our communities where about 50% of my students haven't even heard of ceremonies that are central to our cultural teachings. We've got our work cut out for us.

I worry for the youth living off-reserve particularly, who don't have that opportunity to participate in any of the ceremonies that happen out here, in Maskwacis. I worry about those who haven't been given the opportunity and who won't be. We sometimes try to give them that opportunity in the classroom, take them outside and have them do land-based learning for a few lessons. We take them outside and set up tipis, make smokehouses and smoke meat. One of our next lessons is to make those tipi-backrests. We don't see many of those today, so we're going out to teach students how to make those backrests, to try to bring back some of the culture that we've lost. We want to bring those back, and find different ways to revitalize and retain the language. And, for some students, when you think about it, it could end up being a livelihood for them.

Teaching Skills That Give Back To Students and Their Families

Some of the hand-on activities I (Marie) teach in my language and culture classroom, are, for example, making moccasins, and making breastplates. We

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started with miniature breastplates and moccasins, and I showed them ones that were actual-sized. Some students that get to work and are really interested, they finish early, and I get them to work on a large-sized breastplate for themselves. They get the feel, and see the process of how to start, how to finish. When you think about it, you're teaching them skills that might end up being a livelihood for them, you never know. They might take up these arts and carry them on into their adulthood. For some students also, they might stop going to school at grade 9, and what skills will they have to provide for themselves? Well, at least they learned some useful skills in Cree class. They will, hopefully then, use those skills to put food on their tables, and I tell them this in class. I say, "A lot of these things that I'm teaching you, people make money doing it! You could make yourself money and a livelihood on these things, if you perfect it! So pay really close attention to what I'm teaching you here in the classroom!" That's what we try to do.

The skills are still topic-based, like with the moccasins and breastplates, they go into our unit on *pwâtsimowin*, (*pow-wow*). With the unit on *wahkohtowin* (relations, relatedness), they learn about the tipi, including how to set one up, and they make a miniature tipi. They also learn the *wâspison* (mossbag, to swaddle a baby in), and they learn to make mossbags too. In the unit on food and animals, that's when they get to smoke meat, make a smokehouse and all of those skills. They get to go outdoors and set up snares so there's always ways to try to incorporate land-based learning too. Those skills too, may be someone's livelihood. We're teaching them skills, things that we used to do, *kayâs mâka* (a long time ago) but for some of our students today, we never know for whom it might need to be a livelihood. That's why I try to incorporate as much as I can, even when our curriculum is topic-based. I ask myself and other teachers.. "What's hands-on I can incorporate, there's got to be something I can tie into this!" "For animals, you could teach porcupine quilling, we could make a head roach for *pow-wow*! We can show them how to tan a hide! Or we can make things from *parfleche*!" All of these different hands-on activities, and you're also trying to give them opportunities that way.

As another example, when we introduced *pwâtsimowin*, we knew we were going to do some dance, song, making regalia, having a bit of writing around that, and we started the unit out by breaking the class into groups. We "gave each group \$50 000 dollars each" to host a *pow-wow*, and we asked them, "Where are you going to spend the money? We want to see a plan, listing where all of that money is going to go, so keep it all accounted for!" You could hear a pin drop in that room, all the kids were really thinking. They had to really consider what it might be like to have to be responsible for planning a huge event in the community like that, and they're like "OMG, We're planning a *pow-wow*! We have \$50 000 dollars!" So that's how we introduced the topic to them, followed by regalia, and then dance next. First the basic steps, then the hoop dance is where we'll end it off. So we're trying to keep it fun and engaging for them!

One thing that I noticed also, is that when students from our community hear that folks from other places are doing well in my classes, they want to join in so

that they can compete, in a way, to be at the top of the class in their own cultural arts and knowledge. For example, in a hoop dance program I ran, my students, who were also family from my community, initially weren't too interested, or were not motivated to pick up the skill. But when there were students from the Philippines who were becoming experts, my relatives joined in and practiced hard to become good at it too. They wanted to be the pro's, it's a piece of their culture! Soon, the kids were good enough in the program to put into a dance troupe, and we were invited to go perform at places all over the province. It was amazing to see them all be so engaged in it, to have pride in themselves, saying things like "Wow, I know how to do that!" That's what I'm trying to get, to help kids from our community to gain confidence, and to pick up more of the language.

I tell each of my students, when I teach, "When I ask for your participation, and you want to try it—I ask all of you, please don't laugh at anyone. ekâwiya pahpi-awiyak, osâm ekakwenehiyawecik (Don't laugh at anyone, because they're trying to speak Cree)." They're really trying, and you don't want anyone to laugh and take their confidence away. I heard from another of my students, "...My parents speak Cree, both of them speak Cree. All my older siblings speak Cree. I'm the only one who doesn't. And I'm so scared to speak it, because I don't want anybody to laugh at me, so I don't speak it. But you're giving me the confidence to just do it, because you're making these projects and we have to speak up, that's where all of our marks are coming from! You made it mandatory that we have to speak, so that gave me confidence to do it!" I say to my students, "You don't need to be bashful about it, because we're all trying. How are we going to learn if we don't try?" and "Don't feel discouraged if somebody says, 'Say it this way' or 'You say it like this..' Don't be discouraged, because they're trying to help you to learn it, you want people to help guide you! Don't feel like people are attacking you when they try to help you, they're really not." We have to learn to take constructive criticism, and not take it to heart. That's what we want to do.

Relationships as Foundational to Our Teachings, with the Spiritual and with Our Communities

Spirituality in our languages and cultures is important to understand, especially when trying to teach in and around cahkipehikanak (Syllabic writing). I (Marie) share with students the oral teachings around those little cahkipehikanak, each little symbol has a spirit. They have a sound, a song. They're a little tiny star, and they're alive. So in saying all of those sounds, we're remembering the stars, they help gravitate the entire universe. Our language is alive through this sound system, so our language is sacred. I try to let them know that anytime we're talking about those specific cahkipehikanak, I make my classroom quiet, and there should be no hats on, there should be no phones out. Everyone should be paying attention, because that's their foundation. You want them to understand something holy, that there's sacredness behind it.

There are stories I like to share, orally and through videos recorded of Elders, of people being brought up the traditional way, brought up with the language,

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and taught how to be self-sufficient. In one story they talk about how one person was raised in such a way, and he had his own family, so he taught his children that same way, and he had grandchildren, and so on. In that story they explain that this language and nehiyawiwîn (Cree culture), it's so holy and sacred, that it can prolong life, he was able to see great-grandchildren. In one of these recorded documentaries with Elders, they discussed that, when people once used to live as old as 400 years old, living nehiyaw pimâtisiwîn (the Cree way of living), and they were able to converse with the supernatural beings that are out there.

When I hear stories like that, I just get goosebumps, like “Wow! Our language is so sacred and holy, and we're not even taking the opportunity to speak it, and to try to hold onto it? Wake up people, waniskâk! We were once able to converse with the supernatural beings!” That in itself is sad, to see that so many of our people aren't passing the language on. I spoke with a colleague, a fellow teacher, and I asked him about a meeting he went to, to determine how many fluent Cree speakers we have in Maskwacis, he told me we're below 50%, fluent speakers in our reserve. And I just think, who is that, the people who are fluent? They're the Elders, and what happens when we lose our Elders? That's scary. We need to work hard to try to retain the language, our generation needs to do lots of work.

We need to involve Elders in our classrooms, because they have a rightful place in our education systems, they traditionally would have had that place. Even in on-reserve schools though, we hardly see them. I brought it up once, “Why do you have no Elders here? You have Elders in that school, and the other one, why not here?” This is a pertinent time in a young person's life, Elders should be conversing with these little ones. This is where they tend to get lost. They're trying to feel out where they fit in the world—this is why we have a lot of people going this way, or going that way—they don't know where they fit. Elders need to be part of the education system and we need to have the opportunity to utilize their knowledge, their skills and experiences; in the classroom setting. We need them, absolutely we do. It can be difficult at times, in our education systems, when people don't understand that concept. The traditional ways, prior to colonization, Elders were there to educate the youth. Everyone played a role in that education system, not just a teacher. Even babies played a role in that education system, but we don't have that, we don't see it today. That's what needs to be brought back. But how do you make people understand, who do you talk to? Or worse, some half-listen, or hear the problem and choose not to do anything about it.

In my class, I'm fortunate to have my dad nearby. I check to see if he's available, and every now and then I get him to come into the classroom. Other Cree instructors that are older than me, I try to pull them into my classes too. For example, when we did tipis with land-based learning, I utilized the expertise of the teacher just next door, he grew up on the land, and so I tried to incorporate a lot of his teachings into my class as well. We kind of lean on each other in that way. When I got here, at first, I wasn't aware that there were other Cree teachers, and assuming I was the only one, I got a bit scared! When I met them, I was the total opposite- “We need to do this! Let's do this together! We're going to do this together!” So all three of us have been working together to build land-based

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learning opportunities at our school. We lean on each other for support, because one might know something more than me, or I might know something more in one area.. It's ideal when there are other Cree language teachers that you can collaborate and share information with. Off-reserve, I was the only Cree teacher in my previous school. I tried to create resources and do some land-based teaching, and sometimes administrators would be entirely supportive and approve everything, and then when it came time to run through the activities, they would stop me in my tracks. "You can't do that! We can't do that!" It was really difficult.

I like that on-reserve, I have more opportunity to teach everything that I grew up with, that's what I love about teaching Cree. I get to teach everything I've learned since I was young. How to snare, how to cook, how to smoke meat and work with parfleche. A lot of it, what they learn in my classroom, I taught myself too. I had to actually go outside of my family and learn it from someone else, who had that knowledge, so that I'd be able to teach it. So I have the opportunity to teach everything I know to these students. It's gratifying, hearing them go away with "Hey, look what I did!" or "Look what I made! Look what I can do!" That's why we're in teaching, that's a purpose in life, right there.

I love being able to do that, to share that knowledge, and not keep it just with me. I feel like everything I've learned, throughout my growing years and now, I want to be able to pass that on. When we look at our Elders, the situation we're in now, trying to pass on our oral stories and what-have-you... we don't want to continue down that road. Some of our stories and knowledge are already lost, because we're not taking or given the opportunity to go and give protocol to these Elders for that information. That's why I do what I do. I share a little bit of the oral teachings that have been shared with me. When there's snow on the ground, or when there is an opportune time, like when they're sitting quietly, that's when you want to tell those stories. That's when you know that they're listening.

Teaching Cree Virtually at a Cultural College, to Everyone

I (Marie) also teach online, to adult students. There's an introductory, basic level of Cree we teach them, and I call it "survival Cree", because that's basically all it is. We still start at the foundation that is Cree syllabics, because they need to have the knowledge of them for the basic sound system. Our basis for language learning is in syllabics. In that class also, there are lots of non-First-Nations students, and people from all sorts of other tribes. I have people in my classes who are Blackfoot, or Navajo, and I was so surprised to see they're learning our language! It's good, they're learning, because then they can be allies for our language. We can help each other revitalize our languages and retain them. The more people that speak Indigenous languages, the better.

So many people are learning Cree as an additional language. I've worked with a person before, who I didn't know was a speaker, she was mōniyaw (non-Cree) and I didn't know she was taking classes and really trying to learn. One day these men were talking together, we were standing near them, and then she started talking in Cree to them too! They looked surprised, and so did I! She

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understood what they were saying, and she shared with me that other times, she knew when people were talking about her. In those cases and more, people that work in public systems and organizations, or even healthcare—it's an asset for them to understand Cree, and Indigenous languages, when working in those fields. Even when teaching, there may be a student who comes from a home with fluent Cree speakers, and it helps for teachers to learn it. Some teachers really do want to learn as well, and not be Cree teachers—I knew this Physical Education teacher that was always coming into my classroom saying “How do you say this? I want to be able to say this!” and then all of a sudden his emails were all in Cree! He's starting to use the language he learned, and I was like, “That is so awesome! That's what we want to see!” Those people, non-Indigenous folks, or from other tribes, or working in other fields—they are our allies. The only negatives to people learning is that there are also those who want to learn our languages and cultures for personal, financial gains. People that want to learn the language, build resources, and then sell it back to the community. We don't want that. We want people that are going to help us hold onto the language, not make money off of it.

Christina's Experiences Teaching Cree Language and Culture Online for YIWCL's, *nehiyawewin piko-îte ayapîhkânihk*

This past spring (January 24 to April 25, 2023), was the second time that YIWCL hosted a virtual Cree language class for youth girls and young adults, in this particular format. To provide some comparison, the summer day camps for YIWCL in 2020 and 2021 were designed to follow as close a format to the in-person sessions as they could, which meant they looked like Zoom and Google Meet meetings, showing participants how to do hands-on activities (such as beadwork) by holding up items close to the camera, and asking them to stand and perform actions, and to keep their cameras on. Some digital tools were used (eg. asking students to create projects using Padlet) but virtual activities did not make up the bulk of the lessons. The virtual Cree language sessions held in the spring of 2022 and 2023 were, instead, built in the consideration of a solely digital and remote experience, and involved more direct instruction on the language, rather than using Cree as a medium to teach other skills and activities.

Decisions Made about the Format for 2023's Spring Cree Language Sessions

I (Christina) knew from previously having run and co-taught the Virtual Cree sessions in Spring 2022 that one hour would not be sufficient to delve into subject matter and to create connections between participants, so I chose to make the classes two hours each. YIWCL staff agreed that we should run these sessions for 12 weeks, so that participants could (potentially) qualify for a certificate or letter stating they attended 24 hours of language-learning time. On that note, we ended up not sending participants any certificates, because we had no way of measuring who was putting in work to learn asynchronously; instead, I let folks know that

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I could, if they asked me to, write them a letter stating how many hours they attended each class, and what the overall goals of the virtual Cree sessions were.

I used Zoom as a meeting space for everyone to connect, provided access to a Discord server, and sent folks all the learning materials through email each week. I did not set up a Google Classroom for participants to use, due to time constraints prior to starting our sessions; instead, I proceeded to use email to send out worksheets, handouts and links to other digital resources, and I did not run into issues with that method. Each session had an associated Google Slides / Microsoft Powerpoint presentation, where I wrote out notes, embedded links to Google Jamboard and YouTube videos, and displayed prepared examples of SRO and syllabic writing, complete with animated markings to direct participants' attention to certain things while I spoke. Some examples on slides were also filled in synchronously, either in the 'edit' mode of Google Slides, or by clicking onto a Jamboard and having prepared examples "ready to be written on", synchronously with the group—provided they each had access to the Jamboard link (which I posted in the Zoom chat box). Any participants who were unable to access the Jamboard link due to their circumstances (eg. traveling, using their phone screen to join the class), I suggested they write out their own work on a physical sheet of paper in front of them, or to access the Jamboard link (in the Powerpoint slides I shared with them) at any time outside of class. (Folks generally didn't take me up on that option.) I recorded each Zoom session together and sent the recording out to two respective groups of participants (Tuesday or Thursday), along with any additional resources or answers to questions, if they came up in our sessions.

The purpose of our spring virtual classes this year was to share basic Cree language skills, discuss cultural elements in and about the language, and to help learners at all levels to improve their understanding of written forms of Cree. I chose to build lesson plans on reading and writing in three forms: Standard Roman Orthography (SRO); syllabics, and phonetic spelling, using the majority dialect of English local to Edmonton. I also included, wherever I could, ways to begin personal research and navigating Cree resources online. A number of popular Cree language resources were shared and discussed, both digital and physical. The Tuesday group of participants also were sent a package of learning materials with a selection of 6 children's books from University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'į nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills, in nehiyawewin—Plains Cree (Y-dialect).

Passion for Language Revitalization and Community Helps Create Space for Adult Learners

Almost half of the responses we received in our registrations for learning Virtual Cree this year were from adult women, approximately between 30 and 60, who wanted to improve their reading and writing in Cree, or who were still beginning learners and who wanted more language input. In order to accommodate the needs of each of these ladies who had registered, including those who were out of the scope of our programming, which is intended for young, Indigenous women. I

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(Christina) requested permission from my supervisor for us to hold an additional session for adult learners on another day, creating a ‘Thursday group’, which I would volunteer to teach (while the ‘Tuesday group’ would be paid work). I thought, rather than to deny a large quantity of people who are also yearning for connection to their language and culture, and rather than to disregard my own feelings—that so much of these opportunities are denied to adults of working age—why not look for some way to meet the need that I had found? I used a very similar plan, handouts and slides for both groups, since it was already my own curriculum, lesson plans and handouts that I would use for teaching. The ‘Thursday group’ also were not to receive any of the physical learning materials (books, swag, etc) that belonged to the YIWCL program, (and I could not afford those materials out-of-pocket); so, I shared my thoughts about the efficacy of some of the childrens’ books as learning resources, showed them a few page excerpts from my personal copies of multiple learning materials, and directed them to where they might purchase copies for themselves, if they wanted to do so.

Consistently, with all of the programming that I have put together, I have gotten requests and registrations from adult women (19 to 50 typically, but sometimes ladies older than that also), who have similar desires as the older youth girls who join us in YIWCL: for language and cultural learning, increased self-esteem and a sense of belonging in their Indigenous community. Researchers and Indigenous language advocates often voice the need to teach young adults their language and culture, as adults are generally the portion of the population who are starting, planning to start, and who are raising their families. Young parents as Indigenous language speakers are key for “successful intergenerational transmission” of the language (Fishman, 2001, in Smith-Christmas & Armstrong, 2014). The idea is that young parents often feel the need to revisit, reclaim and pass on their heritage languages and cultures, and that children growing up in households that speak (fluently or otherwise) their heritage languages are better equipped to revitalize that language. In my observations, that need in adults often goes unmet, for a variety of reasons (lack of funds to attend classes and workshops; lack of extra time to put towards personal study (due to family time requirements and the need to go to work); lack of support all around, which includes multiple barriers to entry into certain programs). Supporting adults to learn and speak their Indigenous language/s increases the availability of potential teachers of the language, either at home or in a formal setting, and can motivate increased use of Indigenous languages in a community overall (McIvor & Ball, 2019).

I personally felt that I would have been doing a great disservice to the number of Indigenous women that were seeking out language and culture opportunities had I chosen to refuse registration to adults for our programming and not look for some acceptable alternative to offer to them. Though it’s admittedly ‘difficult to “say no” to people’, I think this issue also points out where need exists in our language and culture programs, not only in YIWCL but in general. My request and plans to volunteer my time to host additional, smaller classes / study sessions for the adult ladies on Thursdays was just one quick answer to this larger issue, for this particular case, and for the short term. I think this scenario has

highlighted an opportunity for us to either develop or to advocate for the portions of our communities which are underserved (eg. adults, families, those with lower income), regarding the need for accessible and high quality language and culture programming.

Teaching Indigenous Languages Online Helps Make Them Accessible for All

Once I (Christina) started advertising for the sessions and collecting registrations, I saw that at least one of the youth registrants mentioned on her form that she was Deaf, and I realized I needed to make some changes in order to consider everyone's learning needs equally in my planning. I've heard other instructors say, countless times, "you need to hear the language being spoken in order to learn it" or, "you need to hear yourself say the words to make them yours." That's all fine for the hearing and speaking community, but what does one do for anyone else?

I looked online for ways to make my teaching more accessible; I found a variety of captioning apps and programs, and I wondered whether there might be an ASL interpreter available through the University of Alberta that I would be able to apply to have come into my classes. Being that the classes aren't academic, for course credits, I didn't think our program would qualify, so unfortunately, I didn't look in that direction very far. I ended up emailing that student directly if it would be sufficiently helpful if I provided captions in class for when I spoke English and wrote out Cree words on a handheld whiteboard. She said 'yes, that would be fine', and also indicated that having notes and the slides I'd be using sent to her ahead of time would be very helpful to her. I'd like to be able to say that I was planning to do this already, and that it's a natural part of my teaching, but I did need the reminder to be more proactive in that area: providing materials ahead of time for students to organize (or learn to organize!) their own thoughts and familiarize themselves with the look of my teaching so they know what to expect; and to be ready for transitions in tone, topic, or class timing.

When the first class began, things worked out fairly smoothly using the captions that were provided through Zoom, although the use of the small handheld whiteboard to write out Cree words that I was saying was quite slow. I was also unable to tell if the way that I was conducting the class was working well for the student I was trying to assist, as she kept her camera off and did not use the chat function much during the sessions. (I did get a thumbs-up emoji from her a few times when I paused to ask if each person was doing alright.)

For the Thursday group as well, I was unaware initially that one of the ladies there was also deaf, as she did not share that information with me in the registration form, but chose to let me know during class. She had a family member present with her, I discovered later, to interpret some things during our session. After class she shared with me that she was very pleased to have access to captions through Zoom, because (paraphrasing from her family member) "when she had taken Cree classes in-person previously, she would often miss the cultural / additional information that is quickly spoken and that goes unwritten." This participant also mentioned that it was helpful for her to see phonetic spellings

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of Cree words, as she had difficulty learning to read SRO and matching it to how Cree is pronounced versus English (or as I had clumsily put it—‘using the sounds of English’—the phonetic rules in English). She also shared with me that she’d like to see more information on Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL).

From that discussion onward, I’ve been working to incorporate as many instances of phonetic spelling as I can into my lessons, and to share it as another valid and useful way to write in Cree, as the language is not standardized. So often we are tempted to say that one way of speaking or writing is more true or helpful than another, and it all really comes down to our own personal preferences and biases. I do think that it’s helpful to understand how to read and write the more structured forms of SRO and syllabics, mainly to have a common way of communicating in written Cree (like in biographies, papers, or online resources) and to understand linguistics-based resources; but at no point would I say that those forms are “better” or “proper” to use.

I also took it upon myself to look up some information to share with the class on PISL (which is amazing), and I found and shared links to old videos that were part of a documentary, as well as videos of Dr. Lanny Real Bird teaching PISL along with multiple spoken Indigenous languages (2018). If instructors are knowledgeable in PISL, I think there would be tremendous value in teaching it alongside written or audible Cree language, as an addition or even alternative to TPR, which may not be intended to have communicative use (something to research!) or have the same significance as PISL (used in many Nations around the Great Plains).

I was very aware of my unintentional ignorance and lack of preparedness for accessibility needs when it came to providing a good learning experience for all of the students in my virtual Cree classes. I worked to change my phrasing, when trying to emphasize multiple forms of practice and input for language; rather than just stating things like “say the Cree words you hear out loud, so you can hear yourself speaking the word.” For students who neither speak nor hear, this sentence is anywhere from unhelpful to harmful, as it can contribute to creating dis-inclusion. I looked back at my initial reasoning for asking students to speak out loud during class (even if their microphones are muted), and it was because hearing and saying the words as they learn them can actively engage more senses, in different areas of the brain, which can help with retention. It also helps provide another instance of input of that word or phrase, and we know that more language input—being exposed to a word often, and in many different ways and contexts—is how we pick up language. As I became aware of my phrasing, using words like “hear” and “speak,” I thought about other ways that my goal/rationale, to provide more input for students and engage multiple parts of the brain for their learning, could be achieved. My first attempts included asking students to move their mouths along with the new word or phrase as they read it on the slides; then to “rewrite or draw the words” as they followed along; and then to “as you read the word, perform some other action, to make the word your own. It can be saying it aloud, writing it, making a doodle or drawing, acting it out for yourself. etc. Try to involve different parts of your brain, as reading on

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the screen is a visual way to do it.” I ended up just openly communicating my reasoning directly, so that students could give themselves multiple ways to ‘feel the language’, or otherwise take in the words, and to build a relationship with nehiyawewin (Plains Cree). This open communication about why I was asking students to do something more with the language than just see it on a screen also provided us with another way to point out where metacognition (thinking about our thinking processes) is practiced in our learning.

I would like to (and I would suggest to others to do so as well) seek out more strategies and tools, and upgrade my own knowledge in and about PISL and TPR to improve my Cree language teaching. I am hesitant to add ASL (American Sign Language) in that list, at least for teaching Cree, because I understand that there are also issues of re-colonizing in the use of ASL alongside Indigenous languages and cultures (Vox, 2022). As Indigenous teachers of Indigenous languages, we need to be mindful of our methods and the history of the resources we choose to use. I’ve been considering this challenge in my practice; how to be more creative in expanding my knowledge of teaching, using multiple forms of input and output.

Making changes based on student input improves the overall learning and teaching experience. In my classes, I first focused on welcoming all students and establishing our learning space as one where we are all here as learners on some level, and where harshness surrounding the language and judgements about fellow students or speakers is very inappropriate (eg. including others’ dialect, accent, word choice, writing preferences, background, etc.). I sent out feedback forms and often asked if what I was doing was working well for everyone, or if folks needed something different to be done. I took all feedback onboard, and I made changes based on the needs and requests of any students that shared them with me. Changes to my initial teaching plans that I felt were either directly or indirectly resulting from student feedback on their learning needs included: sharing slides and handouts ahead of time; creating ‘organizing documents,’ listing all the handouts sent out to students and listing all the YouTube links to unlisted videos of class recordings; creating handouts listing basic Cree grammar-teaching-style examples; typing out Cree words and phrases on slides (and most handouts) in SRO, syllabics, and phonetic spelling; paying close attention to my phonetic spelling to follow the same “rules” throughout all my slides; underlining areas of emphasis in word pronunciations, and pointing out differing emphases in two different dialects that are local to my area; checking my example videos for whether captions were provided, and if they included any written Cree words; transcribing a recorded interview with an Elder into SRO and adding those captions into the private YouTube video; typing Cree words into Zoom’s chat box (in SRO) when discussing things in class without slides (because captions don’t pick up Cree language).

Having recorded classes or workshops available online also responds to a need by providing access to Cree language and culture across time and space; folks can access recordings or materials across the continent or the world, and when it works best for them, at their own pace and on their own time. In both of my classes (those meeting on either Tuesdays or Thursdays), there were people

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registered from places much further away than the Edmonton area, reaching all over Alberta, into other provinces across Canada (Saskatchewan, Ontario) and into the United States (Montana, Alaska, California). Some of the participants from much further away have shared deep gratitude with me, for their being able to access Cree language, culture and community, despite having moved away or been born far from their enrolled reserves and extended family (Many of whom were originally from reserves in Alberta!). Some of the students in these classes lived in areas where, even if they were to find local Indigenous language classes or cultural workshops, they would not be for Cree language, Plains or otherwise. Some of my adult students told me, at the end of our last class together:

“I’m going to miss our Thursdays. I’ve never had a sense of community before especially because it’s just been me and (my parent).. And I really felt a sense of belonging here. I’m very grateful for all of you. Thank you so much for this experience.”

“I’ve had fun. I’ve had something to look forward to (each week). This is a lot of fun.”

“I wanted to thank you for the Cree course this year. I wasn’t able to attend after the first few classes since my college classes started to conflict, but I continued watching lessons online and really really enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to learn Cree virtually.”

The last quote in particular, emphasizes the importance of ensuring access to language and culture is provided for busy adults too, who might otherwise have to put off the pursuits that feed their spirits and help strengthen their families, sometimes for years.

Literacy in Cree Language Is a Complex Issue

The most insightful questions and topics come from our students, and in our virtual Cree this past spring, some examples surrounded the difficulties in encouraging literacy in our Indigenous languages. I (Christina) wanted to share some of a discussion we had on our last day of class together, so that Educators might consider ways to improve the teaching methods that we commonly use as a community. Our discussion began in reference to a few quotes I shared from Andrea and Belinda’s book, *nehiyawetân kikinâhk: Speaking Cree in the Home, A Beginner’s Guide for Families* (Custer & Daniels, 2022):

“Once you can say and understand a word in Cree, never use it in English again!” (p.93)

“Even if you think they do not understand what you are saying, speak anyway. Demonstrate.” (p.91)

One student began: “How about once you can READ and understand a word in Cree, since I can’t speak, I only can sign.” I added that the quoted advice is for

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language mentors and teachers, and generally for audible, face-to-face transmission. When we start to think about what we're doing earnestly, and actually begin the process of learning and using our languages, we will need to adapt the advice for our own situations, every time. For the second quote, I also shared, for learners who are speaking aloud with a mentor, one can always ask to be spoken to / communicated with in Cree—"mahtesa, nehiyawewin. enohtenisitohtamân nehiyawewin." (Please speak Cree, I want to understand Cree language). Another student shared: "Some of them don't know how to write in Cree they said they know how to speak in Cree but don't know how to write... Then they would say, Oh, I will get back to you later I will have to think how to translate." And they don't get back to me." I replied (paraphrasing): "That's what the phonetics are for... we can ask them "Can you write it out the way you say it?" and then, if we, as learners, understand enough of those phonetic spellings, we can go "Okay, this is how you can write that if you use SRO or syllabics, and you can teach them and they can teach you, back and forth. It's not easy, I know. That's kind of the situation facing all of us, is we have to try to teach each other... We can also ask someone travelling with those speakers to please write what they say phonetically in Cree [or in SRO or syllabics if they know it] so that you can still receive those higher ideas that they're saying. You would be the one creating that teaching space!" I also acknowledged that many Cree learning resources, teachers included, are not 'geared towards' reading and writing, which was the initial reason that I wanted to focus my theme for this Spring's lessons on reading and writing skills. There are a number of teachers who are very much against reading and writing in Cree, seeing written literacy using Roman Orthography (and sometimes syllabics as well) as tools for colonization, alongside residential schools; phrases like "Our languages were always oral, they were never written down" show that train of thinking. Not everyone who doesn't teach reading and writing is antagonistic to the idea though; there are also some Elders and educators etc. who just happen to have never been taught how to read and write in Cree, and who may not see any value in learning to do so.

I believe, however, that refusing to learn and teach Cree written literacy is removing the use of a tool that we could otherwise be using for great benefit, because written literacy as a tool is widely understood by people, Indigenous and otherwise, and is a way that we've been able to convey stories from those who have passed on and had books written, or between folks who are far from their home communities and supports, with those who are deaf, or in ways that we might not have yet considered. I understand the hesitation (and outright refusal) to learn or teach literacy in Cree language, because I'm aware of our history with education. Most Indigenous peoples' introduction to written literacy in Canada (and the many other colonized places in the world) ranged from unpleasant to violent, and I would never downplay the harm that those institutions and their aftermath have wrought. There are Elders, teachers and Knowledge Keepers who don't believe in engaging in practices that even remotely remind them of the institutions and methods that have harmed them or their loved ones and are at the roots of cultural and physical genocide. That is a reality that can't and

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shouldn't be denied, and we as educators need to be sensitive and mindful in our approaches so that what we are trying to accomplish for language revitalization doesn't get rejected, and doesn't re-colonize. We also need to keep in mind that it is easy to pass teaching methods down from experienced to new teachers that are outdated but are in widespread use, and if we are not mindful, being consistently reflective in our plans, we can cause harm unintentionally through our actions and through our inaction. *kâkike ekikâpimohteyahk pâ-peyâhtik* (we must always move forward with care).

I can understand where people are coming from, when I hear sentiments like: "Cree language shouldn't be taught in schools, it should be taught out on the land." or "Our language was never written down, and we need to return to that if people really want to learn it." However, I do believe that we live in a time and in situations that don't often allow for ideal conditions for teaching Indigenous languages and cultures. By welcoming Cree language (and many more Indigenous languages) to be taught in schools and through institutions, and by continuing to do our best to ensure that the resources used are high-quality, involving Indigenous voices, and are centred on the spirit of the language first and foremost, we can help meet the needs of the Indigenous people that need access to some kind of resource. We need to meet people where they are at, while we build the ideal situations we seek, and not wait until conditions are ideal.

I see Cree language literacy as being able to read and write in the multiple semi-standardized forms of SRO and syllabics, as well as having an understanding of the linguistics-based information that surrounds categorization and explanations about the language. Cree literacy is a set of tools that learners can use to gain access to complex language input, on their own time and outside of a systematic learning environment. The ability to read biographies and other long-form resources in the language can also help fluent Cree speakers to practice and retain their knowledge while away from other Cree speakers, and to access thoughts shared by Cree speakers from different locations or from the past. I disagree with the notion that traditionally, 'Cree language was never written down', because we know from historical accounts and biographies that in the past, there were indeed fluent Cree speakers, that were culturally-minded, that chose to read and write in the language when literacy was available, and it made them no "less Cree" for doing so. I also disagree with the idea that reading and writing are intended only for peoples of non-Indigenous background (partly because the stories of the origins of syllabic writing tell us otherwise (Stevenson, 2000)); but I also support that there are definitely situations where it is best to make mindful (and sometimes cautious) decisions about how certain instances of writing will be used, and by whom (Hinton, 2001). In order to make informed judgments, we must keep our minds open and communicate with our communities, so that we each understand when technologies like literacy are being utilized appropriately and when the rejection of such a tool is the best decision.

Concluding Comments

Through this reflection on our teaching youth, young adults and older adults, in-person and online, and through the K-12 schooling system or through cultural camps and workshops, we are reminded of the necessity of providing high-quality, passionate and free access to Cree language and culture. Through mainly oral feedback and our own observations, we were made aware that so many people are grateful for the opportunity to take part in learning and to be able to share their own knowledge. We believe that people learn best when they feel comfortable enough to establish relationships and where the setting is casual enough for them to feel free to make mistakes without judgement. As learners of nehiyawewin, who have either not grown up speaking the language or who have not spoken it in a long time, students face barriers: a lack of adequate learning resources; a lack of support from their fellow nehiyawak (Cree people) or from the few teachers they may be lucky enough to find (not to mention on a wider societal level); and a lack of financial resources and time to dedicate to their learning, despite the fact that they feel a strong desire to know and be a part of their heritage cultures and languages. We feel that by providing access to language and culture in virtual spaces, we overcome barriers of distance and transportation, and we are able to benefit from the use of technology to help meet accessibility needs. By providing sessions for free, we overcome financial barriers which can provide motivation and incentive to register. By ensuring that learning is done in a casual, but structured way, and with emphasis on supporting learners whole selves (emotional, physical, mental, spiritual) we overcome barriers of feeling excluded and of fearing harsh judgement.

There are still challenges and needs that go unmet in the ways that we've been offering our camps and workshops thus far, including age and gendered limitations for our cohorts, few 'spots' available for those who wish to register, an unfortunate lack of ceremonialists, especially in urban settings, and a lack of training in our institutions for Indigenous language teachers in general, but especially in the areas of virtual teaching for Indigenous languages, immersion teaching, land-based teaching, and language and literacy teaching. However, we keep our hopes high for decolonization and Indigenization initiatives to help us improve language and culture revitalization, and we are excited by the increase in interest shown by youth for their heritage languages and traditional lifeways. esohkihakameyimoyahk! (We strongly continue on!)

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