Executive Summary of the Research Project "Learning While We Teach: The Experiences of Instructors in Community-Based Programs
Dr. Carmen Rodríguez de France
With support from Doctoral candidate Anya Hall
University of Victoria

Introduction

The teaching and learning of Indigenous languages, epistemologies, and pedagogies requires presence, relationships, and relevance. Distance teaching and learning poses a challenge when these relationships rely on a medium such as synchronous and asynchronous sites for learning. This project focused on researching the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous instructors when facilitating courses in 4 of the community-based programs delivered by the Department of Indigenous Education at the University of Victoria, many of which are now delivered online.

   The early months of 2020 proved to be challenging in more ways than one, crushing people's lives and livelihoods due to the arrival of the coronavirus-19. In British Columbia, the virus prevented students and instructors in schools, colleges, and universities from ending the academic year with face to face classes. In late March, all these spaces for learning were closed and remained closed until the Summer of 2021 when many classes resumed, and life on campuses and schools returned with changes and adaptations not only in terms of maintaining physical distance but as importantly, in terms of adopting technology to deliver courses online. Various platforms were tested and some of them were kept while others disappeared.

    In the Faculty of Education, and specifically in the Department of Indigenous Education, instructors were encouraged, challenged, and confused about the need to deliver and facilitate language courses using only distance based pedagogies and strategies. While this was a good idea at the time, according to Pulla (2020) "the mere substitution of technology in place of traditional curriculum delivery is not adequate" (p.185). Consequently, new approaches in the use of technology are needed to help educators develop and even co-create culturally relevant curriculum and learning materials based on the contexts of the learners, allowing the development of flexible and interactive mediums with which both teachers and learners can engage.

The Research Context

Distance -based programs are not new to the Department of Indigenous Education. Language revitalization initiatives and other courses have been offered in communities in face to face environments for the past 35 years, allowing Indigenous students to come together to create a learning environment in which they feel safe and comfortable despite the cultural differences amongst them. Traditionally, these courses and programs require students from different locations in Canada to be together for one week (usually in the Summer) at the start of their programs with Elders and knowledge keepers involved in the facilitation of said courses where learning is fully experiential and relational. These sessions are complemented by asynchronous sessions where the students learn at their own pace once they return to their place of origin. Online platforms have complemented these programs in order to support learning, and instructors have made use of a variety of tools to support students.

However, the past 24 months have presented instructors with a series of opportunities and challenges in terms of the tools and the pedagogical approaches used by them, as well as the substitution of experiential learning activities in the community-based programs, which are now delivered online.

The Department of Indigenous Education is composed of 5 tenure track faculty members and up to 8 sessional instructors and other appointed instructors. Not all of the sessional instructors are Indigenous but given their track record learning and teaching Indigenous languages, they are allowed by the community to facilitate courses. For this project, I was able to recruit 2 non-Indigenous instructors and 3 Indigenous instructors all of whom have been long standing sessional teachers. All of them were interviewed using zoom as a platform to capture their experiences teaching language online.

Given the changes as described above, this project sought to investigate the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous instructors when using online platforms to deliver their language courses.

The main questions were:

- What strategies and approaches or methods did you utilize in our online teaching ?
- [How] was this different from what you have done in the past?
- What did you learn about yourself when doing this work?

Shared Experiences

There were seven main themes that emerged from the interviews, related to the 3 main questions as above. This section is organized offering an overview of such themes. The details and comments from the participants will be part of the larger dissemination documents in journals, blogs, and other sources.

1. **Accessibility**: Online teaching offers advantages and disadvantages, such as being able to reach more people and sharing a variety of resources easier, but relying on stable internet connections and adding physical discomfort by increasing people's screen time. Participants differ in their views and experiences but some suggestions are offered by some participants to overcome challenges. This can also include some technological suggestions mentioned, such as using headphones and microphone or preferences for certain platforms.

2. **Learning and working from home**: This also creates advantages and disadvantages, such as being able to learn a language in the context of the community versus not being able to study due to demanding or stressful home situations. Instructors also spoke about their own experiences working from home, with varying degrees of ease or discomfort.

3. **Relationship (connections with and between students):** Relationship with and between students was discussed in relation to online versus face-to-face teaching. One point was that students needed extra support and care while not acting like the student's parent. Participants had different opinions about students with videos off and the use of Breakout rooms in Zoom.

4. **Cultural teachings:** This theme was mostly discussed by participant 1, but with some interesting thoughts that are relevant for the research. Some topics that came up were the importance of being in a circle, creating an atmosphere of reciprocity, using humor and sharing stories.

5. **Learning expectations and adaptations:** Adaptations were made by most but not all participants. Discussions included the need to maintain high expectations and being understanding of students' situations during the pandemic and their challenges with online learning. Some strategies in the next section can help enable students to reach their learning goals.

6. **Suggested strategies and needs**: Support from the university to work with a new platform was mentioned by most as helpful and essential. Many different teaching strategies are offered by the participants that help for online Indigenous language teaching.

7. **Personal attitude and learnings for instructors:** Experiences vary, but the discussion highlights resourcefulness and pride to have been able to adapt and learn so much

By exploring these approaches to teaching and learning, the research will hopefully contribute to advancing the possibility of access for Indigenous students who up to this moment in time might not have been able to participate in post secondary opportunities due to the perception that Indigenous languages and pedagogies could only be taught in face to face environments and contexts. The study findings will hopefully provide ideas and guidance for other instructors for making their teaching more relevant and dynamic for Indigenous language learners. This could lead to the creation of appropriate and adequate practices in online course design and delivery.

Works Cited

Pulla, S. (2020). Mobile Learning and Indigenous Education in Canada. A Synthesis of New Ways of Learning. In Management Association, I. (Eds.). Indigenous Studies. Breakthroughs in Research and Practice, pp. 175-199.