

“Indigenizing the Teacher’s Toolbox” Language Teaching Practices in a Shoshone Classroom

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This paper examines some of the challenges associated with the task of “incorporating cultural content” into a university-based Shoshone language curriculum. I argue that the common practice of using models and methods for teaching English as a Second Language as a base, for example, and adding on indigenous cultural content is problematic on multiple different levels. I demonstrate some of the strategies the Shoshone teacher and the elders employed to make the curriculum more suitable, reflecting their teaching styles and their students’ needs. The teacher called this strategy “indigenizing the teacher’s toolbox” – combining “Native and non-Native tools” to promote the Shoshone language and culture.” I suggest that collaborative, action oriented research is necessary to develop and test alternative models of instruction that are grounded in local models of teaching and learning and reflect the goals, needs and pedagogical practices of the communities they intend to serve.

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to all the Shoshone and Goshute elders and youth I had the honor to work with. Without their wisdom, expertise, insights, and help, this project would not have been possible. I will forever be grateful for this opportunity.

This paper was inspired while conducting an ethnographic research project at the University of Utah’s Center for American Indian Languages in Salt Lake City in the summer of 2012. During this time, I worked as a curriculum developer and a language coordinator for the Shoshone/Goshute Youth Language Apprentice Program (SYLAP). I was hired by the director of the program specifically to improve the existing SYLAP curriculum and make it “more culturally relevant and engaging for Native students” (personal communication, March 2012). The existing SYLAP curriculum was a product of a variety of collaborative efforts over the years, mostly among applied linguists at the University of Utah and Shoshone speakers, and was largely based on mainstream models and methods of second language teaching and learning, specifically in the English as a Second Language setting. My background in curriculum development, language teaching, and language teacher training (all in the in the context of European languages), were the basis of my qualifications for this employment. My training in linguistics and anthropology as well as my research focus on issues of language endangerment and revitalization, were seen as an added benefit that would help clarify the needs of Shoshone communities, and in turn, improve the services

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provided by the SYLAP program. While my role in the program allowed me to have an insider perspective on this particular revitalization effort, I am not a Shoshone person, and therefore, I am an outsider to the home communities of the project's participants.

I will discuss the SYLAP team's attempt to incorporate cultural content into the program's curriculum and the set of challenges it presented. By "team" I am referring primarily to the collaborative efforts between the Shoshone teacher, the visiting Shoshone elders and myself. As an outsider, with limited cultural and linguistic understanding of Shoshone, my work relied heavily on this ongoing collaboration. In this context, the notion of incorporating "cultural content" was generally talked about and understood as incorporating practices and activities identified by the Shoshone collaborators as culturally important, representative of the Shoshone worldview and a way of being in the world. At the same time, careful attention was given to the sensitivity and appropriateness of the material under consideration, as not to violate cultural norms related to knowledge and information flow. However, how to best accomplish this task proved challenging. I argue that these attempts highlighted a much broader issue common to many similar programs, namely the problematic and contentious nature of "teaching culture" in the general context of language revitalization, especially in an academic setting. In this setting, instead of understanding culture as everyday practices that are complex, politically situated, always in flux, and actively co-constructed by social actors (see Eder, 2007; Hermes, 2005; Hoffman, 1999), culture is often envisioned as a static object that is easily identifiable, describable, and above all, teachable. Similar to Hermes (2005), I also argue that this approach of improving existing curriculum by adding on cultural material has a tendency to change the meaning of culture. Focusing explicitly on culture as an object that can be taught and learned in schools orients the language workers towards culture in a very particular way. This orientation, as well as the classroom format and methods through which this is to be realized, often entails explicit preoccupation with authenticity and tends to historicize, essentialize, and ritualize practices and activities. On the other hand, daily-lived contemporary practices of the language workers and the students themselves, for example, might be overlooked, become devalued, and rendered as less authentic or non-traditional. In short, it encourages the treatment of culture as a historical object to which one must aspire. It also tends to treat culture as homogeneous, stressing only differences between culturally distinct groups, while neglecting intra-group diversity and greater depth. Leonard's discussion of modern Miami language practices challenges this "common discourse in which American Indian cultures and languages are frozen in the past and are authentic only if unchanged relative to some perceived norm associated with their past" (2011, p. 153). This dominant discourse, Leonard argues, imposes notions of purism on both language structure as well as patterns of use (2011, p. 136). I argue that these same impositions are also applied to cultural concepts and practices in the process of this type of curriculum development.

I will demonstrate some of the ways Shoshone language workers grappled with the task of “incorporating Shoshone culture” into their classroom practices. One of the main challenges, I believe, was the fact that the SYLAP classroom format stressed pedagogies, activities, and approaches to learning adopted from methods for learning non-endangered languages such as English, rather than reflecting the needs, goals, and pedagogical practices of the communities it was intending to serve. As Hinton (2011) points out, learning and teaching endangered languages have different features and demands than teaching other, non-endangered languages, and this fundamental difference must be reflected in language planning and practice. Hinton argues that since cultural revitalization frequently happens along with language revitalization, “rather than learning ‘how others do things’, as would be the case for foreign and majority languages, a goal may be to have the learners themselves become able to carry on and enhance the practice of the traditions of their cultures” (Hinton, 2011, p. 310). I will focus my attention on the process of teaching itself and the particular ways the teacher and elders attempted to embody Shoshone cultural meanings and values in their instructions. With the help of the visiting elders, the teacher employed a classroom practice he called “indigenizing the teacher’s toolbox” – combining Native and non-Native tools to teach Shoshone language and culture. In addition to some of the more obvious, overt cultural practices and performances such as singing, drumming, and dancing, this approach also included highlighting and contextualizing language practices and linguistic features of the Shoshone language. Lastly, it also included just simply being together and doing things together.

SYLAP participants and Shoshone speech community overview

The SYLAP program serves Shoshone and Goshute high school youth from all over the West, who wish to engage in learning the Shoshone language in an academic setting, attending language classes and participating in cultural activities while earning university credits. The admission process for the SYLAP program was designed to closely mirror standard college admission process, aimed at preparing the students for applying to college. To apply, the students were asked to obtain two letters of recommendation, provide high school transcripts, write a statement of purpose and fill out general admissions application. Students were required to meet an application deadline and submit all the documents to the selection committee for review. The selected students then came to campus where for six weeks they took Shoshone classes, participated in various afterschool and weekend activities, and engaged in paid work as interns, gaining various skills in the field of linguistics. The internship tasks included participation in language documentation activities, such as gathering data for the ongoing University of Utah’s Shoshone Talking Dictionary project and the transcription and translation of historical recordings from the Wick R. Miller Shoshone Collection held by the University of Utah. Students also worked on developing language materials to be used in their communities, such as children’s books, short language videos, and a Head Start program curriculum. Most recently, the students also began developing the first ever Shoshone language video game.

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The SYLAP teacher was an integral part of the program and a driving force behind inspiring students to become language activists, and continue to be actively involved in Shoshone language and culture advocacy beyond the SYLAP program. The teacher has been involved with the program from the very beginning. While the program is in session, he works as a language teacher and assists in curriculum development. For the rest of the year, he works as a Shoshone language consultant for the University of Utah Shoshone Project. In addition to the university based language revitalization activities, over the years, he has also been involved in various community based language renewal efforts. In his early 30s, he is not a native speaker of Shoshone, but he has managed to reach fluency in the language. As a teenager, under his own initiative, he started learning Shoshone through pairing up with various elders and spending countless hours learning to listen and to speak. The teacher's interest in the Shoshone language prompted him to get a BA in linguistics from the University of Oregon, and his training informed his classroom teaching practices and his understanding of how the language works. He saw SYLAP as an opportunity to give his students the necessary knowledge of linguistic theory for them to become better equipped when facing the challenges on their own, as independent students of Shoshone in their home communities.

Elders who engaged with the SYLAP program came from many different Shoshone and Goshute communities and as such exposed the students to different dialects of the language as well as the various distinct, regionally specific cultural practices. The Shoshone territory is vast, including present day states of California, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Montana. Located largely within the Great Basin region, this area encompasses some of the most arid conditions on the continent, as well as one of the most varied regions in terms of climate, topography, flora, and fauna. Many of the elders have been involved in various language revitalization efforts in their communities, and all were experienced in Shoshone classroom teaching and had previously been involved in various University of Utah projects and initiatives.

The Shoshone language has been classified as the northernmost member of the Uto-Aztecan language family, and a member of central Numic branch. The number of Shoshone speakers has been declining and although no reliable census figures are available, Loether estimates there are about five thousand fluent speakers overall, most of them over the age of fifty. Even though there are still some children acquiring the language at home, it is becoming increasingly rare (2009, p. 240). Despite this relatively large number of speakers, the domains for Shoshone language use have been steadily declining. The largest and likely the most vibrant community of Shoshone speakers (about a thousand), is on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in southeastern Idaho (Loether, 2009, p. 240). However, there are also many communities that only have a very few speakers left, posing a challenge to regionally specific, dialect sensitive revitalization efforts. Despite the decrease in the number of Shoshone speakers, the language has maintained most of its "band-centered" dialects, tied to specific families and their home territories (Loether, 2009, p. 241).

Oral traditions and text production

Central to curriculum development and the production of classroom teaching materials are activities oriented towards the utilization and production of texts. Carr and Meek (2013) point to the long-standing textualizing traditions of American anthropology, aiming at Native American/ First Nation’s cultures and languages, reflecting theoretical focus of studying language and culture together. Since language revitalization emerged from this tradition, entextualization practices have been central to these activities. The utilization of historical texts as well as the production of new texts has come to occupy a central position in many language revitalization efforts, including the SYLAP program. As narratives become incorporated into classroom language teaching materials, they become a new, distinct genre, polished decontextualized texts, frequently lacking any trace of discursive and performative features, reworked and reshaped to fit the classroom context and the particular instructional framework. Eder argues that since storytelling is related to rich and complex traditions, the actual practices of storytelling are essential for maintaining their integrity. She further argues that if stories are removed from oral tradition, for example by being turned into written texts and brought into classrooms, there is a risk of the link between practices and content becoming broken, causing the narratives to lose their integrity (2007, p. 291). Hermes described a concern expressed by one of the Ojibwe speakers she interviewed. He felt that the way the language was thought in a classroom not only separated words from complete thoughts and their contexts, but it also appropriated them into English, changing their meaning (2005, p. 50).

Many scholars have demonstrated the centrality of oral narratives in Native communities. Oral narrative traditions are utilized for example, for moral instruction, socialization of children, healing, as well as constructing culturally relevant and appropriate tribal and social identities (e.g., Basso, 1996; Cruikshank, 1991, 2005; Eder, 2007; Kroskrity, 1993, 2012a, 2012b, Meek, 2009; Nevins, 2004; Nevins & Nevins, 2012; Palmer, 2012; Sarris, 1992; Toelken, 1987). It is through these narratives that cultural values emphasizing knowledge and wisdom of ancestors and the importance of collective versus individual identities are imparted on the audience (Kroskrity, 2012, p. 4). Palmer argues that a story is the product of a close encounter between the storyteller and the listener, where responsibilities are shared, resulting in a significant, worthwhile human event (Palmer, 2012, p. 25). The ideologies concerned with storytelling often take their own moral stances, for example, explicitly or implicitly indicating who gets to tell the stories, how and where they tell them and to whom and when stories should be told (Kroskrity 2012b; 179). Furthermore, Ochs and Capps have argued that narrative-embedded moral stances are “rooted in community and tradition [and aim] toward what is good and valuable and how one ought to live in the world” (2001, p. 45).

Given these important functions and the long and rich tradition of Native American oral narratives, it is unsurprising that they have become relevant in curriculum development, both as oral and textual sources to draw from and built upon. At SYLAP the Wick R. Miller Shoshone Collection provided a rich

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linguistic and cultural source, and was seen to have a promising potential for teaching material development. Some of the central components of the Wick R. Miller Shoshone Collection are recordings of traditional narratives and songs from the 1960s and 1970s. The Collection also includes many pages of various manuscripts and Dr. Miller's field notes – it is my understanding that most of the audio materials have been digitized, but not all transcribed or translated, while the manuscripts and field notes have been neither digitized nor transcribed or properly catalogued.

Drawing primarily on the Collection's audio content, a variety of classroom materials such as picture books, classroom worksheets as well as short Claymation films have been created over the years. This involved not only incorporating traditional narratives, but also composing new narratives based on culturally significant characters such as the coyote, for example. All this was done in effort to bring cultural content into the SYLAP classroom and facilitate culturally sensitive and engaging teaching materials for use in the communities. While the efforts that were put into these projects were impressive, nevertheless, some of the projects did not escape controversies. Through the recontextualization of these important cultural resources and their movement from familial into institutional contexts, these stories underwent what Nevins and Nevins (2012) call radical translation. The authors argue that radical translation involves "recontextualization across different semiotic regimes in which the purpose of speaking, the status of words, and the location of agency are configured differently" (2012, p. 143). While in the school context the language of storytelling is primarily thought of as "a conduit of referential meaning encoded by the storyteller and decoded by the listeners" (Nevins & Nevins 2012, p. 144), in the familial or community ceremonial contexts language is seen as "an invitation to each listener to imagine, to orient themselves through awareness of place and ancestral actions, and as the story unfolds to come to their own revelatory meaning" (Nevins & Nevins 2012, p. 144). In the school context, such as the SYLAP program, narratives are treated as culturally important items to be transcribed, translated and incorporated into lesson plans. Simplified versions of traditional stories are presented in a way that can facilitate the participation of learners with varied Shoshone language fluency, and activities are developed often using only parts of the story to target specific grammatical constructions or selected vocabulary, in order to practice simple conversational skills. Such approach to language ignores the essential relationship between the teller and the listener and the care that must be taken in the timing and performance of the narrative. To briefly illustrate this further, one of my colleagues at SYLAP and an applied linguist, shared a lesson she has learned from running numerous community-based teacher workshops. During one workshop's brainstorming session on activities that could be developed based on traditional narratives, she suggested that one of the activities could be discussing the meaning, lessons, and morals of the stories—something she has personally done successfully while developing English as a Second Language curriculum in the past. This suggestion, however, was strongly rejected by the teachers. She was told that for Shoshones, such things are not to be discussed

openly, and instead, it is up to the listener to contemplate and make sense of the lessons individually. To alleviate these types of tensions, heavier emphasis was placed on creating materials that would only very loosely draw inspiration from traditional narratives.

“Indigenizing the teacher’s toolbox”

As I have already pointed out, the intrusion of mainstream ideas about language learning and teaching is further complicated by the fact that many language revitalization programs, due to various constraints, often use English language curricula as a template for creating their language materials and lesson plans, incorporating cultural materials as means of tailoring the curricula to local contexts (see Hermes, 2005; Hinton, 2011). This “add-on” approach often does not map on well, resulting in the creation of materials that are not adequately suited for the job, often resulting in what, Hermes calls “the narrowing of culture to fit existing school framework” (2005, p. 52). The achievement of cultural competency coincides with or perhaps according to some in the Shoshone communities, even precedes language fluency. One of the participating elders captured this idea by stating that “the first step in language learning is learning about culture” (2012, field notes). The recognition of classroom instruction not being the most ideal way to facilitate the achievement of both language fluency and cultural competency was common. However, given the current situation - namely the decrease of Shoshone domains of language use, classroom instruction has been, even if with some hesitations, identified as a viable alternative.

In the following pages, I hope to illustrate the SYLAP teacher’s employment of a strategy he called “indigenizing the teacher’s toolbox” – employing Native and non-Native tools to teach. These efforts aimed to advocate for classroom-based language teaching, while incorporating Shoshone cultural content into teaching practices to facilitate both language and cultural learning. This strategy, he explained, involved having to “grasp onto non-Native tools and indigenize them” and utilizing technology, ways of teaching, and even ways of understanding language, and make them usable for the purpose of teaching Shoshone.

Trained in formal linguistics, the teacher used his understanding of Shoshone morphology and syntax, for example, to teach the language. Additionally, he took full advantage of one of the Shoshone orthographies in his classroom practices, and saw it as an essential and effective tool for Shoshone language revitalization. Learning how to both read and write in Shoshone were skills the SYLAP students gained throughout the program. In addition to recognizing the usefulness of what he called “non-Native” linguistic approaches to language instruction, he also saw the need for incorporating Native knowledge and traditions into the classroom. By recontextualizing the Shoshone language, culture, and traditions this way, he attempted to create a new model of what it means to learn and know Shoshone. How to employ this approach in his classroom, however, was a frequent source of negotiations.

One of the first challenges we encountered was trying to use “Shoshone only” in the classroom. Creating immersion-like experience for the learners as

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much as possible was a goal we set out to accomplish at the beginning. However, the students lacked the linguistic competence to understand lessons concerning culture and traditions in Shoshone. Many classroom lessons would at first start in Shoshone, but would quickly revert into English. While I offered techniques to help him “stay in Shoshone”, drawing on my own experiences in teaching in English only to a class consisting of speakers of multiple languages, with English being the only one we all had in common, he kept reminding me that teaching cultural knowledge and language together was essential, and there was no way to divorce the two. He argued that the language needed to be placed in a cultural context for the students to understand it, and for that, English had to be employed. Since we were instructed by the director of the program to follow the “Shoshone only” model, having so much English spoken in class became problematic and a pressure was put on both of us to remedy this. Needless to say, we were not able to fix this “problem.” Some of the elders who participated in the program at times spent the entire classroom period speaking in English about various aspects of Shoshone culture, covering topics that on surface, to a non-Native person, might seem largely unrelated to language as conceptualized in the mainstream classroom setting. It became clear to me that Shoshone ideas regarding language competence have a lot less to do with grammatical and morphological structures than they do with passing on Shoshone cultural knowledge and the Shoshone way of being in the world. One elder commented that “Indian teachings are just as important as anything you learn in the classroom” (2012, field notes) asserting legitimacy and authority of indigenous knowledge and its place in the education process. Since most students had limited fluency in the Shoshone language, contextualizing and clarifying Shoshone language learning using English became a regular feature of the SYLAP classroom instruction.

Contextualizing learning: I will now turn to some examples of how language learning was contextualized in the SYLAP classroom and how both Shoshone and institutional pedagogical models were employed to produce a hybridized language instruction model. Having elders available to interact with the youth was seen as an essential part of having Shoshone culture present in the classroom or at least available for inquiries. The essential role of elders in the transmission of cultural knowledge was often brought to my attention. For example, an elder said that listening to, and knowing, stories elders tell is “creating what they [ancestors] used to do” and that to be a Shoshone, one has to know the stories. “You have to listen to learn the language” one of the elders advised. “Listen to your elders, they will not always be here,” another elder warned (2012, field notes). However, during SYLAP language lessons, elders were often seemingly underutilized, just sitting or standing in the front of the classroom, not taking overly active role in this particular form of instruction. For the most part, they would only be called upon by the teacher for pronunciation and lexical clarifications and in general, would not lead any lessons. The elders were most actively participating after classes were over, in various hands-on internship activities and in one-on-one settings. These included expanding the Shoshone Talking Dictionary, creating picture books, and working on transcrib-

ing and translating Shoshone recordings. Importantly, elders spent a lot of time in the evenings just being with the youth, sharing stories and at times creating crafts, modes of interactions that seemed more comfortable and natural.

However, there was one particular elder who took a very active role in the teaching process and when she entered the classroom, the teacher would take a seat and let her take over the class. Her lessons and teaching style were very different from the teacher’s. She generally spent the first part of the class concentrating on a specific grammar point that we planned to cover and then skillfully moved onto linking this grammar point to some specific aspect of Shoshone culture. While the examples of the grammatical points would be given in Shoshone, the explanations would take place exclusively in English. Her teaching was very much teacher, or in this case, elder-centered, and students would only very minimally be called upon to practice speaking Shoshone. Mainly, they were expected to listen, which they did intently. During the one week she was with SYLAP, she managed to incorporate topics such as Shoshone traditional subsistence diet and the effects of non-traditional foods on contemporary communities, Shoshone use of traditional medicine and substance abuse awareness and prevention,, and various other aspects of general social conduct she placed in the context of traditional Shoshone values.

To give an example of her approach, I will describe how she handled one of the topics she was asked to teach, specifically, the use of possessive pronouns. The elder followed the lesson plan as I had prepared it, introducing the various pronoun forms and using them with nouns the students were already familiar with. She formed simple sentences such as “my backpack”, “our house”, and “their daughters”. After she had written it all on the board and given numerous examples, she moved onto explaining that while the forms “my” and “mine” do exist in Shoshone, in practice, they are rarely used. She explained how sharing and collective ownership has always been valued in the Shoshone society, and how expressing that something belongs exclusively to only one person would not be an appropriate way to behave. This example highlights the inadequacies of curricula developed by cultural outsiders without extensive community collaboration. While my training and expertise in language teaching and curriculum design were useful, they were clearly insufficient. I was able and competent enough in creating lesson plans, focusing on practicing grammatical constructions and introducing vocabulary list, but how to contextualize this material to reflect Shoshone cultural practices was something I could not do.

The teacher felt a certain amount of discomfort teaching the SYLAP students about what he understood as culture as he did not consider himself a cultural expert in any way. While he might have appeared confident discussing certain aspects of culture with non-Shoshones, such as myself, or the much younger students, in the presence of elders, he deferred questions regarding culture to them instead. To see how culture, as the teacher understood it, was incorporated into the SYLAP classroom majority of the time, I follow with some examples.

First: during class, the teacher would frequently give information about dialect differences and identify the Shoshone regions the words came from. He

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visibly enjoyed this particular activity, stating, “anytime somebody gives me a word, I take it”– drawing parallels between his love for traveling through the Shoshone country and how people in the past used to travel and picked up words spoken outside of their home regions. He frequently encouraged the students to do the same, travel, and get to know the people and their dialects. He also stressed the importance of knowing the dialect of one’s own people, and explained that regional dialects are the “last connection to pre-reservation life,” and that all regional dialects are of equal value (2012, field notes).

Second: the teacher often engaged in “breaking Shoshone words apart” into morphemes, identifying the functions of each meaningful unit, stressing the importance of knowing the structure of the language to understand “what is going on” (2012, field notes). Giving the etymology of words would frequently complement this activity. For example the verb whose English gloss is “to sing”, literally means to “embrace with voice,” in Shoshone he explained. He often linked these etymologies to the idea of Shoshone worldview as expressed through language, and explicitly contrasted them with the plainness of Indo-European languages, particularly English.

Third: Shoshone has a rich system of instrumental prefixes that attach to verbs and signal a manner in which something is done. He would discuss the emphasis the language (and, by extension, the Shoshone culture) place on indicating how something is done. He enjoyed joking by giving examples of the instrumental prefix “pi” (meaning with the behind, back or butt) attached to verbs such as smash – as in “smash something with your butt,” and then attaching an aspect marker “repeatedly” to it. He would basically demonstrate how one can creatively play around with the language, if one knows the “parts,” “the structure,” the linguistic stuff” (2012, field notes).

Fourth: The teacher engaged the second year students in the transcription and translation of one of the recordings from the Wick Miller Collection, a story titled “The rock monster.” Working with the teacher and the elders, the students would spend the entire class period tirelessly identifying word roots or stems, prefixes and suffixes, trying to figure out how words and sentences are put together, identifying specific grammatical structures and features. The purpose of this activity was not only to get the students to understand Shoshone grammatical structure, but also to train them in the practice of rendering traditional stories in terms of linguistic activities, such as standardized phonetic transcription, glossing and free translation. This activity, while having a heavy linguistic focus, was also often accompanied by the teacher and the elder’s commenting on various poetic features of the text, sometimes the etymologies of specific words would be offered to illustrate the contrast between Shoshone and English. Certain words would also at times be identified as “really old Shoshone words” and contemporary Shoshone equivalents would be given. At times the story’s teachings would be discussed, although, not a lot of emphasis was placed on this particular aspect. Several students in the group were actually familiar with this story and by sharing under what circumstances and who told the story to them, they contextualized it to some degree. Here Nevins and Nevins’s (2012) concept

of “radical translation” introduced earlier seems relevant. In this example, the main focus and orientation towards these narratives was linguistic, and the final product of this activity was a transcript that was later entered into a database.

Fifth: The teacher was a gifted singer and a drummer. He often incorporated traditional songs into his lessons. He talked about how singing was always a favorite pastime for the Shoshones. The students would quickly learn these songs and frequently assemble in a circle whenever they had a bit of free time to sing together outside of class. In fact, singing was one of the most popular activities the students did together. Both the teacher and the students made numerous attempts to record these songs, hoping to put together a CD collection for each student to take home at the end of the program. The practice of singing stimulated conversations among the students on how it should be properly done, stressing the importance of reproducing authentic Shoshone performances. One of the students pointed out how voice should be used: “Old Shoshone songs were sung with a relaxed face” she said, “singing happened in the throat,” and she proceeded to produce audible, voiced breaths to demonstrate how it should be done. That was “the old way of singing,” she added (2012, field notes). It is important to mention, that the teacher took special care to ensure that students did not perform songs and dances reserved for specific, often sacred occasions and locations. Overall, it seemed that most elders who witnessed these performances enjoyed them and often asked for songs and dances to continue or to be repeated.

Conclusion

In this paper I hoped to highlight some of the challenges the SYLAP teacher and the elders faced, working in an institutional setting, with curriculum that, in my opinion, falls short of reflecting the needs, goals and practices of their communities. I also hoped to illustrate some of the creative strategies they collectively employed to remedy this problem. The SYLAP teacher adopted a method of teaching well suited for his classroom and his teaching style, in his words – “combining Native and non-Native tools to promote the Shoshone language and culture” (2012, field notes). Some of the ways he tried to accomplish this included for example, teaching his students one of the Shoshone orthographies, introducing some linguistic based understanding of Shoshone language structure, as well as engaging the students in language play, contextualizing narrative and musical practices and performances, and developing explicit lessons concerning Shoshone cultural practices. Additionally, he took on an important mentor role, helping and encouraging students in their language learning process in the SYLAP program and beyond. The elders were an essential part of this process as well. While at times they played a very active role in the classroom and evening activities, teaching students specific skills or giving them carefully framed lessons on Shoshone culture, by simply being there, they also provided an implicit model of proper Shoshone behavior and a way of being.

Through my work at the SYLAP program I learned many valuable lessons. I learned that having curriculum development and teaching skills outside of language revitalization context was helpful, but not sufficient by itself. Assum-

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ing that one could take a model and methods for teaching English as a Second Language, for example, and simply transfer them into Shoshone, adding on cultural content would be a mistake. I hoped to demonstrate that this approach is problematic on many different levels, as it carries with it assumptions about language and culture that do not map well onto situations of endangered language revitalization. The approach also doesn't reflect the pedagogical traditions of the communities themselves. Nevertheless, I believe cultural outsiders can provide helpful assistance in curriculum development. In order for this to work, however, it must be done in close collaboration with communities and must be grounded in local models of teaching and learning. Instead of creating language lessons first and inserting culturally relevant material into it later, I believe the process needs to be reversed or at the very least structured very differently. Building lessons around and through important language and cultural activities and themes, for example, is one way to remedy this problem. More collaborative, action oriented research exploring alternative models of teaching and learning is necessary to help these types of language revitalization programs thrive and succeeding in bringing languages back into the communities.

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