# Ten Years of Mi'gmaq Language Revitalization Work: A Non-Indigenous Applied Linguist Reflects on Building Research Relationships


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# Ten Years of Mi'gmaq Language Revitalization Work: A Non-Indigenous Applied Linguist Reflects on Building Research Relationships

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**Abstract:** Language revitalization work at one First Nation in eastern Canada has been ongoing for over two decades. Several approaches have been put in place: core teaching of Mi'gmaq as a primary school subject, language documentation and the creation of an online dictionary, and an Elders' focus group on language, as well other shorter-term projects. In 2006, a group of university researchers was invited to collaborate with local Mi'gmaq language instructors who were trying out an image-based way of introducing adult community members to their language. After 10 years of continuous community–university contact, from 2006 to 2016, a non-Indigenous researcher reflects on the involvement of the academic applied linguist outsider in a constantly changing learning process.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, language revitalization, Mi'gmaq, Mi'gmaw, Mi'kmaq, Mi'kmaw, research ethics, second language acquisition, second language pedagogy

**Résumé :** Depuis deux décennies, un travail de revitalisation linguistique se poursuit auprès d'une Première nation de l'Est canadien. Différentes méthodes ont été mises en œuvre dans le cadre du projet : l'enseignement proprement dit du Mi'gmaq à l'école primaire, la documentation linguistique et la création d'un dictionnaire en ligne, et la formation d'un groupe de discussion constitué d'aînés dont les débats portent sur la langue, ainsi que divers autres projets de plus courte durée. En 2006, un groupe de chercheurs universitaires était invité à collaborer avec les formateurs locaux enseignant la langue Mi'gmaq dans la mise à l'essai d'une méthode basée sur l'image, destinée à familiariser les adultes de la communauté avec leur langue. Après 10 ans d'échanges ininterrompus entre communauté et université, de 2006 à 2016, une chercheuse non autochtone réfléchit à la façon dont s'inscrit la participation d'une universitaire externe, spécialiste en linguistique appliquée, dans un processus d'apprentissage en constante évolution.

**Mots clés :** acquisition d'une langue seconde, autochtone, didactique de la langue seconde, éthique de la recherche, mi'gmaq, mi'gmaw, mi'kmaq, mi'kmaw, micmac, revitalisation linguistique

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## Background

*Language revitalization work in this community*

In Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation, as in many other Indigenous communities (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Kirkness, 1998; Nettle & Romaine, 2000), the Mi'gmaq language has been slipping away. A hundred years ago it was the only language spoken by most community members, and through the middle of the twentieth century it was still a thriving community language (although increasing numbers of younger speakers were bilingual in English). But in Listuguj, Mi'gmaq is now mainly the language of Elders and the elderly for ordinary day-to-day communication rather than formal ritual use. Few children hear spoken Mi'gmaq every day in their homes. Overwhelmingly, for community members younger than 65, the most commonly spoken language – often the only spoken language – is English.

When the bleeding away of the Mi'gmaq language became apparent and it was clear that without concerted action there would be no Mi'gmaq speakers in Listuguj once the older monolinguals and Mi'gmaq/English bilinguals were gone, the community took steps. As in other Indigenous communities in Canada, a band-controlled school was set up in the wake of the 1972 National Indian Brotherhood document *Indian Control of Indian Education* (NIB, 1972). This provided a possible site for Mi'gmaq teaching to children, and indeed such teaching has been going on for several decades. This teaching has been on the model of "core" programs elsewhere in Canada, also known as "drip-feed" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Like "core" programs elsewhere, it has not produced new speakers or even semi-speakers.

The education authorities in Listuguj have therefore been aware of the need to pursue language revitalization strategies in many ways and places besides "core" teaching in the community's K–8 school. A variety of other revitalization efforts have been under way for several decades as well. The Listuguj Education Directorate (LED) established a Mi'gmaw[1] Language division with a full-time Mi'gmaq Resource Coordinator, and it set up, among other things, an Elders' Focus Group with corpus planning responsibilities and a "Mi'gmaq Online" project that has resulted in the development of several online tools.[2] Immersion teaching for very young learners has been implemented in the community school, starting with an immersion kindergarten class for five-year-olds, first set up in 2001–02 (LED, n.d.). In 2011, a Nursery Immersion pilot project for four-year-olds was launched at the LED building. Immersion was then extended up through the school grades year by year and has been available up to Grade 3 since fall 2015. Furthermore, and particularly relevant for this article, since 2006

an image-based method for teaching Mi'gmaq to adult and older adolescent learners has been developed by local community teacher-researchers. This method has gained widespread recognition and had some significant successes. Listuguj members for whom "core" teaching proved ineffective have found their enthusiasm for learning their language rekindled through this method.

*Ten years of community–university collaboration*

In mid-2006, some faculty members at McGill University were brought together by newly enrolled Mi'gmaw doctoral student Janine Metallic to discuss applying for grant funding to support Mi'gmaq language teaching in her home community of Listuguj. Janine's mother, Mary Ann Metallic, had been trying out her newfound vision of how to teach this Algonquian language through pictures for only a few months, but already it was clear that the approach she had dreamed up had the potential to catch on in a way that no previous attempts at revitalization of the language had come close to.

Over the 10-year period from 2006 to 2016, more than half a dozen faculty members from McGill (all non-Indigenous) and at least that many graduate students have been connected in some way with the Mi'gmaq second language teaching at Listuguj First Nation. We have brought several different disciplinary perspectives to bear on our understanding of the learning and the interactions we have witnessed. Three language teachers in the community have made McGill researchers welcome in their classrooms, and many other language workers and administrators have spent countless hours in discussion with the outside researchers about the language and how it can best be supported through our collaborative efforts.

## Situating the researcher

I am one of the researchers supporting the Mi'gmaq language work and was among the small group that Janine Metallic brought together in 2006 when she first had the idea of applying for funding through university channels to help support her mother's approach to adult language teaching. In a few short months, one creative teacher and one open-minded administrator willing to give new ideas some space had managed to arouse considerable interest among potential local learners of the language through some experimental classes, but there was no budget to extend the teaching. The general feeling at the time, shown by subsequent events to be well founded, was that it might be possible to obtain research funding to explore the ongoing development of the teaching method, now often called the "Picture Method." The ways in which learners were rapidly connecting with the new

pedagogy, and fluent older native speakers were finding ways to transform themselves into teachers, seemed like natural avenues for research in applied linguistics/second language acquisition and pedagogy, the field in which I had been trained.

In mid-2016, 10 years later, I sat down to write a retrospective of the development of the method, the teachers, and the learners as a follow-up to an earlier article co-authored with community teacher-researcher Mary Ann Metallic (Sarkar & Metallic, 2009), only to realize that it is not my story to tell. Mi'gmaq speakers past and present, not outside researchers, own that story. It was Mary Ann's daughter Janine who brought me to that realization. Her input, and that of her family, was crucial in the way in which this article was eventually framed.

I hope that the teachers and learners of Mi'gmaq in this community will one day tell their story in writing themselves. The more widely the story is known, the more it will motivate potential speakers to decide to learn their Indigenous language. It has already inspired many; the teachers in this community have a busy and active network of contacts who follow their work.[3] But after much talking to people in the community and elsewhere, as well as not a little uncomfortable soul-searching, I have come to the conclusion that it is not appropriate for someone like me, a non-Indigenous university researcher, to speak directly *for* the community, unless directly invited *by* them, in either the teaching or the telling that comes out of a community's desire to revitalize their language.[4]

What I can offer instead comes from being a non-Indigenous researcher[5] who has spent 10 years going back and forth between McGill and the community, trying to understand, often putting my foot wrong, and being set right by the endlessly patient, knowledgeable, and tactful language teachers I worked with. I have set down here some reflections on how difficult but also how important it is to break down barriers of misunderstanding and mistrust. On my first "field trip" to the community in August 2007, soon after we learned that our second application for SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) funding had been approved, I had no clear idea of what "research" with an Indigenous community would look like (I was incredibly green), but I had lots of what *I* thought were wonderful ideas about what I could bring to the project. Ten years later, it has become clear that the research I have done, if that is the right term, has been on the non-Indigenous side of the fence. It has been about how to be in a relationship with particular individuals in one Indigenous community and about how to work together in that relationship without stepping on too many feet. Learning how to stay

out of the way, while remaining available for the kinds of tasks someone like me *can* help with, has truly been my main form of research. In this context, the word "help" is highly charged (see, for example, Bishop, 2015; Land, 2015). I am at the beginning of this learning process, and it has taken 10 years just to get to the point where I can begin.

I hope that putting the experience into writing for an academic venue such as this journal will prove useful to people other than myself. Like Brophey & Raptis (2016), in their groundbreaking study of the experiences of non-Indigenous University of Victoria researchers, I am writing particularly for non-Indigenous academics who, like me, may have the opportunity to work together with Indigenous partners on issues of language revitalization. More than anything, the past 10 years have made it clear to me what I should have known *before* I got into this extended relationship. The question of "what happens next?" is one I cannot answer, but I will try to find some ways of asking it that leave the way open for growth that will be good for everybody, not just for those on the academic side of the equation who hope to increase their publication credits and chances of successful grant proposals.

*The funding challenge*

Indeed, the first challenge – and still the worst one – in the kind of new relationship I found myself in, when I first drove out to the community in summer 2007, is the problem of funding. I do not mean the problem of how to *get* funding; that is a challenge that all career academics face. I will start from the assumption that grant funding has been obtained. The research model that was then imposed on the project was the classic one:[6] there was a Principal Investigator, who happened to be me; perhaps some academic co-investigators; and on the other side a whole Indigenous community, represented in this case by teachers and administrators at the LED, who asked nothing better than to get on with their teaching and strategizing around the revitalization of their fast-disappearing language, with financial help if feasible and as little outside interference as possible. But the classic research model, when researchers are not insiders, is *about* "interfering," which originally meant something very much like "sticking one's oar in." As Brant Castellano (2004, p. 98) has pointed out, "Aboriginal perceptions of reality and right behaviour clash with prevailing norms of western research." The biggest challenge is to work around the power differential imposed on us all by the classic research model. I went out to the community that first time in 2007 holding the grant purse strings, after working hard on a couple of grant proposals

(one failure in 2006, then the jackpot) with one community member, and because she was our doctoral student I had barely met anybody else from the community. It was nothing like a proper introduction to a whole community with different lifeways, or to how they might think, talk, and act differently from what I was used to as a settler applied linguist from urban central Canada.

But from the moment the first grant came through, I was the only person allowed to sign cheques. Furthermore, the fact of being a faculty member (albeit a relatively junior one) conferred a quite undeserved aura of authority in Listuguj, and it took me some time to even realize I had such status in the eyes of some of the people I was now working with. The kind of grant we had can be applied for only by someone with a Ph.D. and a university affiliation. I understand the historical reasons for this set-up, but I do not think it is a good fit for Indigenous communities.

Those first two grants we obtained – awarded in 2007 (the funding period was 2007–2010) and in 2010 (to 2013) – were not quite so bad, because they were in a category of SSHRC grant, now defunct, called the Aboriginal Research Pilot Program. Much was good about that program. For one thing, the regular peer review was preceded by a very differently staffed Indigenous-focused review that weeded out proposals with nothing to offer communities. The Indigenous community was also a full partner in the research, so transferring funds to the community was easy; it was done in the same way in which funds can be transferred to another university for use by a co-investigator. Nobody on the Indigenous side of the research had to have a Ph.D.

The third grant we received, the one that paid for the visit to the community during which I wrote these words, came after a major restructuring of the SSHRC program architecture. It is a very different kind of grant, called an Insight Grant, with very generous funding over five rather than three years (2013–18), and I know we are lucky to have it. I am by no means ungrateful to the Canadian public and the academic adjudicators from across the country who represent them annually at review time. I have been one of those adjudicators and I know how difficult the job is. But when I had to tell the then–Director of Education in the community that she could no longer be a full partner under the new funding structure but would have to invoice me, following my directions, for the funds I regularly transferred to the community, I was ashamed, and I understood her indignation.

In any case, the original idea behind applying for *research* funding – to support the teaching and to follow along with it to try to understand why it was so successful – has become increasingly cloudy for me over time. The research has turned out to be on quite different

topics from those I had originally had in mind. How could it have been otherwise, when this was never my project? As an uninformed outsider, how could it possibly have been my business to poke and pry into the deeply personal process of working and growing together that was happening between speakers/teachers and would-be-speakers/learners from this tight-knit community? When I arrived in 2007 with all sorts of ideas about "research" and how we were going to conduct it, it must have seemed very odd to quite a few people.[7]

### Getting ethics approval

This brings us to the thorny topic of getting ethics approval. Space constraints do not permit a full discussion of research ethics in Indigenous contexts, a topic on which there is a rich literature that settler researchers should know more about, but the inquiring reader could start with any or all of Brant Castellano (2004), Kovach (2009), Schnarch (2004), Smith (1999, 2008), and Wilson (2008). The topic here, however, is more nitty-gritty. As soon as that first grant came through, we were faced with the usual institutional ethics approval process; under the rules, the grant chequebook will in effect not be released to the Principal Investigator until the project has received ethics clearance. The reasons for the rules are eminently sensible; accountability is paramount. In our case, however, it meant that before any funds could be disbursed I had to lay out a complete research plan, based on our successful grant proposal, that assumed the acceptability of certain kinds of actions in the community, certain ways of asking questions and looking for information, when I really hardly knew the local context at all.

Looking back, I know I could have written that first Research Ethics Board application differently, because when it came to the third grant we received, I *did* write it differently (it was then mid-2013). At that point, after six years of going back and forth to the community every few months and many cumulative days and weeks of hanging out there, I had a much better idea of how to negotiate around the bureaucratic requirements, how to meet them *while* satisfying the language workers in the community that I was not up to something. Indigenous people have been "researched to death" (Brant Castellano, 2004; Schnarch, 2004), and it must have looked to this community very much as if another outside researcher was going to feel just fine about coming in and doing research *on* them. I certainly felt that I was trying hard from the beginning not to do any such thing as conduct research "on" anybody. One can do research "on" plants, insects, or animals that cannot consent; research has often been done "on" people in this way, but in the social sciences this is getting increasingly hard to

justify. In the participatory model, one conducts research together *with* the people who are part of the research context. I thought I had not made the "on" mistake, but in retrospect I think I knew no other way to conceptualize the research process. I hope that casting a look back in this way will be one of many moves that will open up possibilities for change in the system in which I was trained. Change is badly needed.

We eventually got our ethics approval, though not until after a long and frustrating time of miscommunication and crossed wires between the community and me about what exactly it was all *for*. The saving grace was that my Indigenous partners were willing to work with me and teach me. I am glad they did not give up on me, but it comes back to a larger issue: Ignorant as I was, I alone held the purse strings on some very substantial sums of money that were earmarked for them.

In mid-2007, then, I started visiting regularly, although in retrospect I think my presence was far more intrusive than I realized at the time. I was green, but I was certainly enthusiastic. I am grateful beyond words for the opportunity I was given to sit in Mi'gmaq language classes, taught mainly by Mary Ann Metallic and her sister, from 2007 to 2014, when Mary Ann retired.

## Visits to the community, 2007–2014

### *Timing and length of visits*

Between August 2007 and December 2014, I visited the community 29 times, usually at three- or four-month intervals. Occasionally six or seven months would elapse before I could get away from everyday academic life at home. With a few exceptions, these visits were all timed so that I could be in the Mi'gmaq classroom for an entire working week, or at least from Monday to Thursday. I came in at opening time on Monday morning to say hello and find out what the expectations were for the week, usually I sat in on all the classes I could, and then I left after the working day on either Thursday or Friday to start the long drive or train trip back.

My visits have continued since December 2014, but not as frequently. In this article, I have chosen to focus on the period during which Mary Ann Metallic was actively teaching. I have tried to look back over those seven and a half years of frequent trips out to the community from the point of view not only of what I was learning about the Mi'gmaq teaching but also of what those trips taught me about how to be there, in case other non-Indigenous researchers might find this in any way helpful as they embark on their own journeys.

*Sitting in Mi'gmaq class taking notes in longhand*

I took over 500 pages of notes in longhand during those years, only recently transcribed in full. It sounds odd to say it, but for at least the first two or three years I had no conception that what I was doing had any relationship to ethnography. I was not trained as an ethnographer and knew next to nothing about it. However, from the mid-1990s on I had spent a lot of time in kindergarten classrooms, observing young children learning their second language. The habit of having a way to take notes at all times had become second nature. An ability to take rapid and accurate notes is a great boon to anyone doing classroom observation, and children under six are usually fairly oblivious to this adult activity.

I knew that adult language learners, on the other hand, would be very aware of a note-taker in their midst, especially since one of the remarkable features of the "Picture Method" as it has been developed at the community is that learners are not required to take notes, and many of them do not. Usually, I remembered to ask the class if they minded if I took notes, and there was sometimes a bit of discussion, because it had to be very clear that although I was there in a university research role, I was not "evaluating" the learners in any way. When questions were asked, I stressed that I was interested in how the teachers were teaching, not in observing the learners learning. I was also trying to learn as much of the language itself as an occasional visitor could. Dobrin & Schwartz (2016) point out that in anthropological work, this kind of participant observation is a precursor to figuring out what "best practices" for collaborative work will be. At the time it just seemed like good sense.

Adult classes: significant learnings

In the years when I sat in on classes, I have seen several very dedicated learners progress from beginner to intermediate level. They are now regular and comfortable users of Mi'gmaq. This is a testament not only to their commitment as learners but also to the unremitting hard work of their teachers, who have been endlessly inventive at devising ways to convey the structurally complex grammatical underpinnings of Mi'gmaq to adults whose school days were often long behind them. Given that the adult learners were not necessarily able to attend every class or enrol in every session (so there might be long gaps between an individual's bouts of intensive exposure and practice), this is a remarkable achievement.

Many anthropological linguists are known for their extraordinary fluency in one or more Indigenous languages. Robert Leavitt, for

example, has spent a lifetime becoming a speaker of Passamaquoddy/Maliseet[8] and has contributed significantly to keeping the language alive and making sure others know more about it (Francis, Leavitt, & Apt, 2008). I would have liked nothing better than to throw myself into the learning of Mi'gmaq to the exclusion of other pursuits, but the constraints of academic life did not allow it, at least not in the way I would have wanted to do it. Even when I was able to spend time in the community every three or four months and thought I was starting to get a glimmer of understanding, the intervening time away doing very different things invariably meant that I always felt that I was starting nearly from scratch. I can only imagine how difficult and how frustrating it must be for Indigenous youth who grow up in cities far away from the lands where their languages are spoken (there are many such youth) and who would like to reconnect with those languages.

The fourth time I went to the community, in June 2008, I made this note to myself: "Take-home message from the project: Don't assume I know anything!" I did not include enough written context in those notes for me to know why I thought it was so important to remind myself of that idea, but I am very glad I did. It is probably *the* most important thing I have learned. And despite all the intervening years, and all the times when I have put a foot wrong and needed to be corrected and thought I finally *got* it, I still need to be reminded that in this context I know next to nothing. Too much is culturally different (as well as economically, socially, and historically different) in the experience of the Indigenous people I have met and worked with for me to be able to take for granted any transferability of the sorts of things I know. Indigenous people have had a very different history from settlers, as non-Indigenous Canadians are starting to grasp. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada made its findings public (TRC, 2015), it helped to make a difference. Many events and news items have now converged to help settler Canadians realize that there is something important about the history of this place that we (I speak as a settler, albeit a very recent one) were not taught at school. And we need to try to understand it. The first step is to *listen* instead of talking. I am not very good at this myself; I hope I can improve. But the years of being with people who generally place a particular value on silence, who prefer to listen more than they speak, and who do not talk just to fill a conversational vacuum, have been edifying.

A corollary, one I wish I were better at, has been the importance of paying very close attention to non-verbal communication and not to prize the verbal above the non-verbal. I am constantly being reminded

of how much I can improve in this area, despite many years of teaching experience. All teachers can benefit from listening to their students more and noticing what they communicate without words. In the Mi'gmaq classrooms where I have spent time over the years, communicating takes many forms that do not require spoken words. The teachers themselves constantly remind the learners of this practice. I have often heard them say, "In our culture, we don't usually talk so much. You learn by just watching and listening."

One of the things that is communicated in the classroom, by teachers and learners alike, is the importance of being grounded in where you come from. Who you are matters; this is something that universities, with their fetishization of abstraction, do *not* teach. The Mi'gmaq courses I have seen always begin with the teaching of language forms that allow the learners to situate themselves in their family and community context: This is who I am, this is where I come from, this is who I am related to. No conversation can begin if all the speakers do not know those things about one another. As far as I know, this is true of interaction in Indigenous contexts generally,[9] and I have come to think that it should be true of all contexts of human interaction everywhere. After 10 years of involvement with the language revitalization work in the community, by far the most important thing I have learned is that it's all about relationship (Wilson, 2008). The relationship McGill has with the community is through individuals, so who those individuals are matters tremendously. I am solely responsible for my relationship with the community, with the people in it, and with the work they do. But I had to learn that the hard way, as I found out a few years into the project.

## New directions: Nursery Immersion

In September 2011, the Listuguj Education Directorate started a "Nursery Immersion" pilot program for four-year-olds. The teachers who had been working with adult learners for the previous four or five years were co-opted into the program and took care of it for four school years on the premises of the LED; it has since been moved to the community school and been taken over by other teachers. Immersion has been extended upwards through the grades. I learned a lot about the start-up process for the Nursery Immersion when it was under the same roof as the adult classes. Because of the need to co-opt the teachers, adult classes were put on hold for the start-up term, so during my fall visits in 2011 I wound up sitting in the little-kid immersion classroom right through my 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ times in the community. We did not have ethics clearance to work with children at that point, since we were working with the original ethics certificate that

covered the grant from the 2010–13 funding period which mentioned only adults. When I arrived at the community in September, I was taken completely by surprise by how swiftly the immersion classroom had been set up; the teachers were, I think, nearly as surprised as I was. I sat and watched, with the permission of the teachers and of any parents who I was able to talk to; I was unable to stop myself from my reflexive habit of taking notes, but no one will ever see them but me. The experience took me back to my early kindergarten observation days. Watching young children learn language and learn through language is one of the most rewarding activities I know.

However, there is a sequel, and it turned out to be another move in the ongoing learning process. With the knowledge that the Nursery Immersion class would be in place for the next few years, and with the end of a grant funding period looming in 2013, I asked the administrators and teachers if I could add a pre-school immersion piece to the new grant application that we submitted in 2012. This was in the Insight Grant competition previously mentioned and was considerably higher-stakes, since it was for a five-year period. The rules of the grant application game are that if one hopes for sustained and unbroken funding of a project, one must always apply for a new grant the autumn before the current grant is due to expire. The Nursery Immersion went so well in its pilot year of 2011–12 that it seemed to me like the logical extension of our ongoing work together to build it into the fall 2012 grant proposal.

At this point, therefore, I brought on board some pre-school–education specialist colleagues as co-investigators. They had not previously been involved with the project and had not been to the community. I now know that I did not explain the implications of writing the grant proposal this way to the community nearly as carefully as I needed to. We wound up getting the grant, but the notion of bringing in new people out of the blue, with no relationship to the community language workers, was a very dubious one. I now consider that proposing to do so was unfair to everybody. This has been a very hard lesson to learn, because I was playing the game the way it is supposed to be played and *winning* by white-researcher standards. After six years of getting to know the language educators in the community, I ought to have known better. I had still not fully understood that inviting people to come and work with them is *their* prerogative. They had invited me, but that did not mean I could take the initiative in inviting others.

With some time to go in the current funding cycle, it is now clear that the imposed-from-without research ideas that my colleagues and I brought in about working with the pre-schoolers and their parents,

however full of potential they might have been, are not going to go forward (despite the fact that on this round we *do* have impeccable ethics clearance for this age group). There are reasons unrelated to the grant preparation process per se; at the LED there have been administrative changes at several levels that would have changed what we do in any case. My current academic colleagues may or may not be able to go ahead and forge their own relationships with individual teachers (there has been progress in that direction, for which I am thankful). With hindsight, perhaps I could have managed things differently and still brought in the Insight Grant. But there would have needed to be a lot more consultation and perhaps more formal structures guiding the grant-writing process, both at the university and in the community. I hope this can be made part of the process in future.[10]

*Paying attention to conversations, not just to classes*

In retrospect, I feel sure that the time I spent just talking to the community teachers and learners was undoubtedly one of the best uses of my time there, though that was not necessarily clear to me when it was happening, nor had I read enough about Indigenous methodologies (I hope this would not now be true of a new non-Indigenous researcher in this context) to realize how important it would be. Actual language classes were held at certain scheduled times throughout the week, whenever I was there; I scribbled furiously through every class until my hand ached (hence the 500-plus pages of longhand notes, almost all of which were taken while a class was in session). But that left long hours in the classroom for simply talking to the teachers, getting to know them, and hearing about what they thought was important – building our relationship, and not just in the classroom; we have a long-standing tradition of going out for dinner on my last evening there, which I consider an excellent use of grant funds.[11] Over the years the teachers and I have become friends. Difficult as it may have been to get to that point, and dense as I may often have been about far too many things they were trying to tell me, I know that there is a relationship and that there is trust on both sides. This is something one knows, not from being trained as a researcher, but from the experience of being human.

The people I have spent the most time with have been the teachers on the project, but I have also spent valuable time talking to the LED administrators and other personnel. It has helped me get a sense of the community as a whole, but I could have done more along those lines. I wish now that I had felt more comfortable about asking if I could come to other community settings besides that rather institutional one. I should have gone to bingo!

*Living in Campbellton, New Brunswick*

All those week-long stays for the purpose of "researching" in the community were from a base in Campbellton, New Brunswick, a short drive or walk away across the Restigouche River and the main shopping hub for the community. This was my choice. Was it a good one? Should I have networked harder and tried to find accommodation in the community itself? This would have been as a paying guest of some kind and would not have been overly difficult, as I know from other outside researchers who have worked in the community. Would it have helped with relationship-building? That is one of the might-have-beens I will never know about; I consider that I was nonetheless extremely fortunate in the relationships that *did* develop around the project. And I am not sorry that I got to know Campbellton a bit. Among other things, it has helped me understand the wider context for the community language work. Some of the community primary school children, and all the high school students, go to school in Campbellton, and that shapes who they become.

## Getting the word out: presenting, workshopping, and publishing

Between 2007 and 2016 I participated in 18 conference presentations in which the ongoing language revitalization work in the community, and in particular the "Picture Method," were featured in some way. I was first author on 11 of them (which I now think was too many) and sole author on five. With a couple of exceptions, I consider that those single-authored presentations and most of the first-authored ones did very little to advance the project in any direct way. They advanced only my career, and sometimes the careers of my academic co-authors. Looking back, I think that the conference presentations that brought the most added value to the project itself were those in which the teachers also participated *and* where the audience included Indigenous language educators. These gave the teachers a chance to talk to other people in the same line of work and involved them in a back-and-forth exchange of experiences that they themselves credited with giving them new ideas for their teaching. It also clearly inspired other Indigenous educators who were looking for a variety of "ways into" the teaching of their own languages, especially when the languages belonged to the same family, as so many aspects of the grammar are similar (the Picture Method is grounded in Algonquian language structure). I am certain of this, because on several occasions I witnessed it personally.

But it has to be said that the teachers have gone ahead and participated in Indigenous-run and Indigenous-themed conferences of this kind without needing any help from me, on far more occasions than I know or need to know about. When I do know about them, it is because the grant funding paid for them to go. It happened quite often that I went along (paid for by the grant), but I really did not need to. My presence added nothing to the presentations, though I learned a lot.

So I have to ask myself this: When I went along to conference presentations where I might as well not have gone, for all the good my presence did, was that a good use of grant funding? I think it was, toward the beginning of my involvement with the project, as a way of breaking the presenting-in-public ice for the teachers. Putting themselves forward in public has never been easy for them. Academics are schooled in the selling of themselves and their work, and they go through a long apprenticeship with respect to presenting their work to both academic and non-academic audiences over many years. It was easy to offer support and it may have been useful.

But that kind of behind-the-scenes support is no longer needed. In any case, the most productive contexts for the presentation of the work that has been done in the community have always been local, in Mi'kma'ki (the area of the Maritimes where the people of the Mi'gmaq nation live) and in Mi'gmaq, the language. Lots of exciting developments are in progress around the teaching and speaking of Mi'gmaq, in the language itself, both in the community and in other parts of Mi'gmaki; but for that very reason it is usually not appropriate for non-Mi'gmaq speakers to be involved.

If it ever seems like a good idea for someone like me to talk about this project in some setting of the teachers' choosing, I will be very happy if they ask me to do so. But I will no longer do what I did many times between 2007 and 2014 – jet off on my own to mainstream conference settings to present work so ably being done by other people, namely the community language educators. This may sometimes have been appropriate in the past, as a way to get the word out to settler academics in my discipline (applied linguists and/or sociolinguists) who have little or no idea of how important and difficult this work is. There is a lot of educating of professional academics that needs to happen. But I now question it as a use of the grant funding where the community language teachers were concerned, because it did not directly advance their language work by one iota.

On one occasion I was invited along to a workshop that the teachers were asked to give to a group of teachers of Passmaquoddy in Maine. It was eye-opening and exhilarating to be present, but as a non-speaker

I was not able to participate. I am very glad they are so often invited to give workshops about their teaching in various places all over the Maritimes, and if grant funding can help with that, so much the better. About that, there is fortunately no need to feel conflicted. About the pressure to publish out of this work, I do feel conflicted, as any reader who has gotten to this point will understand.[12]

### Concluding remarks

So I come back to where I started: the quandary of how to be a non-Indigenous researcher in a relationship with an Indigenous community, centred around issues of importance to them and to me (in this case, second language teaching and learning issues), and maintain a sense of professional and personal integrity. How can we work together without it turning into the old colonial story of white people from the outside trying to be helpful but winding up doing more harm than if they had never come? I know that in my discipline we all too easily assume that what we know about second language acquisition and pedagogy in the usual Western contexts (from classrooms to factory floors) will be true for all contexts. But this is an incorrect assumption. The challenge of figuring out how we fit in, *if* we fit in, is one I am only just beginning to map out for myself, in this long reflection on the "experiences (cultural, personal, and educational)" this non-Indigenous researcher considers to have "shaped [her] abilities to research sustainably with Indigenous communities" (Brophey & Raptis, 2016, p. 238[13]).

There is of course our facility for writing grant proposals. But if the proposals are to make sense, a real relationship has to underlie the thinking that goes into them. This did not happen in the case I have described here; the first successful proposal preceded the development of a relationship. But the relationship would not have grown without the funding to support the visits. Was it a Catch-22?[14] What other scenarios are possible? The importance of trying to sketch these out early in the process is something applied linguistics researchers need to inform themselves about, as field linguists have long been aware (Eira, 2007; Leonard & Haynes, 2010; Rice, 2011; Stebbins, 2012).

As we go forward with the next phase of the project, I hope that the vexed question of what, how, when, where, and why to present or publish out of the work will be something the community language workers and I can discuss in a truly collaborative way. If I were to offer a recommendation to a novice researcher in this field, it would be that at the inception of relationship-building – as soon as it becomes clear that there *is* a relationship in the building – some kind of formal

step be incorporated to ascertain what people's expectations are on both sides of the relationship. The pressure on career academics to churn out "academic product" is not necessarily obvious to Indigenous language teachers; the local pressures on the teachers, as community members in a web of relationships, need to be explained to academics. Structures should be set up to make better understanding possible, and they should be cyclic, evolving with local needs. Regular Sharing Circles, with appropriate ritual, would be one way forward.

As it happens, the "next phase" of the project is an adult immersion pilot program now under way which promises to be very exciting and which is being developed by the Picture Method teachers at the same time as other new initiatives in adult education that the LED has decided on, notably a community-based B.Ed. program under the auspices of McGill. Things are moving forward in this community. Dealing effectively at the level of infrastructure with underlying sources of misunderstanding – or potential misunderstanding – is therefore of critical importance. In the building of any relationship it should always come first, and it should never be forgotten.

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## Notes

1 "Mi'gmaw" is a singular form and "Mi'gmaq" a plural form.

2 For example, https://www.mikmaqonline.org/, http://migmaq.org/ .

3 Some published information about what they have done in the classroom is available from earlier stages of the collaboration (Sarkar & Metallic, 2009; Sarkar, Metallic, Baker, Lavoie, & Strong-Wilson, 2013; Sarkar, Metallic, Metallic, & Vicaire, 2011; Sarkar, Metallic, Vicaire, & Metallic, 2013)

4 In an article I have found helpful, Czaykowska-Higgins (2009), writing from the disciplinary perspective of theoretical rather than applied linguistics, similarly comes to the conclusion that "the story of the project is . . . not mine to tell alone."

5 My previous work was with marginalized linguistic communities in Montreal, mostly of immigrant origin, and I am myself of mixed South Asian and white origin. I am usually taken to be Indigenous. In Listuguj, this means that I explained myself a lot.

6 This was certainly the case at McGill at the time (2007). As an anonymous reviewer remarked, "Surely research models in universities in Canada are changing or should have changed exponentially over the years from 2006–2016? If they have not changed at the university where this research is working, then it is time for that to take place!" Agreed. At McGill, however, the process has been slow to start up. A Provost's Task Force on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education was finally appointed in 2016, much later than similar initiatives at many other Canadian universities where Indigenous students and issues have historically been much more present. It is to be hoped that change is now at least on the horizon.

7 A number of partnerships involving Mi'gmaq communities and most of the universities across the Maritime provinces already existed (and more have since been created), though at the time I was not well prepared and did not know about them. At present, these exist through Acadia University, Cape Breton University, Dalhousie University, Mount Saint Vincent University, St. Francis Xavier University (all in Nova Scotia, which forms part of traditional Mi'gmaq territory), and the University of New Brunswick. From my current point of view, being located in a larger institution outside the relevant geographical area seems like a distinct disadvantage.

8 This language of the Algonquian family is related to Mi'gmaq; there is some mutual comprehensibility. The language is known as Maliseet on the New Brunswick side of the Canada/US border and as Passamaquoddy on the Maine side.

9 I am grateful to Janine Metallic (personal communication, July 2016) for the term *self-location* to describe this phenomenon. See also, for example, Absolon (2010), Kovach (2009), and Lavallée (2009).

10 As an anonymous reviewer suggested, "[p]erhaps it would be useful to have an Advisory Circle or Steering Committee or Elders' Advisory Board guiding the research process from its inception to its conclusion?"

11 In retrospect, I think this kind of "irreducibly social process" (Dobrin & Schwartz, 2016) could and should have been a somewhat more formalized aspect of the grant budget. The same anonymous reviewer commented, "sharing food, hosting gatherings etc. are all part of relationship building in many communities. Research funding needs to make room for expenditures of this kind because without support for relationship building it is much harder to build relationships, and without strong relationships, it is much harder to do research in a good way."

12 An anonymous reviewer generously countered the points above as follows: "Could one argue that publications may not have directly advanced the project of language teaching and learning as such, but having many publications may have made it easier to get more research funding? . . . Is it possible that going to conference presentations where the PI's presence might not have been necessary strictly speaking, could arguably have been important for relationship building, and therefore for the research project's ultimate success?" It's possible!

13 Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this article.

14 Castleden, Morgan, and Lamb (2012) and Schnarch (2004) also refer to aspects of the Indigenous–non-Indigenous research relationship as a Catch-22 and offer useful suggestions about ways out of it.

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