Aboriginal Canadian Second Language Acquisition and Constructivist Principles:
Language revitalization as the Drumbeat for Change.

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Language revitalization amongst Canadian First Nations Peoples is a subject that is plagued by unsupportive colonialist education practices. A complex and often convoluted topic, there are differing views amongst member of communities in regards to what the language teaching should look like; particularly in recognition of the fact that the languages themselves were always traditionally used and transmitted in a strictly oral manner. Juxtapose this with a Euro-mainstream educational system familiar to the majority of Canadian adults where language exposure is linear, heavily phonetic and in print and therein lie many complications. An entity that communities can agree upon is the inextricable link between languages themselves and Indigenous cultural wisdom, identity and long term continuance of the first inhabitants of this continent (Norris 2001). A potential solution for addressing the need for second language acquisition amongst young Native adult Canadians is the culturally responsive constructivist methodology.

Previous community efforts with adult language education have met with limited success, due to their espousement of the mainstream diadetic or instructivist techniques that do not positively reinforce First Nation learning styles. Reflecting instead what is the general trend in higher education in most countries today (Whyte 2011). When analyzing First People's learning styles cautions must be made in creating overtly generalized assertions regarding the existence of a single Indigenous learning mode. And any such statements are used within communities amid appropriate disclaimers and prudence. Given the rich cultural and historically diverse tribes and clans of Aboriginal Canada one can't be immune to the certain danger in the use of static declarations regarding any type of similarity. However to show the impact of a constructivist paradigm on the learning of First Nations students there is a need to identify the ways in which they differ in respect to learning from non-Aboriginals. In addition to this, there are several studies that show distinctive traits and commonalities with First Nations Learners and as such these shared characteristics do warrant some attention (Hankes 2006).

The frequent mode of dominion transgression amongst invading civilizations over global Indigenous was the elimination of linguistic diversity and establishment of a homogenous language system. Today, in an effort to regain sovereignty and remove the shroud of colonialization many Aboriginal Canadians are putting heavy emphasis on language revitalization. With the linguist security not being in itself the end to this political exertion but the means by which it may be achieved (Nichols 2006). The need for these reclamation efforts is momentous in its timing. Recent Statistics Canada

information regarding Canadian Aboriginal language speakers showed that in the last five years there has been a five percent drop in the self identification of conversational use of an Aboriginal Language (Norris 2001). This is not an expected result, in light of the increased focus on language classes for youth in off-reserve and on reserve schools (Canadian Council of Learning 2009). However, it is possible that these traditional tongues have not however been taught in a traditional manner, even within community schools. As noted by concerned First Peoples globally from Mohawk to Maori, the only truly native thing in the schools before the emphasis on ancestral language and culture, were native kids (Nichols 2006).

In addressing this concern, a constructivist approach would platform Canadian Aboriginal Learners into stronger educational success due to the similitude between the two styles. In turn, enhancing the learner's feeling of competence about their language learning and directly raising their desire to learn more (Kohenen 1992). Thus, any implementation of constructivist techniques will also sustain the First Nation's principles of education (Hankes 2006). Community educators have long been identifying the "necessity for special methodologies and sensitivity to the goals and contexts of the Aboriginal communities globally" (Norris 2001). With the constructivist emphasis on reflection, experiential learning, and collaborative activities there is a direct parallel to the traditional First Nations approach to teaching which stresses "think then do, watch then do, listen then do" (More 1987). This practice is far removed from the instructivist Euro-centred approach of "trial and error" that is still underlying most mainstream Canadian education motifs. Additionally the elements of constructivism which emphasize collaborative dialogue and personal contemplation are more reflective of the need and aspirations of the community traditions. Where reflection on legends and oral stories also comprised the vehicle for moral, attitudinal and community values transmission a key component in the epistemology of Canadian First Peoples (More 1987).

For successful language revitalization there has to be a healthy population of adult speakers incorporating the language into all aspects of home, work, business, education and social contexts. Both parents and grandparents are a principal source for learning an ancestral language (Canadian Council for Learning 2006). A constructivist classroom, and one in particular that is technology based, lends an alternative for adult Native language students that is flexible and feasible. And as many communities of Aboriginals throughout Canada adopt working Nation state policies and attain self-government, having linguistic sovereignty affords them more control over their education and politics (Nichols 2006).

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Additionally, it would be supportive of younger generational language efforts. The Arizona Language stabilization project identified the lack of ability to practice the language at home and the parent's lack of proficiency in the language as the two most frequently identified barriers to success for younger students and that the home should be the essential source for native language learning (Cantoni 2006). And in the key findings of the State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada from the Canadian Council on Learning it is stated that "Canadian Aboriginal children and youth reported that family provided the greatest support when it came to learning their ancestral language."

Recently, Aboriginal language classes that have been created for adults have adopted the content-based, heavy phonetics approach that is so inconsistent with traditional language teaching. Albeit, reflective of what the general trend is in higher education in most countries today (Whyte 2011). Although this transmission-acquisition approach does have success in learning simple subject content, it does not incorporate the "input, feedback and production of output that learners need to assist their learning beyond the classroom" (Leeser 2004). This is mostly due to the fact that the learners rarely speak; instead they rely on subject input from texts and teachers (Leeser 2004). Given the efforts that are being made to incorporate language teaching amongst the Canadian Natives and the widely recognized importance of language acquisition to Aboriginal Learning, it is troubling to identify a continuance of long-term decline in the use of First Peoples languages (Centre for Learning 2006).

Ascertaining the channel for altering this trend is critical and a means does exist. It begins with recognizing that educational decisions and policies must be congruent with the Aboriginal perspective on learning. And it considers alternatives such as the incorporation of technology into educational delivery. It is important to caution however, that even though it is relatively easy to make resources available to students with the use of technology, putting those into practice effectively "requires imagination and effort" (Whyte 2011). Further to this, there needs to be endeavors to put the learner at the centre of every activity and provide the time for the adult student to incorporate the learning and situate it cognitively. This would reflect a practice that adheres to the fundamentals of both First Nations education practices and constructivist conventions.

The challenge of being an adult and learning a second language cannot be ignored. Dr. Michael Krauss, director of the Alaska Native Language Centre, equates it to learning how to swim in a classroom setting versus swimming in water (Krauss 2007). Constructivist methods however are finding success in second language classrooms with adults in other countries. For instance, incorporating the constructivist idea

that a learner constructs new meaning based upon their previous experiences there has been heavy emphasis on activities which develop a student's interlanguage (the language system specific to an individual that they use to make sense of new incoming knowledge) and the outcome is greater ease with second language acquisition (Whyte 2011). Further to this, in a 2002 study amongst adults learning English as a second language, there was a "significant positive relationship between the learner's use of metalanguage and subsequent uptake" when exposed to a constructivist technique in their foreign language classrooms (Leeser 2004). Still other research more specific to First Nations learners details how constructivist tasks that are more "simultaneous processing approaches" or tasks that allow the learner to synthesize separate elements into a group or perceive the task as a whole as opposed to segregated parts are supportive of Indigenous learning needs (More 1987).

In light of this, what would an Aboriginal second language course for First Nations adults look like with a constructivist approach? It would start with all activities being situated directly on the student and having the experiential learning process as the foundation. Moreover, it would incorporate a structural timeframe that promotes reflection and benefits the need for knowledge uptake and incorporation. It would also rely upon the wisdom traditions and oral history of the people within the community of speakers. The teacher would take a backstage and give up much of the centralized control so inherent in an instructivist classroom. They would also be cognizant in approaching errors as a means to an end and as an inevitable part of the teaching process while shifting their contribution to providing guidance and being a co-ordinator (Whyte 2011). As mentioned in the November 1996 Rationale and Needs Roundtable symposium for Stabilizing Indigenous Languages one of the main detractors to encouraging First Nations students in second language acquisition is the shame of being wrong and making errors (Cantoni 2007). Further expanded clearly by Viljo Kohenen "language learning requires the ability to cope with the unknown, to tolerate ambiguity, and to generally accept feeling child-like in the learning process (Kohenen 1992). An adult learner would not benefit from the detractor of heavy assessments and evaluations during this process. Supplemental to this, adding elements of constructivist classrooms that are supportive of First Nations Learning needs, such as creating a learning space that puts at the heart the immediate personal experience of the learner themselves would be emphasized (Kohenen 1992). As reflect & learn/ watch & learn students how the student makes sense of and perceive the environment around them truly lies at the core of the individual learning experience. This juxtaposes well with a constructivist language class emphasis on experiential learning where the learner is viewed as the "active organizer of all incoming information" (Kohenen 1992).

The need for reclamation and revitalization of ancestral languages amongst First Nation communities in Canada is an urgent one. Hand in hand with other decolonialization endeavors it will allow Aboriginal peoples the opportunity to embrace and enhance their cultural wisdom for generations to come. Language ownership also creates the space for re-establishing sovereignty. History has it that when Columbus first exerted his right to claim the Americas for the Spanish crown in his notebook he wrote that he was uncontested. Since the Indigenous did not contradict him when he exerted this right, ignoring the fact completely that his Spanish was not understood (Nichols 2006). Such events are in the past and Indigenous communities are looking for educational practices that mirror their own traditional pedagogy; best exemplified by a constructivist approach to second language acquisition. In essence, it is not strictly learning the use of the language that is important for adults living within urban or rural Aboriginal communities. It is instead, that the language serves as a means to ensure the wisdom traditions and create healthy and vibrant communities.

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