

Professional training and empowerment for Indigenous communicators in Canada

Shannon Avison

The Indian Communication Arts (INCA) program was one of the first programs at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) which, when it was established in 1976, was the first Indian-controlled post-secondary institution in Canada. Forty years later, our name has changed to Indigenous Communication Arts, our College has become the First Nations University of Canada, we offer certificate and diploma programs, and we are ready to launch a four-year degree. We have used innovative strategies that reflect the values of kinship and reciprocity embedded in our languages, to adapt to the digital age and provide university training for Indigenous storytellers, who work in mainstream and Indigenous media across Canada.

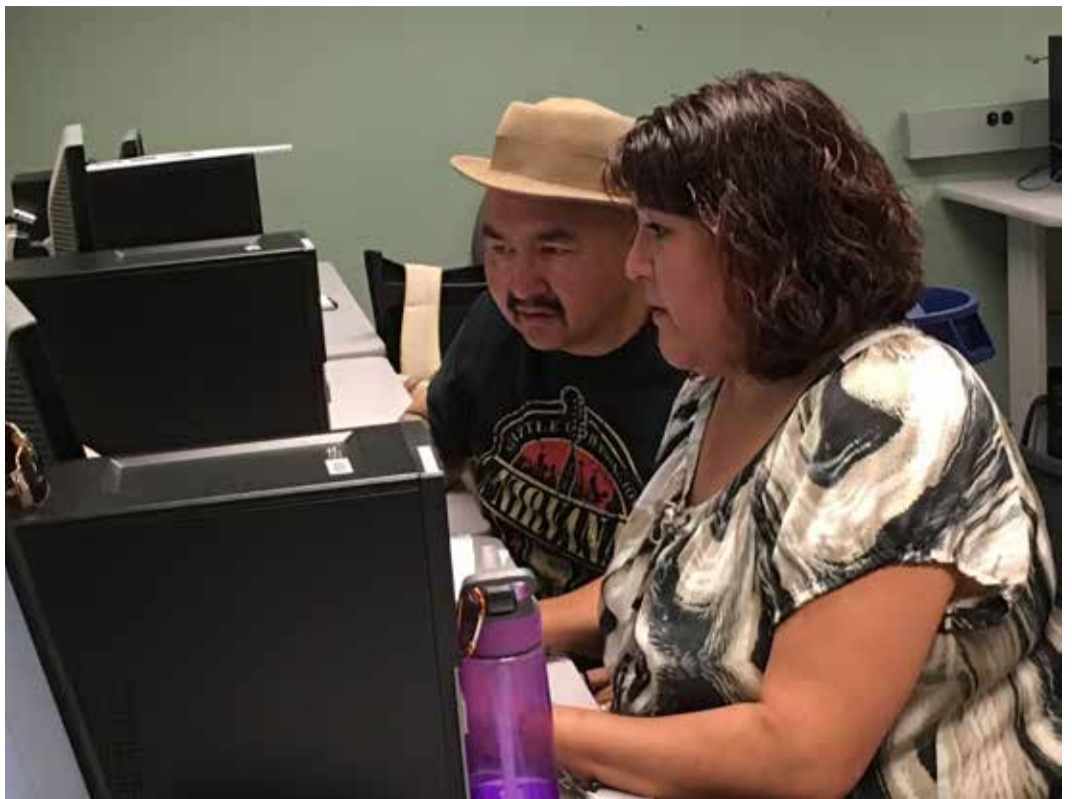
SIFC was established by leaders and veterans from the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, now the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN). Indian-control of Indian education started with K-12 schools, and expanded to post-secondary when the FSIN partnered with the University of Regina in 1976 to establish SIFC. The first programs were Indi-

Mervin Brass, Managing Editor, CBC North, with student Andrea Dustyhorn at the INCA Summer Institute, 2018.

an Fine Art, Indian Languages, Indian Education, Indian Studies, and Indian Social Work. INCA was piloted in 1982 with a two-month crash course and established as a two-year certificate program in 1983. It provided an introduction to journalism and trained journalists to work in Indigenous media, including the FSIN's monthly magazine and tabloid, *Saskatchewan Indian* and the *Moccasin Telegraph* weekly radio show, and for regional native communication societies.

In 1983, the Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation was established to provide Indigenous radio in the north. Today it broadcasts to over 70 communities in English, Cree, Dene, and Michif. About 30 community radio stations broadcast in local Indigenous languages for part of the day and use MBC as a wrap-around service. INCA provided training for broadcasters like Pauline Clarke, who returned home to Southend and established Reindeer Lake Communications. Pauline has been the voice (in Cree and English) on CIRL 97.9 FM for 20 years. This year, she signed up for a refresher in Radio and Podcast Production (INCA 351), which was available remotely because of COVID.

In the early 1990s, we started offering the INCA Summer Institute in Journalism and an INCA Internship. These unique "courses" give students hands-on training and supervised work experience. The Summer Institute is a six-week "crash course" that is offered every second year from May to June. Most students complete their internships in July or August; but internships are available year-round. INCA can be combined with Bachelor's degrees in English, Political Science, Indigenous Studies, Languages, and other programs. Kerry Benjoe completed INCA and a BA (English) before she started her 17-year career as a reporter at the *Regina Leader-Post*. Today, she is Managing Editor of our province's



monthly *Eagle Feather News* and a sessional instructor in INCA.

Instructors in the Summer Institute are all working journalists and most are Indigenous. Many are INCA graduates who have worked in the media for decades, including Nelson Bird, Assignment Editor at CTV; Mervin Brass, Regional Director of CBC North; and Connie Walker, Host and Managing Editor of Gimlet Media. APTN sends producers to teach our students to produce news stories for APTN National News and aptnnews.ca. CTV Saskatchewan worked with students to produce an episode of their weekly *Indigenous Circle*. MBC broadcasts our students' radio programs across their network. CBC Saskatchewan and the CBC network have aired student-produced programs on National Indigenous Peoples' Day.

When it was established, INCA relied on instructors and facilities at the University of Regina. Today, INCA has dedicated classrooms, a newsroom, and production studios. Partnerships and special projects have supported acquisition of equipment and provided professional opportunities for students. The INCA program has become a go-to program for community organizations that want to support student learning and portfolio development, at the same time as they produce media projects economically. INCA faculty have coordinated opportunities for students

to work on contracts, including publications for events, podcast series and documentaries for bands, tribal councils, provincial and national organizations.

When we were forced to switch to online learning due to COVID, we took it as an opportunity to offer our diploma program remotely for the first time. We also developed a one-year certificate in Indigenous Journalism and Communication (INJC) and promoted it directly to individuals who work and volunteer at Indigenous media organizations across Canada – with a focus on community radio stations that operate in almost every Indigenous community in northern Canada. In 2021-22, radio announcers from CIRL (Southend, Saskatchewan), Paradise Radio (Cowessess First Nation), CKLB (NWT) and Tsihqot'in Radio (Williams Lake, BC) are completing our courses in Radio and Podcast Production, Media Business, Photojournalism, and Public Relations. The INJC will be offered remotely every second academic year, and students only need to leave their communities for six weeks to complete the Summer Institute.

Indigenous media in Canada

The evolution of Indigenous media in Canada is the subject of one of our core courses. There were many colonial publications produced by missionaries, residential schools and the Department of Indian Affairs. However in 1969 two key events spurred the development of Indigen-



ous-controlled media: Indigenous organizations rejected the 1969 White Paper, which proposed the elimination of Indian status; and, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau had the goal of creating “a just society” and believed media was important for democracy and engagement in the public sphere. This led the federal government to establish the Native Communications Program (1973-1990) and the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program (1983 to today).

Indigenous media expanded rapidly after 1972, when communication satellites provided southern programming to every community with a dish. We remember the role of organizations like Taqramiut Nipingat in Arctic Quebec and Inuit Broadcasting Corporation in what is now Nunavut, in demanding access to broadcasting licenses and funding. Television Northern Canada was established in 1992 and evolved into the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) in 1999. Many of the early visionaries and employees at TVNC and APTN had received journalism training in INCA, including INCA graduate John (JC) Catholique, who was on the first APTN Board.

Indigenous radio and television broadcasters continue to access funding from Canadian Heritage under the Northern Aboriginal Broadcasting (NAB) program and Indigenous Language and Culture programs. INCA students are employed by many of these Indigenous media organizations, and the INCA program has received direct support to provide training and employment for broadcasters and podcasters. Most recently, our *pîkiskwêwin: Sharing Our Endangered Indigenous Languages On Radio and Online* project received funding from the Government of Canada for two years, ending March 31, 2023.

pîkiskwêwin, which means “language” in Cree, has supported training for over 40 First Nation and Métis podcast producers, ranging in age from 18 to 71. This has inspired a new

Paul Dornstauder, Executive Producer, CBC Saskatchewan with INCA student Cole Cappo.



Students Jaida Beaudin-Herney (left) and Jennifer Francis scrum with federal Minister Jane Philpott at the 2018 Summer Institute.

development in the INCA program. Although some INCA students are fluent in their languages and have found employment in Indigenous language media, the pîkiskwêwin project has helped us evolve new strategies for supporting them and others to develop their language skills to work in Indigenous language broadcasting – one of the most effective ways to revitalize the languages.

A major challenge when asking First Nation and Métis people to use and develop their language skills is “language trauma.” In residential schools, Indigenous languages were literally beaten out of children. Many parents made the decision to not teach their languages to their children, to protect them from abuse and ridicule. Through this project, we became aware of the phenomenon of “latent/silent speakers,” which is the focus of research by scholars like Charlotte Ross, who is involved with pîkiskwêwin as both advisor and producer.

pîkiskwêwin producers range from language learners to fluent speakers. They are producing podcasts in Indigenous languages – a Michif cooking show; interviews in Sauteaux, Nakota, Dakota, Cree, Michif, and Dene about topics like parenting, prayer, food security, mental health, leadership, education, culture, buffalo teachings, lullabies and legends. Producers are learning their languages by working with speakers who help them translate their questions before conducting their interviews. We have all come to realize that “the language spirit is strong.”

Using the languages to do journalism is one way to revitalize the languages. Broadcasting and podcasting are being used to promote Indigenous languages to listeners and learners of all ages.

Expanding INCA to a four-year Bachelor of Arts program has been a dream since it was established (Spence, 1985). It will answer the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action: “We call upon Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations” (TRC, 2015). Our INCA students have lived this history and understand the context of stories they are assigned in mainstream newsrooms. Some of our students are non-Indigenous and new Canadians, who leave the program much better prepared to cover Indigenous stories.

Empowerment for transformation

After almost 40 years, INCA is in a strong position to establish a Bachelor of Indigenous Communication Arts. Our experience and reputation training journalists to work for Indigenous and mainstream media organizations, and to work in Indigenous languages, distinguishes us from all other journalism programs in Canada.

Our track record of training Indigenous journalists as reporters and producers, and now as managers and senior managers, makes us a reliable source of qualified and talented journalists for mainstream media. INCA has a network of graduates, mentors, and employers who act as advisors. We are adapting to the digital age by tapping into the expertise of Indigenous journalists who work in newsrooms, and updating our facilities in consultation with industry experts.

INCA empowers Indigenous peoples to have a voice in the transformation of Canadian society. For 40 years, we have built a network of Indigenous communicators – from entry-level students to reporters with decades of experience in national news organizations, to award winning radio and television producers, to investigative journalists, to a regional director of a national network.

Our alumni from 30 years ago know what it was like to be “the only Indian in the newsroom.” They bring that knowledge and share strategies for dealing with ignorance, racism, and lateral violence with students in the INCA Summer Institute. And they support students with ongoing mentorship as they enter the industry.

Recent Canadian legislation reflects an understanding of the role of Indigenous media in supporting culture and language. The *Indigenous Languages Act*, June 21, 2019, declared that “Indigenous-language media and lifelong learning of Indigenous languages ... are essential to restoring and maintaining fluency in those languages.”

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, received Royal Assent in 2021. It requires that Canada work in partnership with Indigenous peoples to implement the UN Declaration. This includes Article 16, which declares that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-Indigenous media without discrimination,” and “States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect Indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect Indigenous cultural diversity.”

Whereas the *Broadcasting Act, 1991*, recognized Aboriginal peoples and cultures as one of Canada’s minority groups, and did not support Indigenous languages specifically, the proposed *Act to Amend the Broadcasting Act* refers to Indigenous languages over a dozen times and requires Indigenous language content production

and distribution by Aboriginal and mainstream broadcasters.

The demand for Indigenous storytellers is increasing and the INCA program is expanding and evolving to meet the demand. The support we get from alumni, as mentors, trainers, and employers, is vital to the success of our students. The media projects we manage give our students opportunities to build their portfolios and their networks. COVID forced us to offer our courses remotely and we now have a role to build capacity in regional Indigenous media organizations.

Soon we will have a four-year degree program to add to our certificate and diploma programs. And we offer the only journalism and communication program in Canada that prepares Indigenous storytellers to work in media organizations, from tiny radio stations and community newspapers, to regional and national newspapers and television networks. ■

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Shannon Avison was raised in Whitehorse, Yukon before she moved to Saskatchewan to attend the University of Regina, and discovered the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College – now First Nations University of Canada. She completed the Indian Communication Arts (INCA) certificate program in 1988 and was hired as a Lecturer in the program in 1989. She completed a Bachelor of Arts (Indian Studies) in 1994 and a Master of Arts (Media Studies) at Concordia in 1997, and was promoted to Assistant Professor. Her research and teaching centers around Indigenous media. She has proposed and managed dozens of projects that employed her students and others, including *pikiskwêwin: Sharing Our Endangered Languages On Radio and Online* (funded by the Government of Canada).