

Centering Indigenous Students and their Perspectives in Linguistics Course Design

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to reflect on our experiences and the outcomes of a collaborative project to develop an undergraduate linguistics course focused on Indigenous languages in Canada. Our development team consists of a senior undergraduate student who is an Indigenous language learner of Michif and Anishinaabe background and a non-Indigenous faculty member with a long history of collaborating with Indigenous communities on language projects.

Background

Our collaboration is grounded in principles of learner-centered pedagogy and student engagement. While these concepts are often seen as important goals in postsecondary education, students are rarely asked to actively collaborate in course development, and instructors are typically the ones responsible for planning content, structuring delivery, and designing assignments (Dunlop 2012). This lack of student consultation in course design can result in students feeling disengaged. Moreover, Indigenous students are at a heightened risk for feeling unsupported or alienated in postsecondary learning environments (Gallop & Bastien 2016). Particularly in courses with Indigenous content, there is a danger of Indigenous students experiencing trauma or cultural harm (McDonald 2016). However, when postsecondary educators foster positive and supportive relationships with Indigenous students, they can play an important role in the development of inclusive and engaging programming (Black & Hachkowski 2019). Particularly within the field of linguistics, there is growing interest in decolonizing research and pedagogy (Czaykowska-Higgins et al. 2017; Leonard 2017) and encouraging Indigenous students' involvement in linguistics (Gerds 2017; Sumida Huaman & Stokes 2011). With this background in mind, we focused on the question of how we could collaborate to develop a course that would draw on our collective experiences and knowledge to create space for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to learn and reflect on the critical issues around Indigenous languages in Canada and how the field of linguistics can support community-based language revitalization.

Methods

This project was funded through a "Reconciling Curriculum" grant available through our university. The objective of the grant program is to create "constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism and the work of reconciliation." The specific goals of our project are to create new course content and assessment materials that are grounded in Indigenous methodologies and student perspectives. With this in mind, we developed the following: (i) an annotated bibliography of background materials and course readings, (ii) a media library with videos, audio content, and interactive web spaces, and (iii) an assessment bank with quiz questions, problem sets, and journal prompts. We held biweekly meetings to discuss and combine our two perspectives. We recognized our lived experiences as valuable and important to our work, as there is a duality that allows for each of our own experiential knowledge to guide research and planning,

Outcomes

The result of our collaboration is a curriculum that has successfully inspired and challenged students by authentically incorporating Indigenous perspectives and methodologies. Beyond the product of our collaboration, we have also benefitted from the process. Our work is informed by the perspectives of a student and a professor, as well as the lived experiences of an Indigenous and non-Indigenous person. Determining the best ways to integrate our respective backgrounds has taught us both new ways to think about the role of Indigenous students in the field of linguistics and particularly in linguistics course design.

References

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