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INSPIRING PRACTICES | FINALIST 2024 | COLOMBIA

#LANGUAGES

Young people create digital platform to preserve indigenous language at risk.

In partnership with members of the Kogui community, a group of students develops a website with multimedia activities to preserve and enhance language, pronunciations and culture.

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PROJECT NAME
Koguinet

STEM AREAS
Technology and science

OTHERS AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE
Languages and culture

Colombia is the third country in Latin America with the largest number of languages. There are more than 65 languages resulting from traditional indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The Kogui language is one of them: with 9,000 speakers, according to the last DANE 2005 census, it is in danger of disappearing due to factors such as displacement. It was precisely by thinking about how to collaborate to save the Kogui language that a group of students developed a digital platform for the preservation of grammar and language, in a process marked by empathy and community appreciation.

The Koguinet project was a finalist of the program Samsung Solve for Tomorrow Colombia in 2024, mediated by Professor Zamir Monteiro, from the school I.E.D John F. Kennedy, in Fundación, municipality of the department of Magdalena. The choice to work on language preservation through technology makes a lot of sense in an institution with a broad STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) culture and project-based learning, as well as a recurring participation in other editions of Solve for Tomorrow.

As the professor reports, the meeting between the rich cultural diversity of its territory with the possibilities of STEM creates an environment conducive to differentiated learning projects. “Here (in Fundación) we welcome ethnic groups such as the Palenquero group, the indigenous groups Arhuacos and Kogui (the last one being the one with whom we have worked particularly). Thus, this cultural diversity makes our territory a main point for promoting intercultural education from

the STEM approach, and the methodological phases of design thinking that combine perfectly."

The idea for the Koguinet arose from the interaction of one of the group's students, who had daily conversations with one kogui member, with great difficulty in understanding some expressions and communicating. At the same time, the indigenous person he knew complained about the acculturation process and how they were losing their community stories. The young man brought this to his teacher and colleagues to think together about what they could do. They formed a group of four students, three in the tenth grade and one in the last grade. In the Colombian education system, the eleventh is the last school year.

Young people gathered to think about the challenges of Kogui pronunciation and how to systematize learning about the indigenous language on the digital platform.

Empathic challenges to preserve a language

The idea of the interactive platform was simple: to create a digital space where people of different ages could do multimedia activities to replicate the language, relating images and words. Empathy was again key to the process: from the beginning, young people decided that they needed not only to do a deep investigation of Kogui culture, its population, its territory and its social challenges, but also that the whole project had to be built in collaboration with the Kogui community, in a horizontal and open way, as befits the collective intelligence of traditional communities.

"We had contact with one of the Kogui members who basically accompanied us through most of the process. Students had to put themselves in each other's shoes; feel how this ethnic group is

not appreciated culturally by a population that ignores them. So, I think that in order to move on to the different stages, such as the ideation and definition of the challenge, we must desire to carry out a real change from the heart, which is evident in practice and which does not remain in the discourse alone, as normally happens in other methodological designs", the educator shares.

To start the design of the website, they worked with the knowledge and resources already available at school. The tool chosen was Scratch, a block-based programming language. "Students did not need to know how to code HTML. The software creates these codes. The group used gears that are like blocks, but each block generates an instruction within the program. For example, they can use a block to increase the size of an image or to give it the appearance of movement," explains Montero.

Ardora, WordPress and Wix were the complementary developers to shape the site Koguinet.com. The idea was to make a simple navigation site, where "anyone located in any territory of the world can access, learn about the Kogui culture, its language, knowledge and cultural practices".

But the main wish was that people of the Kogui culture could also use the platform easily. The first challenge of the project was defined: To bring together a large number of indigenous people, from different ages, to make suggestions for the platform. "It was a challenge that became complicated for us because we knew only one Kogui member. We finished the prototype and were looking for koguis in Fundación, but the majority were Arhuacos". It took some time, but by talking to some Koguis such as Oscar, a street vendor, they were able to increase the number of participants. "It was an achievement that the members of the community knew and liked the project," concludes the teacher.

With a consolidated research group, students used Design Thinking strategies to draw a user experience map from the inputs of the koguis. This digital mapping consists of understanding how the user would like to relate to the content of the site, if he wants more videos, more pronunciation tips, etc. It was a challenge to collect the testimonies, because although the desire was to hear the demands, there were orders that free apps and websites could not make. It was a real exercise of articulation to balance the orders with what was possible in practice.

Momento Eureka!

To design and implement a user experience map, the group did not refuse to use examples from other projects that participated in the Solve for Tomorrow program at school. "We had the guidelines to promote critical thinking in students, with practical examples to develop proposals in the best possible way," recalls the professor. This was especially important in articulating community requests with what could be done on the website".

The last challenge was pronunciation. Kogui is not a simple language; there is a very sophisticated pronunciation system that acts directly on grammar. The students wanted to incorporate this into the project as a way of preserving the language, but they had difficulty even with the indigenous explanations. Patience was needed to learn, but they had it, because the students consider an epistemic justice, as explained by the mediator teacher. " For the indigenous people it was also very difficult to learn the language, to use it in commerce, to be able to study. Then, when the students managed to learn pronunciations, they were very proud."

Community validation

It took about three months to complete the whole project and finally reach the testing phase, which the students and teacher called community validation. The name is accurate: after so much work to bring together participants of different ages, the idea was to test the website with a diverse audience, able to provide challenges, absences and also successes of the prototype.

"We started with the children of the Kogui community and also with the youngest school students, thinking how important it was to forge respect for cultural diversity from childhood. We then took the prototype to teenagers and adults in the Kogui community, which facilitated the feedback process." Community feedback was positive. Beyond language care, they were interested in seeing connections between STEM areas and traditional culture as a part of the project dedicated to talk about biology from the Kogui traditional medicine.

In the end, this is a school and community project. Students who participated in the first version are now leaving school and starting college. The goal is that students in the next few years who enter grade 10th should continue developing Koguinet.com. Since the main challenge is pronunciation, the main task now is to design the website in a way that can be easier to learn.

Explaining!

User experience map: To create a website, the best way is to try to map the user's experience when accessing the site. It is possible to understand the user's persona, which is the way that the user makes, his emotions, and how he navigates the web page. To do this, it is necessary to have empathy and deep interest in the subject, as was the case with the students of Koguinet.

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Focus on practice!

Take a look at the teacher's guide on how to develop a digital platform to preserve indigenous languages at risk..

1 Empathy

Empathy was the heart of the project. One of the students had the idea in his direct contact with a Kogui member, and thought he wanted to achieve a project that would not only talk about how rich the Kogui culture is, but also would be done together with the community, so that it could make sense for all.

2 Definition

The idea of the website was to have a part to talk about the Kogui culture, about pronunciations and also with videos, tasks and activities to encourage language learning. The challenge of learning the indigenous language seemed very good to them, because they also knew about the difficulty of Spanish for indigenous people.

3 Ideation

To make the project with available resources and become a site of easy navigation, the group worked with platforms such as Scratch, an open programming language with which the school was already working. The idea was to do something with zero costs and more time to research the Kogui culture and interact with the community.

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Prototype

Students heard more than 150 people to draw a map of the website's experience. It was a challenge of articulation, because it was not possible to do everything on a platform of free construction, but it was important to practice dialogue and conciliation.

Test

For the students, the most important thing was community validation. The indigenous people who helped them build the map of the experience were also those who tested it. The idea is that everyone should feel comfortable and that the site could always be accessible to indigenous people and the community at large. The returns were good and the idea is that the project can grow further, mainly in the pronunciation part.