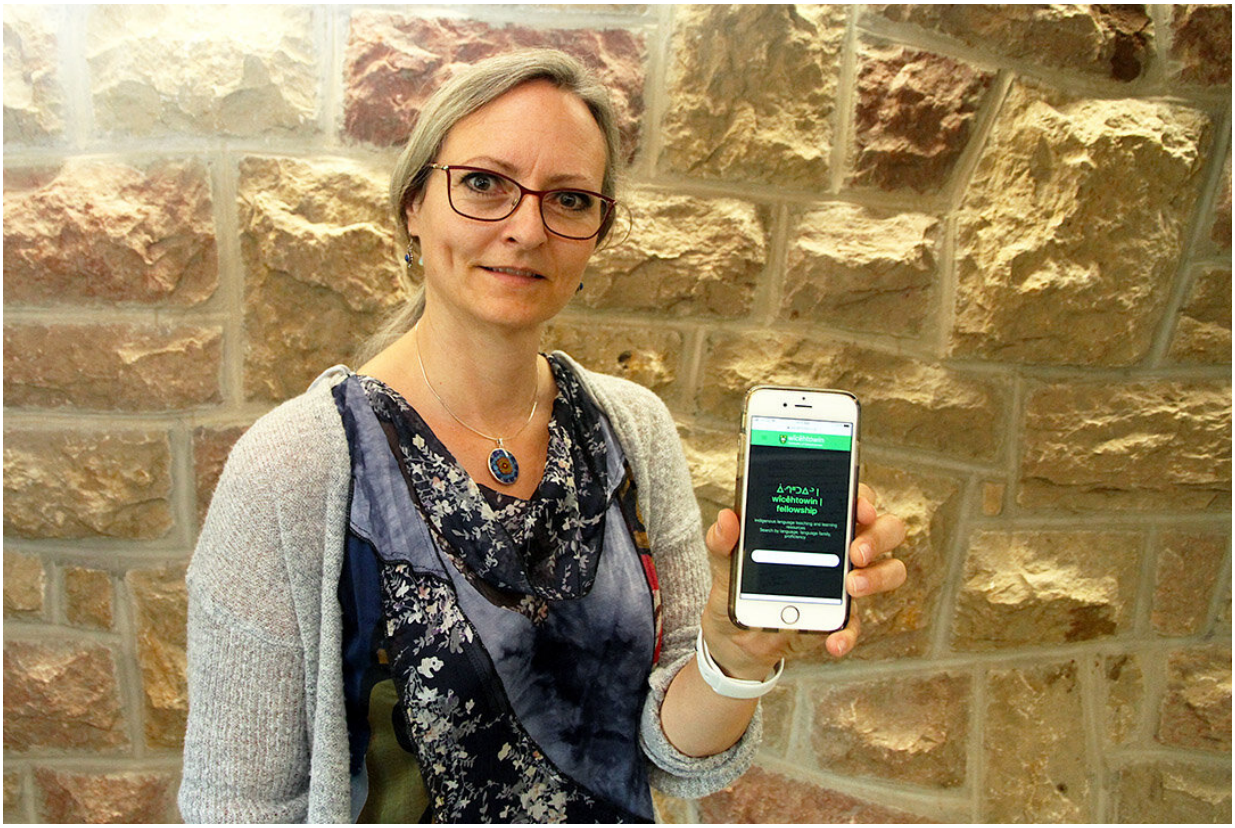
Research team developing Indigenous languages app

September 16 2019, by Chris Morin



Dr. Marguerite Koole (PhD) is an assistant professor of curriculum studies in the College of Education. Credit: Chris Morin

"If we are going to work to revitalize Indigenous languages, we need to engage the community and we need to make this knowledge as open and

accessible as possible."

That's why Koole, an assistant professor of curriculum studies in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan (USask), is working with a team of teachers, researchers and programmers from across campus in order to launch a web-based database to help educators revive Indigenous languages.

The database, named wîcêhtowin, contains information and links to websites, video/audio repositories, and apps designed to improve language knowledge.

Koole said the project began in 2016 when a team of USask researchers conducted a scan of online learning tools for Indigenous languages in Canada.

"We wanted to see what was out there, and as we were searching for apps and publications, it began to pile up," said Koole. "And we thought that it would be useful if this information was all in a central database that everyone could access."

The database includes teaching methods as well as information on Indigenous companies that can be hired to develop language technologies and apps. With so many communities turning to technology to help preserve their language, it's vitally important to share these methods freely, Koole said.

"The name wîcêhtowin means 'fellowship' in Cree, which is what we are hoping this project accomplishes," said Koole. "We want to encourage people around the world to contribute to it and be a part of helping it grow."

While the discovery of so many language revitalization resources is

encouraging to Koole, it has also motivated her to continue her campus collaboration further. With the initial research turning up mostly dictionary apps and resources for beginners and advanced learners, she is hoping to create technology that's also suitable for those who are at the intermediate level in their language studies.

With $100,000 in funding from the Canadian Internet Registry Association, Koole is pulling together scholars from across USask to develop an app on campus that will help people learn how to form sentences and words in Cree.

Working with Indigenous language expert Kevin Lewis of curriculum studies, the app will be built on the tech side by students of Dr. Julita Vassileva (Ph.D.) and Dr. Ralph Deters (Ph.D.) in the Department of Computer Science.

"Because we've done the research to find out what's out there with the database, we know that we are looking to develop an app to help people to form sentences and words in Cree," said Koole, who is optimistic that this will be the first of a series of apps, and hopes that they will also be able to tackle other Indigenous languages such as Michif, Dene, Nakota and Dakota—other languages that she said are equally important to teach and preserve. Ultimately, the aim is to model and share the design and architecture of this collaborative app.

"It's important when working on projects with an Indigenous focus that there is a lot of input and communication between a lot of people. I'm honored to be working with this group, and so far, this project has turned out fabulously."

More information: Wîcêhtowin: wicehtowin.ca/

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