Yakama Rising

Indigenous Cultural Revitalization, Activism, and Healing

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FIRST PEOPLES
New Directions in Indigenous Studies
physical contact with my environment. And people in my environ-
ment. And that’s what I want to do with my own work, in school, my
research. You know, to learn how to, with sociolinguistics, to be able
to develop programs in language and things like the Wapato Indian
Club. So I think it is, in the sense of all the things that our people
have been through, where we’re at now is a very large leap into that
healing process. A gigantic leap.

Haver goes on to further credit Sue’s tireless efforts to help the chil-
dren. He refers to her work as the foundation of all the good work that
club alumni will do in the future. In an analysis of his comments, the ac-
tivism of club alumni is apparent as part of an intergenerational effort to
heal our people:

You know, I think that Sue’s dedication is, how would you say, a very
strong placing stone, I guess you could say. You know, something
that, in history, is there. She held us there just long enough. And I
think with the support of the community, with the families that par-
ticipated, maybe they couldn’t get as far as we could, but just be-
cause they were there now, we can get a little bit farther.

Haver recalls the crucial support that Sue provided during his youth.
The Wapato Indian Club gave him an opportunity to begin healing; it
uniquely connected him with his own culture and with other cultures. He
uses the memories and examples of the Wapato Indian Club to inform his
own scholarship and work. As a reentry student at Heritage University, a
local university, Haver is inspired to use his studies to develop youth pro-
grams similar to the Wapato Indian Club and to continue helping nurture
the next generation of leaders on Yakama homeland.

Core Values and the Wapato Indian Club’s Model
of Indigenous Social Change

From its inception, the Wapato Indian Club has advanced what indige-
nous studies scholars would call a decolonizing agenda. Indigenous youth,
resisting an assimilationist agenda of the settler-colonial education system,
insisted that their cultures and traditional teachings be offered to them. By
analyzing the critical pedagogical work and politics of the Wapato Indian
Club, we can understand the important place of indigenous youth and
their allies in cultural revitalization efforts.

After analyzing interview data and the limited archival material about
Wapato Indian Club, I created a list of core values that served as the foun-
dation of all the work done in the club. In my second interview with Sue,
I shared the list with her, and we talked about each value, and any posi-
ble revisions that the list might need. Ultimately, we finalized the follow-
ing list: Respect, Inclusivity, Responsibility, Self-Awareness, Listening,
Healing, and Unity.

These are the core values that guide the club. They are the basis of how
the club teaches youth “how to be” in accordance with elders’ instruc-
tions. Even decades later, alumni are able to articulate how their partici-
pation in Wapato Indian Club helps them to continue striving for these
ideals, as Haver articulates so eloquently. By carefully listening to partici-
pants’ narratives, I was able to envision a model that would represent the
Wapato Indian Club and the process of teaching the core values to partici-
pants. But I knew that this model needed to be something more than an
assemblage of arrows and boxes. I wanted the model to be rooted in the
culturally based stories and teachings that were so precious to the people
involved in the Wapato Indian Club. Below, in figure 2, I share my con-
ceptualization of this emerging model. Within the model, there are repre-
sentations of powerful features of the bird who was so important in the
Wapato Indian Club performances—the swan, wawkiluuk, who is sacred
to Plateau peoples. It is a being that is strong and enduring, and is a pow-
ful place-based example for our people. Its elegance reminds us of the
beauty of our traditions, and its graceful flight provides a guiding light that
the club follows, always striving and reaching toward a gracefulness and
discipline that will bring about healing and unity. As the archival materi-
als and interview data quoted within this chapter indicate, the swan was
an important symbol to communicate the message of respecting all cre-
ation and paying honor to nature through performances. Within the
model, the swan itself embodies the core values taught within the Wapato
Indian Club, serving as a reflection of and an image of guidance for the
critical pedagogy used within the club. As the swan embodies the teach-
ings, so too are the children expected to embody these values, as they
learn and carry on the teachings of their elders. As such, the children’s
bodies become a site for critical pedagogy. The praxis developed in the
Wapato Indian Club thus contributes to our understanding of indigenous
social change theories, encouraging us to remember the potential and
contribution of recognizing young people's leadership and the importance of the body as a liberatory tool for critical awareness, leadership development, and decolonizing praxis.

This model provides an example of a decolonizing praxis that emphasizes the importance of the local context and the connection to place-based teachings. It encourages all peoples to build a relationship with the special beings/relatives with whom they share the land. According to indigenous teachings, the Creator has placed important teachers, like the swan, in our presence, and we have the honor to learn from these beings/relatives. The model I provide here demonstrates the importance of an indigenous place-based paradigm for learning and teaching.

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CHAPTER TWO

I Don’t Want Our Language to Die

Indigenous Language Revitalization, Survivance, and the Stakes of Building a Moral Community

An Ethnographic Introduction: Dancing to Honor the Past, Present, and Future

We sit around a table at the university cafeteria, enjoying our lunch together. Then, all of a sudden, the elder announces that she would like to have dancers at the honor dinner tomorrow night. Word quickly spreads across the lunchroom. Soon a practice session is organized, and several women have committed to dancing. The elder is pleased and agrees to help teach the dance during the practice session.

Later that afternoon, the women assemble in the longhouse on campus. The elder scans the room until she finds suitable instruments. She uses a spatula and a cardboard box as a makeshift hand drum. Upon testing out her new “drum,” she explains the legend that accompanies the song she will be singing, and she reminds the women of the dance steps for the Farewell Dance. The legend that she shares is place-based, reminding us of our surroundings and the legendary beings who shaped the world before our time, from the ocean to the Columbia River Gorge to places in between. This particular legend explains the formation of Beacon Rock, a prominent landmark that stands next to the Columbia River.

As elders do, she explains how she learned the song and dance. She tells a story of when she was a young girl, perhaps fourteen years old, when
tribal peoples and universities. This is a point I discuss further in chapter 5, where I propose recommendations for successful partnership-building.

Developing a Culturally Relevant Representation of the Yakama-NILI Partnership Model

This chapter has examined the ways in which activists engage in language revitalization within the Yakama-NILI partnership. I have developed a list of ten principles that define the essence of the activists' work. Below I provide the list of principles, as well as, in figure 3, a culturally relevant figure that represents the principles as a cohesive whole.

Principles of the Yakama-NILI model:

1. Support intergenerational teaching and learning
2. Collaborate to create critical mass
3. Develop practical, applied focus
4. View work in spiritual terms
5. Listen
6. Practice sincere outreach
7. Encourage long-term commitment
8. Support solution oriented Do-ing
9. Support grassroots efforts
10. Aim all efforts at supporting tribal peoples' self-determination

Cultural Relevance of Figure 3

I choose to represent the visual model as a culturally relevant image. K'úsi (horse) has great meaning to Yakama peoples. Yakama elders often share stories of the importance of horses to our people's survival. In this book's introduction, I shared tribal histories that explain horses are a gift from the Creator. Today, large herds of wild horses still remain on the reservation foothills, and careful management of them as a precious resource is one of the most important issues facing our natural resources personnel (Yakama Nation 2012). Most of all, however, Virginia Beavert inspired the use of the horse as the basis of the model because of her extensive knowledge of horses and the many stories she tells about this beloved animal.
As the image shows, movement is important in this model. Language revitalization work, like k'úsi, adapts and moves through the environment. The essence of this model is rooted in the knowledge gained through the NILI-Yakama case study, as well as the rich body of literature that has developed around Indian education scholarship over the past forty years, which demands that educational systems recognize the inherent cultural and political rights that indigenous peoples hold. Education systems must value and support tribal peoples’ vision of self-determination. The ten principles represented in the model provide insight into how this process can work in a partnership between educational institutions and tribal partners. Yet, not all of the examples of indigenous education activism take place in partnerships with formal education systems. In the next chapter, we will examine a case study of grassroots activism that articulates a model of cultural revitalization outside of the formal schooling system.

Old Ways of Preserving Fish: An Ethnographic Note about Lessons from the Ancestors

It is a beautiful late-summer day with clear blue skies and warm, bright sunshine. The sun’s rays are so warm and comfortable, it seems almost as if the sun is smiling down upon us. Today we will learn how to care for food as a gift from the Creator, and in doing so, we will understand how much we depend on the sun (áan) and the wind (hutil). These are the lessons of our ancestors. We are fortunate that elders have carried these lessons and are ready to share them with us. The younger generations are ready to learn and will in turn become the next teachers for the future generations.

We drive up the long, bumpy dirt driveway, careful to avoid the adjacent irrigation ditch that waters nearby pastures. As I look upon the abundant plant life on the shoulders of the deep ditch, my mind drifts; I think back to the countless hours I have spent in the library, examining the archives of local newspapers from over 100 years ago. I recall the dramatic nineteenth century headlines of the white-owned media, which titillated with delight about the riches that could be made if further settlement were allowed onto the reservation. The headlines called for opening the Yakama Reservation, the rich land being "wasted" by "lazy" and "ignorant"
is the foundation of Xwayamí Ishích. The “exchange of knowledge” between an older community member and a younger community member is most important to Xwayamí Ishích. While oftentimes this means youth are learning from elders, it is also important to have younger adults learning from slightly older adults. This inclusivity is at the heart of the work Xwayamí Ishích accomplishes. No one is too young or too old to participate, as everyone is a valued participant.

Jessica, like the other activists interviewed in this book, also engages in her work with a great sense of humility. I asked her if she considered herself a cultural revitalization activist. She responded:

I’m not the one revitalizing the culture. I’m not the one who has all this knowledge and stuff. The activists really are the people that are giving that knowledge. I just feel kind of like a facilitator. So, I facilitate other people being activists. I really don’t know if I would call myself a cultural revitalization activist. But I think the community is, like the people that are facilitating, the people that are giving the knowledge, and the people that are receiving it, together are probably activists. I don’t think you can separate it.

Jessica was quick to credit the people she works with as the activists, pointing out she herself did not carry the traditional cultural knowledge to be a revered teacher. She was humble in her response, only referring to herself as a “facilitator.” Yet, in my participant observation with Xwayamí Ishích, I witnessed Jessica’s skill in helping elders teach the workshops, as well as Jessica’s generosity in assisting learners, of all ages, to attend the workshops and practice the new skills they learned. In so many ways, Jessica’s activism makes the cultural revitalization work of Xwayamí Ishích possible, by opening up her home to host workshops, bringing people together, and securing the funds and donations necessary for the workshop materials. With her humble approach, she resists a colonial logic that would normally situate Jessica in a role of hierarchical power and importance, as president of Xwayamí Ishích. By refusing to uphold the hierarchy and instead taking a grassroots approach to making power by crediting “the people” and “the community” as the important activists and leaders, Jessica’s involvement with Xwayamí Ishích challenges a colonial logic that naturalizes hierarchy to consolidate power among a few elites. She refuses to situate herself as the most important person or leader in the efforts of Xwayamí Ishích, and in doing so provides leadership centrally concerned with empowering those around her.

My analysis of the activists’ narratives has resulted in a list of the core values that underlie the work of Xwayamí Ishích, which I list below and have illustrated in a model that fits the spirit of the organization’s work.

**Values of the Xwayamí Ishích model:**

- Humility
- Faith
- Grassroots empowerment
- Place-based teachings
- Intergenerational teaching and learning

The values of Xwayamí Ishích are represented by the namesake of the organization, a beautiful golden eagle. The strong golden eagle serves as a protector over the precious place-based cultural teachings the organization seeks to preserve and revitalize through intergenerational teaching and learning. Humility and faith are the guiding values of the organization,
serving as the foundation of the eagle’s wings. It is upon this approach to their work that Xwayamami Ishich activists have built their organization. At its heart, the model of Xwayamami Ishich holds a powerful message not only for those involved with the organization, but for all those who can make a contribution to healing social change by working toward a vision of education that upholds the ideals of humility, faith, and grassroots empowerment for intergenerational teaching and learning of place-based teachings.

Conclusion

As we have seen with other case studies in this book, grassroots activists view their work in spiritual terms. They view their work as a blessing upon themselves, and they wish to serve the community in a good way. Jessica noted she prayed to the Creator to ask for the right people to come into their lives, making the work of Xwayamami Ishich possible. She states that in every instance this has happened. She also believes the Creator is guiding their work; the Creator guides those who attend the workshops, so everyone there is “meant to be there.” This trust, in the spiritual dimension of her work with Xwayamami Ishich, nurtures and sustains her through the difficult times of bureaucratic hassles, paperwork, and struggles to find enough funding and volunteers to keep the work going.

Despite these struggles, there is also an unwavering effort to keep working toward the vision our ancestors held for us: to be a healthy community, rooted in traditional cultural teachings. When times become difficult, as inevitably they do for people working at the grassroots level, activists maintain their resistance by focusing on the promise of solving problems within our community by holding fast to our ancient traditions, following the Seven Generations philosophy, honoring women elders as culture bearers, and creating new methodologies to serve our people. Women serve as important leaders in this effort. As they reflect on their experiences, their narratives and actions are powerful examples that help dismantle colonial logics that naturalize hierarchy and further marginalize indigenous peoples and cultural practices. In their day-to-day work, the activists involved with Xwayamami Ishich are dedicated to resisting the patterns of assimilation that lead to cultural knowledge gaps for our young people. As with the other case studies in this book, the Xwayamami Ishich activists have the attitude of “just do it!” that tribal elder Virginia Beavert expressed in chapter 2. In the next chapter, we will engage the broader lessons activists shared regarding successes, challenges, and their hopes for the future. This vision, grounded in their tireless efforts to engage in activism that brings about healing social change, serves as a theory of Yakama decolonizing praxis.