

Mobilizing and Activating Hałtzaqv̄la (Heiltsuk Language) and Culture Through a Community-University Partnership

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Article abstract

The sharing of existing linguistic resources through online platforms has become an increasingly important aspect in revitalization projects for Indigenous languages. This contribution addresses the urgency of such work through the lens of a partnership in support of one language, Hałtzaqv̄la (Heiltsuk), a critically endangered Wakashan language spoken in and around the traditional Heiltsuk territory of Bella Bella, British Columbia. Alongside immediate community needs for language preservation and reclamation—informed and guided by Heiltsuk values and goals—lie important ethical and practical questions about how best to activate historic recordings of Elders and knowledge holders who have now passed. Our partnership was explicitly structured around the objective of helping to mobilize the large body of existing language documentation and revitalization materials created in and by the community to support broader community access through digital technologies. Working within the fast-changing digital environment requires agility in order to respond to time-sensitive goals and the strategic needs of the community. Ensuring that such work is grounded in respectful collaboration requires ongoing care, consultation and consideration. The digital landscape is still a new and exciting space, and the opportunities to use online tools and technologies in service of language revitalization are ever increasing. We believe that the strategies, approaches and modest successes of the Heiltsuk Language and Culture Mobilization Partnership may be informative for other community-based language reclamation projects. We hope that outlining our experiences and being transparent about the challenges such partnerships face may help others engaged in this urgent and timely work.

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PROJECT REPORT

Mobilizing and Activating Hałzaqvła (Heiltsuk Language) and Culture Through a Community-University Partnership¹

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The sharing of existing linguistic resources through online platforms has become an increasingly important aspect in revitalization projects for Indigenous languages. This contribution addresses the urgency of such work through the lens of a partnership in support of one language, Hałzaqvła (Heiltsuk), a critically endangered Wakashan language spoken in and around the traditional Heiltsuk territory of Bella Bella, British Columbia. Alongside immediate community needs for language preservation and reclamation—informed and guided by Heiltsuk values and goals—lie important ethical and practical questions about how best to activate historic recordings of Elders and knowledge holders who have now passed. Our partnership was explicitly structured around the objective of helping to mobilize the large body of existing language documentation and revitalization materials created *in* and *by* the community to support broader community access through digital technologies. Working within the fast-changing digital environment requires agility in order to respond to time-sensitive goals and the strategic needs of the community. Ensuring that such work is grounded in respectful collaboration requires ongoing care, consultation and consideration. The digital landscape is still a new and exciting space, and the opportunities to use online tools and technologies in service of language revitalization are ever increasing. We believe that the strategies, approaches and modest successes of the Heiltsuk Language and Culture Mobilization Partnership may be informative for other community-based language reclamation projects. We hope that outlining our experiences and being transparent about the challenges such partnerships face may help others engaged in this urgent and timely work.

Keywords: Collaboration; culture; digitization; Heiltsuk; Indigenous; language reclamation

¹Hałzaqvła is the popular and currently preferred spelling used within the community to refer to the Heiltsuk language (see Heiltsuk Tribal Council 2015). Consequently and respectfully we use Hałzaqvła throughout this article and alert readers to note that this and other spellings, Hałhzaqvela (Rath 1974) and Hałzaqvła (Rath 2007; Heiltsuk Language & Culture Mobilization Partnership 2021), are all pronounced the same.

Introduction

In our digitally saturated age, the sharing of existing linguistic resources through online platforms has become an increasingly important aspect in revitalization projects for Indigenous languages (Pine and Turin 2019). This contribution addresses the urgency of such work through the lens of a partnership in support of one language, Hałzaqvł̄a (Heiltsuk), a critically endangered Wakashan language spoken in and around the traditional Heiltsuk territory of Bella Bella, or Wágl̄isł̄a, British Columbia, with only 2 percent of the community identifying as fluent speakers (Dunlop et al. 2018; Hałzaqvł̄a Authority Board 2019).

Alongside immediate community needs for language preservation and reclamation—informed and guided by Heiltsuk values and goals—are important ethical and practical questions about how best to activate historic recordings of Elders and knowledge holders who have now passed. Heiltsuk mobilization of language and culture can be dated to 1973, when the Bella Bella Band Council (now Heiltsuk Tribal Council) initiated a language and culture documentation and revitalization strategy. Within the decade, this led to the institution of a language and culture archive and Heiltsuk Language Studies Program in the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, as well as the establishment of the Heiltsuk Language Program in the (newly Band-controlled) Bella Bella Community School. This in turn led to the creation of printed texts and accompanying audio cassette recordings of the sound system, the Hałzaqvł̄a orthography, and grammatical introductions to the language for distribution and use within Bella Bella. Heiltsuk have long harnessed technology in support of Hałzaqvł̄a, from modified typewriters that would accommodate the needs of their orthography to customized computer fonts and a searchable multimedia digital dictionary produced using Microsoft Access in 2007.

In the interdisciplinary field of language revitalization, ensuring culturally appropriate access for community-based language learners to connect with their linguistic heritage and cultural knowledge is usually a central goal (Pine and Turin 2017). Since the 1970s, the Heiltsuk Tribal Council and the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre have been making available instructional materials and training fluent Heiltsuk speakers to transcribe and translate community-selected material using the specially designed Heiltsuk orthography.

The Creation of the Heiltsuk Language and Culture Mobilization Partnership

In 2016, the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, the Bella Bella Community School and the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program at the University of British Columbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate digital access to the extensive resources created through the Heiltsuk Language Studies Program at the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre for the Heiltsuk Nation, and to collaboratively create new opportunities for speaking, writing and reading the Heiltsuk language (Figure 1). The objective of this partnership was, and continues to be, to expand and deepen existing community language revitalization and cultural documentation in a digital environment. The urgency that motivated us was the realization that audio cassettes, on which so much cultural and linguistic knowledge had been recorded, were becoming obsolete, while computers and the internet were becoming the new norm.

In order to share existing materials in digital spaces, we first needed a keyboard input system that would work across platforms without requiring the installation of specialized fonts (Figure 2). This would in turn facilitate access to a searchable online Heiltsuk dictionary with associated audio alongside the digitization and online hosting of resources previously developed by the Heiltsuk Language Studies Program. Our partnership has brought Heiltsuk Elders, youth, language teachers and champions, educators, and members of Tribal Council together with students, staff and faculty in Vancouver and Bella Bella around common goals of language revitalization.

A key aspect of this partnership has been the opportunity to learn from and mobilize the rich historical archive of Heiltsuk documentation of their own language. The Heiltsuk Nation has been designing, leading, resourcing and managing its own permanent record and understanding of the Heiltsuk language since at least 1973. This included welcoming John Rath, a PhD student in Linguistics from Leiden University in the Netherlands, into the community in the early 1970s to work on a multi-year documentation project that resulted in the development of grammatical descriptions, lexicographical work and a practical orthography for writing down the language (cf. Rath 1974, 1981 and 1985). During his time in Bella Bella, Rath worked with a broad cross-section of fluent speakers to develop a large body of self-instructional materials. Rath also trained two Heiltsuk linguists, Lillian Gladstone and Evelyn Windsor, who transcribed and translated texts and made audio recordings of speakers. University-community engagements often prioritize academic research in ways that have historically benefitted universities more than communities (McGregor, McIvor and Rosborough 2016). Noting this, we established different objectives from the outset. We were guided by three Heiltsuk cultural leaders and intellectuals on the university side—Pamela Brown, Gerry Lawson and Kim Lawson—with additional direction and advice offered by Heiltsuk Hereditary Chief and retired educator Chester Lawson and the staff of the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre and the Heiltsuk Language Program



Figure 1: Meeting between the Heiltsuk Tribal Council and the Heiltsuk Language and Culture Mobilization Partnership, July 2018. Photo by Bridget Chase.

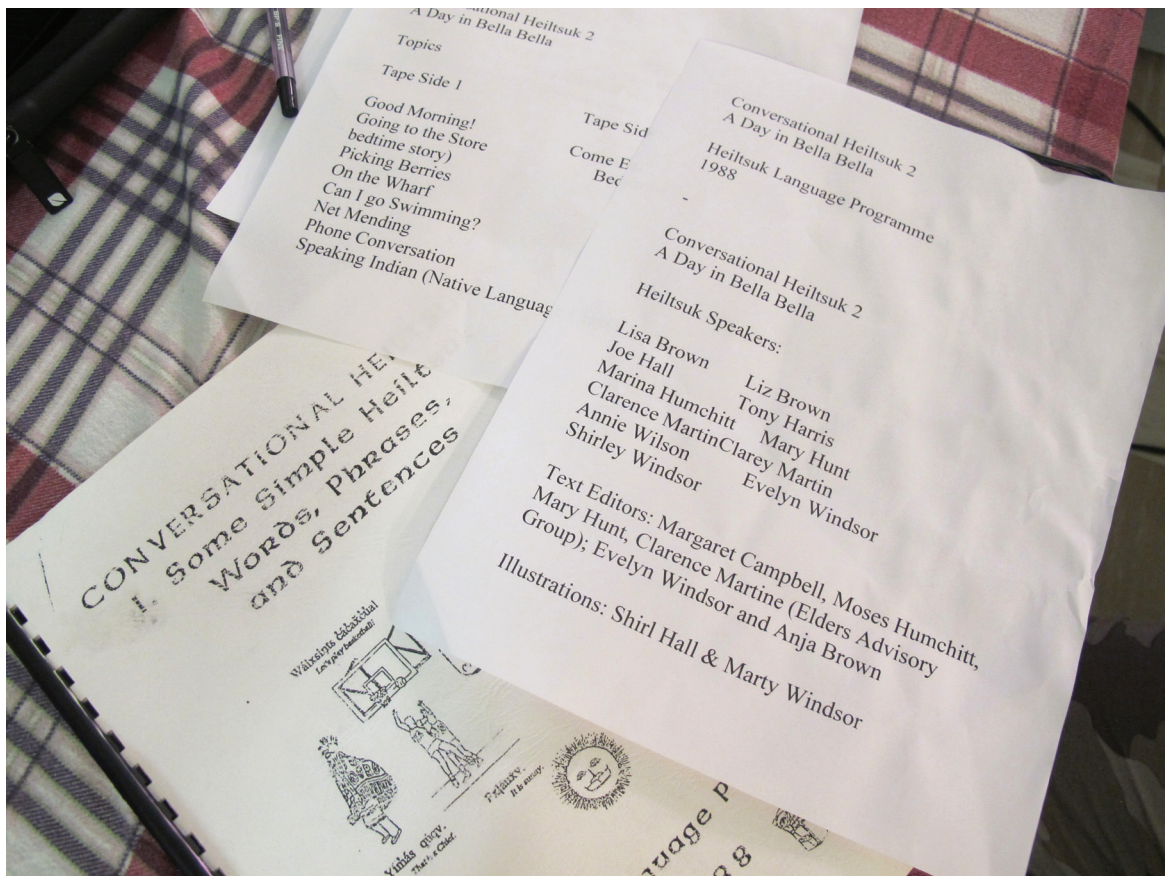


Figure 2: Heiltsuk language documents being prepared for rekeying using the Heiltsuk Unicode keyboard, July 2018. Photo by Bridget Chase.

at the Bella Bella Community School. The partnership was explicitly structured around the objective of helping to mobilize the large body of existing language documentation and revitalization materials created in and by the community to support broader community access through digital technologies (cf. Brown et al. 2017).

Our initial work included multiple foci, including a mixture of tangible deliverables together with exploring flexible opportunities for our partnership to expand and contract as contexts changed. We identified pathways to channel university resources, knowledge and student labour in ways that were mildly subversive yet still academically credible towards the partnership. This included opportunities such as the Remote Communities Based Learning Fund, now the BC Rural Community Engaged Learning Fund, which supports instructors in designing courses that include community-engaged learning opportunities for their students. Since 2016, our partnership has helped to enhance access to materials already created in, for and by the community by developing online spaces that support Heiltsuk community members who are documenting, reclaiming and revitalizing Hałtzaqvł̄a through newer digital tools and technologies.

Assemble the Team, and the Projects Will Follow

Any partnership is only as strong as its constituent parts. Assembling the right group of people, in terms of skill set, disposition and collegiality, is the first step. Our partnership has always been centered by its Heiltsuk backbone: not only the three Heiltsuk members of our university community mentioned above, but also Jennifer Carpenter, Fran Brown, Rory Housty (Figure 3), Jan Gladish and Robyn Humchitt in Bella Bella, who, along with many others over the last four years, have provided strategic direction. In addition, our partnership has been infused by the energy, dynamism and skills of undergraduate students at UBC, both Indigenous and settler, each of whom has brought immense value to our shared work. From the beginning, we were committed to engaging Heiltsuk students who were interested in language reclamation and education. Uplifting all Heiltsuk and supporting community members looking for opportunities and experiences through community-based language and culture work is a central aspect of our partnership. Key students—some now graduated and working in aligned fields—include Aidan Pine, Bridget Chase, Benjamin Chung, and Annie Guerin, as well as Heiltsuk students Maria Martin, Aly Reid, and Sheila Reid, all of whom have spent time in Bella Bella, funded by the partnership to advance specific linguistic, technical and pedagogical projects identified by staff at the Bella Bella Community School and the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre.



Figure 3: Rory Housty and Annie Guerin recording, 2018. Photo by Bridget Chase.

Early Successes: A Unicode Keyboard and an Online Digital Dictionary

In the first year of our partnership, we focused on developing the baseline tools to bring the Heiltsuk language into accessible digital spaces. While the internet is often considered to be a great equalizer, in reality digital inequity poses a critical challenge for minority language communities. Around ten languages account for nearly 90 percent of the top ten million websites (Charlton 2018). The first step for any language to be used on the web is for its orthography to be able to be typed, rendered and shared across different operating systems and browsers in ways that are consistent and predictable (Schillo and Turin 2020). In 2017, with technical support provided by Aidan Pine, we developed a cross-platform Unicode input system for the Heiltsuk language to support speakers who had previously relied on a font-specific encoding—requiring each user to have the font installed on their own computer. The Heiltsuk Unicode keyboard supports seamless communication on all web platforms.

Around the same time, Pine used his nascent dictionary software, Mother Tongues (Figure 4), to host an online version of the 2007 Digital Heiltsuk-English Dictionary. Based on the original Practical Heiltsuk-English Dictionary (Rath 1981) with an updated orthography, then built using Microsoft Access (a database management system), this first ever searchable Heiltsuk-English lexicographic resource was originally commissioned by the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre and supported with a grant from the First Peoples' Cultural Council. Enriched with historical as well as contemporary recordings of speakers, the Heiltsuk Mother Tongues dictionary application is accessible online, is regularly used by community members, and is optimized for both mobile devices and desktop computers.

These relatively simple interventions were necessary developments without which more complex digital tools could not be designed. Having a unique and stable Unicode keyboard input system—for Windows PC, Apple Mac and Chrome operating systems—as well as a rich ten-thousand-word online digital dictionary gave the Heiltsuk speech community a new level of representational autonomy (cf. Pinto 2018).

Digitization: Breathing Life into Analogue Collections and Sharing Back

With Heiltsuk Unicode in place, we were now in a position to support the transformation of archived analogue publications about Heiltsuk language and culture into more easily accessible, living digital documents. Just as the Heiltsuk Mother Tongues dictionary offered an online and interactive version of a previously existing dictionary, we identified additional opportunities to re-code existing language and cultural materials and prepare them for online delivery. What followed included the rebuilding of a classic and much-loved Heiltsuk alphabet chart (Figure 5)—the laminated poster of which has adorned classrooms in the Bella Bella Community School since 1986—into a dynamic and interactive webpage, featuring audio recordings and accompanied by Shirl Hall's original line drawings.

Thereafter, our partnership team worked to retype a seventy-eight-page Short Classified Wordlist dating to 1985 and developed an interactive Heiltsuk calendar. More recently, we have partnered with colleagues at

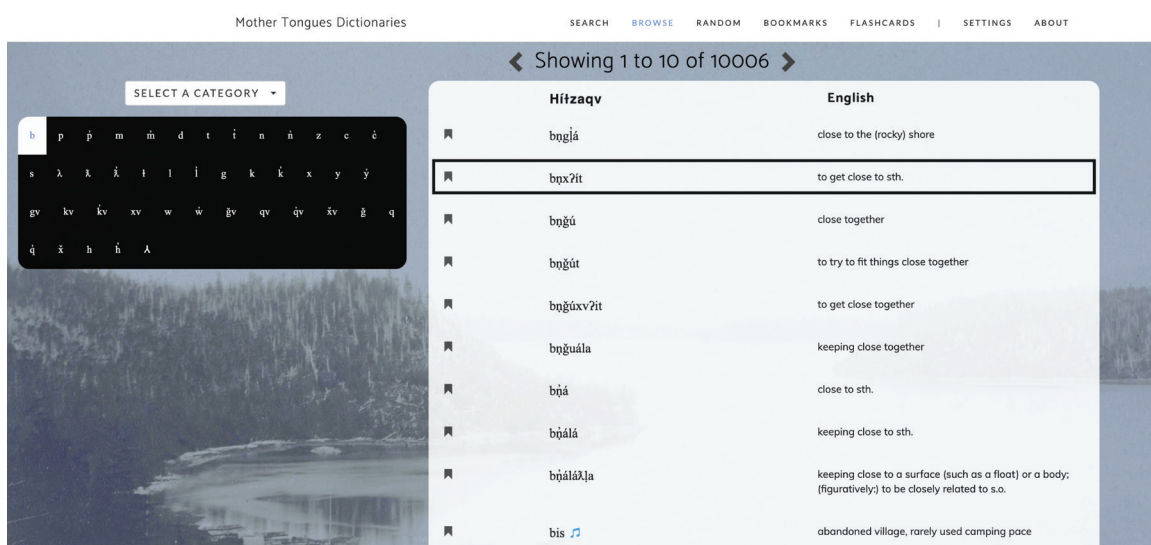


Figure 4: Screenshot of Mother Tongues Dictionaries, 2019. <https://mothertongues.org/heiltsuk/dictionary/#/home>.



Figure 5: Heiltsuk Alphabet Chart, 2018. Photo by Bridget Chase.

Indigenous Storybooks to retype, digitize and host five beautifully illustrated storybooks published by the Heiltsuk Language Programme in 1988 (Figure 6).

While reanimating previously analogue print materials by making them searchable, linking them with online audio and building opportunities for interaction is certainly positive and valuable, it will never replace the human connections that come with face-to-face language sharing and the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Acknowledging this, in addition to the online tools our partnership has developed, we have sought out opportunities to situate our work in social contexts within the Heiltsuk community through events, exhibits and gatherings.

In 2018, at the suggestion of our colleagues in the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, staff and students who were active in our partnership held a widely publicized and well-attended open house at the Bella Bella Community School, inviting all community members to use and critique the online tools we had developed and interact with the people who had developed them (Figure 7). This “sharing back” provided an important opportunity for community members to put faces and names to what might otherwise have been a technical and remote undertaking. Later that year, at the invitation of curator Pam Brown, our partnership supported the “Culture at the Centre” exhibit at the UBC Museum of Anthropology by showcasing our Heiltsuk language tools to tens of thousands of visitors through an interactive iPad installation (Figure 8). We were delighted that the Heiltsuk Unicode keyboard found good use in all of the Heiltsuk exhibit labels and associated content.

Finally, our partnership has been fortunate to support the urban community of Heiltsuk speakers residing in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia with the development and content provision of a Heiltsuk Urban Language course. The urban language classes bring together upwards of a dozen Heiltsuk language learners of all ages alongside a language instructor who teaches with digital and analogue materials made more readily available through our partnership. It has been rewarding to witness the fruits of our collaborative work being folded back into community gatherings, cultural displays and in-person language learning opportunities.

Living Language: Reconciling Opportunities and Challenges

The technical steps involved in moving materials from analogue to digital and making resources available online are the least complex aspects of our work. We have also tried to respond to more intricate challenges,

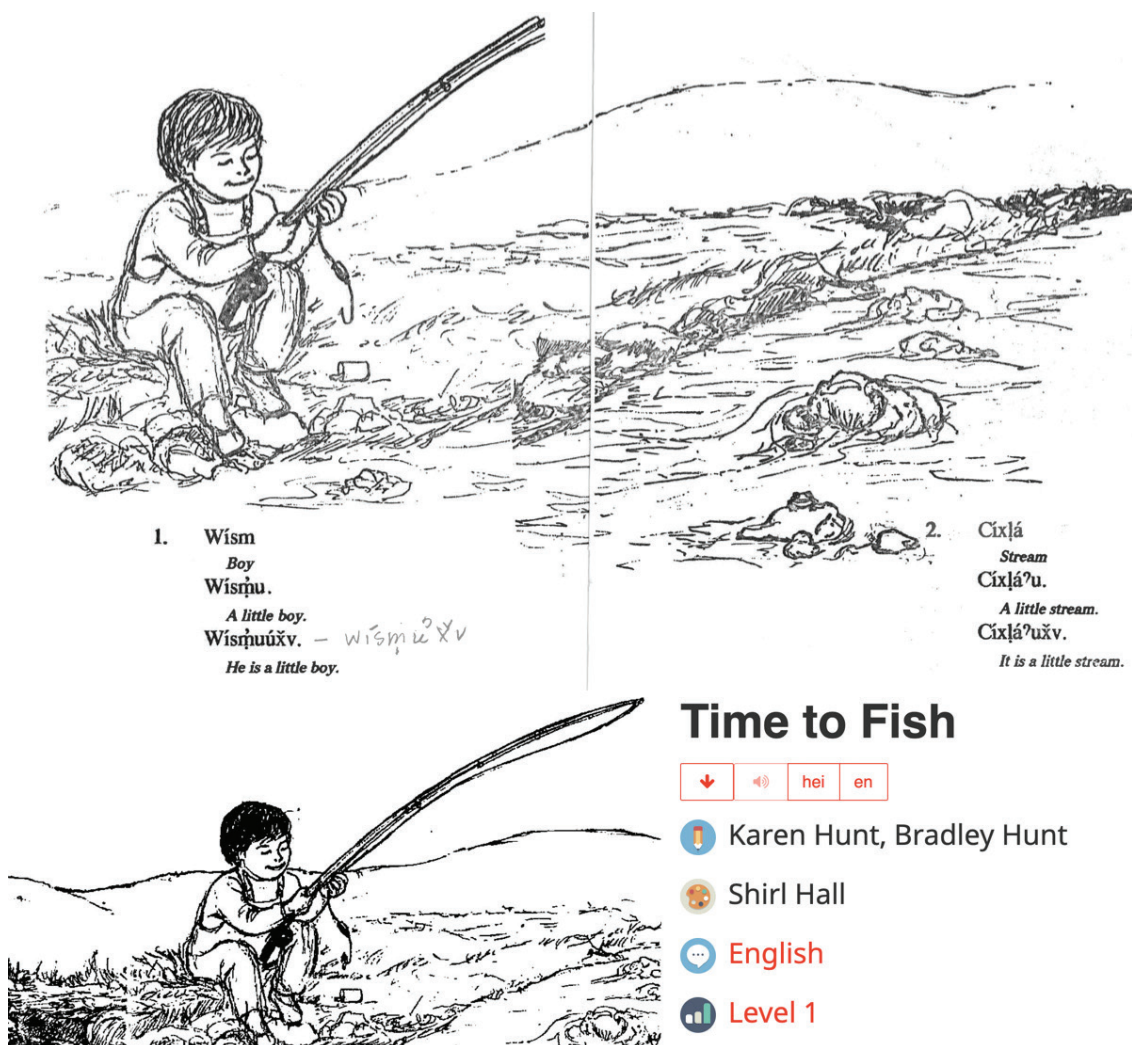


Figure 6: *Time to Fish*, published by the Heiltsuk Language Programme, 1988, on the top; and its digital replica hosted on Indigenous Storybooks, 2020, on the bottom. <https://indigenousstorybooks.ca/bellabella/stories/en/0010/>.

such as the question of how to develop effective methods for representing language in online spaces that are pedagogically informed and engaging for new learners (cf. Schillo and Turin 2019). The goal of our partnership remains the mobilization of text and audio recordings so that Heiltsuk community members have better access to their language, in both Bella Bella and off reserve. What is the right balance between spending limited time and resources developing Indigenous-specific language learning tools versus partnering with pre-existing language learning platforms, such as FirstVoices or Duolingo?

As new resources are identified, unearthed and shared, and community conversations about Heiltsuk language reclamation and revitalization deepen, the partnership has adapted in order to remain relevant, and has needed to navigate challenging questions. How should we approach the inevitability of language change, not to mention still existing regional and dialectal variation within the Heiltsuk speech community? How can we ensure that the collections in the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, which represent an important chapter in the evolution of Hałzaqvł̄a, are accessible and available to community members through web platforms? And how can we ensure that our work remains firmly grounded in the OCAP® principles of ownership, control, access and possession while at the same time reaching a wider audience online (cf. Kruijt and Turin 2017)?

Working within the fast-changing digital environment requires agility in order to respond to time-sensitive goals and the strategic needs of the community. Ensuring that our work is grounded in respectful collaboration requires ongoing care, consultation and consideration. Ethical decision-making in an online world sometimes means that resources are left to wait a little longer in their analogue forms until appropriate agreements have been reached about how and with whom to share them. But such compromises

Community Open House

Please come to a drop-in
open house hosted by the
Heiltsuk Language and
Culture Mobilization Partnership

We are a group of faculty and students from UBC and the Heiltsuk Community, working with the Culture Centre and the School on Heiltsuk language and culture projects. Want to learn how to type Heiltsuk on your computer? We will show you what resources are available, how to look up words in the online dictionary, and discuss our goals for the future. All are welcome and we look forward to answering question and hearing feedback.

WHERE: Gvukvas Ka'kax'ila/Learning Centre, Community School
(Come through the back door)

WHEN: Friday July 6, 2018 at 1:30-3:30pm

heiltsuk.arts.ubc.ca | Refreshments will be provided!

Figure 7: Invitation for the Community Open House in July 2018.

come with their own costs: how long can a community whose fluent-speaking population is aging truly wait? While our partnership is proud of its many achievements, we continue to grapple with issues of historic trauma, authority, workflow, and above else, the grey areas identified in the questions above.

A digital tool is only as good as the people who use it, and a partnership is only as strong as the partners who come together to work for aligned goals. The digital landscape is still a new and exciting space, and the opportunities to use online tools and technologies in service of language revitalization are ever increasing.



Figure 8: Museum of Anthropology attendee looking at the iPad in the “Culture at the Centre” exhibit, 2018. Photo by Ken Mayer.

We believe that the strategies, approaches and modest successes of the Heiltsuk Language and Culture Mobilization Partnership may be informative for other community-based language reclamation projects, and we hope that outlining our experiences and being open about the challenges such partnerships face may assist others engaged in this urgent and timely work.

Acknowledgements

While they have declined the invitation to be recognized as co-authors of this article, Pamela Brown, Gerry Lawson and Kim Lawson each deserve special mention and appreciation.

Anthropologist and curator Pam Brown, MA, of Heiltsuk and Kitasoo ancestry, recently retired from the post of curator, Pacific Northwest and Urban Indigenous Liaison, at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver. Pam’s expertise includes material culture, collaborative research, community exhibitions and Aboriginal internships. Her priority has always been to make museum resources more accessible to Aboriginal communities, artists, Elders, youth and organizations. Pam directed the Native Youth Program from 1994 until her retirement. Pam worked with the Heiltsuk Cultural and Education Centre for many decades and is a founding member of our collaborative partnership.

Mălágus Gerry Lawson serves as Manager of the Oral History and Language Lab at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. A proud member of the Heiltsuk First Nation and an enthusiastic new language learner, Gerry has over fifteen years of experience in the field of Information Management and Heritage Digitization. His work is focused on developing practical, scalable resources for Indigenous cultural heritage preservation, and to decolonize information practices. Gerry serves as the Technology Lead for the innovative UBC Indigitization Program, sits on the Canadian Federation of Library Associations’ Indigenous Matters Committee and the Association of Canadian Archivists’ Truth and Reconciliation Task Force, and is a member of the board of directors of the First Peoples’ Cultural Council.

Kim Lawson is the Research and Community Liaison Librarian at the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre (RSHDC) at the University of British Columbia. A member of the Heiltsuk First Nation, Kim is involved in community governance work. Her much-cited Master’s thesis, “Precious Fragments: First Nations Materials in Archives, Libraries and Museums,” was written to acknowledge Indigenous cultural professionals (storytellers, archivists, librarians, curators and knowledge keepers) doing important memory, information and cultural work that was largely unknown outside their communities and undocumented in Library and Information Studies literature. She was Archivist/Librarian at the Union of BC Indian Chiefs while finishing her Master of Library and Information Studies from the UBC School of Library and Archival Studies (SLAIS). She worked at the Xwi7xwa Library (UBC) for thirteen years. Kim sees the interconnectedness of education, critical thinking, cultural humility, information services and metadata as a crucial aspect of Indigenous informatics and community resilience.

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