

Shared Knowledge and Experiences by MALS Elders



Acknowledgements

Thanks to

Violet Okemaw

Helen Robinson-Settee

Chuck Bourgeois*

Richard Perrault*

*Chuck Bourgeois passed away in 2018 and Richard Perrault passed away in 2019. MALS would like to offer special acknowledgement of their contributions toward preserving Aboriginal languages and culture.



Back row, L-R:

Don Robertson, Wanbdi Wakita,
Martha Peet

Front row, L-R:

Patricia Ningewance, Nelliane
Cromarty, George Fleury,
Stella Neff

This document is a summary of the MALS Council of Elders meeting that took place on April 11th and 12th, 2016 at the Manitoba First Nations Education Research Centre. The Elders present were

- Don Robertson Cree
- Nelliane Cromarty Ojibwe Cree
- Angelique Enekwinnare Dene
- Marie Enekwinnare Dene
- Wanbdi Wakita Dakota
- George Fleury Michif
- Patricia Ningewance Ojibway
- Stella Neff Cree
- Martha Peet Inuit
- Ellen Cook Cree

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Manitoba Aboriginal Language Strategy (MALS) Elders Gathering: April 2016

Introduction

During their two-day meeting, the Elders covered many topics and made several recommendations. Under the broad theme of language revitalization, the Elders discussed the limitations of Western teaching methods, Indigenous approaches to language instruction, and the role of the Land and our communities. Further, the Elders shared some of their ideas on how they thought MALS could take a more active role in language revitalization efforts. The Elders often used personal narratives and referenced traditional stories while sharing their thoughts. Overall, the Elders agreed that effective language instruction should give students the tools they need to reconnect to the values, practices and beliefs of their communities.

After being recorded and transcribed, the meeting yielded over forty pages of data. The four main themes are presented below, followed by a summary of the Elders' commentary. Appendices 1 and 2 are examples of successful education programs currently being offered at University College of the North. Both descriptions reflect the four themes identified in this report, and could potentially serve as models for future language revitalization programs. In Appendix 1, Elder Ellen Cook talks about the Centre for Aboriginal Languages and Culture at University College of the North. In Appendix 2, Elder Stella Neff gives a detailed description of the Kenanow Education Model at University College of the North.

Executive Summary – Overall Themes and Ideas

Indigenous Approaches to Language Instruction

Almost unanimously, the Elders felt that a successful language revitalization program had to be based on a holistic and student-centred approach because there is a great deal more involved in language revitalization than simply providing the proper curriculum. Family and community, emotional well-being, connection to the natural environment, as well as storytelling, ceremony and mentorship were all identified as critically important factors. Teachers need to understand that Indigenous languages are taught through relationships, and showing students how to build and maintain healthy relationships is just as important as vocabulary and grammar. The Elders emphasized that Indigenous languages are based on spiritual understandings, and students need to be exposed to these throughout the learning process.



Understanding why their languages are so important will allow students to become personally committed to their own learning. Language programs should also give students opportunities to learn and practise outside of the classroom and beyond the typical school day. As students become more fluent in their language, they will begin reconnecting with other important aspects of their culture, and develop better relationships with each other, their families, and their communities. As one Elder pointed out, the language has to be lived, not taught.

Limitations of Western Teaching Methods

Because of the deep connection between our languages and our cultural understanding of the world, even the best-equipped classroom can only offer limited opportunities for language instruction. Some Elders were also concerned about how English translations did not always reflect the true meaning of what is said in our languages. Spiritual teachings, Land-based approaches, close relationships, and informal family-centred language circles can be difficult to incorporate into rigidly structured school schedules. Learning an Indigenous language means also learning about a different way to look at and understand the world. A language program must be dynamic and adaptive, allowing students to see the value of their language outside of formal educational settings.

The Role of the Land and Our Communities

Many of the Elders repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Land in language instruction. Practising traditional skills and learning their associated vocabulary out on the Land gives students meaningful learning experiences and the opportunity to interact with Elders and other traditional knowledge keepers. Reconnecting to the Land through the language is also an important step in rebuilding the relationships that were damaged during the Residential School era.

The Elders described how important community life was in learning the language. Learning to speak their language empowers not only the students, but also the communities they come from. According to the Elders, communities have an important role in revitalizing their languages. A locally focused language program will allow students to learn the dialect and the place names of their home communities.

Beyond these ideas on how current language programming could be improved, the Elders also had suggestions on what role MALS could play in these efforts.

Specific Directions and Guiding Questions for MALS

The Elders each expressed a desire to see all the good ideas being discussed at MALS meetings translated into action and implementation. They also suggested that an inexpensive way to create resources and promote language revitalization would be to

create informal groups of fluent speakers matched with assistants who have technical skills. Acting in their role as 'bridges', MALS associates would make the knowledge of fluent speakers more accessible to second language learners. While funding proposals and administrative functions are important to our long-term stability, efforts in this area should not replace our overarching goal of persevering Indigenous languages. As one Elder said,

The thing that we seem to be doing is waiting. Waiting for something. Waiting for a government to write our, an okay, go ahead" to speak your language, there's no waiting, we still have to go, we have to do it, you don't have to wait for anything [...] In the meantime, individually our nation don't wait, you just go home and start doing it!!!

Our languages can never be separated from their ancestral roots – reconnection to ancestry should remain as the primary focus of revitalization efforts. Recognizing this, one Elder provided the following questions as a guiding framework for the future of MALS:

How did our ancestors draw strength from each other and the language, and how can we draw from that strength today?

How can we reconnect to what we have been disconnected from?

These questions are vital considerations as the Manitoba Aboriginal Language Strategy moves forward with language revitalization efforts.

Summary of Elders' Discussion

Indigenous Approaches to Language Instruction

- The individual learner needs to be acknowledged and incorporated into the language learning process.
- Learning the parts of the body first, and then the internal life of a person, situates the learner within the learning process.
- Respect for oneself and for our instructors is an integral part of language learning – this respect can also be learned through prayer.
- The way language is at the beginning of the learning journey will stay with a student. If they are having a positive emotional experience, they will associate that with the language. This is the opposite of what happened to our young people in the Residential Schools.
- Spirit is a large factor of language learning. We need to acknowledge the seen and unseen aspects of language learning, and teach our students to recognize them as well.
- We should not be afraid to express emotion.

- Our languages cannot be separated from the stories, songs, teachings, and ceremonies of our ancestors.
- Indigenous languages are contextual, and they need to be taught in their original contexts.
- Our focus needs to be on language revitalization, not language loss.
- We are connected to the Creator, and the universe through our bodies and our spirits. We need to tap into that connection when we are teaching and learning the language.
- Our languages began to disappear when our ceremonies began to disappear.
- We need our languages so we can continue to pray in the old way.
- Language instruction should be taught through relationships.
- The 7 Grandfather Teachings posters can decontextualize those teachings. In our language, those teachings cannot be so easily separated and hung on the wall.
- Our languages are what give us our sense of identity, and a connection to our relatives and our ancestors.
- Respect and proper behaviour were taught through storytelling.
- Modelling and mentorship were used as teaching methods before, instead of direct instruction.
- Experiential learning is a powerful teaching methodology.
- Students have everything they need within themselves to learn our languages. We only need to put them in touch with their spirits.
- “We have to live our language, we have to live it to know who we really are.”

Limitations of Western Teaching Methods

- Using English can sometimes be a barrier to learning our languages.
- Indigenous languages teach us how to relate to each other and the world around us differently than we do in English.
- If our teachers don't have positive relationships with our students, they won't be able to share the language in a good way.
- Students need to learn their languages 'from within', and that is very difficult to do in English.
- Education needs to be holistic and teach students how to be good human beings, rather than strictly passing on academic skills. This is beneficial for all students, not only Indigenous.

- Our cultures and our languages teach about knowledge and ways of being that Western education does not, and cannot.
- The spaces where we teach language are just as important as how we teach language.
- Many of us still believe that learning has to happen inside a school, but our language needs to be taught on the Land as well.

The Role of the Land and Our Communities

- Indigenous languages come from the Land, and should be taught through interaction with the Land.
- Our languages give us our identities, and our identities are connected to the Land.
- Indigenous languages teach us not only how to say 'tree', but also what it does, where it grows, what it can provide for us, and how to treat it respectfully.
- The Land can teach us if we let her.
- Disconnection from the Land is disconnection from ourselves.
- The language lives in family, community and story.
- Communities still have the right and the responsibility to decide what language their children will learn, and how they will learn them.
- Nations and communities need to take control of how their children are educated and develop their own resources to do so.

Specific Directions for MALS

- MALS associates with technical skills could work with fluent Elders to create resources. These partnerships do not need to be formalized.
- These professionals can bridge the knowledge of the Elders to relate it to students and teachers.
- The Elders have the knowledge, and MALS has the skills and technology to make it accessible to students.
- MALS should work toward producing a resource for teachers working in language revitalization.
- Ideas, initiatives and strategies developed during MALS meetings need to be carried out in order to be effective.

Appendix 1

Centre for Aboriginal Languages and Culture – University College of the North
by Ellen Cook

The Ininimowin Program (CITI – Certificate in Teaching Ininimowin) is offered by the Centre for Aboriginal Languages and Culture (CALC). The Centre is affiliated with the University College of the North. The Ininimowin program is the only post-secondary program that is presented entirely in Cree. The Centre hires Cree instructors to teach the courses, which add up to 31 credit-hours in total. The courses are one week each in length as most of the students are working in schools as non-certified teachers, either as EA's or Cree instructors. Stella and I usually co-teach several of the courses.

Many of the graduates of the program are working in the schools as Cree teachers. The courses have been offered at Norway House, Sapotaweyak, Opaskweyak, and at UCN in The Pas. There were 12 graduates from the first year it was offered. Students come from various northern communities – God's Lake, God's River, Oxford House, Cross Lake, Norway House, The Pas, War Lake, Grand Rapids, Easterville, Split Lake, Pukatawagan and Shamattawa.

The courses offered are as follows:

Structure of Ininimowin	Deals with morphology, syntax and semantics, etc. It covers the worldview and philosophy that affects language structure.
Miskasowin	Finding oneself, the history and ancestry; looking back; building our family trees; students will examine how Aboriginal people have maintained their cultural beliefs through family and community. The concepts of wahkotowin and wahkotamowin will be explored to develop understanding of place and language.
Teaching Methods II	Computers and technology.
Community-based Curriculum	Students develop a curriculum from their own communities, learning the history of their communities, and renaming the place names on their traditional lands, which have been changed to English.



Learning Assessment

Learning how to assess the language; introduction to appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures in Ininimowin language curriculum development.

Principles of Teaching and Learning

An introduction to the principles and practices of Aboriginal language teaching. The Kenanaw Learning Model will be used to develop knowledge of skill teaching, child-centred learning, learning strategies, and learner autonomy for language teaching.

Developing Innovative Learning Programs

Students are paired with community knowledge-keepers and Elders in a land-based setting to develop an innovative, culture-based curriculum.

Foundations of Aboriginal Language Education

Explores the foundations of Aboriginal language education from pre-contact to contemporary contexts. Students will examine traditional language learning processes, language development and language acquisition in Ininimowin, second language acquisition, and bilingual learning processes.

Tradition and Change

Introduces students to Aboriginal traditional teachings through the use of sharing circles, group activities and other Aboriginal cultural practices, and by working with traditional and non-traditional teachers. Students learn about the historical and contemporary issues of Aboriginal people and actively participate in various cultural experiences, including a feast.

Practicum

Completion of a 40-hour practicum in a classroom setting is required. The practicum will include opportunities for the candidate to observe, plan, and teach under the mentorship of a cooperating teacher.

Some of the courses require research, asking Elders about their communities and families. I was in Split Lake, and two of our former students were teaching Cree and they had their own classroom. One of them had the project she had done for the Community-based Curriculum nine years before. She had it displayed in her classroom and was quite proud of her work, which she now uses to teach the students about the place names surrounding their community.

Throughout the year, the students learn how to use/read and write standard Roman orthography in writing nēhinawēwin (Cree), as well as syllabics. Much of the course program incorporates the Kenanaw Learning Model as a teaching tool, using the recommended teaching methodologies that are based on Aboriginal traditions and worldview.

Appendix 2



References

Neff, Stella. (2019). Kenanow Model DVD. Kenanow Bachelor of Education Program – University College of the North. Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy.

