Les Olympes de la Parole

The Sacred Heart School of Montreal

Aboriginal Women and Empowerment via Technology

By Daphne Giroux, Daisy Smith and Katalina Toth

Lead Instructor: Ms. Erika Rath

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Preamble:

We live in a country that prides itself on bringing equality and justice to all. However, there is an enduring inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in all aspects of life in Canada. Below, we address specifically the problems Indigenous peoples in Quebec have accessing basic services like education, health and technology, and propose how improved access to technology could address some of the issues in education and health. However, any attempt to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples by providing technology must avoid the imposition of Western culture and values. Providing a flow of information exclusively from Western Culture to Indigenous cultures with no reciprocation risks obliteration of a way of life that has already been subject to attempts at assimilation. Indigenous people of Canada have already been forced to adapt, perhaps more than any other culture, and how they adapt to technology should be determined by their traditions, values and priorities.

To this end, we read studies on the current state of access to technology for Indigenous peoples in Quebec, identified gaps in education and health care for women and children that could be addressed by improved access to communications technology, and considered successful models of Indigenous interaction with technology to propose solutions that would respect their culture and traditions. Along with the independent research conducted, two students who live on the Kahnawake reserve and attend the Sacred Heart School of Montreal were interviewed: Ainsley Goodleaf and Jamie Diabo.

Indigenous Peoples in Quebec:

Indigenous peoples constitute 5% of the population of Canada or 1.6 million people. Approximately 180,000 of Canada's Indigenous people live in Quebec. Indigenous peoples are divided into three groups, i.e. the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Métis (StatsCan, 2017). In Quebec, there are 55 indigenous communities (Secretariat aux Autochtones Quebec, 2018). Some of these communities, like the Mohawk reserves, are within reach of metropolitan Montreal, but many are in remote regions, from James Bay all the way to Nunavik, the region of Quebec north of the 55th parallel that extends to the Hudson Strait.

Access to Broadband Internet:

The "digital divide" is a term describing a gap in access to communications technology. A fundamental part of the digital divide is a lack of access to the internet. According to a 2005 study on internet access for remote Indigenous communities in Canada and Quebec, 37% of people in these communities have no internet access at all, and 42% of residents use dial-up internet, a type of internet that is one-tenth the speed of the slowest broadband connection and cannot be used if someone needs to make a phone call from the landline simultaneously (Aboriginal Canada Portal, 2005; Smillie-Adjarkwa, 2005). A 2016 update from the CRTC website (CRTC, 2016) shows that in Quebec, only the Indigenous people in urban areas have access to terrestrial broadband internet. For the large proportion of Indigenous people that are in remote regions the main access to internet is by satellite and has a maximum speed of less than 1.5 mbps, compared to speed of 30 mbps for basic high-speed in Montreal, and frequently

disconnects, making high bandwidth applications such as downloading large files, video-conferencing, and even FaceTiming difficult to impossible.

For the Cree communities in Northern Quebec, this situation should be improved in the near future, with a collaboration between the Federal government, Distributel and Cree-owned Eeyou Communications that will provide broadband terrestrial high speed to 14 Northern Cree communities beginning in March 2018 (CBC, 2018). For the Inuit in Nunavik, upgrades to fibre optic connectivity are coming (Rogers, 2017), with the Kativik Regional Government obtaining $15 million of support from the federal government (Digital Canada 150, 2017) and financing from the Quebec government to: 1) extend fibre optic lines to communities along the coast of Hudson Bay by 2019; 2) install fixed wireless radio tower links to fibre optic networks farther south; 3) increase bandwidth for communities served only by satellite; and 4) provide the infrastructure for 3G cell phone service, a first in Nunavik (FirstMile, 2018). So there is hope that in the next few years these communities will have access to some of what we in metropolitan areas take for granted.

However, an issue with internet access, whether by broadband terrestrial, or by satellite, is cost (Smillie-Adjarkwa, 2005) . For example, Mohawk people living on the Kahnawake reserve in Montreal can access high speed internet through broadband terrestrial connection. However, in 2011, the median household income in Kahnawake was only 54% of the median household income in Montreal ($37,000 vs $69,000) (StatsCan, 2017) so families can't afford the high-speed internet that students like Jamie and Ainsleigh need to do homework. In rural areas, the cost is much higher, and the speeds are much lower, and satellite access is even more expensive(Saltzman, 2017). A CRTC panel found that monthly data charges in the North

frequently run into the hundreds of dollars for slow service and low data caps (Thompson, 2018), a problem that is particularly difficult in Nunavik where houses are frequently headed by young single mothers whose only income is government transfers (Laneuville, 2015).

One solution to this problem could be creating public spaces equipped with computers with free access to internet. In Quebec, communities typically set up computer access within public libraries which is a Western model. Creating a model that incorporates indigenous approaches to knowledge-sharing and community could allow technology to reinforce community and culture rather than undermine it by Westernizing it. An aboriginal community that has successfully integrated technology and used it to strengthen their culture is the Maori of New Zealand. When the Maori began to adopt technology, they set up computers and wifi in what were called "virtual Marae," where Marae were a central place for community and knowledge-sharing in Maori culture (Greenwood, 2011). Thus the Maori culture incorporated technology into existing social structures rather than adopting Western models. In Inuit culture, the *qargit* were traditional social institutions where Inuit families gathered and shared oral traditions but were largely dismantled when Western culture introduced schools and churches (MacLean 2004). Recently, a Canadian teacher won the Global Teaching Prize for her success teaching the Inuit in Nunavik (Batrawy, 2017), and one of her key insights was that while Western cultures value isolated, abstract learning and that takes place in schools where families are not involved, the Inuit model of learning is applied learning incorporated into the fabric of family and community. To use technology to strengthen rather than undermine indigenous culture, providing free, higher speed access to technology in a community meeting place that

unifies learning, meetings with elders, children's centers etc. could strengthen social bonds and Inuit culture.

Indigenous Access to Education:

Education is an area where computer technology could significantly improve the lives of Indigenous women and girls. Educational attainment is a key determinant of health and well-being (Brandt, 2015). A parent's education level is the single most important predictor of a child's future academic success, not money or social status (Weissman, 2012). This fact predisposes Indigenous people to follow a harder path than most Canadians, even before they are born. Almost 60% of the Quebec Indigenous population fails to graduate high school, compared to 26% percent of the non-Indigenous population. Interventions that could increase graduation rates could help women by giving them more employment opportunities, and could help their children by passing on intellectual and economic benefits that would in turn increase their chance for academic success (Arriagada, 2016).

An examination of the educational experience on reserves can shed light on the troublesome graduation statistics. Funding for schools on reserves is inadequate. The Federal government invests 30% less funding per student to educate Indigenous children than other Canadian students (Porter, 2016). Teaching staff and reserve officials report that the level of government funding provided to schools is insufficient to pay for educational necessities such as a library, gym equipment, textbooks and computers. Without the resources that other Canadian students have, it is unrealistic to expect that the majority of Indigenous students will succeed.

Another difficulty is the remote location of many Indigenous communities. Even for students who finish high school, higher education is physically unattainable for many. There are no universities near many Indigenous settlements, so pursuing a higher education often involves leaving family and friends and a way of life to go the city where cultural barriers and loneliness are major challenges (Billson and Mancini, 2007). For many young women, moving away would mean leaving children behind; almost 20% of Indigenous women have children in their teenage years compared to 6% of non-Indigenous people (StatsCan, 2017) creating additional difficulties.

Increased access to communications technology has the power to address some of the challenges in education. Increased availability of computers in schools and in the community could provide access to distance learning, permitting residents to remain in their communities, and to gain the necessary training to fill positions the community needs. In a recent review of technology in the North, Alexander (2011) describes one example of the effect of increasing access to technology on the Inuit: "Technology has played a key role in graduating the first 21 Inuit students in… the first graduate degree program offered in Nunavut, enabling Inuit students to study part-time through face-to-face courses in two communities ... and critically important, through online learning." Making education accessible without taking people out of their community provides hope by making the route to change visible to those in the community.

The M.Ed program works with educators in Nunavut to improve local leadership in education. The program specifically uses decolonizing methodologies to ground the programs, including recognition of the Inuit right to self-determination and recognition of the marginalization of Inuit culture, language, traditions, and worldview (University of Prince

Edward Island, 2009). Part of the way they do this is by creating a learning environment that is bilingual and bicultural, so that Inuit youth are validated and recognized. In the past the goal of Indigenous education was, as stated by our first Prime Minister, to "take the Indian out of the child" (Fine, 2017). Now, the goal is explicitly to strengthen Inuit identity because a strong child will be a strong youth and adult.

Greater access to instruction in technology and programming could allow Indigenous people to disseminate their culture by creating their own online content. For example, they could share stories usually transmitted through oral tradition on a much larger scale with software and with visuals. Recently, a pilot project explored this approach. A week-long coding workshop was run to teach Inuit children to use open source software to create their own online content, that is, to see computers as tools to create rather than passively consume (Frizzell, 2017). After the workshop, the children were given refurbished government laptops from Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada that came preloaded with Windows 10 and with the programming software so they could continue using it without having to download it from the Internet using the erratic connections. In one week, they were able to record traditional throat singing and create remixes as well as create a computer game. If courses in programming and web development -- and computers -- were more widely accessible to both children and adults, Indigenous peoples could develop a greater online presence that could be used to promote their culture, foster connections with communities and create business opportunities. They could also be a tool of advocacy to make aspects of their situation – boil water advisories, exorbitant food prices in the North and overcrowded and crumbling houses -- better known, and thus gain the public's support in lobbying the government.

Greater access to technology in education could also be used to better incorporate Indigenous languages into the classroom. In Quebec, 90% of the residents of Nunavik speak Inuktitut. However, because teachers are generally not Inuit, there is a lack of bilingual teachers and teaching resources, so students entering school receive minimal instruction in their native language. As Ken Hale, an eminent linguist said: “Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of social and spiritual possibilities. To lose a language is like dropping a bomb on the Louvre.” (quoted in Martin, 2017).

Technology has the potential to support teachers, even non-native teachers, in language instruction. For example, recently, interactive applications to teach Inuktitut syllabics to children ages 3 to 7 have been developed for ipads (Kativik School Board, 2016). Ipads preloaded with these applications could be provided to childcare centers to better prepare students to begin writing and to reinforce the value of their culture. For older children and adults, the Nunavut government and Pirurvik (an education center in Iqualuit) recently released apps that provide virtual keyboards to allow writing in Inuktitut syllabics on ipads and iphones (CBC, 2015). If classrooms and community centers in Nunavik were provided with ipads preloaded with the Inuktitut keyboard, students could use traditional syllabics for their writing in school and for online communication in social media with communities across the Arctic. Email and social media require little bandwidth and are already important in the North. This would make syllabic writing relevant in a way that it cannot be when it is not included in the school curriculum and when it is not used in electronic communication. Wider access to these kinds of technological advances would strengthen the Inuktitut language in schools, tighten the connection between the

school curriculum and the students' culture, and make Inuktitut more relevant to the younger generation.

Issues in Health Care for Indigenous Peoples

Health care is another area where greater access to technology could improve life for Indigenous peoples. There have been many health reports on Indigenous people but little of this information comes from Indigenous people themselves. The government has increasingly turned to online surveys as a means of gathering information for policy development (Wherry, 2016). This is a major problem as many Indigenous people have little to no access to technology, and therefore cannot vocalize their needs through surveys. Some struggles Indigenous women face include lack of access to health care in their community, substance abuse, teen pregnancies, and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety.

Transportation South

An important barrier for Indigenous peoples in Quebec is access to health care in their community. For example, Nunavik is served by only two Health Centers both of which have limited capacity to deal with major health problems. In a single year, 8,000 flights south to Montreal are made by patients and an accompanying family members for health care (Rogers, 2017). These trips are profoundly disruptive for families: when a mother or a child needs care in the south, the mother must leave the rest of her children for prolonged periods to access it. A nurse working in Nunavik reported that many of these visits are necessary because nurses do not have access to medical expertise that would allow them to decide definitively whether the person

can be treated safely on site, so they err on the side of caution and sends patients south (Aboriginal Midwifery and Midwifery Factsheet, ND). If they had more access to technological advances like two way-video conferencing with specialists in Montreal, and high-speed internet to allow them to review large files like scans simultaneously with a specialist, it would significantly reduce the need for these trips (Ross, 2018).

Substance Abuse Among Indigenous Peoples

Substance abuse is a common health problem among Indigenous people (Chansonneuve, 2007). Drug abuse rates are four times higher within Indigenous communities than non-Indigenous populations (Frotin et al, 2015). The Kahnawake Health Report identifies substance abuse, including alcohol, as the number one health concern of the community, with current health services on the reserve being inadequate to deal with the heavy caseload (Kahenstineson Jacobs, 2011). Kahnawake chief Carl Horn, speaking about the opioid epidemic said: “We’re moving on from marijuana, to the point where kids are crushing oxycodone, snorting it and injecting it.” He continued; “It’s a serious issue in our community, and it’s getting worse and worse.”(MacArthur, 2016) This issue is not limited to the urban Indigenous populations. One quarter of the Inuit living in Nunavik meet medical criteria for binge drinking (Khan, 2008). From the physical point of view, alcohol causes cirrhosis of the liver and in the long term can lead to Korsakoff’s dementia. Moreover, from a social point of view, alcohol addiction can have devastating effects on educational and occupational achievement, family structure, and financial resources. Although addiction is difficult to address through technology, the access to technology can allow Indigenous people who are trying to abstain or remain sober

to gain support from online resources. For example, the Indigenous group "Our Spirit: Sober Strong" provides online support, contact and friendship for Indigenous people trying to stay sober . TeleHealth interventions could allow the five addiction treatment centers for Indigenous people located in Quebec to extend their reach, as currently they offer only on-site treatments, and have web presence that acts primarily as online pamphlets. Extending their reach through Telehealth and online support groups could allow Indigenous people living in more rural areas to have access to resources that are scarce in remote regions and inadequate even in urban regions. Although in many remote regions, TeleHealth two way conferencing is difficult due to connection speed and inconsistency, investment in video conference services optimized for satellite connections, has made video conferencing possible in Nunavut (Zarate, 2010). Further, the TeleHealth Network has a library of recorded webcasts on topics relevant to Indigenous health (First Nations Telehealth Network, 2018) which make lower demands on bandwidth than videoconferencing, and could be accessible as soon as remote networks are upgraded, if the communities were provided with computers in publicly-accessible spaces. Finally, Indigenous people could use internet access to find services and information, such as online hotline services that support people during the crises associated with addiction.

Teen Pregnancies Among Indigenous Peoples

High-risk pregnancies are more common in Indigenous women. For example, Indigenous people have higher rates of teen pregnancy, higher rates of pregnancy complications such as high blood pressure, diabetes and bleeding, greater multiparity, more extreme birth weights, and greater rates of premature birth and infant mortality than non-Indigenous Canadians (Duhaime et

al, 2015). Infant mortality among Indigenous populations is roughly three times the national average in Canada and in Nunavik is four times the national average (Duhaime et al, 2015). Prenatal care is highly correlated with pregnancy outcomes (Creanga, 2015). A maternal health survey found that 40% of pregnant Indigenous women receive inadequate prenatal care and 25% receive minimal to no prenatal care (Newburn-Cook, 2007). The lack of prenatal care in Indigenous communities is partly due to the traditional Indigenous view that pregnancy is a natural process requiring no intervention, a view that sees pelvic examinations, fetal monitoring, induction of labour, etc. as harmful interference with the child (Sokolinski, 1995). This cultural reluctance combined with long distances to clinics, long waits to see the doctor can make prenatal monitoring difficult to deliver (Sokolinski, 1995). In isolated First Nations Indigenous communities, mothers are transported south many weeks in advance of their due date and give birth in cities a thousand kilometers from home (Billson et al, 2007). This would be traumatic for any mother, but is worse for Indigenous mothers due to language and cultural barriers, negative stereotypes about Indigenous people that influence hospital experiences, and the intergenerational trauma associated with the government's history of removing Indigenous children from their families (Billson et al, 2007). However, TeleHealth interventions for high-risk pregnancies have been implemented successfully according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information (Dinesen, 2016). These two-way video-feeds allow access to doctors by midwives in remote locations and have reduced the need to transport mothers for childbirth (Dinesen, 2016). With the impending improvement of communication technology in remote areas, such an intervention could be implemented in Indigenous communities in Quebec. Finally, when access to high-speed connectivity in remote areas is implemented (March 2018),

subsidized provision of ipads or tablets to hospitalized mothers and their families could reduce the trauma of prolonged separation for health care by allowing families to stay connected through Skype and Facetime.

Mental Health Among Indigenous Peoples

Another vital part of healthcare that could be addressed with technology is mental health. The risk of mental health disorders has increased in Indigenous people. (Kirmayer et al, 2000) Suicide is the number one reason for death among Indigenous people aged 44 and younger. 126 out of 100,000 Indigenous males aged between 15-24 commit suicide compared to the 35 out of 100,000 non Indigenous people in Canada. Suicide rates among Inuit are 11 times higher than the national average in Canada, and Inuit rates of suicide are among the highest in the world (Kral, 2016). It has been shown that communities with some type of self government, ownership of traditional lands, local control of healthcare and education and community facilities that preserved their culture have lower suicide rates (Mihychuk, 2017). Therefore, an important factor in helping reduce mental illness in Indigenous peoples is returning the power of self-governance to them, supporting them in the development of autonomy and working with them to strengthen their communities which were weakened by colonization. Any government in the modern age requires technology: one cannot create a budget, administer justice, track health care outcomes or communicate with constituents without the internet and computers. But even at this moment, there are many young people in Indigenous communities who need help now, and in remote Indigenous communities therapists are few and are hard to reach. For example, Nunavik has a single resident psychologist for 14 communities (Nunavik Regional

Board of Health and Social Services, 2018). Increased access to technology for Indigenous people would allow those in remote locations to access mental health professionals, and could potentially combat feelings of depression and isolation by allowing people to connect with online support groups.

Summary

Indigenous peoples in Quebec face enormous barriers accessing education and health care, barriers that are compounded by the digital divide. In education, better access to computer technology could increase access to higher education, strengthen Indigenous cultures in schools and communities, while web development and programming courses could give Indigenous people the ability to share their language and culture, create economic opportunities and provide a means of airing grievances and contacting government officials.

Better access to computer technology could also address some of the many health care issues Indigenous women face. Greater internet access could increase access to specialists in remote regions, could reduce the need for mothers and children to be transported south for health care, improve Indigenous people's ability to influence government policy on their health priorities, improve maternal and prenatal health, and allow better access to online forums and hotlines for issues such as alcoholism, depression and suicide.

Computer technology is by no means a perfect, all-encompassing solution to the various and abundant issues faced by the Indigenous communities in Quebec. However, the digital divide has played a vital role in keeping Indigenous people in situations of vulnerability and powerlessness. Computer technology could give Indigenous communities the ability to better

educate themselves to fight a system working against them, to make their voices heard in a society that would silence them, and to ensure the health and happiness of a community long neglected and oppressed by those in power.

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