

Waking Up Ojibwe: Aginjibagwesi Virtual Family Night

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Mooshkine Waasigek indigoo. Maang nindoodem. Gochiching nindoonjii. Fort Frances indaa. I am from Couchiching First Nation. I grew up in Fort Frances, Ontario, Canada, in close proximity to my community. My grandparents attended either residential school or Indian Day School. Although we attended powwows, my parents and I did not grow up around the Anishinaabemowin language. I completed a Diploma of Education through the Aboriginal Teachers Education Program (ATEP) of Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, and am currently working towards my Bachelor of Education via Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario. After graduation I was hired at Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) through United Native Friendship Centre (UNFC). Here I learned Anishinaabemowin at carpet time with little three- and four-year-olds. My fellow AHS classroom teachers and assistants demonstrated how to seamlessly include culture and language in classroom environments.

The story of the *Virtual Family Night*, which is part of the *Waking Up Ojibwe*, or *Anishinaabemodaa*, language revitalization program (<http://www.wakingupojibwe.ca>), is a story of learning from Knowledge Keepers and Elders to implement traditional ways of learning. In 2017, Seven Generations Education Institute (SGEI), the Rainy River District School Board, and SayITFirst entered into a partnership and developed *The Ojibwe Language Strategy*. The main goal of the strategy was to bring

Anishinaabemowin back into the homes of the Anishinaabe people. In 2019, the Gigidiziiminaanig committee—a group of language speakers and Knowledge Keepers representative of the local 10 Anishinaabe First Nations—renamed the strategy *Anishinaabemodaa*. In English, this can be translated to “let’s all speak Anishinaabemowin.” We now use Anishinaabemowin (the language of the Anishinaabe people) instead of Ojibwe, as Ojibwe refers to a group of people and not the language.

This commentary is based on my work at SGEI in the *Waking Up Ojibwe* language department, where I am the Gaa-wijiji’odaamin’aad Abinoojiiya’ Ji-Anishinaabemonid, which roughly translates to “the one who plays with children so we can learn the language.” My role involves working with educators, partner centres, and local schools to encourage daily implementation of Anishinaabemowin. I also contribute to the creation of Anishinaabemowin educational materials.

My work with adults in children’s lives reflects the recommendations of researchers who emphasize that supporting children’s Indigenous language learning must start with “creating proficient adult speakers” (McIvor & Ball, 2019, p. 14). The adults can then use the language functionally in their interactions with children.

I was hesitant to go forward with this commentary because I questioned whether cultural teachings were meant to be shared in a formal academic setting. I agree with Galla (2018) when she argues “[n]ot all knowledge is authorized “public” knowledge - even if it is made “accessible” in this digital age” (p. 107). Furthermore, since the teaching of Aginjibagwesi (goldfinch) was a cultural teaching passed down to the Jones family of another community, I did not view it as my teaching to pass on to others in a formal setting such as this journal. I met with Dennis Jones (Anishinaabe name Pebaamibines), who first received the teaching. Through our conversation, I realized that passing along the Aginjibagwesi teaching in this paper has potential to benefit others, as the teaching

holds a lot of cultural relevance to language revitalization efforts beyond my community.

The teaching tells us that we make an offering to one of the keepers of the language, Aginjibagwesi, to ask for help with learning the language. In doing so, we enter into relationship with Aginjibagwesi and everything and everyone connected to the language. This relationship reflects more than connections with Elders who are passing on stories and teachings. When we enter into relationship with Aginjibagwesi, we are in relationship with the spirit of the language—a perspective consistent with a “language-as-a-process-of-sustaining-relationality” (Henne-Ochoa et al., 2020, p. 483) ideology of language.

How it Started

Prior to my joining Anishinaabemodaa, the teachings of Aginjibagwesi were given to *Waking Up Ojibwe* employees and language learners Shannon King (Anishinaabe name Waawaategiizhigook) and Carissa Copenace (Anishinaabe name Niigaanigaabawiik) by the Jones family to share with other language learners. It is important to mention that, even though they were given permission to help pass the teachings on without the Elders present, *Waking up Ojibwe* continues to work with the Jones family to learn more about the teachings and the appropriate ways to share them with learners of Anishinaabemowin. Niigaanigaabawiik, Waawaategiizhigok, and Brigitte Neganigwane, a previous *Waking Up Ojibwe* employee, met with fluent speakers Nancy Jones (Anishinaabe name Ogimaawigwanebiik), Don Jones (Anishinaabe name Niiganibines) and Pebaamibines. They followed protocol, offering asemaa (tobacco) and gifts, before asking for knowledge and guidance on creating a book and language kit out of the Aginjibagwesi teachings.

While this was happening, I transferred within UNFC from AHS to the Community Action Program for Children (CAP-C) working with families of children ages up to six years old. *Waking Up Ojibwe* was in partnership

with UNFC children's programs. I was offered a chance to attend a daily class called *Daga Anishinaabemodaa* taught by Pebaamibines. This was a ninety-minute class, structured with 15 minutes of English at the beginning and end, with one full hour of conversational Anishinaabemowin immersion via Zoom. During the first class, we had an online ceremony honouring the goldfinch and asking for help to speak the language. Everyone was asked to bring yellow cloth, asemaa, and a small food offering for the ceremony. I learned how Pebaamibines sat in ceremony and learned about Aginjibagwesi. He was told to pass on this teaching to other language learners.

Shortly after completing *Daga Anishinaabemodaa*, I was hired by *Waking Up Ojibwe*. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, Niigaanigaabawiik I actively began working on the *Aginjibagwesi Project* (later named *Aginjibagwesi gaye Gaa-wiiji'itwawaad*, or *Goldfinch and the Helpers*). She brought me onto the project to draw on my early childhood experience. I helped to create a resource guide, *Aginjibagwesi Gaye Gaa-wiiji'itwawaad (Goldfinch and Friends)*. In addition to the teachings, the resource guide includes Anishinaabemowin phrases to use during instruction, a song, and other activities. After the completion of the resource guide and materials, we held an online ceremony with Ogimaawigwanebiik and Jones to help this program go forward in a good way.

Aginjibagwesi Teaches Children and Parents Virtually

In the early days of the *Ojibwe Language Strategy*, communities requested a type of program that would bring together families, speakers, and Elders to participate in language activities and games. We developed the *Family Night* program and provided all materials and supper in exchange for a daycare employee or community engagement employee to learn alongside *Waking Up Ojibwe* employees.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the program could not take place in its original format. Classrooms were not available, and fluent speakers

and traditional Knowledge Keepers were not yet making public visits, so we had to create other learning opportunities for families. Like others who have used digital technologies to extend the reach of Indigenous language revitalization through video communication platforms, such as Zoom (McIvor et al., 2020a, 2020b), I developed *Virtual Family Night*. In this six-week program, Aginjibagwesi and his friends helped children and their parents develop Anishinaabemowin language skills and Anishinaabe teachings within family units. Similar to other digitally-based Indigenous language revitalization programs that focus on conversational language within families and communities (Chew et al., 2022; Hermes & King, 2013), the language in *Virtual Family Night* comes from the community.

Six families, with parents and children ages one –eight years old, joined me each week. Three families lived on-reserve and the other three families lived in Fort Frances. One mother was part of *Waking Up Ojibwe's* Adult Revitalization Program. This is a full-time course on-campus at SGEI. One family still is actively part of *Waking Up Ojibwe's* program. One mother is a teacher at an on-reserve elementary school. Two families attended daycare at a partnered Early Years Center. School-aged children were in Anishinaabemowin classes in school, and the preschool-aged children were enrolled in a daycare where the language is part of everyday interactions with early childhood educators.

Each family was in their own home using a laptop equipped with a camera and microphone during the class. If the family did not have access to a laptop, I provided them with one. I delivered all the supplies and a healthy supper beforehand to the six families so the parents could actively participate in the learning experience.

At the beginning of *Virtual Family Night*, I shared the teachings I had of Aginjibagwesi. Everyone asked Aginjibagwesi in Anishinaabemowin for help learning the language. I created play contexts for children to learn the language. Specific play contexts included Anishinaabemowin language,

songs, movement breaks, colouring pictures, repeating Anishinaabemowin words, answering science questions, and making crafts. I ensured a mix of gross and fine motor activities (e.g., songs with actions, cutting and pasting) as well. While children were engaged in the play activities, I talked with parents about structural aspects of the language, such as making a diminutive out of nouns and pluralizing nouns. I also showed adults several resources for further language learning like the online *Ojibwe People's Dictionary* (<https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu>).

With Niigaanigaabawik's help, I planned these evenings. In order to identify what worked and what didn't, we watched video recordings and reviewed my observation notes I wrote after each class.

What I Learned

As I reviewed recordings from the six virtual sessions with the six families, three important observations stood out to me:

1. Children showed self-confidence as language users as they took up roles as leaders and teachers alongside their parents and I.
2. Many positive interactions (e.g., touching, laughing, and smiling) spontaneously took place between the children and their parents while learning Anishnaabemowin together.
3. The children's relationship with Aginjibagwesi and the spirit of the language extended beyond our virtual sessions.

One of the many examples of children demonstrating their self-confidence in using Anishnaabemowin involved a child I'll refer to as Bobby (pseudonyms are used for children's names). Bobby started counting in Anishnaabemowin with me and then, when I turned off my microphone, continued counting for everyone. In so doing, he became the leader for all of us to follow. Another example involved school-aged Giizis, who introduced her brother with an almost-correct use of izhinikaazo (his/her name) and then corrected herself without prompting from her parents or myself. In a country with a history of separating Indigenous children from

their language and culture, *Virtual Family Night* placed Anishnaabemowin at the center of interactions amongst family members and across families in the virtual group. Learning Anishnaabemowin together provided a foundation to build children's sense of self and a sense of belonging within their family and community (Grenoble & Whaley, 2021).

The second observation is exemplified in one class where I led parents and children through a series of stretches. We stretched and touched various parts of the body while using the language. When I gave the instruction to touch your stomach (zaaminan gimisaad), Niibish chose to lovingly touch his mother's pregnant stomach. Another example occurred during a session where we sang Anishnaabemowin songs. Leisha and her mother, Susan, were hugging and kissing while singing the songs. Even as I was translating and explaining some words, they continued to touch one another. These examples demonstrate the importance of placing interactions and relationships at the center of Indigenous language learning, a characteristic of effective programs identified by other researchers (Chew et al., 2022; Henne-Ochoa et al., 2020).

The third observation comes from the small goldfinch plush toy that would make its bird call when squeezed. The relationship between this tangible Aginjibagwesi and the children was apparent in sessions. Douglas could accurately recall the role of Aginjibagwesi in Anishnaabe communities. Giizis excitedly shared her adventures with Aginjibagwesi during the week in between classes. She explained that Aginjibagwesi slept in her room, and Giizis's mother talked about taking the toy for car rides on the weekend. Children's physical relationship with the plush goldfinch toy helped to foster children's learning of the language beyond the virtual sessions, and a deeper connection to the spirit of Anishnaabemowin.

Moving Forward

My future initiatives will be guided by my reflections on the delivery of the program. The virtual format allowed me to record and

review the sessions, giving me the opportunity to reflect on the what I observed and the pedagogies that supported the learning. Additionally, this format allowed for families from different communities to come together and learn. However, there are limitations to the virtual format. For example, interactions are confined to the space around a screen. Furthermore, not all language use was documented due to the muting of microphones. Future initiatives will allow me to consider how to make the most of the advantages each format offers. Additionally, I hope to follow up with the families to explore whether they have maintained a relationship with Aginjibagwesi and the language, and whether they are still using the language in everyday interactions.

I agree with McIvor and Anisman (2018) that homes and families play a crucial role in the revitalization of Indigenous languages. *Virtual Family Night* was a starting point for what I hope to continue to do in the future to continue this work. Since the end of the pandemic lockdowns, I have developed in-person family language initiatives. With the help of Niigaanigaabawiik, we created the *Aginjibagwesi Storywalk* event. This version of *Aginjibagwesi O'dibaajimo Mazina'igan* (Teachings Book) can be enlarged and printed on individual cardstock and displayed throughout the community as part of the *Storywalk* event. Each page has a QR Code which families can scan using a smart device to hear Ogimaawigwanebiik read the page to you in Anishinaabemowin. Multiple families participated in the walk. Afterwards children and adults made asemaa ties to bring home. Coming full circle with my language learning journey, my first *Storywalk* event was held in partnership with the UNFC CAP-C program, the job where I first learned about Aginjibagwesi.

Above all, my future language initiatives will involve starting with ceremony and listening to communities and learning from Elders. I believe *Virtual Family Night* was so successful because it was created organically, through sitting and conversing with other language speakers and learners,

listening to their stories and reflections, coming to understand protocol, and collecting ideas and suggestions—all with the goal of reviving the language.

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