B.C. First Nations Head Start
FirstVoices Kids!

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On a cold, rainy day in October, at the Head Start conference in Vancouver, a ballroom filled with Head Start staff and parents fell silent when Tyrone Sitting Eagle's voice sang out into the lunchtime chatter—a young boy clearly speaking the words of his people's language.

Tyrone's is the voice on FirstVoices Kids for his Sto:lo community. He and his mom practiced for weeks saying and perfecting all the words and phrases for the language-learning program. On the day set for doing the recordings in Chilliwack, Tyrone had a bad cold and was sitting in front of the mic with a huge box of tissues, so his voice on FirstVoices Kids is not as clear as Tyrone's voice usually is! But it is there—his voice, speaking his language.

Tracey Herbert of the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council (FPHLCC), who worked on the kids program together with Head Start staff, says that she was inspired by hearing languages shared in children's voices. "I felt that if a small child can say these words, then I can too."

Beginnings

FirstVoices started out very local—a project created by two teachers at the tribal school in Brentwood Bay on Vancouver Island. When their computer lab got upgraded in March 2001, the teachers began experimenting. They got a font created for their language and then took videos and images of plants and wildlife and put words with them. Their idea caught the attention of the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, who supported further development of the idea. Now, five years later, FirstVoices is making it possible for Aboriginal communities all over the world—including those in Canada, the U.S., Australia and Africa who are already using or preparing to use FirstVoices—to preserve the voices, language and knowledge of their people.

FirstVoices makes it simple to archive language via the Internet and use the archived resources for interactive teaching. Communities can create their own alphabet, dictionary and phrase book. The dictionary can include words, sounds, images and video. Using the data in the archive, users can listen to and practice vocabulary and phrases, see pictures (for example, view a traditional medicinal plant, hear the word pronounced, and see information about its uses, where to find it, watch a video of community members collecting the plant, etc.), and play games to help with

vocabulary recognition and retention. A community does not have to make their archives public—they can use passwords to decide who can access the information.

FirstVoices Kids

The seed for FirstVoices Kids was a conversation between Tracey Herbert from FPHLCC and Head Start program consultant Kelly Terbasket: "They [FPHLCC] had lots of ideas on what they wanted to do with their Internet resources and how to make them available to communities. We were talking one day and thought of this idea to have children's games on the Internet in their own language." Head Start staff, FPHLCC staff and Head Start community partners put their heads together.

FirstVoices Kids uses pictures to guide pre-readers. The child clicks on the logo for their language group (an easily recognizable picture). They can click on photos or illustrations to hear a word or phrase, or play simple games such as painting a picture (which teaches vocabulary of things in the picture).

The Kids program makes it possible for young children to hear the recorded voices of elders at any time. They can play games and listen to a child's voice speaking their language. Parents and staff can play along with children. Community cultural knowledge and language is not only recorded and preserved, but is there for everyone to learn from whenever they wish.

Challenges

In order to create a kids program, a community must already have begun archiving with FirstVoices. Currently about half of B.C.'s 32 language groups have FirstVoices archives. "Because not all communities have archives, for the kids program we were limited to working with those groups who already have their language archived. But we hope that the Head Start programs who have been involved in this pilot phase will inspire and excite other communities to get involved, and we hope that Head Start workers will promote the program to their community if they don't already have it," explains Kelly.

Successfully creating a FirstVoices archive starts with relationship building in the community, selecting a language administrator, ensuring agreement on things like an orthography (spelling system) and finding people in the community who have the capacity to do the job. Partnerships between elders and tech-savvy young people have worked really well in many communities. Then comes raising funds, training, getting a custom keyboard set-up for the language, lots of manual work collecting data and doing recordings, and lots of manual work entering data.

Doing the recording is not as difficult as it sounds—a recording "studio" can be anything from a professional studio in a bigger centre to setting up a tape recorder in a quiet office or an elder's home. Communities are responsible for ensuring they have the capacity to build and manage their archive themselves. For communities who have already begun archiving with FirstVoices, adding the Kids component is just an additional step.

A challenge to overcome for some communities are misgivings elders or community members may have about using the Internet. "People worry about putting language on the Internet—that it is just one more thing that can be appropriated by non-First Nations," says Kelly. "In my mind, the

bigger, scarier concern is the extinction of our languages; we are so close to that already. Some people are fearful, and they don't realize that you can actually have passwords so the community controls access to the information." Tracey points out that in the past communities often found themselves reliant on an outsider, usually a linguist. FirstVoices enables them to generate, own and control all the cultural information and how it will be used. "It is really empowering in that way."

Web access issues

Many communities and Head Start sites are isolated and far from all have Internet access. What can they do while they wait for promised global web access infrastructures to be built? Communities can start with the building blocks so they are ready. All the steps of building a team, organizing, funding, collecting data and making recordings can happen now. In that sense the most essential cultural preservation work is already taking place. The resources will be there to archive on FirstVoices when web access is available. It is also possible to collect data and recordings and travel to another centre in order to use the web tools for archiving.

Next steps

Since FirstVoices Kids is brand-new, there are still many ideas to explore, and lots of evaluating to do. As Phase 2 of development gets going, plans are in the works for a song and story component and a new game, and staff will be gathering information about Head Start projects, any issues around Internet access, and monitoring how pilot sites are using the program—what works, and what can be improved.

For more information on FirstVoices and FirstVoices Kids, contact Peter Brand at the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation (FPCF).
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To visit FirstVoices Kids, go to: www.firstvoiceskids.com