

## Digital Storytelling and Reconciliation

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**IN HIS ADDRESS** to the United Nations in September 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau presented a vision of Canada as a country committed to diversity rather than division, collaboration rather than conflict. He focused in particular on the role education plays in providing the next generation with the tools needed to be successful citizens and active contributors to the global economy. A critical component of this endeavour is the important work of maintaining and developing the linguistic capital of our nation, with particular emphasis on Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee communities, which have struggled for legitimacy in our society. Our diverse linguistic landscape leads us to commemorate a very complex history as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation.

We speak different languages, and a compelling way to share our personal histories is through our stories. The work of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) demonstrates the power of stories to engage all Canadians in what defines and challenges us as a nation. Indigenous storytelling and ways of knowing can play an important part in reimagining a multilingual Canada in the twenty-first century. The critical work of reconciliation started by the TRC will allow us to forge a multicultural, multilingual Canada, in which reconciliation is meaningful and inclusive, and where Indigenous priorities are powerful in our nation-building agenda.

As we seek to reimagine a multilingual nation, language and literacy educators are keenly aware that the digital revolution has dramatically transformed how we interact with one another, how we represent ourselves, and how we speak, write, and tell stories. Digital tools have enabled the genesis of a broader range of vocabularies, genres, and styles. Languages are documented and shared in creative ways, with the goals of preserving those that are endangered and promoting a greater awareness of how multiple languages coexist. Through texting and chatting on social media, we have begun to speak by writing. In doing so, our voices create change that underscores the goals of reconciliation.

Moving across online and offline spaces with greater fluidity, Canadian youth are able to engage with an even wider set of people, cultural histories, and languages. In the digital era, the multilingualism that is emblematic of the rich diversity of our country continues to grow and find dynamic spaces in which languages thrive and reshape each other. This growth not only affirms the value of these languages but also asserts how Canadians of different cultural backgrounds—whether Indigenous, immigrant, or refugee—all hold a legitimate place in our vision of the future. In digital media, these stories can take shape through words, images, voices, and gestures, heightening their contributions. Publishing and production companies no longer have a monopoly to decide whose stories are shared and whose voices get to be heard in the grand narrative of our nation.

The dramatic increase in technological innovations has not benefited all Canadians equally, however. In particular, there are Canadian children and youth (potentially at risk in our reimagined future) who do not have equitable access to and use of digital technology. Children living in low-income families or in homes with limited access to digital technology are vulnerable. While we work toward building greater digital infrastructure and integrating technology into schools, we need to be aware of who is reaping the benefits of this digital future and who remains on the margins.

A related challenge stems from our nation's colonial history, which has created a different set of educational, social, and economic realities for Indigenous peoples as compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. By harnessing the power of the digital, youth from a range of

backgrounds have the opportunity to assert a legitimate place in this narrative and to claim their right to speak. The ongoing challenge for educators, communities, and policy-makers is thus to understand the extent to which digital innovations can promote a multilingual Canada in the era of reconciliation.

Before reimagining the future, we must fully understand the present. Officially a bilingual country, Canada is increasingly, in practice, linguistically diverse. In the 2011 Census of Population, 20 percent of the population reported a mother tongue other than English or French, and more than 200,000 people regularly speak an Aboriginal language at home. The Multiliteracies Project, based at UBC and the University of Toronto, was one of the first national Canadian initiatives to recognize that the linguistic and cultural diversity of schools is a source of great strength to our nation. This collaboration resulted in exciting innovations, including the creation of multimodal dual-language digital stories, digital sister-class projects, and the use of the students' home languages to facilitate content and language learning, in both first and second languages.

Indigenous communities are also embracing digital storytelling as a means to revitalize their cultures and languages. These technologies have brought new approaches to language and literacy learning with opportunities for expressing contemporary Indigenous identities for children and youth. For example, the Young Lives Research Lab at the University of Prince Edward Island has engaged Indigenous youth in digital storytelling projects to communicate and share their experiences of mental health well-being ([katilleczek.ca](http://katilleczek.ca)). These young people took part in their own community-based research to creatively represent cultural events, practices, and realities that shape their lives, studies that have implications for enhancing youth-related programs and policies.

The link between new technology and ancestral knowledge is also supported by emerging mobile applications, virtual games, and online tools developed by or in partnership with First Nations communities. An early online initiative by the South Slave Divisional Education Council in the Northwest Territories has made a dictionary and audiovisual stories and resources available in Dene languages such as Chipewyan and Slavey, as well as Cree ([ssdec.nt.ca/ablant](http://ssdec.nt.ca/ablant)). In British Columbia,

First Voices archives and provides new technologies that allow First Nations communities to document and learn their languages, helping to ensure their survival ([fpcc.ca/language/FirstVoices](http://fpcc.ca/language/FirstVoices)). Simon Fraser University's First Nations Languages Centre has launched a digital app consisting of eighteen episodes of a story built around a significant Secwepemc cultural character, whose powers allow viewers to learn language and cultural traditions tied to the land, ecology, and social relations ([sfu.ca/fnlc.html](http://sfu.ca/fnlc.html)). In Alberta, Little Cree Books has published the first freely available online collection of stories in an Indigenous language to be released under an open licence in Canada ([littlecreebooks.com](http://littlecreebooks.com)). In the north, a special Inuit-language keyboard enables Inuit speakers to type using Roman orthography and have their messages conveyed in syllabics, while Apple's app store offers language applications in Cree and Ojibway for hand-held devices. These exciting developments point the way forward to a more inclusive future shaped by multilingual contributions.

Building on these initiatives, and in the spirit of the TRC, we must seek to create productive communities for younger multilingual learners in the multilingual Canada we envisage. Although one in five Canadians speaks a language other than English and French as their mother tongue, fluency in other languages drops sharply by the third generation. This intergenerational loss of language not only is a personal loss for individuals and families but also represents a great loss for Canada as a multilingual nation. First-language maintenance is associated with many benefits, including better academic performance, enhanced identity, and improved ability in English and French. Although many teachers recognize the importance of bi- and multilingualism for their students, a lack of available resources too often compromises support efforts.

In seeking a path forward for a multilingual Canada, we can seek inspiration from a number of exciting innovations over the past decade. For example, UBC's Storybooks Canada is a powerful interactive website that makes stories from Saide's African Storybook initiative available in refugee and immigrant languages of Canada, such as Arabic, Punjabi, and Mandarin, in addition to English and French ([storybookscanada.ca](http://storybookscanada.ca)). Powerful tools on this website help beginning readers and language

learners make connections between speech and text, and between their home and official languages. A related project at UBC is actively pursuing applications to support the learning of Indigenous languages, and is making stories from Little Cree Books available in a variety of accessible formats in both Canadian Aboriginal syllabics and standard Roman orthography, as well as developing language-learning tools and resources from the open-licensed texts ([global-asp.github.io/lcb](http://global-asp.github.io/lcb)). Another promising digital initiative for Canadian schoolchildren is SFU's Scribjab, a multilingual tool available as a mobile phone app that enables children to create and illustrate their own stories in English, French, and other languages, including Indigenous languages ([scribjab.com](http://scribjab.com)). This program creates a space for children to communicate their stories and to increase appreciation of their own multilingual resources. With such digital tools, young Canadians will have a better chance of becoming and staying multilingual in future generations.

Notwithstanding the exciting digital developments in Canadian language and literacy education, we need to ensure that teachers are adequately trained in twenty-first-century pedagogies. Teacher education programs are experimenting with innovative educational strategies that weave inquiry and critical thinking together to address real-world problems. Currently trending is the massive open online course (MOOC) "Reconciliation Through Indigenous Education," developed by the Faculty of Education at UBC to assist educators with the goal of acknowledging Indigenous histories and languages in Canada, and promoting reconciliation. This course draws on Indigenous knowledge keepers, educators, and resources to create learning environments that strengthen Indigenous-settler relations. The MOOC contributes to the revisioning of this relationship by creating a community of diverse learners through its interactive and accessible structure.

Although there are intersections in the histories and realities of Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee people that contribute to patterns of marginalization in this country, the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation reminds us that we must create a new national legacy that includes Indigenous stories and perspectives, attending to the urgent priorities of Indigenous language and cultural revitalization and maintenance. We must also celebrate and foster the full range of immigrant and

refugee languages in Canada. Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth need opportunities to learn from each other's experiences, to engage productively with difference, and to build coalitions to advance reconciliation. In our efforts to build a stronger nation in the digital age, the challenge for educators is to harness insights from the TRC to ensure that the stories of Canadian children and youth are those of diversity rather than division, collaboration rather than conflict. It is a vision for a twenty-first-century Canada that honours and celebrates the linguistic contributions of all our storytellers.