



Retaining the Voices and Understandings of Our Nations: Language's Essential Connection to Identity

By Frank Deer

I grew up in Kahnawake, a Kanienke'ha community in southern Quebec, through the 1980s and 90s. During these formative years, I attended band-managed schools, learned of traditions and spirituality from community members, developed a rudimentary understanding of my ancestral language, and bore witness to the struggles associated with indigenous/non-indigenous relations. My perspective on my own identity was affected by these experiences in a variety of ways and can sometimes make it difficult to situate myself in our transcultural society. Although I don't often feel it necessary to explain my indigeneity to others, I sometimes find that I'm explaining it to myself.

My personal and professional life trajectories have brought me to Western Canada where I've found that my experiences, and subsequent feelings of identity, are not dissimilar to those of other indigenous people. Perhaps the most interesting of these similarities is the desire to affirm, in part or whole, unique manifestations of indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition that are relevant to the self.

This is not a desire that is held by individuals alone. Many communities have collective visions of this desire. Government departments have begun demonstrating their commitment toward assisting in such journeys of affirmation, and the discourse around primary and secondary education has begun to embrace the notion of what is sometimes referred to as cultural revitalization and celebration.

My work is intended to investigate and promote the ways in which primary and secondary education supports one rather important dimension of the journey of indigenous peoples toward affirmation of their respective identities: indigenous languages. A capacity that I've frequently cited as the principal proxy for cultural identity, indigenous languages are at a sort of crossroads in many parts of this land. Many are, according to numerous studies and reports, set to disappear in the next few generations.

With the decline and loss of indigenous languages comes, according to many, the decline of a world-view. Perhaps we've all heard or read of the notion that language and culture are intrinsically connected—as I get older, I've come to better appreciate this notion. The notion of identity and language as inseparable may be better understood when one considers the richness of traditional meaning associated with an ancestral language, as opposed to maintaining a lexicographical preoccupation with translation that assigns primacy to the understandings acquired by those of the dominant culture. When a language goes into disuse, unique dimensions of identity associated with the self and community that are so replete with the imagery and motifs of ancestors may be adversely affected.

The importance of indigenous languages to the ethno-cultural identity of indigenous peoples is the focus of my current research. I recently received a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to support my work in community-based sustainability of indigenous languages. I believe it is important to understand what will lend to the viability of indigenous languages in 21st century Canada. By exploring and sharing the successes that some have experienced in the sustainability of their respective languages, indigenous peoples and communities may benefit from a stronger connection to their own indigeneity.

Profile **Frank Deer**

Frank Deer is an Assistant Professor and Director of Indigenous Initiatives at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education. Having received his Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the University of Saskatchewan in 2008, Frank has worked in the area of indigenous education with a focus on citizenship, identity, and indigenous literature and oral discourse. Frank is

the author of refereed articles in such journals as the *Canadian Journal of Education*, *Canadian and International Education*, and the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. Frank's study *First Nations Languages: A Comparative Study in Culturally Relevant Sustainability* is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Frank has served as a classroom teacher in the Frontier School Division and Winnipeg School Division.

