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December 2020

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This article was originally published at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120970938>

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Citation for this paper:

McIvor, O., Sterzuk, A., & Cook, W. (2020). i-kiyohkātoyāhk (we visit): adapting nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin (Cree) language learning to the COVID-19 reality. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 16(4), 413-416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120970938>.

# i-kiyohkātōyāhk (we visit): adapting nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin (Cree) language learning to the COVID-19 reality

AlterNative  
2020, Vol. 16(4) 413–416  
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DOI: 10.1177/1177180120970938  
journals.sagepub.com/home/aln  
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## Abstract

i-kiyohkātōyāhk (we visit) is a phrase which describes our experience of trying to recreate an online version of our way of life, being together in the language. The following report is our view of the ways nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin (Cree) language learning has adapted to the COVID-19 reality since March 2020. Our hope is that by sharing the experience most familiar to us, the one we are living as learners and speaker-teacher, we offer a useful perspective and potential solutions or directions for others.

## Keywords

Indigenous language revitalization, technology, language learning, synchronous video chat, COVID-19

As co-authors, we have come to know each other through our shared love and concern for the continuation of nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin (the Cree language).<sup>1</sup> Our language (across multiple dialects) is one of the largest language groups in Canada, and yet the profile of speakers, like many languages, is older (Statistics Canada, 2017), and there are very few communities who are systematically passing on the language to the youngest generations in a way that would create new generations of new first-language speakers. This leaves the language vulnerable and also in danger of disappearing within one or two generations.

i-kiyohkātōyāhk (we visit) is a phrase which describes our experience of trying to recreate an online version of our way of life, being together in the language. The following report is our view of the ways nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin (Cree) language learning has adapted to the COVID-19 reality since March 2020. Canada is a large country with at least 70 Indigenous languages (Statistics Canada, 2017) of which nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin is just one. Our report then is purposefully ethno-centric, that is, nēhiyaw/nīhithaw (Cree)-centric. Our hope is that by sharing the experience most familiar to us, the one we are living as learners and speaker-or teacher, we offer a useful perspective and potential solutions or directions for others.

## Locating ourselves

*William (Bill) Cook* is a Rock Cree from wapātakociwanohk (Southend, Saskatchewan, Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation). He is a husband, father, a first-language speaker and a nīhithawīwin educator. Bill is also a master's student at the University of Regina. His current work examines the use of technology to connect Cree language learners with language

speakers at a distance through synchronous video chat technology. Bill is a sessional instructor at the First Nations University of Canada and a board member, Cree instructor and technology leader for the nēhiyawak Language Experience (nLE). *Onowa McIvor* is maskēkow-ininiw (Swampy Cree) from kinoseo sipi (Norway House Cree Nation). She is a language recoverer of nikawaypan (her late mom's) ancestral language. She is also an Associate Professor, and a leading scholar in Indigenous language revitalization at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Onowa co-leads the NEȚOLNEW Partnership netlonew.ca, a national project focused on Indigenous Language Revitalization. *Andrea Sterzuk* is a White settler academic, originally from rural Saskatchewan, Canada. She is a Professor at in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina and teaches and researches in the area of applied linguistics. She is a settler learner of nēhiyawēwin.

## Assessing our situation

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis that hit North America in March 2020, there were many efforts underway to continue nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin. Some of these undertakings were in-person, on the land, while others were already

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Figure 1. Cree Literacy Network (creeliteracy.org).

virtual. However, the global crisis halted all in-person language work other than what was possible within one's own family "bubble" and pushed efforts online. Here we will share with you what has occurred within our language group. We used a free online tool called Padlet.com to collect and analyze (a) pre-COVID language activities (both online and face-to-face), (b) shifts we witnessed due to the inability to gather in-person and, finally, (c) new initiatives that occurred in response to the pandemic. We hope by sharing the resilience and innovation shown by our language advocates, learners, teachers and speakers that others may see themselves here too, draw inspiration from successes we have had and together we can continue moving forward with our language work during this difficult time.

### Pre-COVID activities

Our review found the most common activities prior to the global health crisis of 2020 were in-person language classes in the community, mainly through non-profit organizations and post-secondary institutions. These in-person opportunities for learning were also represented by "speaking circles" aimed at conversational skill-building well as "language cafes" with similar aims. In addition, asynchronous interactions via social media and websites were also prolific, however mainly used for meta-language discussions—meaning learners and speakers were "talking about" the language rather than "talking in" the language. *nêhiyawêwin/nîhithawîwin* speakers and learners' use of social media and other digital platforms to share their knowledge and love for the language proved strong, prior to this global shift. With over 31,000 members, the Facebook group *Nêhiyawêwin (Cree) Word/Phrase of the Day* is one such notable example. Other platforms include the website *Cree Literacy Network* which frequently benefits from the writing and videos created by Cree language expert Solomon Ratt (Figure 1).

Another example of pre-COVID activities can be found in the work of Simon Bird. Using the name *#CreeSimonSays*, Bird, a Cree language activist and teacher, maintains a YouTube channel with over 1K subscribers as well as a Facebook page with over 17,000 followers where he shares

videos, memes, short games and polls designed to help Cree language learners.

### Shifts and new initiatives—responding to COVID-19

The most obvious shift based on our systematic review of social media channels focused on our language was a shift from in-person to online language classes via platforms like Zoom. In addition, *nêhiyawêwin/nîhithawîwin* language activists have begun using Facebook live or posting pre-recorded videos to share online *nêhiyawêwin/nîhithawîwin* content from which others can learn.

In our conversations about these recent innovations, Bill shared that he sees himself as a helper of *nêhiyawêwin/nîhithawîwin*. Bill, along with many other *nêhiyawêwin/nîhithawîwin* teachers, seems to find ways to connect with others who are in the same learning journey. From this perspective, then, he uses many tools to share the gift of language to people that are interested in learning, speaking, knowing and listening to it. As a living example, since COVID-19 began, the tools that he uses have shifted entirely to online spaces. Teachers like Bill have adapted and found ways to use technology to connect learners with (often older) speakers of the language. Galla (2018) explains that Indigenous peoples are increasingly

"coming to terms" with digital technology—finding ways to exploit these "new" technologies to promote and benefit language revitalization efforts in ways that were not available before. Digital technology is a medium that allows language learners and speakers—regardless of age—to access and engage with their Indigenous languages . . . (p. 114)

An example of a current language program shifting to online delivery can be found in the work of the *nêhiyawak Language Experience* (<https://neh yawak.org>). Under the direction of Cree language activist and scholar Belinda Daniels, this not-for-profit organization has operated face-to-face language camps and classes for over 15 years. Bill is one of the nLE language instructors, with Onowa and Andrea as learners. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, the

**Nehiyawak Language Experience Inc.**  
 Due to **COVID-19**  
 restrictions  
**nLE Summer Cree Camp is going**  
**ONLINE**  
**Registration Opens June 1st**  
**@ 9:00am**  
**(SK Time)**  
 Multiple Synchronous Sessions  
 Simultaneously with professional Cree Instructors  
 \$300 per person, 40 spots available  
 Please register online  
**4 Hours a Day for 4 Days**  
 To Register go to:  
**www.nehiyawak.org**  
**(click tab: nLE Summer Cree Camp 2020)**

**Figure 2.** Nēhiyawak language summer camp poster, retrieved from public post on social media site.

nLE team moved quickly to redesign their classes and immersion program to shift to online delivery. The program now uses a blend of Zoom, Moodle-based learning management system (LMS), and other third-party software to connect teachers and learners (Figure 2).

Several other online Cree teaching groups have also popped up online during COVID-19, including ones based in Vancouver, British Columbia; Edmonton, Alberta; and Winnipeg, Manitoba. These groups use Zoom to deliver lessons to students. In the case of the Edmonton and Vancouver groups, the classes were originally established as face-to-face and then moved to an online setting. Bill also created a new online space for Cree language use and learning known as *The Cree Group*; this speaking and listening group meets for one night a week for 1 hr via Zoom. This group of speakers and learners also began as a face-to-face language meet-up in February 2020. Initially, the attendance was somewhat low and fluctuating. When COVID-19 began, Bill moved the group online which is sponsored through nLE and interest in the group expanded when it became more accessible to participants from across North America. In our conversations, Bill describes this greater interest and involvement as moving from “a low valley to the top of the valley.” In this sense, moving online meant that his calls out to fellow Crees and language learners were heard further and louder. Online activity has created a different vantage point for these language practices and provided a sense of community, connection

**Nehiyawehwin**  
**On-line Cree**  
**Language Classes**  
 Thursday Afternoons  
 May 7th - June 25, 2020  
 3: 00 pm - 5:00 pm  
 On the internet via Zoom.  
 All ages welcome!  
 Apply on-line now!  
 Join the Ojibway class at this link:  
<https://forms.gle/i687HpnuGB2XXoAA6>  
 Questions?  
 Email our Language Program Coordinator Jessica Couzelis at:  
 PAFNWLanguages@gmail.com. Include Cree Class or Ojibway class,  
 your full name, phone number & the Indigenous nation you belong to.  
 Funding by  
 FIRST PEOPLES  
 CULTURAL COUNCIL

**Figure 3.** Online classes poster retrieved from public post on social media site.

and calm to learners, some of whom invite family members within their household to participate and listen in on the lessons (Figure 3).

The following are examples of some of the shifts and adaptations we have seen over the past several months in response to COVID-19. We have seen new language leaders emerge, with both new and former language enthusiasts coming forward. Some of these innovations were already underway prior to COVID-19 but underwent adaptations, while other solutions have arisen from the current global health crisis. Examples include new “lesson series,” individuals began creating language videos sharing publicly and challenges were posed to other learners, sharing one’s efforts on a regular basis with other learners. New language lesson opportunities have also arisen from.

These experiences have created opportunities in terms of increased access to the language but it has also revealed some challenges like access to cellular transmission and the high-speed Internet connections necessary for certain online platforms. Some of the new online groups and language exchanges also include Elders. This too has resulted in some required innovations. Many Elders are willing and others are even tech-savvy but still require some direction. In some situations, like the language programs that are shifting from face-to-face contexts to online interaction, Elders may need new devices and therefore programs require funds to purchase tablets for all. In addition, relevant and needed apps must be downloaded and plans in place on how to train Elder-speakers in safe and accessible ways. Examples on how this can be done are, for example, through step-by-step screen captures, creating “how to” videos and sharing via YouTube or securing tech-savvy “family bubble” members to assist in navigating this technology.

Galla (2018) also recognizes that connecting across generations could have impacts for youth.

Community-based language revitalization efforts have the potential to bring together youth, who are more comfortable with digital technology as users and producers, and elders, who are language and cultural knowledge holders, to work collaboratively on language initiatives and projects—thus allowing for an intergenerational exchange of ideas, skills and learning opportunities. (p. 108)

## Solutions

As programs continue to function online, a checklist tool might be useful in terms of troubleshooting possible issues. From what we have observed over the past several months, teachers and programs need to pay attention to: Internet service availability, technological devices (tablets, cell phone) accessibility and individual comfort levels of speakers and learners using technology; in online learning environments, offering various levels when possible might be advantageous; creating guidelines and instructions that guide users to access points for video conferencing such as Zoom, bluejeans, adobe-connect, google hangouts or skype; recruiting younger family or community members that are in Elder-speakers' safe "bubble" who are tech-savvy and are nearby to assist.

Other considerations are sponsorship or financial assistance from organizations that will take on the financial burden of third-party software membership fees, website hosting fees, higher level Zoom functionalities, Moodle LMS for sustainable curriculum sharing and the ability to offer these learning opportunities for free to all participants.

## Conclusion

The potential isolation created by the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have led to more individuals to "step up" to share their knowledge of the language and a greater number of diasporic learners to reach out for access to learning. COVID-19 has brought out a wide range of nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin language learners from a wider geographic span to online learning platforms. In our context, participation in the online learning and conversation groups seems to have served as a way to form community during a time when face-to-face interaction was not possible. As a Cree instructor, Bill is personally grateful to offer new

language learning opportunities in so many different platforms because it reminds him that Cree people are culturally resilient people. In Bill's words, "we will always find ways and we will find each other."

This is "our" situation—perhaps like other language learning communities around the world, we had some technological solutions already underway and others have emerged from the present situation. But what is important is that our languages continue. That we move from the low part of the valley to the high, and perhaps in some ways there may even be some benefit that comes from the shifts we have experienced that have forced us to think about learning and sharing language differently. This is our view, our language situation and one set of solutions as we see it. We hope you may find something in our story that is useful and helpful in your context. ekosi.

## Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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## Note

1. nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin (the Cree language), both spellings will be used throughout the article. The first spelling is the "y" dialect. It is most common and widely spoken in Canada, and the one Andrea is learning. The second is Bill's dialect (th) and also the dialect Onowa is learning. Bill also understands and teaches both.

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