A COMMUNITY LEARNING NETWORK ZINE

Let's talk about it....

Strategic Conversations

Developed for CALP Staff by CALP Staff

This zine is built around

reflective practice

both self-reflection and critical reflection.

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Strategic Conversations

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From the Creative Director

When I think about conversations, many words come to mind, including connection, relationship, reciprocity, understanding, vulnerability, relatability, curiosity and time. The addition of time to this list surprises me the most. And yet we can't have conversations without it.

The conversations we have as CALP staff invite adult Albertans with foundational learning needs to share their learning needs with us. This takes time. We are asking these adults to be brave and vulnerable, to take risks and feel safe, and to trust and believe in themselves. They need time to do that.

These conversations are often referred to as first meetings, intake and initial assessment. We titled this publication *Strategic Conversations* to reflect that this work—your work—is a series of conversations. And like any conversation, they shift and change depending on who you are talking to. No one conversation is like another. At their heart, these conversations involve building trust and bringing hope.

Within the pages of *Strategic Conversations*, you will hear from CALP staff from across the province. They were invited to address the current landscape of Community Adult Learning Programs while in conversation with you, the reader. I want to thank the contributors for sharing their knowledge and experience with us. I am grateful for the conversations that led us here.

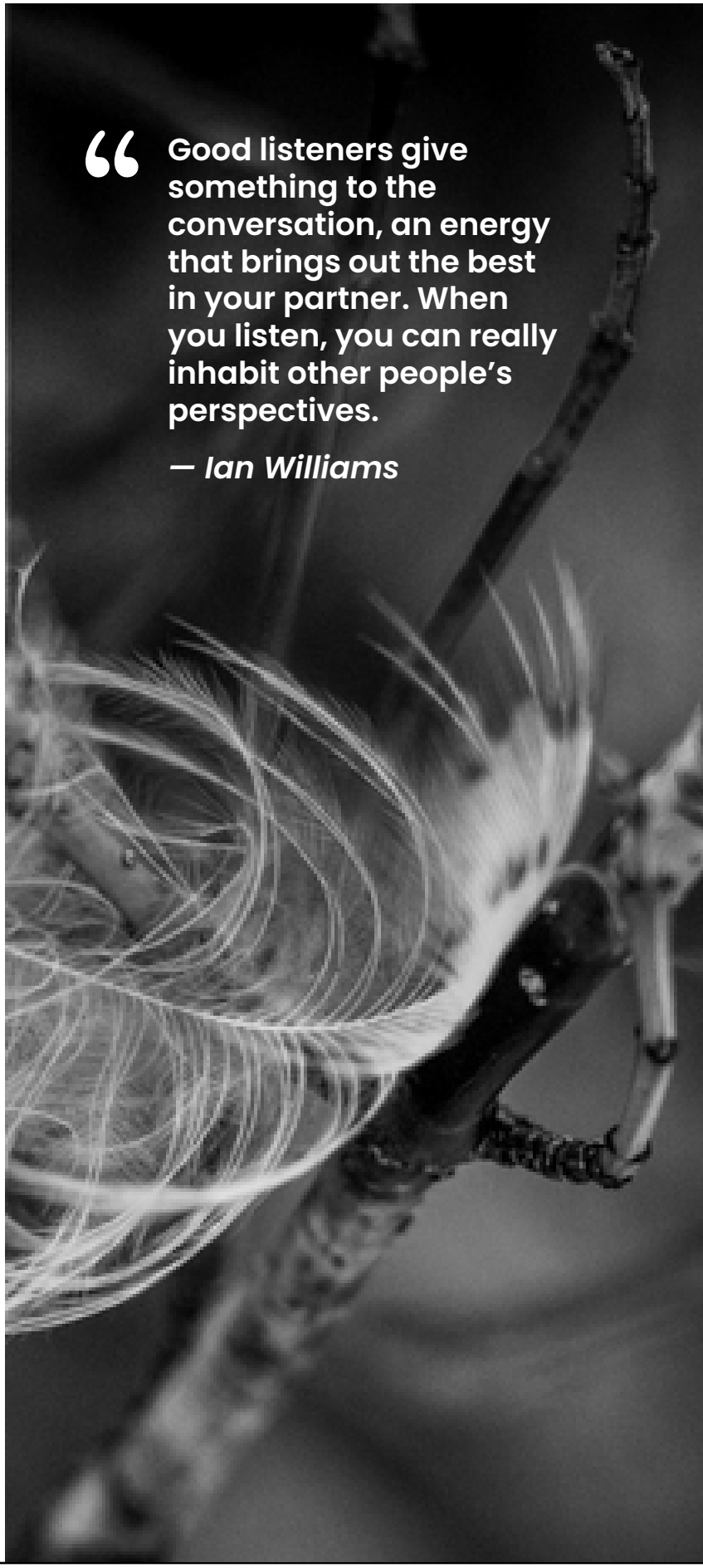
Like any good conversation, we hope you find yourself nodding in agreement, pausing for reflection, wondering out loud, allowing something to sink in and potentially disagreeing. These are the realities of conversation: you are allowed to agree and disagree, laugh and cry, and learn and unlearn. We are not seeking consensus. Instead, I hope that *Strategic Conversations* encourages you to listen and engage in further conversation with yourself, your peers and the CALP system.

Thank you for spending your time with us.

Emily

What's Inside Strategic Conversations

ARTICLE ID | ARTICLE NAME



Pick Your Path through Strategic Conversations

Welcome to the Strategic Conversations zine—a flexible, reflective resource created with Community Adult Learning Program (CALP) staff in mind.

This isn't a guide you read front to back. It's more like a good conversation: it can start anywhere, begin at any time, go in unexpected directions and be returned to again and again.

Here's how to get the most out of it:

Flip Through Freely

Start anywhere. Whether you have a few minutes or an hour, there's something here for you:

- A deep dive
- A quick insight
- A downloadable tip sheet

You'll find all of this within the pages of our zine. Let curiosity guide you. The "right" page is the one that speaks to you in the moment.

Practice Reflection

This zine is built around reflective practice—both self-reflection and critical reflection. Use it to think about:

- Your approach to adult foundational learning
- Your relationships within CALP
- The spaces you create
- The assumptions you hold

Peer Learning

These articles are perfect conversation starters. Discuss them:

- In professional communities
- At team meetings
- During a coffee break
- On a walk-and-talk
- As prompts for professional development

Share your thoughts. Listen to others. Pay attention to your response. Sit with the tension.

Let the zine spark real dialogue that deepens your practice.

Explore by Theme

Each article is tagged with themes.

learner-centred – B D F G I K M N

strengths-based – A C E H J L O

establishing trust – G K L N O

building relationship – B D E F

planning for learning – A J M

welcoming space – C H I

humane – B D G H

radical – L M N

relational – C E F K

hopeful – A I J O

Don't worry about overlaps—these themes are interconnected, just like the work you do.

Return Often

This is a resource designed to grow with you. Come back for:

- Inspiration
- Possibilities
- Further learning
- Reflection

Sometimes the article you didn't know you needed becomes the one that shifts your perspective. Use this zine as a living resource that supports your professional learning, your team, and most importantly, the adult Albertans your program serves. ◇

Contributors

THE STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS ZINE WAS DEVELOPED FOR CALP STAFF BY CALP STAFF.

We asked contributors to be bold, thought-provoking, vulnerable and radical. Each article can be located by matching the letter included in their contributor biography to the article with the same letter.

H

Tamara Argue

Tamara is a proud mom of four who cherishes both the joy and the chaos that come with raising her children. Her love for the outdoors inspires their family adventures—whether it's hiking, camping or simply enjoying nature. Tamara expresses her creativity through crafting— another passion. As an Afro-Indigenous woman, Tamara strives to instill her cultural values in her own life and in the lives of her children. Tamara has worked in Literacy for nine years, dedicating herself to helping adult learners improve their skills and achieve their educational goals. She finds fulfillment in empowering others through knowledge and supporting them on their journey to success. Balancing family, work and personal interests keeps Tamara grounded and motivated every day. ⋄

O

Lisa Berry

Lisa loves adventure, the outdoors and live music. She finds joy in deep conversations, travelling and being in or on the water. Always eager to grow, Lisa embraces challenges that push her outside of her comfort zone and is dedicated to being a lifelong learner.

She values her family and friends deeply and feels honoured to work alongside adults who are actively creating meaningful change in their lives. ⋄

I

Emma Dabrowski

Emma entered the CALP world in 2019 as a Literacy Coordinator before moving into her current role as Executive Director of Kneehill Adult Learning & Newcomer Services two years later. She and her team are intentional about staying relevant and responsive to the unique needs of their rural county.

Here are three quick facts about Emma:

- There is no problem so simple that she can't overthink and complicate the hell out of it
- She is deeply interested in the anti-disestablishmentarianism movement—primarily its pronunciation
- She naturally thinks and speaks in sets of three

But perhaps most relevant is Emma's passion for lifelong learning, including her own perpetual learning journey. She has a heart for adults whose foundational skill gaps create barriers to autonomy and success in their personal goals. For Emma, it is a great privilege to meet learners where they are and walk alongside them—if only for a time—on their learning journey. ⋄

M

Kristin Dmytriw

Kristin is the Director of Programs and Training at the Centre for Family Literacy, where she has been dedicated to advancing Adult

and Family Literacy for close to eight years. She is a passionate 'practicer' of strategies and approaches that create impactful and meaningful learning experiences for families, practitioners and community members. In addition to her literacy work, Kristin is committed to supporting staff, fostering a collaborative and adaptive environment, and ensuring her program team has the resources and guidance to thrive. ◇

D

Flagstaff Community Adult Learning Team—Lois Polege, Treena Brooke, Val Rathjen

Lois Polege, Treena Brooke and Val Rathjen live, work and play in the beautiful rural landscape of eastern Alberta, proudly serving the ten towns and villages that make up Flagstaff County. With nearly 50 years of combined CALP experience, the Flagstaff Community Adult Learning (FCAL) team brings expertise in organizational management, learner instruction, newcomer engagement and community partnership-building.

At its core, FCAL is committed to creating a welcoming space where people can learn, connect and truly belong.

Community-building is central to everything FCAL does—and it begins the moment someone walks through the door. Every team member plays a vital role in shaping that environment. Whether it happens over a cup of coffee, while looking for a job, or through a shared learning experience, FCAL strives to ensure that each person feels seen, heard and valued.

As Lois said years ago—and it still holds true today: **"Our goal is that everyone leaves with hope."** ◇

B

Veronica Fukuda

Veronica Fukuda holds a Bachelor of Arts in French and Spanish and a Master of Arts in French from the University of Calgary. Her thesis focused on the pronunciation of "l" and "r" by non native speakers of French, and through her studies, she became exposed not only to the theories of second language acquisition but also to different methodologies about teaching and evaluating language competencies. She completed her Teaching English as a Second Language Level 1 certificate in December 2021. Currently, she is a mother, wife, CALP Program Manager, PBLA Lead Teacher, and LINC Instructor, local community volunteer and sometimes a weekend farm hand. These experiences have helped her gain a better understanding of her own personal growth, what it means to be a part of a community and why it is important to help others find the same feeling of belonging. ◇

G L

Rochelle Galeski

Rochelle Galeski was born on the lands now known as Treaty 2 Territory, in what is colonially known as Brandon, Manitoba—homeland of the Dakota, Anishinaabe, Cree and Métis peoples. For the past 35 years, she has lived and worked on Treaty 7 Territory, the traditional lands of the Blackfoot confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Stoney Nakoda Nations: Chiniki, Bearspaw, Goodstoney, Tsuut'ina Nation as well as Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.

Rochelle's paternal roots trace back to her grandmother, who immigrated from Russia and settled in eastern Canada, and her grandfather, who was French Canadian. She speaks a

familial blend of English and French—what she affectionately calls franglais. On her mother's side, Rochelle was raised in the presence of her Scottish grandparents, whose values continue to shape her life.

Raised in a middle-class home by hard-working parents, Rochelle learned early the importance of contributing meaningfully to the world. Much of her early adult life was devoted to raising five children while actively supporting her church and school communities.

Today, Rochelle is a passionate humanitarian and literacy advocate. She served as the Regional Coordinator for the Pathways Adult Learning Program at Medicine Hat College and works with organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross in the area of social response.

She acknowledges the privileges she carries—economic, racial and educational—and recognizes how these have shaped her journey. Rochelle's identity as a mother, leader, advocate, settler and trauma survivor deeply informs the way she engages with others, the questions she asks, and the inclusive spaces she seeks to create. ◇

B

Michelle Gietz

Michelle brings a unique and powerful combination of experience in agriculture, economics and post-secondary education—an ideal foundation for leading a successful CALP in rural Alberta. After working for 30 years across other provinces and the United States, a persistent calling brought her back to her home community in Alberta.

Her career spans private industry, government and non-profits, giving her a well-rounded understanding of organizational operations and the importance of cultivating a positive workplace culture.

Michelle believes that life, like economics, is about decision-making. By applying the principles of choice to adult education, she empowers learners to take control of their own paths. Her agricultural knowledge helps ensure that local programming remains relevant and responsive to community needs.

Her years teaching inner-city college students further shaped her educational philosophy—grounded in empathy, gratitude, sound decision-making and engaging learning experiences.

While raising five children (now grown), Michelle nurtured her personal passions to stay balanced and inspired. Storytelling, writing and collecting old books continue to be meaningful creative outlets in her life. ◇

A

Berniece Gowan

Berniece has spent the last 23 years working in the community adult literacy and learning field. She began in a data entry/admin role, which she was clearly unsuited to. But she persisted. She had the opportunity to work with Dr. Jenny Horsman, a community educator and researcher whose focus is on the impact of violence on learning. The work with Dr. Horsman created an opportunity for Berniece to integrate her previous 20 years of experience as a social worker with the knowledge she was gaining about adult literacy. Berniece has been primarily involved with providing support, training and professional development (PD) to adult literacy/learning practitioners. She has managed CALP grants, supported adults in learning programs, project managed and contributed to adult learning assessment tools. Finding creative ways to build literacy awareness into services and programming that address the complex needs of vulnerable populations continues to be a passion for Berniece. Berniece is currently the Literacy and PD Specialist for Calgary Learns and is grateful to be a part of the CALP PD providers team! ◇

K

Heidi Grogan

Over the past three decades in community-based education, Heidi Grogan has learned from adult learners whose courage shaped her understanding of how trauma and schooling collide. She's forever curious about self-concept—how it breaks, how it heals—and how the invitation to learning offers opportunity to become more whole. At Calgary Learns, she supports literacy and foundational learning programs. She believes that learning is never just about skill, but always about personhood. Outside her role, she writes about healing, officiates ceremonies and watches for her own becoming in the mirror and on the river (in her kayak). ⋄

F

Tanis Harms

Tanis Harms is passionate about effective communication. Her own journey began in a place of fear and discomfort, which led her to discover simple strategies anyone can learn in order to be confident and intentional when interacting with others. Whether formal or informal settings, effectively communicating care and interest in others builds relationships. Tanis' experience with various sizes of group settings, teaching college communication classes, workshops and providing customized coaching has helped her develop and refine her own skills, resulting in her enthusiastically sharing what she has learned with others. ⋄

E

Kim Heatherington

Kim loves to write her own bio, oh yes!
She'll rhyme it and chime it and clean up the mess.

From Fort Saskatchewan, her cozy domain,
On Treaty 6 land, through sun and through rain.

For twenty-plus years (and maybe some more),
She's opened up minds and opened up doors
In adult learning, she's planted her seed,
Helping folks grow with each thought and each deed.

She believes in the power of laughter and play,
In sprinkling joy through the work and the day.
She loves nature, and people, and travels galore,
With family and friends—who could ask for more?

Kim knows every voice has a gift to bestow,
And lifting them up helps the whole planet grow.
Now in the Sturgeon Region, she's starting anew,
With passion that's bright and a wide-angled view.

She's moving from family to grown-up-type stuff,
(Though both, she would say, can be tricky and tough!)
She's finding that skills from one role to the next,
Are puzzle-piece perfect—she's truly feeling blessed!

So here is dear Kim, with her purpose in sight,
Spreading her magic, her heart, and her light.

By Kim Heatherington (and ChatGPT) ⋄

C

Lee Holfeld

Lee Holfeld is a Learning Coach and a Community Engagement Facilitator with Pincher Creek and Willow Creek CALPs, but her teaching career really began over 50 years ago when she realized she could boss her baby brother around and he'd actually listen. A fierce ally and lifelong educator, Lee delights in unlocking the mysteries of how we learn to learn. Whether she is guiding learners or rallying communities, she brings curiosity, compassion and just the right amount of mischief to the table.

Lee joins her brother Kurt Holfeld for this episode of 'Inside Voice'. Kurt is an instructor and co-chair of the school of Interior Design with Dawson College in Montreal. He totally let his sister boss him into doing this. ⋄

J

Odette Lloyd

Odette is a settler, living and working on Treaty 6 Territory. She has been in the role of Team Lead at the NorQuest Community Adult Learning Program in Whitecourt since 2019, and has worked in Alberta's community-based learning system for nearly 15 years. In addition to her work with the NorQuest CALP, Odette is dedicated to improving her community through relationship-building, advocacy and volunteering in areas of housing and homelessness, inclusion and diversity and Reconciliation. She can also teach you how to juggle. ⋄

N

Amira Nanis

Amira Nanis is an ESL teacher with over 18 years of experience. Her journey in education began at the young age of 15, when she started teaching ESL to young children. In 2013, she founded her own school, Twiza, marking a significant milestone in her dedication to language learning and education.

After experiencing the war in Libya, Amira's passion for teaching expanded beyond language instruction to include a deeper exploration of the systemic injustices within ESL education. This path led her to pursue a second master's degree in Educational Policy with a specialization in Social Justice.

For Amira, social justice is more than a passion or an expression of care—it is a profound and evolving body of knowledge. She is especially grateful for the insights gained through her studies at the University of Alberta. Her upcoming graphic novel delves into the injustices faced by young girls and the lasting impact those experiences have on women into adulthood.

Amira is also deeply engaged in the study of linguistic imperialism and its influence on how people think, speak and relate to the world. ⋄

Mandy Pack, Photography

Mandy Pack is the coordinator at MHC Pathways—Adult Learning Foundations for the County of Forty Mile. Her photography and portrait work are driven by the simplicity and cryptic beauty of monochrome. ⋄

Strategic Conversation

A strengths-based planning for learning hopeful

Now What? Supporting Adult Learning

SUBMITTED BY **Berniece Gowan**

> **Now is the only place anyone ever starts from.**
> **— Jenny Horsman**

Among the many roles a foundational learning practitioner has, it is essential to be a co-explorer and a knowledgeable guide on the learning journey.

Learners come to programs hoping and expecting that we will be able to help them solve a problem. That problem may be interfering with their ability to do what they want and need to do in their lives at home, at work and in their community. As problem-solvers with complex lives, they are counting on your adult literacy and foundational learning program to help them figure out a solution.

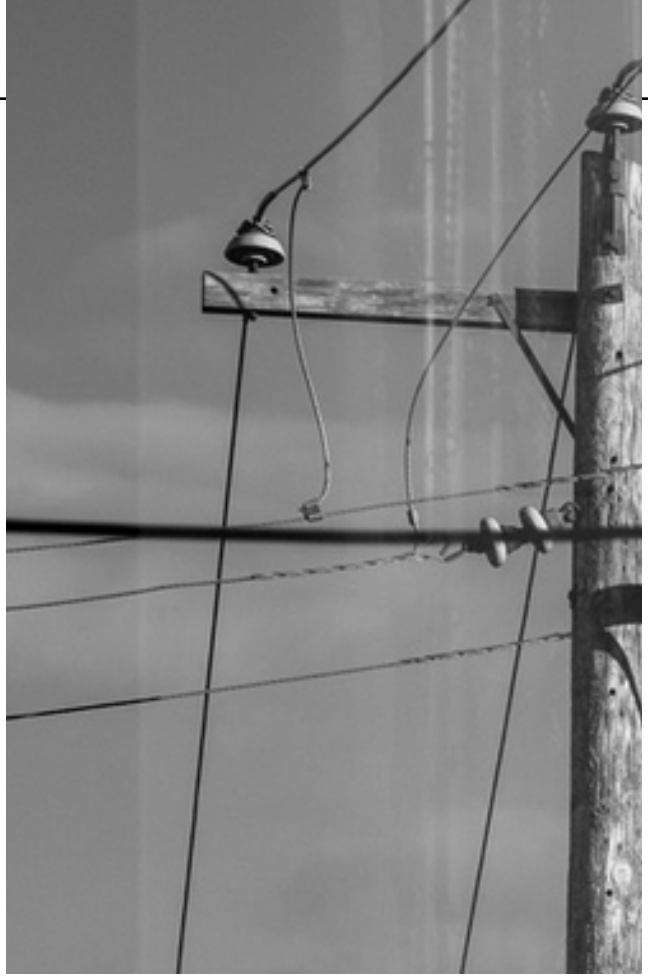
To find that solution together, both the practitioner and the learner need to know more about the problem, the expectations, the goals and what progress might look like. Practitioners need to be skilled, hopeful, respectful, patient, committed to lifelong learning, have the right tools and a good 'learning first aid kit' for emergent issues. Learners need to be able to trust, and have us demonstrate, that we know what we are doing when it comes to supporting learning to happen. The learner also needs to have a good understanding of what you and your program can offer. This may result in the possibility that you might not be the best place for them to start, but in this case, you may be able to provide information and knowledgeable referrals for a better fit.

We need to respect and communicate that adults-as-learners have a wealth of knowledge and experience that will contribute to their foundation for this new learning. This is work you will do together.

When a practitioner accepts the learner's invitation to co-create a learning pathway with them, the first step is to take time to build a connection. Time is often a scarce resource for you both. Many practitioners report that the more they invest at the beginning, before the first day of class, to establish trust and get to know the learners, the greater the impact on levels of engagement and retention. When you can both acknowledge that there are factors that make it difficult to return to learning as an adult, that there are supports and challenges (systems, people and situations) in a person's life that impact learning, learners will know that they are walking alongside someone who respects what it means to bring one's whole self to learning. These connecting conversations allow the shared learning journey to begin well.

Some thoughts to keep in mind:

- Learners in our programs would not be here if they had been successful the first time through the education system. There are a number of factors (poverty, learning disabilities, systemic inequalities, racism, aversive and chronically disrupted learning settings, bullying, etc.) that contributed to that. Those factors matter.
- Between *'past learning experience'* and *'now'*, there has often been little opportunity to gain more insight into what got in the way of one's learning in the past, what it means to be a strong learner and how to build a learning identity that can support one to meet new learning challenges with confidence.
- Adult learning needs to be relevant, learner-led and problem-centred. This recognizes that adult learning is an active, purposeful, expressive and explicit process.



So where do we begin?

Many adults coming to literacy and foundational learning programs are intimidated by the process of setting learning goals. This is a task they are often asked to do at intake. I have heard adults say "what if I don't know for sure, I just want to come back to school" or "I am afraid my goals will get held against me if it looks like I am not going to meet them" or "I don't want to set a goal because it might be another thing I fail at". Setting learning goals can feel risky, especially when one isn't confident about re-engaging with learning.

If you are meeting a learner for the first time, you will want to know why they have come to your organization, what they are interested in, how they think and talk about learning and what they know about how they learn best. You are beginning to build a learning relationship. Some of this happens through conversation and some of this is done more explicitly through an assessment process. All of it is programming, even if you have not yet stepped into the classroom. The exchange of information, perceptions and ideas sets the fragile groundwork for the work you will do together.

For learners, assessments can feel like a test that will reinforce, to a stranger, everything one does not know. For practitioners, some formal assessments can sometimes leave them with a 'now what?' feeling, or a discomfort with being in a position where it feels like they are 'judging' someone's knowledge.

However, if a practitioner doesn't know what is going to help someone be successful in their program (reading, writing, skills for learning, digital literacy, AA, etc.), they risk entrenching the learner's past negative experiences with learning. For each learner, it is personal. It is a practitioner's role to provide stronger, more tailored learning opportunities, and this cannot be achieved through 'guessing' what the learning needs are.

Assessment can be one of the most helpful, and respectful, tools we use to engage with adults who return to learning. Assessments can help demystify what it means to learn. It is the process of breaking learning down into understandable chunks that represent unique strengths and challenges. Assessments, wisely chosen and wisely used, can build confidence, reveal skills and strengths, set learning priorities, shape a learning plan and inform short and long-term goals.

Assessment tools can be formal or informal, depending on the reason an assessment is being used. Most importantly, assessment is a practice that begins at the first point of contact between a practitioner and an adult learner and continues, for both, over the length of your work together.

Ideally, both the practitioner and the learner will be very interested in the assessment process and what information is uncovered. On a learning journey, like all journeys, it is very

helpful to know where one will begin and what will be helpful along the way. To extend the metaphor, judicious assessment can help both the practitioner and the adult-as-learner map out the journey together.

You can start, even at intake, with a low-risk assessment conversation/activity, remembering the importance of being respectful and clear in our communication about why we want to learn more. In intakes I've done, I used to say something like *'Many people return to learning as an adult because some problem has come up that has to be addressed. Often people have had either negative experiences with learning in the past, difficulty with learning or life disruptions that have gotten in the way. In this program we want to support you to have success achieving your goals for coming and we want to avoid repeating past difficulties. So I am going to ask some questions about your past learning experiences and your hopes and worries about learning.*

Some of those questions might be:

- What do you think I need to know to support you to be successful in this program?
- What is motivating you to return to learning at this time?
- Are there supports or circumstances in place right now that make it feel like the right time to do this?
- What has gotten in the way of learning in the past? Are these factors that will need to be addressed so that you can focus on learning now?
- What was school/learning like for you growing up?
- Did you have favourite subjects? Was there a particular teacher who influenced you? Why? How?
- Did you have any supports or accommodations for learning when in school?
- Have you ever suspected you have, or have you been diagnosed with, a learning difficulty?

You will have your questions that you like to ask. And, even only having time to ask a few good questions (and demonstrate your good listening) begins to open a space for future conversations.

I also like the following process, adapted from a tool called Creating Learning Partners, which you will find on the CALP portal. The script can go something like this, and the answers can be written/scribed by either of you, just keep it conversational and welcoming:

"Think about a recent time when you learned something new.

- *What were you trying to learn?*
- *What motivated you to choose to learn that?*
- *Did you have previous knowledge or experience that helped you learn that?*
- *What skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking, numeracy, etc.) did you use?*
- *Did you have to practice in order to do it well?*
- *Did you need to ask someone for help? How did that go?*
- *Was this a positive or negative learning experience for you?*
- *If positive, what do you think made it work well?*
- *If negative, what might have worked better for you?*
- *Have you been able to maintain that new learning?*

Thank you for answering these questions. This is what I heard you say about how you learn (paraphrase here using, as much as possible, the learner's own words not your interpretation of them). Have I missed anything here? Is there anything you wish that I had asked? Is there anything you would like to add or correct?

You know a lot about how you learn and the skills you have talked about are the ones we will build on. You and I will also work together to find out what other practical skills you need to help you learn.

We will use some assessment tools to help us figure out where to focus your learning. These tools will help us both understand what your strengths and challenges are and help us build a learning plan that makes sense to you. We will set some learning goals together so we will know what direction we are going and what progress we have made."

The answers to these kinds of questions become a page in a learning portfolio. They begin to answer, for both of you, the question 'What do I know about how I learn? ' That is a hopeful and powerful way to begin.

From there, you can move into appropriate skill-specific assessments (reading, writing, numeracy, etc.). Choosing low-stakes assessments means the learner can explore their own abilities without fearing judgment while at the same time becoming more curious and knowledgeable about the skills they want to learn.

I believe that when a practitioner chooses to use assessments with an adult learner, they are entering into a contract with that learner. The learner agrees to share experiences and knowledge about what they know about a particular skill or subject and about how they problem solve when they are learning. The practitioner agrees to share and explore the results with the learner and to use that information to co-build a learning plan, one that can be adjusted and adapted as the learning relationship strengthens.

As with all things, how you begin influences the outcomes. When the invitation to work together comes, remember you both have so much to bring to the table. ◇

I'm a download

Contents of a Good Learning First Aid Kit

The checklist includes:

- [ ] Comfortable with urgent and emergent learning opportunities over fixed curriculum
- [ ] Able to adapt authentic materials (whatever walks in the door with the learner) as learning resources
- [ ] Problem solver, aware of resources in the community
- [ ] Strong listening and communication skills
- [ ] Humble—modeling that no one knows all the answers but working together you have a good chance of figuring it out
- [ ] Committed—to the principles and practices of adult learning
- [ ] Prepared—well-trained, strong tools

SUBMITTED BY **Berniece Gowan**

The Priority of Being Welcoming

Strategic Conversation

learner-centred
building relationship
humane

SUBMITTED BY **Veronica Fukuda & Michelle Gietz, Brooks Community Adult Learning Council**

Think about how you feel when you walk into a new job interview. Maybe you feel a little anxious, nervous, excited or jittery.

Or what about a visit to the doctor's office where you are asked to fill in a bunch of forms with information you have already given them? Or how might you feel when different doctors continually ask you to repeat sensitive information, possibly traumatic, even though it's recorded in your file? These potential feelings of frustration, embarrassment, nervousness, anxiety or fear of being judged are what many foundational learners walk into our organizations with. They often have had negative experiences with education in the past. Our job is to create a safe and welcoming space so that we can help the learner get what they need to get started on the goal that brought them through our door.

How do we do this?

The first step is to have a conversation with the person. To get to know them. To listen emphatically and carefully to what is being said (or not said) and read body language. The balance is to gather information from the learner to help understand needs and meet our reporting requirements without grilling the learner as if it is an interview. We want the learner to feel no judgment from us, only to be supported and heard. There are no right or wrong answers or necessities. Whatever information is shared (or not), we are going to do our best to help.

This initial conversation may only gather the learner's name and phone number while also sharing some programming options available to the learner. Let the learner absorb the information and come back later if they need time to think. Not feeling pressured will also help to establish a safe space for these learners.

What do we say?

This first conversation doesn't follow a pre-determined script and will change learner to learner, need to need, as it is not always black and white. Often, as part of a CALP, we need to work in the "grey" area and be flexible.

First conversations include:

- listening to what is being said
- reading body language
- sensing hesitations
- asking questions without interrogating

If we put ourselves in the learner's place, how would we respond to an "interrogation" with a stranger when we may feel shy, nervous or embarrassed about the information being given? It has taken courage for the learner to walk through the door and ask for help, so we want to respect, support and not intimidate the learner with our questions or by recording information vigorously.

How do we keep track of all these learners and sensitive information?

If we do need to write down an essential detail, let the learner know what is happening and why. Ask for permission if necessary, so that the learner is an active participant in the process and doesn't wonder, "what are they writing about me"? and stir up feelings of uncertainty.

If the learner is more open to sharing, we could record more information with the learner or on behalf of the learner. The initial conversation would be more thorough and collect specific demographic information needed for reporting purposes.

What if the learner is uncomfortable answering our questions?

Remember, leaving blanks and/or selecting "unknown" will be ok. We can gather these unknown pieces of information later when the learner is more comfortable and settled, through instructor/tutor-led activities or other general conversations. Often, saying hello and engaging in polite, daily conversation can go a long way in helping to establish a connection and gathering missing information.

Where are we going to store this information, even if it's just a name and phone number? How do we remember details about all the learners we may speak with in a day, a week or a month?

One option is to use a form. Any form to record information needs to be chosen carefully and written in learner-friendly, simple, clear English with an easy-to-follow layout. Using legal-sized paper allows the layout to have adequate spacing and a larger font, as these conditions also facilitate development of reading and writing abilities for foundational learners (ESL for ALL, 35).

The front of the form can contain student information, while anything administrative is on the reverse side. Marking essential information required for reporting purposes with an asterisk helps to identify key information and any unknowns to complete later.

The form can also include "nice to haves" separated from the reportable data by a dashed line. The "nice to have' information can help:

- plan programming
- identify referrals
- provide personal preferences
- determine learning times
- indicate potential barriers to learning

Who fills out the form?

A learner could record the information on a form, which would also give a quick evaluation of literacy skills. Or we can record the information on behalf of the learner by asking, "Is it ok if I write this down to help remember and find the best option for you?". We can also record the information after the learner has left.

Bringing out a form is usually best left for later in the conversation, not as an opening.

What are the challenges of a form?

Even though a written record can be beneficial for understanding ability and storing details for future use, it can make a learner feel inadequate if the learner is unsure how to answer the questions or where to write.

This can potentially create a barrier or intimidate a learner, such as a learner who has asked for help to read and write English or has English as an additional language.

There can be situations where fear of stigmatization can lead to false information being shared as this is self-reported information with no verification. Even in reporting, there is the option to record "unknown" for some demographic data, so it will be ok if you don't have all the information.

Remember, the first step is to be safe and welcoming, to listen, to focus emphatically and to demonstrate understanding of the learner to create a connection. This connection is what helps a learner to feel comfortable starting a learning journey with you and is one reason a relaxed conversation about programming can be effective.

What are the benefits of a form?

The conversation can also be guided by your chosen form. The form helps direct the conversation into areas needed to get the learner started. This conversation also highlights strengths the learner has, as many literacy learners have developed strong oral and other survival skills. Using a form as a guide helps to avoid repeating questions, now or in the future. It can also help an organization collect information that is relevant and appropriate to complete the CALP Final Report. For example, there only needs to be one question on a form about the level of education. Matching it to the reporting criteria (no schooling, 1-6, 7-9, etc.) ensures that this information is only asked once and then stored for future reference. Knowing past schooling can identify potential learning gaps and programming opportunities. Should the learner return for future learning, the file can be opened and only details such as name and contact information need to be verified, avoiding the duplication of the previous conversation.

A form with space for multiple future registrations allows for collected information to be used again and provides a tangible, lasting record to help:

- plan programming
- collect and maintain reportable data
- provide a history of relevant learning opportunities completed by the learner

The priority is getting the learner started on the journey, remembering the conversation is not an interview, but a step towards reaching a learner's goal and to identify potential barriers and/or skills that may assist in accomplishing those goals.

Forms can be significantly beneficial when designed with foundational learners in mind and used together with a relaxed conversation that views the process from the learner's perspective to support the learner's journey.

Pros of a Form

- Information is easy to find and use again
- Provides a history of the learner
- Collects reportable data in one place
- Helps to plan programming
- Identifies potential barriers to learning
- Can be an informal evaluation of literacy skills

Cons of a Form

- Awareness of Access to Information Act (AB) and sharing/storing of sensitive information is needed
- No standardization of forms—it is up to each organization
- Could feel like a contract or learners are unsure why they need to complete and/or sign
- Misinterpretation of the form if it is not clear, simple language
- Can create potential barriers for some learners who may feel a form is too institutional
- Self-reported data with no verification due to feelings of fear/shame can lead to inconsistent or confusing data

Quick Tips

Sensing hesitation? Just talk—no form needed!

Engage the learner in conversation, not conduct an interview.

On a registration form, mark essential information with an asterisk, the rest can be collected at a later date.

Avoid collecting nonessential information.

What we are listening to...

Podcasts are great ways to listen to conversations firsthand. We only wish there were an opportunity to jump in and contribute. Here are three conversations that we are listening to—and suggest you join us!

Inside Voice

WITH **LEE & KURT HOLFELD**

This dynamic brother and sister duo are in conversation about creating safe space. Both educators, Lee and Kurt explain some of the more common characteristics of physical spaces from an interior design perspective and how that impacts learning.

Plus, the Holfelds are fun! These siblings are comfortable in conversation, and this podcast is a great example of co-creating authentic spaces for learning.

Key takeaway:
Learning together matters.

LISTEN TO PODCAST

Strategic Conversation

C

strengths-based
welcoming space
relational

Holding Space in Learner Intake

WITH **FLAGSTAFF COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING (FCAL)**

This podcast features Lois Polege and Treena Brooke in conversation with Val Rathjen. As a Community Adult Learning Program, they are committed to being a place to belong, to share and be seen.

Listen in as this team explores the importance of extending an invitation to join a learning community.

Key takeaway:
How to be learner-centred.

LISTEN TO PODCAST

Strategic Conversation

learner-centred
building relationship
humane

Nervous System and Learning

WITH **DR. JENNY HORSMAN**

Dr. Jenny Horsman is a researcher and educator. This Literacy Legacy: Training for Instructors podcast is a conversation focused on understanding the nervous system and its impact on learning.

Throughout this conversation, Jenny reflects on what the body communicates about safety, and how those messages show up in learning opportunities.

Key takeaway:
It is impossible to learn scared.

LISTEN TO PODCAST

Getting to Know Learners

I'm a download

The initial conversations can lead not just to someone enrolling in a class but also becoming a part of your learning community.

Beginning the conversation

- Give people your full attention
- Everyone needs to feel seen, heard and valued
- Initial engagement sets the stage for the next steps and building a relationship of trust
- Ask 'What has brought you in today?'
  - » Recognize that just coming in the door might have been a big step

Identifying needs

- May come out of initial conversation but might require further conversations
  - » Watch body language and respect boundaries
  - » When do you ask more vs. know it is time to stop
- Remember it's about them NOT you and your programs
  - » Share what your program offers that may tie into their needs/goals
  - » Address their needs and when it's not you—
- Hand them off rather than pass them off
  - » Know your community and other services available
  - » Include specific names of people to talk to when possible

Building a relationship

- Remember their name and use it
- Want a person to feel safe, able to share their story and find hope in moving forward towards meeting their needs and goals
- Encourage people to return
  - » Drop in and continue the conversation
  - » Share their ongoing needs, struggles and hopes
  - » Build community where they feel a part of something and value
  - » Say "We're so glad you stopped in..."
- Follow up
  - » When appropriate, touch base, check in
  - » Ask "Did the referral help? Did the resource or info shared meet your need? Is there anything else we can do?"

SUBMITTED BY **Flagstaff Community Adult Learning**

More Intake Resources

These initial conversations may be the beginnings of assessment.

Here are some questions to get you started:

From CanLearn Society:
Getting to Know Learners—Initial Interview

DOWNLOAD

From Community Learning Network:
Sample Collaborative Goal Setting Questions

DOWNLOAD

Our goal in our interactions is the opportunity to build an ongoing relationship.

From Calgary Learns:
Intake Assessment Tips

DOWNLOAD

Strategic Conversation

E

strengths-based
building relationship
relational

Connection, Reflection & Relationships— Why it Matters

SUBMITTED BY **Kim Heatherington**

I want to chat about intakes—or interviews, or chats. These first meetings with community members are crucial because the way we approach them sets people up for success.

For many of us, there is pressure to get the paperwork done and the boxes ticked before someone can even start their learning journey. What if we shifted our viewpoint from the intake being about paper and boxes and made it about connection, reflection and relationship?

Connection: Building Trust from the First Moment

Have you ever thought about when connection starts? Connection can start before we even meet with someone. Often, before they even reach out to us, they have seen us in community or heard about us from friends and community partners. Our actions influence intake before we even meet. **Connections in the community matter to the success of our participants and our programs.**

Next is the first meeting, which is not when you sit down with someone but the first call, text or random meeting in the community. Connection is always happening. We need to understand this and intentionally make it part of our work. This means that we need to check ourselves, our body language and our tone. We need to try with every encounter to be fully present and listen, truly listen, so we can validate people's emotions and experiences. This all happens before we start ticking boxes. **Connection takes time.**

Reflection:
Noticing How We Show Up

Reflection is the tough work that we do when we look inward and recognize how we react, both physically and mentally. Reflection helps build connections and relationships. Practicing reflection can be the most valuable tool for us to improve our work. Reflection needs to be practiced. It is best practiced with guidance and support from others.

We need to be asking ourselves questions like:

- Am I making space for others to have or find their voice?
- Am I rushing to place them in a box?
- Are my own experiences affecting how I interpret theirs?
- Is this about me or them?

These are hard questions to answer on the best of days, let alone while we are trying to connect and build relationships with people. This is where having someone else to ask you reflective questions to help you dive deep becomes important.

The other big part of reflection is being able to develop the ability to reflect in the moment when you are with other people (coworkers, community members or clients). When you can reflect and check yourself right then, you can move to becoming more responsive. This is difficult. It can feel like we are just catching ourselves being wrong. Instead, can we move from thinking it is wrong to reflecting on:

- Where is it coming from?
- Can I move through it?
- How is it affecting the connection and the relationship being built?

Reflection is about gaining the ability to notice, adapt and learn. Reflection can lead to personal growth, better self-care and improve the intake process. **Reflection is a part of being a lifelong learner.**

Relationship: Builds the Foundation for Learning

If we connect and reflect with others—especially while meeting clients—we hope that a relationship will form. Why does this matter? Good and healthy relationships will enhance lives. These relationships can increase motivation, engagement and learning.

For many of our clients, these relationships are the beginning of their learning journey. Within this relationship, we are privy to a great deal of information, and we must remember that boundaries are kindness. Knowing our boundaries and our organizational boundaries is important. Boundaries create and sustain healthy relationships. These initial meetings are key to setting up clear expectations of each person's role in the relationship. **With boundaries, people can clearly see their role in the relationship and that they are leading this journey.**

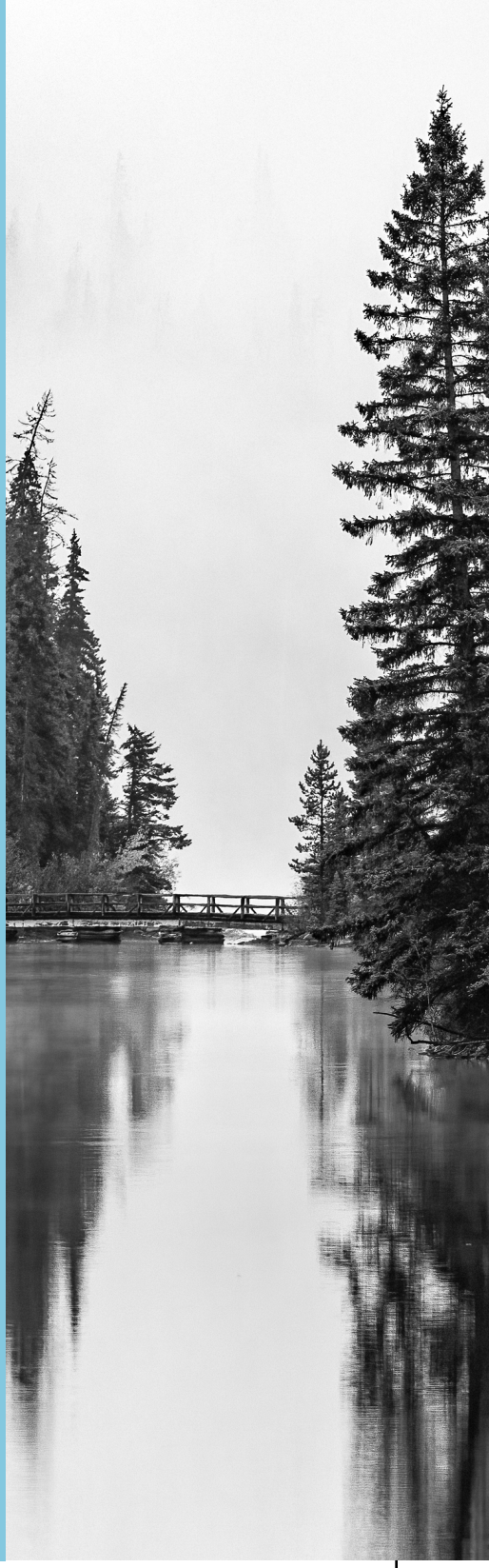
Each of us will form and hold relationships differently, but there are key actions we can take to build, maintain and enhance relationships:

- Always start with connection
- Be curious
- Ask open-ended questions and ask follow-up questions
- Listen with interest and empathy
- Be aware of your body language and tone
- Be consistent
- Acknowledge when they are brave or vulnerable

Relationships take work; we should celebrate accomplishments, embrace challenges, always notice, and be grateful for these relationships. **It takes two people to be in a relationship.**

When we focus on the person and not the paperwork, we open the doors to change and learning—not just for the people we support but also for ourselves. **Connection** reminds us to be present and intentional, creating trust from the very first interaction. **Reflection** reminds us to be honest and curious, allowing us to adapt and grow. Together, connection and reflection foster **relationships** that offer space and opportunity for the learning to unfold.

This is a big topic and there is a great deal we can learn from each other about connection, reflection and relationship. I hope that you read this article and start a conversation with others on how we do our work and live our lives. ◇



Co-Writing Stories of Conversations

SUBMITTED BY **TANIS HARMS**

Preparing well for intentional conversations contribute to engaging stories.

The Authors

Authors often co-write stories, just like conversations involve more than one person in order to result in a strong narrative. By having an engaging introduction, interesting plot hooks, essential chapter development, a plan for blank pages or writer's block and ending with a strong conclusion, conversationalists—like authors—are equipped to co-create strategic conversations that leave those involved wanting more. Similar to an empty page of a book, each story begins with ideas of where the author wants to go or what they might want to include in the narrative, but these are held loosely as the story always develops as it goes. In conversations, it is important not to make any assumptions about where the story will go, or what will be contributed to it, but rather to focus on really listening so that the writing of the story is a shared experience.

The Introduction

A great beginning to any story starts with the introduction, as it sets the tone, context or setting of what is about to happen and invites readers in. In conversations, each person involved is a co-writer, where both parties actively collaborate in the writing process by including their ideas into a shared narrative. Thinking about your setting—the physical location of where a conversation will take place—is important.

- Are you in a space that feels safe for all who are involved in the conversation?
- Are the chairs comfortable?
- Is there anything physically between anyone (like a desk)?
- Are there things that might distract from actively listening to one another?

"These brief but pleasant exchanges can enhance health and happiness, lifting mood, energy and overall well-being. They often promote learning, expand people's world views and contribute to a sense of belonging. Plus, they're good for both parties... research indicates that people view "minimal social interactions" such as a smile, compliment or quick chat as an act of kindness."

https://time.com/6280607/small-talk-tips-benefits/

Once you have set up a great physical setting, it's time to set up the conversational setting. It is important to start the conversation with light topics as these are the essential foundation for engaging the other person in conversation and beginning to develop a safe conversational space and relationship to build upon. Some examples of these topics might include things like the weather, food, locations or specific items such as, "How are you feeling about the weather today?" or "Have you had a good cup of coffee or tea yet today?" or "Wow—I love your mug!"

The Plot Hooks

When reading a story, it is the plot hooks that motivate the reader to keep reading on to find out more. These hooks deepen and guide the direction of the storyline. If a story does not have these unknown mysteries or problems to be solved, a reader might not be as engaged to keep going. Like a story without hooks, closed-ended questions in a conversation block the motivation to carry on, as they close or shut down the flow of conversation. They may cause the book (or conversation) to be closed entirely as the others involved may no longer be engaged. Closed-ended questions often start with "Did", "Do" and possibly "Who", "Where" or "When". Sometimes, closed-ended questions can simply be answered with yes/no responses or one word. By comparison, open-ended questions are those that usually start with words such as "How", "Why" and "What." They have no set or predetermined answer and require a response longer than a word or two. Some examples of good open-ended questions might be:

- "What keeps you busy outside of your work?"
- "What do you enjoy doing in the summer/fall/winter/spring (whatever season it currently is or about to be)?"
- "How did you hear about our organization?"
- "What has brought you by today?"

Tips

From TIME Magazine:

◇

Don't get personal too quickly (e.g. kids, marriage, work) unless the other person shares the information first.

◇

When someone asks you a question, respond with a full sentence rather than a word or two so that they can build on the conversation.

https://time.com/6280607/small-talk-tips-benefits/

It is important to ask open-ended questions that can be used for different age groups, in different contexts and are "safe" (the recipient can answer as lightly or deeply as they feel comfortable). Asking open-ended questions provides the opportunity for a conversation to uncover problems to be solved or information to deepen the plot.

Chapter Development

The middle chapters of a book focus on developing characters and themes, building on what has already been contributed. In a conversation, follow-up questions in response to what someone has already shared help to add dimension, context or key information to guide where the story will go next. Once you have asked someone an open-ended question, hopefully, they replied with an answer (more than a word or two) to that question. Their answer can then be used to help the conversation move forward. At this point, your next questions are developed based on their continued sharing. For example, you could say things like, "That sounds interesting! I'd love to hear more about that", or "Can you explain what that looks like?", or maybe, "I'm not sure I completely understand. Would you be willing to tell me more as to what you mean by….?"

A Blank Page (or Writer's Block)

When co-writing a story, more than one author is expected to be contributing. However, at times, one of the authors may only be contributing a small amount or even nothing at all. This might be due to many factors; when this happens writers can look at exploring how to engage the other writer back into the story by using a few strategies such as:

- switching genres
- shortening the story
- adding in a twist with a new idea
- or giving them permission to pause and pick up the pen again at another point in time

If you are sharing a comment about yourself due to the other person not sharing as much, be sure to keep your sharing brief to provide the opportunity for them to join in the conversation again when they're ready.

In conversations, there are times when, for whatever reason, the other person is not choosing to engage in the conversation. Perhaps they are not responding at all to questions asked, or maybe they are providing very short answers even though you have asked open-ended questions. In these situations, you can attempt to keep the conversation going by using a few strategies. First, after pausing to provide them enough time to answer (and this is hard… so count to about seven in your head before talking again), share some things about yourself. You can do this by answering the open-ended question you have asked of them, or by sharing something else you think might reopen engagement. Ideas for what you might share could include: what you enjoy about your job or role, some of the things that your organization offers, something you think might be of interest to them in the community, or something you enjoy spending time on outside of work. After your brief time of sharing, invite them back into the story by asking a new open-ended question, as it might encourage them just enough to pick up their pen and jump back into the conversation again.

The Conclusion

Conclusions signal the end of a particular story, tying up loose ends or leaving the reader on the edge of their seat anticipating a sequel. Conclusions are essential in providing closure, or to indicate what next step(s) should be taken. If after asking a few open-ended questions the other person still appears to not be interested in actively engaging in the conversation, it is okay to end the conversation or reschedule it for another time. Exiting gracefully from a conversation is like a well-scripted ending to a book. Some things you might choose to say

are, “Well, it’s been great to meet with you today. Thank you for your time”, or “Thank you for coming in, I look forward to when we can continue our conversation.” While saying descriptive words like these, it is important that your body language or actions match your words. Perhaps you start standing up and walking with them to the door or begin to close your notebook or gather up your supplies. However you choose to conclude, be sure that it is both kind and clear, keeping the possibilities open for the next chapter.

Engaging in conversations beginning at the first introduction, asking great open-ended questions to guide the plot, developing the narrative through informed follow-up questions—while being ready with ways to respond if you run into a block—and ending with a strong conclusion, builds conversationalists who, like authors, co-write strategic conversations (or stories) that keep those involved wanting more. How will you and the learners you interact with co-write the next best seller? ◇

Author’s Picks

Tanis’ Top Picks for Conversations

◇

A GREAT MUG

My fave: Night Owl Creations

◇

LUSH SUCCULENTS

They really grow on you!

◇

A DELICIOUS SNACK!

My fave: Flourless Chocolate Cake

◇

COMFY CHAIRS

They really rock!

Conversation Resources

TableTopics Card Game
https://tabletopics.com/

An Introvert’s Guide To Small Talk: Eight Painless Tips
https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinapark/2015/03/30/an-introverts-guide-to-small-talk-eight-painless-tips/?sh=6787e2a9574a

7 Ways to Get Better at Small Talk—And Why You Should
https://time.com/6280607/small-talk-tips-benefits/

9 Magic Phrases That Can Save Awkward Conversations
https://www.rd.com/list/conversation-skills/

Good Conversation Starters
https://www.rd.com/list/conversation-starters/

Breaking the Ice in Getting to Know Others Blog
https://calp.ca/blog/breaking-the-ice-in-getting-to-know-others.htm

I'm a download

6 Tips to Start a Great Conversation

SUBMITTED BY **Tanis Harms**

1

Choose a Great Space

Be intentional about where you have a conversation:

- Is it comfortable?
- Is it safe?
- Is it distraction free?
- Is it private?

Comfy seating, relaxing decor (like plants and pictures) help create a calm setting to chat.

2

Time it Right

It is important to have time available for conversations. Schedule enough time (and maybe a bit extra) for asking good questions and creating space for listening well.

If you don't have enough time, be honest about that and schedule another time that works better.

3

Be a Great Host

Just like how you would treat a guest visiting your home, show hospitality by offering a drink of coffee, tea or water and a snack.

Feeling welcomed goes a long way in building relationships.

5

Ask Great Questions

Great questions lead to great answers, and open-ended questions invite deeper responses.

Start with casual asks and then transition to more personal ones like:

- What's something that would be helpful to know about you?
- When you get the chance, what do you love to do?

4

Show you Care

Open body language and regular eye contact communicate care—even more than the words say!

Is your body angled towards the speaker? Are you nodding, smiling and expressing that you're listening? Are you regularly making eye contact to show that you are focused on what they are saying?

6

End with Room for More

First conversations are just the beginning... so keep them at an introductory level of time and focus.

You want the other person to leave wanting more, so that they come back to continue the conversation and relationship building.

learner-centred
establishing trust
humane

The Brain Story and How it Relates to the Intake of Adult Foundational Literacy Learners

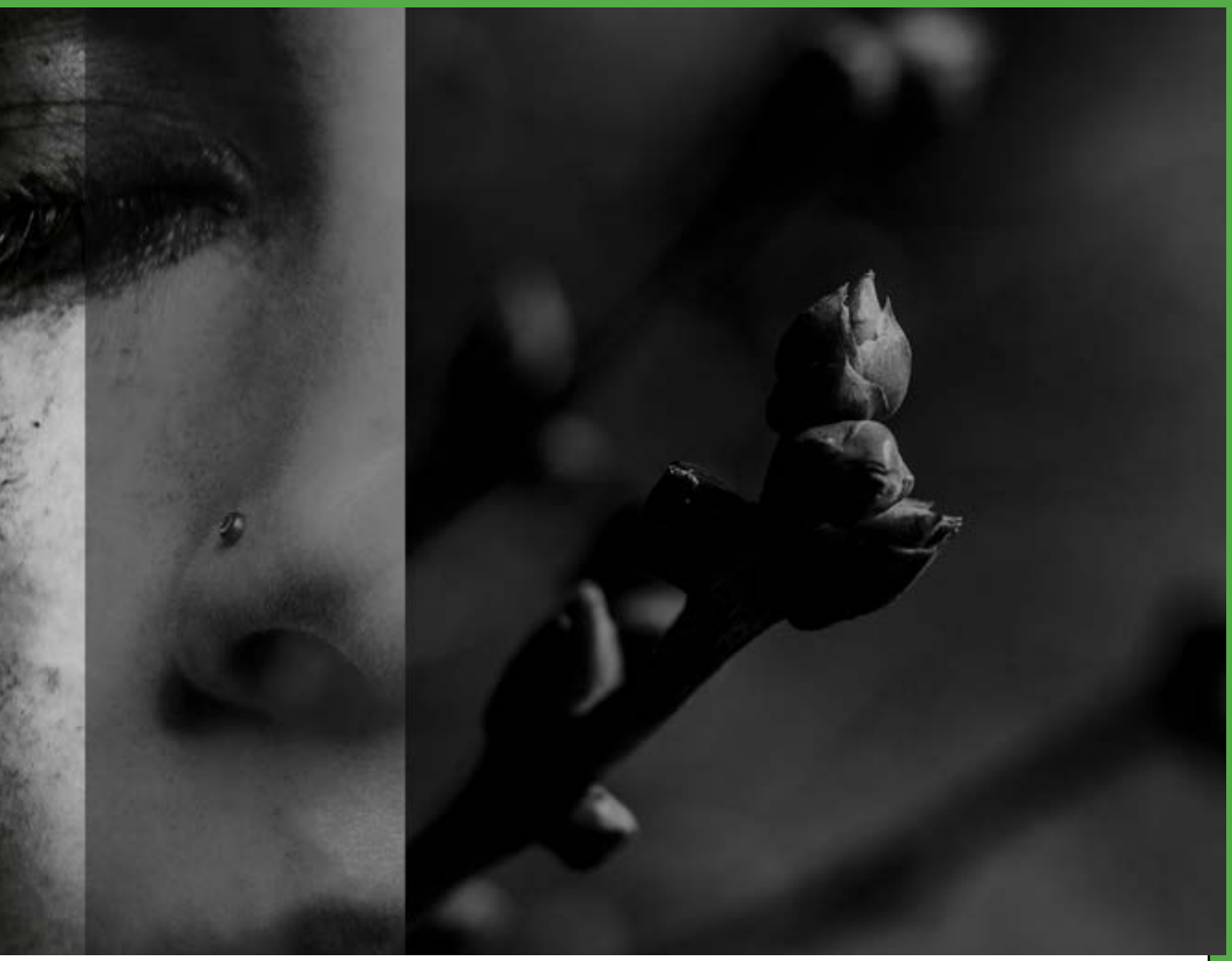
SUBMITTED BY **Rochelle Galeski**

Like recounting a book to a good friend but only having read the last three chapters, we cannot discount the importance of the neurological, genetic and behavioural effects trauma has had on an adult learner.

I learned about the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative—The Brain Story—several years ago in my last job as a home visitor. The Brain Story project describes the importance of development of the brain in children and the critical impact that trauma and stress can have on a child's development.

When I entered into the world of adult literacy several years later, I couldn't stop thinking about how important it was to first understand The Brain Story and how it relates to adult literacy.

Recently, our CALP has had success identifying and supporting adult foundational literacy learners. When we talk about foundational literacy learners, we're talking about barriered, possibly isolated, under or unemployed adults who have low to no literacy skills. These individuals have had difficult school experiences, may have had traumatic childhood, adolescent and adult experiences and, as a result, have not had the opportunity nor the ability to improve their literacy skills. They can't read menus at restaurants, don't understand prescriptions, can't read the documents that come in the mail and most importantly come to the program with little to no confidence.



As I began in-taking these foundational learners, I found that the intake was a process that should not be taken lightly and one that may even take 4-6 weeks to truly understand the learners needs before they are matched with a volunteer or placed in a program.

What we know about the development of a child is that neurological connections are created each time a child has a new experience. Those experiences can be through touch, sounds, sight and/or eye contact and are made every moment of every day—in the home, at daycare, in nature and in all new environments. Trauma then affects the brain especially if the child has not had a healthy environment to help them repair those lack of connections in the brain. Imagine a child who is rarely cuddled by a parent, does not have a parent or guardian who makes eye contact nor introduces them to the beauty of their surroundings. You don't have to be a parent to watch a child experience something new for the first time. Like a baby who feels the wind on their face and has to catch their breath but their parent giggles and cuddles them to protect them from the wind. Those seemingly tiny experiences all add up to be critical in the development of a child's brain. Add traumatic experiences with few or no protective

factors for a child and it transfers with ease to adulthood. In the CALP world we call these learners 'wounded'.

An adult who has grown up in an environment where there are few opportunities to develop neurological connections and has few protective factors is a wounded learner. The impact of their 'wounds' present themselves in many ways however here are the most common behaviours and medical conditions I've experienced in adults in my program:

- Lack of confidence
- Little to no creative thinking skills
- Negative self-talk
- Test anxiety
- Classroom anxiety
- Mental health diagnosis
- Past addiction—half of the foundational learners I see are recovering addicts
- Victim of sexual, emotional and physical abuse
- Un-homed as a teenager (unstable foster care or homelessness)
- PTSD
- Interrupted K-12 formal education
- Lack of maturity in certain aspects of social development like conversational cues, independent thinking and, critical thinking
- Reliant on others to do for them

When a learner comes to us for the first time we need to be fully prepared for anything and we need to understand that an adult literacy learner needs care and attention in order to better prepare them for their learning journey. As coordinators we also have a responsibility to our volunteers who are matched with wounded learners. That is why the intake of an adult literacy learner is a critical process and understanding the brain story, wounded learners and recognizing common behaviours in these adults is so critical.

The Intake

No matter what the past traumatic experiences are, trauma occurs when something or someone has been a thief of a victim's power. By allowing a learner to have choice in their environment, in their topic and in the frequency of meetings, you're instilling power back into their learning experience.

Choice
Even before you meet a learner, choices should be presented. Whether you've had a referral and you are talking with the referring agency or a learner has called you for help, always start with giving the learner a choice.

Some examples are:

"Would they like to meet in my office or at the library or in the referring organization's office?"

"Would the learner like to meet me in a private room or in a public setting?"

"Would the learner need a taxi or can they get to my location on their own?"

"Would the learner like for the referring support worker to be there for the introduction?"

It is important to remember not to give choices that are open-ended. For example, "Where do you want to meet?" This is a humbling and possibly confusing and anxious time for a learner. Offering two to three choices that are concrete is a great way to support the learner and gives them power. Giving choices to our learners does not just stop at the intake. It is an ongoing process that is connected to goal setting.

The initial first meeting

Explicit Instruction
Once the learner has made an agreement with me on location and space, I then move into explicit instruction. Especially because learners who have low literacy skills wouldn't often visit a library, they may also have difficulty reading signs or directions to find our office.

At this point give explicit instructions on directions and locations as well as where exactly they will go once they find the meeting place.

For example, "When you arrive at the office, go to Monica at the front desk and tell her you have arrived and that you are meeting Rochelle. Monica will call me and I will come out to greet you."

Be as specific as possible in a professional manner. I would give the same specific instructions if I was having a meeting with a professional colleague from out of town.

Safe and Welcoming Without Forms
The first time I meet a learner I have no paperwork. I simply have a notepad and a pen. I spend about a half an hour with the learner and I just listen. I often open the conversation with "What's brought you here today?"

Sometimes, but rarely, a learner will need some conversation cues. I find that by the time a foundational learner has come to me they want the help, they desire more for their lives and it begins with literacy. If cues are needed, I'll ask questions like, where they're from, how long they've lived in Brooks, do they work, did they go to school, when did they leave school?

Remind the learner that they are not the first person to come to you who needs literacy support.

The second visit I continue to utilize the same practices as above, choices and explicit instruction. I'll have my forms with me and we'll fill them out together. Form filling is often overwhelming for a foundational learner so please don't put it in front of them and say "go". Keep in mind those practices of choice and explicit instruction. Ask the learner if they'd like to fill out their first name and last name and they can tell you their address and the other information while you write. Break the form up so you do some and they do some.

I'll then have some informal and formal assessment tools with me. My best advice to you is to have many tools with you for assessment. Everything from the alphabet to higher level books. I carry around an assessment bag and it's very heavy but has everything I need so I can move up and down in levels as well as assess all aspects of literacy. It includes adult beginner readers but also menus, cookbooks, gardening books and anything else I think might be relevant to the learner.

At the end of the second visit I emphasize the tutor learner model. Although I am working on building trust and maintaining a safe environment, the learner will be placed with a tutor. I have the most amazing 27 volunteer tutors and I have complete trust in them. I make sure I tell the learner this.

Personal and Protective Factors
The next few visits I work on finding out the learners goals. I always emphasize to the learner that they will be doing this work with their tutor and setting goals is ongoing and they can change and that's ok!

In addition to informal and formal assessment, the intake process should include some investigative work. Guided conversations that give us a general idea of what kind of personal and protective factors our learner has in place will be critical in learner retention. A learner who has little to none of these factors will likely be swept up with the trials and tribulations that life brings. With no support, a wounded learner will likely put literacy last.

Take the time to find out who's already supporting your learner. If they have no supports, refer them to these services, preferably before the learning journey begins. Of course their needs will change and volunteer tutors should be equipped with referral resources but initially this process should begin during the intake.

Consent
Asking for consent gives choice and choice gives the power back to the learner. Consent has been a key component in keeping learners engaged and raising confidence.

As the learner progresses, consent will guide the learner and the tutor in goal setting. Foundational learners may have difficulty telling you what they want to learn but I've found that asking permission to correct or teach something new directs their interest. I also ask for consent and give choices to learners as we transition to new learning materials.

The more power we give a learner, the better they get at expressing their likes and dislikes and what they want to be able to do. Take the time to actively listen when you give these choices, you'll be able to pull out some concrete goals by doing this.

Childhood, adolescent and adult trauma create life circumstances that have led foundational learners to our programs for help. It is not our responsibility to know each learner's entire life story but it is important to know that a foundational learner will rarely have a pleasant and happy past. Utilizing intake practices like giving choices, explicit instruction, consent and identification of their personal and protective factors not only creates a safe space for learners but also allows for better learner retention and an authentically learner-led experience. ◇

Cultivating Brave Space — An Indigenous Perspective

SUBMITTED BY **Tamara Argue**

Remember that feeling when you walked into a place and instantly felt at home? Or maybe the opposite—a place where you just didn't fit? What if every space could feel like that 'at home' place or that sacred place?

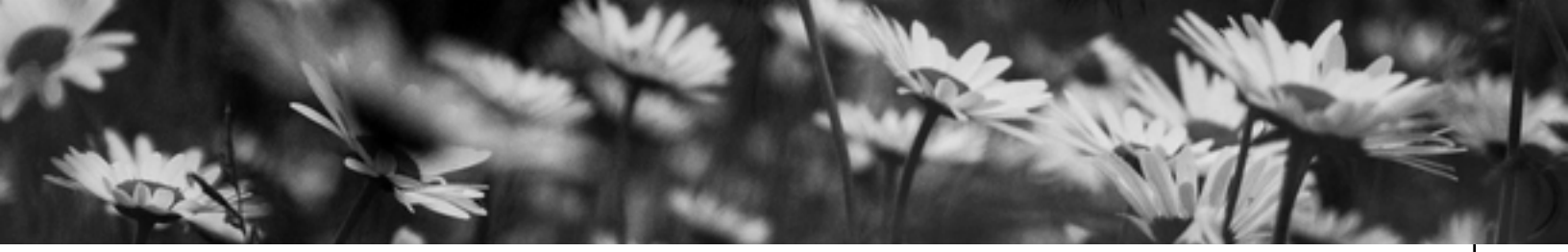
We aren't just talking about how spaces are designed; we are looking deeper. Does a room's layout, colours, or even adding things like plants and water (like many indigenous cultures do) make everyone feel included and safe? Well, I think it does! It's about bringing life into a space, connecting with nature and honouring our traditions, all of which create a sense of belonging and safety.

A simple smile, someone who really listens, or a shared laugh over a cup of coffee or tea can totally transform a space. Understanding how everyday interactions build a sense of community, creating what we call "brave spaces" where honesty, courage and the truth can flourish, leading to healthier relationships.

Why do "brave spaces" matter? These places help us grow and trust each other and work together better.

Creating brave space is critical in engaging with Indigenous peoples. Brave space welcomes vulnerability and honours voices without judgement. A space where individuals find peace, connection to nature and a deep sense of belonging.

Did you know that colonization led to the seizure of Indigenous lands and resources, disrupting our way of life? Silencing our languages, spiritual practices and cultural traditions. Forcing individuals into residential schools, where they were subjected to abuse, neglect and, for some, death.



Indigenous people continue to face discrimination in education, healthcare, accessing clean/safe housing, employment and the justice system.

Indigenous people often face barriers to educational success, including underfunded schools, culturally irrelevant curriculum and a lack of Indigenous teachers and role models.

Indigenous communities experienced higher rates of chronic diseases, mental health issues and substance abuse due to the impacts of colonization.

The trauma experienced in residential schools and through other colonial policies has had lasting effects on Indigenous individuals, families and communities.

These are some of the ways in which colonization has had a profound and lasting impact on indigenous communities and education.

How do I incorporate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the initial meeting?

Acknowledge the traditional territory of the Indigenous peoples that historically steward the land. This shows respect for their history and deep connection to this place.

If possible, invite an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper or Elder to be present during the meeting. Their presence can provide valuable insight, wisdom and guidance.

Offer a smudge. For Indigenous cultures, starting with a smudge isn't just a ritual, it's a sacred contract with the creator, bringing a level of comfort and openness that goes beyond regular hospitality.

Have resources available in your space that highlight Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, such as books, articles or websites.

Recommended Reading

Braiding Sweet Grass
- Robin Wall Kimmerer

Any research conducted by **Dr. Gabriel Weaselhead** (formerly, Lyndstrom)

The Seven Circles: Indigenous Teachings for Living Well
- Dr. Susan McLeod (University of Manitoba)

It's a responsibility of the organization or program to build relationships with Indigenous communities and community members. There is no framework or road map for this work. Be open, honest and willing to learn. You cannot apply a 'pan-Indigenous' approach to relationship building.

What role does self-awareness play in creating and maintaining a brave space?

Self-awareness is very important when creating brave space for Indigenous learners. It helps you understand your own biases, assumptions and cultural background, which can influence how you interact with others.

Being self-aware also means understanding your emotional triggers and reactions. This helps you stay calm and composed during challenging conversations and respond thoughtfully. It also helps us to be more empathetic and understanding towards others, creating a supportive and inclusive environment where Indigenous learners feel safe to share their experiences and perspectives. Self-awareness is key to fostering brave space where everyone feels respected, valued and empowered to learn and grow.

In what ways can the teachings of a Medicine Wheel support self-reflection, learning, and connection within brave spaces?

The medicine wheel can be used for exploring various aspects of Indigenous knowledge and is key in self-discovery practices. The four directions are symbolic of the four aspects of self (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) and the intertwining of all things. This cultural practice can assist individuals in maintaining balance and wellness within their lives.

In what ways can plants be utilized to promote healing, mindfulness and a sense of well-being for Indigenous learners?

Incorporating plants into a brave space can foster a sense of calm and well-being, helping learners feel more grounded and connected to nature, which can encourage openness and vulnerability.

How can we continue to learn and grow in our understanding of Indigenous cultures and issues?

Read books, articles and blogs written by Indigenous authors.

Participate in cultural events, workshops or ceremonies. These opportunities provide direct exposure to cultural practices and perspectives.

Seek opportunities to connect with Indigenous people in your community.

Engage in respectful dialogue and listen to their stories and experiences.

Volunteer your time with an Indigenous-led organization, or something as simple as your voice to advocate for policies and practices that support Indigenous rights and promote reconciliation.

Each CALP program should be moving into 'Reconcili-ACTION', meaning actively seeking engagement opportunities with Indigenous communities.

Including the medicine wheel, smudge, traditional medicines, Indigenous art, Indigenous books, water fixtures and plants in our brave space shows our heart and dedication to honouring culture. This showcases our connection and understanding of Indigenous wisdom, creating connection and building meaningful relationships with our community members. The medicine wheel helps us remember to stay balanced and take care of ourselves in a good way, while the plants help us feel calm and serve as a reminder of constant growth.

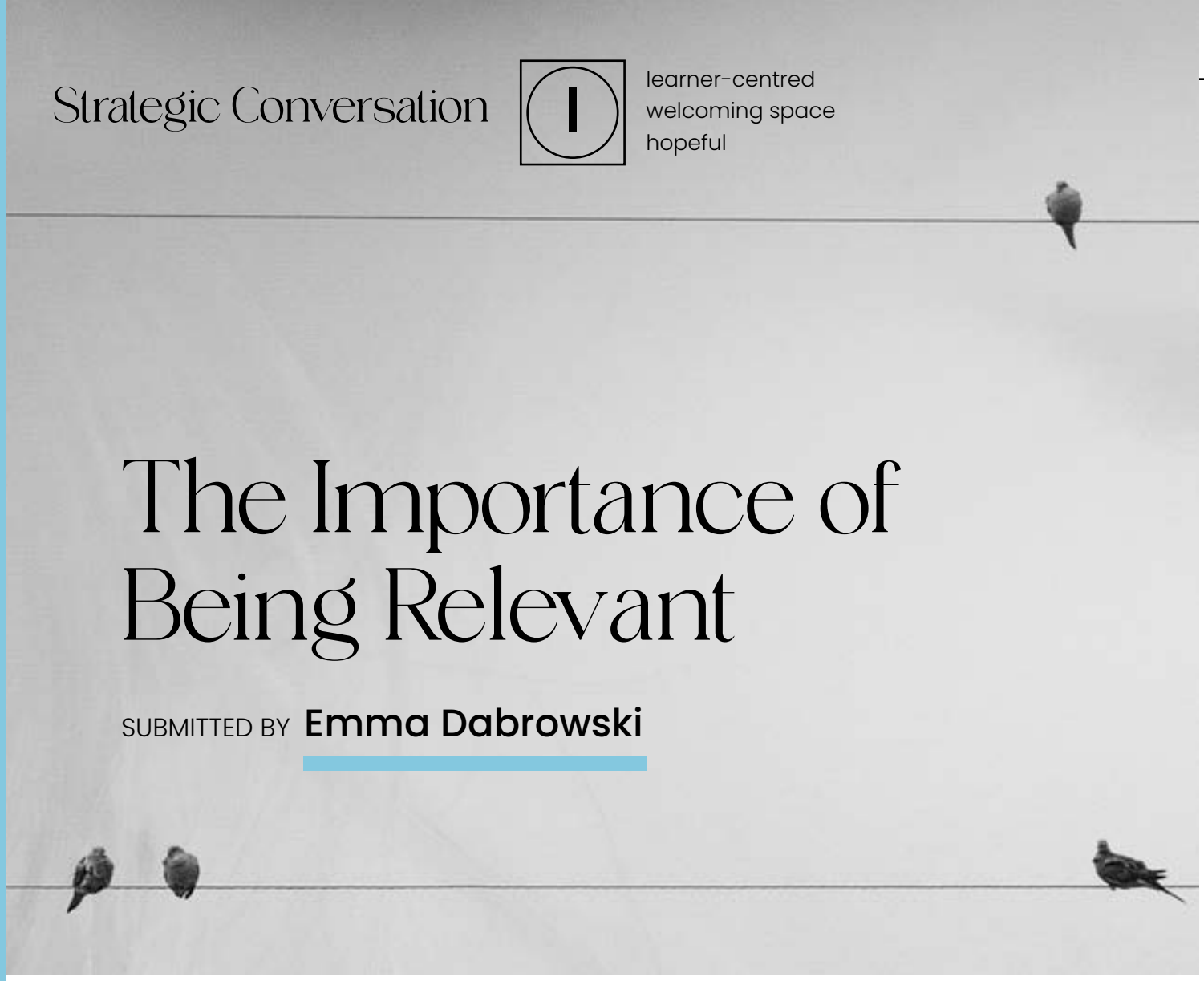
Cultivating brave space is a deep promise to honour Indigenous knowledge. This simple act reminds us to be human, as we serve other humans. This is a beautiful thing, operating heart first. Lifting up the seven sacred teachings: Love, Courage, Truth, Honesty, Wisdom, Humility and Respect. This way of doing things assists us in our space and encourages us to think more about our friendships, what we're learning and how we're all working together to understand each other better. ◇

Know the history of the lands you are working, playing and growing on.

Reconciliation is not a one-way street. Indigenous perspectives thrive on reciprocation. Rooted in the exchange of knowledge, not the extraction.

Strategic Conversation 1

learner-centred
welcoming space
hopeful



The Importance of Being Relevant

SUBMITTED BY **Emma Dabrowski**

What is a relevant space?

'Safe and Welcoming' is a buzz phrase that we hear a lot in the social service field, and rightfully so. As Community Adult Learning Programs, our mandate is to provide learning opportunities which build foundational skills. We know that many folks with foundational skill gaps are also vulnerable people whose very skill gaps create significant and complex barriers to achieving their goals and fully participating in their communities on their own terms. Going back into learning can be intimidating. Our first contact with foundational learners is usually in our learning space, and it's essential that the space feels safe enough to be vulnerable; vulnerable to being assessed and vulnerable to making mistakes (an inevitable and healthy part of any learning). Most people who enter the adult learning field naturally care deeply for vulnerable people and strive for sensitivity. This is great, because having a space that is not a hindrance to learning is the first and most basic step in being relevant. Welcoming and safe is intentional in design. But how do we determine what that looks like for our community? **Relevance.**

What is relevance?

It is the state of being Relevant.

Relevant comes from the Latin *relevare*, which means "to lessen, lighten," hence "to help, assist"[1]. From this same stem, we get the word relieve.

Relevance acknowledges the very real and immediate needs facing adults with foundational skill gaps and seeks to lessen the load they carry. Through relevant services and resources, we can help an adult learner step up onto the path of lifelong learning.

Why be relevant?

Find and Retain
Relevance is a natural avenue to connect with and retain learners. Often adults need to see the value in our organization and staff before they find value in learning. Relevant programs and resources can relieve some burdens carried by learners while providing opportunities for hesitant adults to get to know their local CALP and become comfortable with the space and the people. For someone with a negative school experience, stepping into a traditional-looking learning setting might be overwhelming. But stepping into a familiar building with familiar faces is not.

In our experience, adult learners who see our learning center as more than a classroom tend to engage in learning with greater duration and intensity.

Relevant support and resources available at, or through, a local learning center demonstrate that foundational skills are life skills. A foundational skill gap might lead an adult to drop in for help understanding an important document. Conscientious program staff can use this opportunity for informal literacy assessment and then provide information on available learning opportunities. The same is true for Community Capacity Building activities and general interest programs.

Relevance creates the bridge from Learner Supports and Community Capacity Building to outcome-specific Literacy and Foundational Learning. It's a springboard to further learning!

Adult Learning Principles
Relevance carries into Literacy and Foundational Learning. Knowles' principles of Adult Learning (loosely) state that adults:

- Need to know why they should learn (pragmatic motivation)
- Learn through experience (task-oriented) and use prior experience
- Want learning to be immediately **relevant** to their lives and work

Relevance is the key to all these principles! Meaningful programs utilize real-life, applicable materials in a relatable context to build skills. Using an evidence-based structured literacy or numeracy program is essential to effective skill instruction. Incorporating relevant material (like a letter from their child's school) into that instruction makes the skill immediately applicable and demonstrates how integral these skills are to everyday life.

Without relevance, learning is on our terms. Relevance demonstrates that we are all peers in learning. Community learning centers offer more than 'just' traditional learning. They offer a sense of belonging and affirm the value of those who step through the doors. It invites adults to take ownership of their learning and the learning space.

Relevance is seeing the learner. It's meeting people where they are and with the life circumstances they bring; not expecting people to meet external expectations before they engage in learning.

Staff retention
Finally, being relevant is good for staff. Facing the complex burdens carried by adult learners is often overwhelming and discouraging. Addressing foundational skill gaps while basic needs go unmet can feel futile. Success in learning takes time and is achieved in small, hard-won victories. Meanwhile, the unrelenting parade of systemic issues, like food and housing insecurity, poverty, unemployment and mental health issues, marches steadily. Many staff experience compassion fatigue and burnout, resulting in high staff turnover. Providing relevant, direct support for learners is practical and rewarding. It's something we can *do*; it's active. Outcomes are usually seen quickly. The tangibility of meeting immediate needs can provide some buffer for staff from compassion fatigue and burnout.

How to be Relevant

A vibrant, effective learning center allows community relevance to drive strategic planning. It shapes partnerships and informs complementary funding options.

Being relevant doesn't just happen. It requires intentionality which costs time and resources. These are in short supply for most community organizations. Fortunately, relevance is not a stand-alone element. Incorporate relevance into the program and strategic planning already going on. Know your learners (or those who you hope will become learners), know your community and know the resources and gaps. Be familiar with the unique local social and physical landscape. Then use that knowledge to create relevance.

A great place to start is to consider who is, and who isn't, coming through your doors.

Who are your current learners?

- Do they think their learning center is relevant? (Ask them!)
- Are there common characteristics, strengths or barriers?
- How did they first engage with the learning center? What drew them in the door?
- When and where *do* they engage in learning?
  - » Daytimes, evenings, weekends?
  - » At the learning center or a partner space? Maybe at work or a residential facility?
- Who remains engaged and who does not?

Who is missing? What about adults with foundational skills gaps whose faces you do not know?

- Who are they?
- Are there some common aspects or barriers you can identify?
- What local services do they access? And what draws them there?

Identify ways to create or increase relevance and invite learners to be actively involved in creating and maintaining relevance.

Relevance in our community

We create and maintain relevance to adult learners in our community.

Here are some of the things we do:

We share the use of our space with other nonprofit organizations to offer direct, in-person services locally. Through us, the community has access to previously unavailable relevant employment services, domestic violence

counselling and services for adults with diverse abilities.

Our collaborative relationship with the local Seniors Outreach is so close that many of our senior adult learners do not realize that we are separate organizations! Referrals regularly go back and forth, and our digital program is mobile so that older adults are not barriered from foundational digital learning because of their health or inability to drive. Relevant learning happens on their own devices in their own home.

Our community has no public laundry facilities and low-income housing has no on-site laundry. Adults who lack clean clothes aren't eager to engage in learning. We obtained a small grant to install a washer/dryer in our learning center and operate it by cost recovery. There is a small fee but some give volunteer hours in exchange (fostering ownership in our learning center). Some learners do their laundry during their tutoring sessions.

Lunch With Friends is a local initiative stemming from common challenges that we and our local mental health nurses were observing in vulnerable adults accessing our respective services, particularly after the pandemic (social isolation, high unemployment, food insecurity and skill gaps). We invited foundational learners to partner with us as volunteers. We provide skill training: Food Safe certification, numeracy through basic budgeting and recipe scaling, digital skills to set up Gmail and Google Drive, social media promotion and literacy skills for meeting notes, posters and written updates. From this seed grew an independent nonprofit, run solely by volunteers. So many people in the community benefit from nutritious food, social connection, opportunity to give back and skills training. Our learning center remains engaged through nonprofit mentorship and ongoing skills training. It is a unique privilege to equip community members to make a positive impact in their community!

We offer provincially funded newcomer settlement and integration services. This funding increases our relevance to newcomers to Canada and provides opportunities for foundational learning within a directly relevant context. Navigating a new culture, understanding immigration policies and processes and completing forms require basic literacy and often foundational digital skills. We often complete forms with the newcomer, taking the time to embed ELL literacy instruction. Newcomers who receive settlement services often go on to register in LFL programming.

How does your learning center incorporate relevance? ◇

1 https://www.etymonline.com/word/relevant

Strategic Conversation

strengths-based
planning for learning
hopeful

Pathways to High School Graduation

SUBMITTED BY **Odette Lloyd**

At our Learning Centre in Whitecourt, we often meet adult learners who want to complete their high school diploma or get an equivalency like the Canadian Adult Education Credential (CAEC).

These learners find us in different ways. Some hear about us from friends, coworkers or family members. Others find us online through Google searches or social media. Most come to us by way of direct referrals from employment agencies, community organizations and our local high schools.

Every learner who walks through our doors brings a unique story, a personal goal and hopes for their future. Building trust, being curious and having strategic conversations, we can help them find the pathway that's right for them and build a plan that will get them there.

Understanding the Pathways to High School Completion

There's no single path to finishing high school as an adult. That's why it's important for learners to understand their options so they can choose the route that will work best for their life and future goals. That means we, as CALP staff, need to have a good understanding of the possible pathways.

- **Traditional High School Diploma**
  This is the same diploma many people earn by completing "regular" high school. Some adults choose this path to graduation, but this can often be challenging. It can be costly and time-consuming to meet the Alberta High School Diploma requirements of having at least 100 credits, including specific core courses.
- **High School Equivalency Diploma**
  Like the Alberta High School Diploma, learners need 100 credits to earn their Equivalency Diploma. Adult learners who choose this route may be able to earn credit for adult education taken outside of high school, for things like reading or for their life experience, by applying to their high school principal.* That said, a minimum of 60 credits must be earned through classroom instruction, including taking specific core courses. *Colleges offering Academic Upgrading are also "high schools" and will have a person designated as Principal.
- **Canadian Adult Education Credential (CAEC)**
  The CAEC is the Canadian high school equivalency option, which has replaced the GED here in Alberta. The CAEC is a series of five tests (reading, writing, math, science and social studies). Depending on the end goal for a learner, this route can be one of the more affordable and faster options, while providing a lot of flexibility.

The Government of Alberta has much more detailed information about each of these pathways on their website at *https://www.alberta.ca/academic-upgrading-if-you-are-20-or-older*

Choosing the best option all depends on the learner's specific goals.

That is where our "Strategic Conversations" come in.

The First Conversation:

When learners first connect with us about getting their High School Diploma, we always start with a very casual meeting with them. The first conversation is really more of a coffee date than an intake interview, where we can start to get to know each other a bit better. These friendly chats are key to helping us understand the learner's goals, strengths and gaps.

It's not uncommon for a learner to come to us and say, "So-and-so told me I need to get my GED." Getting their CAEC might be a great option for them, but sometimes a little gentle exploration with the learner might lead us down a different path that will better support their future plans and goals.

Our first conversations focus on building a relationship and getting to know more about an adult's past learning experience and future goals. We ask kind and curious questions like:

- **How long ago was the last time you were in a structured school or training program?**
- **What did you like the most about when you were in the K-12 system?**
  - » Learners sometimes surprise themselves when they tell us about something they enjoyed at school. We leave it open-ended at first, but if they struggle to come up with something positive, we may prompt them with suggestions like thinking about the social aspects, maybe they loved a "less academic" course like Shop or PE, or maybe they had a really cool play structure at their elementary school!
- **Did you ever have a favourite teacher? What did you like about them?**
  - » Even learners who didn't enjoy school can usually recall one adult in the school system who had a positive impact on them. We like to work these pieces into our initial conversations so that even someone who struggled or had a negative experience in school will have some positive associations with their first connections to our program.
- **Do you want to get your High School Diploma for work, to go to post-secondary or is it more about personal satisfaction?**
  - » Finding this out early helps us make better recommendations or suggestions to learners. As we'll discuss, different end goals can often take very different roads.

Digging Deeper: Exploring Strengths, Gaps and Supports

Now we have an idea of what the learner wants to accomplish and why. So now we will build on the trust we have established to explore with them to identify strengths, and see where we can help them build their skills or connect them to community supports to reduce any barriers that might create roadblocks (or even little speed bumps) on their road to success.

Initially, this begins as a conversation. Building on the trust relationship we are intentionally cultivating, we encourage learners to reflect first on their strengths. We talk about "hard" skills, like reading, writing and math, and we discuss "soft" skills like skills for learning, including study skills, time management and more.

This is where more curious questions come into play. For example:

- **What's one new thing you learned or learned to do this month?**
  - » Some learners may need prompting, but with a little help they can always come up with at least one new skill or fact that they have learned recently. This is important to help them build confidence and see themselves as successful learners.

    One single mother who came to our program believed she was "terrible at math." But when we talked, we learned she was managing the household budget for rent, bills and groceries, and often helped her young children with homework. She already had much stronger math skills than she thought.

- **What helps you learn something new? It might be different for everyone. Do you like just trying it on your own, talking it over with someone, watching someone else do it?**

    A young shop hand wanted to get his high school diploma so he could get promoted but struggled with writing. After trying a few short, low-pressure writing activities, we saw he did well when he spoke ideas out loud first. So we added voice planning into his writing practice.

In some instances, we do conduct skills assessments, though we don't generally do it on the same day as our initial meeting. We will book a time on another day for them to come in. We assure them that the paper-based assessments we use will remain confidential, just between us and them. We explain that this is how we can figure out where we are starting from, so we can make a great plan. Completing the assessments separately gives learners the opportunity to prepare and focus on the task at hand, without feeling overwhelmed by any of the conversations we have had so far. In our experience this goes a long way to alleviate any test anxiety, as we have already established a relationship and provided them the time and space to do their best on the "hard" skills assessments. Regardless of what skill level we assess, we follow up with them to reinforce that they already know lots of things and bring lots of skills to the table. We assure them that we will help them make a plan to meet their goal, and we will stick with them throughout the entire process.

"I love that when I come here, I never feel judged for not knowing something."

Making the Plan: A Roadmap for Success

Once we know the goal and some of the learner's strengths and skills gaps, we help the learner choose the pathway to high school completion or further learning that makes the most sense in their own individual circumstances. We've got the big goal and the "why", so next we move on to the "what" and the "how".

Based on an individual learner's goals, here are some considerations when discussing the "what" and the "how":

- **Employment and Employability:**
  Generally speaking, most employers now require a minimum of a High School Equivalency Diploma for the educational requirements of any positions they are recruiting for. For many adult learners, the CAEC is an ideal solution for them if finding work, or finding better work, is the main goal. It is generally much more affordable than upgrading or achieving a traditional diploma. Based on a learner's skill level, it can also be quite fast to complete.

- **Trades Entrance or Apprenticeship:**
  Regulated trades in Alberta are grouped into categories or "clusters", with each group having different entrance requirements. For example, Group A Trades require Math 10-3, while Group B Trades have a minimum math requirement of Math 20-3. If an adult learner doesn't meet the minimum academic requirements, they can either complete their CAEC or they can challenge the Trades Entrance Exam at no cost. Learn more about Trades Entrance requirements at *https://tradesecrets.alberta.ca/get-started/become-an-apprentice/eligibility-and-entrance-requirements/*.

- **Post-Secondary Pathways:**
  Because our CALP is part of NorQuest College, we also speak to a lot of learners who want to pursue formal post-secondary at NorQuest or another college or university. Many adult learners think that if they did not finish high school, they will have to complete a diploma before they can even consider a college education. The good news is that there are other options:
  - » **Academic Upgrading:** Most post-secondary programs do have academic requirements that include specific courses and minimum grades, but these can be achieved by taking courses through academic upgrading, or in some instances by challenging a diploma exam.
  - » **Placement testing:** Many colleges also offer placement testing to mature students who may not have the required credits or marks from high school. In Alberta, Accuplacer is commonly used in the college system. Learners can try practice assessments online at *https://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/students/prepare-for-accuplacer/practice* (free account required).
  - » **Open Entry:** This is becoming more common among post-secondaries. Open Entry, or Open Admissions, can be a pathway for adult learners who are missing credits, courses or don't meet English Language Proficiency requirements. Essentially, this pathway is when a post-secondary allows you to start your studies before you have met the standard requirements. (Here's how it works at NorQuest *https://www.norquest.ca/programs-and-courses/learning-at-norquest/open-admissions-pathways/*)
  - » **Other considerations:** Learners should check with the institution offering the program they would like to take to see if there are any special considerations that may help them (i.e. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition—PLAR—for mature students, supports or programs for Indigenous, Métis, Inuit participation, etc.)

Once we have explored the different pathways, including the credentials and opportunities they lead to, we work closely with each individual learner to co-create a personalized learning plan. They lead the process, and we offer suggestions, structure and tools.

Here are a few examples of how plans come together:

- A **retail worker** told us, "I want to work in Early Learning or get a job as an Educational Assistant, but I barely passed English in High School." With her clear goal, we focused her plan on upgrading her mark in English 30. This is a common entry requirement for the college programs she is investigating. She told us that she loves reading for fun, and

writes a blog, so felt confident that she could get a good grade, but just didn't know how to get started. We helped her apply to the Academic Upgrading program at the College and connected her with the Student Navigator team for help identifying and applying for potential funding opportunities.

- An **underemployed man** in his late 30s wanted to start a trades apprenticeship, but needed to improve his reading comprehension to pass the entrance exam, and to be successful in the classroom components of his apprenticeship. His plan included working one-on-one with a tutor, focusing on reading and other document use skills based on trades-related materials like safety manuals and diagrams to keep things practical.

- A **retiree** shared with us that she had left high school in Grade 9 and always wished she had finished. Her personal satisfaction was the driving force. We talked about the differences between getting a High School Diploma or getting her CAEC. Although she didn't finish high school, she felt her reading, writing and math were all pretty strong, based on the skills she gained through her years of work experience. She decided to write the English Reading, English Writing and Math CAEC exams right away, and then study for Science and Social Studies, to prepare to write those exams a few weeks later.

Once we have a solid plan, we also build in **backup plans.** Life throws curveballs, so if someone's job schedule changes or a family member gets sick, we adjust timelines together. Flexibility is key.

Identifying Supports

Another key part of these strategic conversations is figuring out what kind of supports a learner may need as they pursue their goal:

- Information about any financial supports that may (or may not) be available for the different routes to High School completion and an individual's particular circumstances
- How they would like us to support and encourage them along the way
- Referrals to other services such as social services, government support programs, health or mental health supports, etc.

Continuing the Conversation: Adapting Support Over Time

As learners move forward, we check in regularly. Their needs change, and we stay with them every step of the way.

Some learners just need a little direction and a few resources. Once they have a plan, they work confidently on their own.

> *A person wanted to upgrade their math to get into a Polytechnic program. We provided him with some workbooks to use at home. He emailed us with one question and completed the materials in just three weeks. He told us, "I didn't need much help—just someone to show me where to start." He was able to challenge the diploma exam for Math 30 and improve his grade from high school to meet the entrance requirement for his chosen trade.*

Other learners come to us with more complex needs. They may be dealing with juggling their job, family, financial stress or other barriers. We work with them to identify supports in our community that are available to them, and make direct connections and referrals where appropriate.

A learner was struggling to manage balancing her job with an unpredictable shift schedule, three kids at home and her partner working out of town for long stretches. She wanted to earn her CAEC fast so she could get a better job. She came in for weekly tutoring, used paper-based lessons and workbooks independently at home, and completed the online CAEC practice tests once the kids were in bed. We love getting text messages from her with updates like "I aced that one!"

Celebrating Success

Success isn't always just about getting a diploma or passing a test.

We ask:

- Did the learner move closer to their goal?
- Did they gain a new skill or learning habit?
- Do they believe in their ability to learn?

We help learners recognize their own progress and successes along the way. We celebrate all the wins, both large and small. It might be:

- Finishing a workbook
- Sticking with a study plan
- Asking for help
- Trying again after a setback

"I feel like I'm finally moving forward instead of standing still."

Sometimes learners change direction—what they thought they needed may shift as we explore new possibilities. And that's okay. Our role isn't to tell them what to do; it's to guide, support and walk beside them on their learning journey. Whether someone earns their High School Diploma, gets their CAEC, completes upgrading to start a post-secondary program, or simply builds confidence and new skills, we call that a win! ◇

Note: learners and quotations are composites of folks we have supported here in Whitecourt over the last few years.

I'm a download

Adult Learner Pathways to High School Graduation

Traditional High School Diploma (100 credits)	High School Equivalency Diploma (100 credits)	Canadian Adult Education Credential (5 exams)
• English 30-1 or 30-2 • Social 30-1 or 30-2 • Math 20-1 or 20-2 • ANY 20-level Science • 3 credits in Phys Ed • 10 credits in Career and Technology Studies, Arts, Languages, Phys Ed, or Apprentice • 10 credits in any other 30-level courses	• English 30-1 or 30-2 • ANY Math (5 credits) • ANY Science (3 or 5 credits) • One additional 30-level course • A minimum of 60 credits must be obtained through classroom instruction	• English Writing test • English Reading test • Social Studies test • Science test • Math test
Adult learners can take any high school course they wish, but they are not funded through Alberta Education like most students under the age of 18. Whether they have completed prerequisite courses or not, an adult learner who receives credit for a course automatically gets credit for any prerequisite courses.	Adult learners may qualify for a high school equivalency diploma if they went to high school in Alberta and already have some credits accumulated from that time. In addition to the requirements listed above, a Principal can assign up to 15 extra credits for: • Adult education courses • Age credits • Travel credits • Reading credits	CAEC exams are available through testing centres approved by Alberta Education. Fees for the exams are set by each testing centre, so they do vary depending on where a learner writes. Adult learners may also request that they take the same five CAEC exams in French.

Community Adult Learning Program

NORQUEST COLLEGE

Strategic Conversation

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learner-centred
establishing trust
relational

Reclaiming the Self: Why Self-Concept Is the Hidden Heart of Adult Learning

SUBMITTED BY **Heidi Grogan**

It is Tuesday at 7:00 p.m., and the last of fourteen adults fits herself into a desk meant for eighth graders. At coffee break, she tells us that her mother said, in front of her little girl, "I'm not sure why you think you'll pass your GED—you're not any smarter now than when you were her (looking at her daughter) age."

We've seen this again and again. Adults arrive at learning programs with goals—but also with stories about who they are and what they are capable of. Silent, limiting beliefs shaped by trauma, poverty, early education or years of internalized discouragement. These beliefs shape self-concept—and in turn, self-concept quietly shapes everything else.

Self-concept is invisible, but pivotal. It influences persistence, engagement, risk-taking and whether learners even believe success is possible. It often exists beneath the surface of test scores or attendance records. But for many adult learners, reclaiming a more compassionate and empowered sense of self is at the core of the learning journey.

More Than Content

Adults return to learning with more than literacy needs or employment goals—they bring stories formed in childhood classrooms or homes where learning wasn't safe. Sometimes those stories sound like: "I'm not good at math." "I'm too old for this." "This isn't for people like me."

Self-concept refers to the beliefs we hold about who we are. It forms early, is shaped by our environment and is deeply emotional. While adult learning theories—from Knowles to Mezirow—speak to the self-directed nature of adult learners, they don't always account for what happens when the very self meant to direct and motivate has been fractured by years of self-doubt. I nerd out on research a bit, because to me, staying curious beyond what I already know is one way of honouring the adults brave enough to return to learning… to squeeze into that grade 8 desk, so to speak.

The full studies are worth checking out, but highlights (see references at the end of this article) have practical application to taking on the challenge of helping learners to shift a self-concept that is often just plain mean. I believe that we can do hard things when people are kind and that kindness includes the words we say to ourselves.

Practitioners as Midwives

While we teach skills, we are also—perhaps more importantly—midwives of identity. The practitioners who have most inspired me know this. These mentor-worthy practitioners show up with care and curiosity. They intuitively understand that shame and self-concept sit beside their learners. They seem to say: "Ahem… might we pause?" to the bullying inner narratives that whisper "you can't" or "you don't belong in this course".

These practitioners create conditions for success that stretch limiting beliefs. They name brilliance out loud. They model vulnerability. They normalize mistakes as part of learning. They embed creativity and self-reflection into the process. And always, they convey a belief that something good is possible.

I've learned from them that the smallest acts—a shared laugh, a question asked with genuine curiosity, a music playlist that resonates at the start of class—can serve as powerful tools for transformation. These moments help adults shift from survival mode to a mindset where growth is possible.

Lyn Tett's work in adult literacy shows how learning environments can support identity reconstruction—but not through content alone. Rather, through connection, affirmation and repeated invitations to see oneself differently. Zacharakis reminds us that when adults re-engage with learning after trauma, it is often the emotional and relational elements—not just the academic ones—that make persistence possible.

What We Might Miss

I once worked with a learner who was on track to complete her life skills program and start the GED preparation classes she'd registered for. This, after a year of consistent effort. And then, the day before her final day in program, she quit.

At the time, I thought it was about relapse and addiction. I now wonder: was it that success didn't align with her view of herself, and therefore made her feel afraid? Was there a silent (to staff) panic at the threshold of rewriting her story? Did I miss the signs? Was I focused on outcomes more than internal shifts?

It makes me wonder how often we, as practitioners, unconsciously reinforce the very narratives our programs are meant to disrupt. In our urgency to meet benchmarks, do we overlook the fragile ground learners are walking as they risk becoming someone new?

I wonder if we should, alongside attendance and curriculum goals, also track our own curiosity?

Practicing Curiosity

I remember a GED learner whose hoodie never came off. He sat along the wall, silent, often late.

In time, that learner did change the view he had of himself. I am grateful he shared what his internal narrative was. It was a major learning moment for me.

Behaviour is a clue, not a conclusion. But so often we interpret it otherwise. My first response isn't always curiosity. Sometimes it's fatigue. Or judgment. Or fear that I don't know how to help. But what if, instead of reacting, we asked: "What might be unfolding here?"

Curiosity is the opposite of judgment. It invites connection. And in that space, transformation becomes possible.

Supporting Shifts in Self-Concept

Self-concept isn't shifted through one motivational pep talk. It's re-formed slowly, in community, under the right conditions.

Here are a few practices I've learned or borrowed from others that support this transformation:

- **Create emotionally safe environments.** Adult learners need predictability and dignity. Small things matter—room setup, welcome rituals, how we start class.
- **Design for success.** Create opportunities to "catch someone being brilliant." Say it aloud. Let them hear it.
- **Model learning edges.** When we admit what we're still learning, we create space for learners to do the same.
- **Reframe failure.** Treat mistakes as data, not proof of inadequacy. Ask reflective questions instead of offering correction.
- **Use music and metaphor.** Songs like "Rise Up" by Andra Day or "Perfect" by Pink can bypass resistance and invite resonance. Invite the learners to make playlists, share songs that relate to their self-narrative and bring themselves into the room through music.
- **Help learners feel seen.** Identity shifts are emotionally disruptive. We can normalize that—in so doing, prepare learners to anticipate and understand that the discomfort is actually a good thing.

In the end, what I've learned is that we are not only practitioners. We are witnesses. Midwives. Mirrors.

Our work is not only about learning—it is about transformation. And transformation begins with the self.

Let us be the kind of educators who do not only see the learners in front of us—but help them see themselves anew. ◇

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A Call to Reflection

Think of a learner who surprised you—who grew in ways you didn't expect.

What helped that shift happen?

What parts of your own self-concept shape how you teach, support or respond to struggle?

What stories about "good teaching" or "engaged learning" might need revising?

How might naming your own quiet revolutions make you more available to hold space for others?

The Power We Bring: Positionality and the First Steps of Learning

SUBMITTED BY **Rochelle Galeski**

In the world of adult foundational learning, we often speak about creating safe spaces. Yet, how often do we push further into the concept of safe spaces that examine the deeper currents of power dynamics and positionality that shape those spaces?

The power we carry as CALP staff is not neutral because our positionality carries weight, because social identities affect access, and inequities are often enforced when we ignore power. Positionality is a profoundly relational and political reality, which begins with an honest look at ourselves.

Positionality refers to the awareness and acknowledgment of how facilitators, coordinators, volunteers and learning advocates' social identity, background, power and lived experiences influence our relationships with learners and the learning environment.

In a community-based setting, positionality actively shapes how:

- safe learners feel
- much trust learners place in the programs we offer
- willing learners are to engage, especially if they've had negative past experiences with structured systems

In small communities, anonymity is rare. CALP staff are not just the face of the program; they often are the program. As a result, their history, affiliations and reputation will precede them. Learners often do not encounter a blank slate when they interact with a CALP; they enter an existing community dynamic shaped by memory, relationships and unspoken rules.

The theory of psychological safety described by Amy Edmondson in The Fearless Organization is whether an individual feels safe enough to be seen, to fail and to belong. Even so, psychological safety begins long before the learner is seen, is safe to fail and feels like they belong. A learner's first step is not into our spaces, it is into a relational web of power, reputation and history that you or a CALP holds. In many cases, that history includes past educational harm or exclusion. It also includes the lived experiences of CALP providers, many of whom carry their own stories of returning to learning, facing systemic barriers or navigating life in rural and marginalized communities. This

shared history can be a bridge, if acknowledged with humility or a barrier, if left unexplored. Psychological safety grows when facilitators not only recognize their positionality but also actively build trust through transparency, empathy and genuine respect.

This is why, to explore and further investigate our power and positionality, we ask ourselves hard but necessary questions: What does a learner see when they see me? Am I connected to systems or institutions that have caused harm? Do I hold identities or affiliations that may trigger distrust or discomfort? In communities where personal histories and reputations often speak louder than professional roles, the answers to these questions matter more than any intake form because intake and assessment are not neutral; they are relational.

Perceived reputation is not formed the moment someone becomes a CALP provider, it often lives in the community's memory, shaped by family name, past roles, social circles or affiliations, long before the first class is ever offered; it exists as a thread in the story of someone's life, woven through relationships and histories that learners may carry with them.

Whether we intend to or not, we carry identities that influence how learners experience our programs. In communities and all human relationships, we come to know that perception doesn't always equal truth. Sometimes what others believe about us isn't accurate and the stories people carry about us may not reflect who we truly are or the full journey we've taken. Even so, creating safety starts with the integrity and self-awareness we bring daily to our work and in our lives.

As Marie Battiste argues in Decolonizing Education, educators must interrogate how their roles and identities intersect with colonial and systemic power. Paulo Freire, too, reminds us in Pedagogy of the Oppressed that education is never neutral; it either reinforces power structures or works to dismantle them.

Our CALP aims to dismantle the rigid structures of traditional education by creating informal, welcoming spaces where learning feels accessible, relational and rooted in relevancy. This demands deep self-inquiry and institutional courage, a willingness to ask: Who isn't here and why? What barriers have we unintentionally upheld? Are we truly neutral? Should we be? Do we have the courage to step aside when we are not the right person to lead? To do this work well, we must get comfortable sitting with uncomfortable questions that challenge our assumptions, surface power dynamics and ask us to reflect honestly on how our presence shapes the learning space. As Brené Brown writes in Dare to Lead, "You can choose courage, or you can choose comfort. You cannot have both."

Safety then involves accountability, humility and shared leadership. It may look like bringing in community navigators, elders or cultural liaisons when our presence is not enough. It may involve co-leading with individuals who hold lived experience. It may mean creating anonymous feedback mechanisms, so learners can speak the truth without fear. It most certainly means making space for repair when we get it wrong because in this work, we will.

This self-inquiry and institutional courage ask that CALP organizations embed inquiry into their strategic plans, their team development and

their community partnerships. As David Peter Stroh argues in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, meaningful transformation requires us to see our programs not in isolation, but as part of larger ecosystems of trust, power and healing.

As many of us know, foundational learning demands not only the growth of our programs but the transformation of ourselves. When we show up with humility and honesty by naming our power and working to share it, we create the conditions where real learning can take root, not just for our learners, but for ourselves.

Literacy has strong roots in liberation from oppression. Just as learners find liberation in spaces where they are no longer defined by past failures, we too can be liberated from the stories we've carried, free to show up with humility, authenticity and the courage to grow alongside learners. We do this through self-inquiry and by sharing power in ways that honour both our role and learner agency. ◇

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How to Power Map as a CALP Provider: 10 Practical Tips for Reflecting on Your Positionality

Understanding your positionality is a strategic act of community accountability. Power mapping helps CALP providers reflect on the visible and invisible ways they carry power, authority and influence in a community.

Here are ten steps to guide your self-inquiry:

Start with Your Story
Begin by writing down how you arrived in your role. Consider your education, life experiences, affiliations and social identity. What aspects of your identity are visible to others, and which remain hidden?

Name Your Roles
List the formal and informal roles you hold in the community, past and present. Have you worked in justice, child welfare, healthcare or education? Have you served on boards or faith-based organizations? These roles carry meaning, whether you intend them to or not.

Identify Your Circles of Influence
Map out your professional and social connections. Who do you have direct access to? Who listens to you? Whose decisions do you influence (even informally)? Visualize your influence outward in circles.

Ask: Who Might See Me as Unsafe?
This is hard, but essential. Think about which community members or groups might view you as part of a system that has caused harm. This might include people with lived experience in poverty, addiction, incarceration, racism or colonization.

Map Your Silences
What topics do you avoid or feel unprepared to engage with? Where are you silent out of fear, discomfort or a desire to "stay neutral"? Power often hides in silence.

Scan for Missing Voices
Look around your programs. Who isn't attending? Which community members are underrepresented or disengaged? Ask what barriers, relational, cultural or historical, might be contributing.

Examine How You're Perceived
Ask for honest feedback. Invite a trusted peer or community member to share what others may see in you, your strengths and your blind spots. This takes courage, but it opens the door to trust.

Reflect on Your Defaults
In moments of tension or discomfort, how do you lead? Do you retreat into policy? Assert authority? Stay quiet? Your default response under pressure often reveals where your internalized power sits.

Practice Stepping Back
Power sharing means making space. Is there someone in your community better suited to lead certain conversations, an Elder, a youth leader, a cultural liaison? Be willing to step back and co-create.

Repeat Often, Not Once
Power mapping is not a one-and-done activity. Revisit your map quarterly or during planning cycles. As your roles evolve, so will the way your power shows up in the room.

SUBMITTED BY **Rochelle Galeski**

Adaptive Learning: A Game-Changer in Adult Literacy

SUBMITTED BY **Kristin Dmytriw**

So many times, I reached the end of a program session full of reflections—thinking about what I would change, what I would keep and what I would do differently next time to make the program even better. That used to excite me—until one day it didn't.

I realized that while I was planning for a better "next time," my past learners had already walked out the door. They were never going to experience the impact of those improvements. That moment changed everything for me. I asked myself: *What if I didn't wait? What if I had the tools and the insight to make those changes while the learning was happening, in real time and for each learner?*

That is when I understood the true meaning—and power—of adaptive learning. It's not about next time, it's about right now. It's about making every moment matter, every learner seen and heard, and every experience meaningful. Because when we adapt in the moment, we don't just change programs, we change lives.

Before I go any further, let me offer a little disclaimer: I am not an expert on the Adaptive Learning Approach, not even close. What I am is a "passionate practicer" of it. When I first started to explore adaptive learning, I was terrified of abandoning the program plans I had so carefully prepared. But with practice, patience and a lot of open communication with my learners, I began to see that adaptive learning isn't something to fear—it's an opportunity. A big one. Over time, I've shifted my mindset to see it as not just useful but truly transformative. That's why I am so excited to share with you why the Adaptive Learning Approach is, quite simply, a game changer.

For years, most programming has leaned on structured lesson plans and carefully built curriculums. These are often designed with the best intentions: to provide a roadmap, to give practitioners direction and to ensure progress from one skill to the next. As practitioners, though, we know that adults do not come to our

programs as blank slates. They arrive with rich life experiences, responsibilities and dreams—alongside very specific and urgent needs. A prescriptive, one-size-fits-all approach rarely fits anyone.

That realization can be uncomfortable - for new and even experienced practitioners. When you've been trained to deliver a set program, it can feel risky to let go of the safety of a prepared plan. But adaptive learning doesn't mean throwing out all your plans. In fact, I always come into a session with a framework—a structure that can be stretched, bent and reshaped depending on the learners in the room. It gives me direction, but not rigidity. Think of it as a compass: it provides you with direction while allowing your learners to create their own paths.

It may seem unrealistic to expect practitioners to come to programs prepared to support multiple learning paths. But here's the key: adaptive learning does not mean preparing ten different activities for ten different learners. That's impossible, and it would burn out even the most committed practitioner. Instead, it's about designing one activity that can be done ten different ways.

For example, the same reading passage might be used by one learner to practice sounding out words, by another to build vocabulary, by another to write a response and by the whole group to spark discussion. One task, with slight adaptations, can support many pathways. This not only makes planning sustainable for practitioners, but it also models for learners the idea that there are multiple ways to approach a challenge. Showing them that their way is valid because it's authentic to them and reflects their learning needs.

Another critical part of adaptive learning is constant, consistent and diverse assessment of each learner. We are always observing, checking for understanding, gauging comfort levels and noticing both engagement or disengagement. We're tuning into everything learners are not saying, not sharing, or perhaps not yet able to express. I call these *Moments to Adapt.*

These are the sticky moments of uncertainty, disengagement, discomfort or that general feeling of "ick." They're the moments we sometimes miss—or, if we notice them, we sometimes push through them to keep the group "on track". Or, like I used to do, we jot down a note to fix it next time.

But here's the aha: next time is not good enough. These moments must be addressed now. When a moment of "ick" shows up, the program pauses. Together, we acknowledge the discomfort, talk it through and adapt before moving forward. Then we try again.

Yes, this can feel messy. It can feel hard. Trust me—I struggled with it too. But then I realized something critical: the struggle lessened when I started telling my learners about it.

When I began explaining what adaptive learning is—why I use this approach and how my goal is to create customized learning just for them—something shifted. I invited learners to help me identify those "ick" moments. Suddenly, they were not just participants; they were partners. They became more reflective about how they learn best and more willing to voice when something wasn't working. It wasn't just me scanning the room for signs of discomfort—it became a shared responsibility to co-create the learning experience.

And honestly, one of the most exciting things I've noticed about adaptive learning is how it changes the role of the learners themselves. They take the lead in their own learning. They are excited about their goals, choose materials that mean something to them, and point out what's most meaningful for them and the group. This shift doesn't just build confidence, motivation and ownership—it helps create a safe, trusting and open environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks, sharing ideas and supporting each other. Over time, these programs become more than just learning spaces—they become communities of peers, friends and collaborators, engaged in learning together in a way that feels personal and meaningful.

Another common misconception is that adaptive learning only works in one-on-one sessions. The truth is, it actually thrives in group programming. You might worry that managing multiple learners at once would be chaotic, but that's where the magic happens. Groups bring energy, ideas and perspectives that you could never plan for on your own.

One learner's question about filling out a form can spark a discussion that helps three others. A small struggle with reading a recipe can turn into a teachable moment for the whole group. Someone figuring out a bus schedule might inspire new strategies for everyone. In this way, learners are constantly learning from each other as much as from you. And the result? A vibrant, engaged and supportive learning community where everyone feels seen, heard and capable.

Adaptive learning is more than just a strategy—it's a mindset. It asks us to embrace uncertainty, to see "ick" moments not as failures but as opportunities, to invite learners into the process, and to trust that when we adapt in real time, the learning deepens.

The benefits extend far beyond our learners. Practitioners experience tremendous growth in both mindset and practice. They become more skilled at reading the room, interpreting learner needs in the moment and adjusting strategies in real time. This supports inclusion and accessibility, reaching learners with diverse backgrounds, abilities and experiences, while also strengthening engagement and retention. Participants feel seen, valued and invested. Practitioners gain back precious time to focus on relationships, reflection and responsiveness—all while achieving strong, often improved, learning outcomes.

The ripple effect extends to the organization and the wider community as well. Adaptive programs generate richer insights about what truly works, what learners need and how offerings can evolve. This creates more agile, learner-centred organizations, better equipped to meet community needs and demonstrate meaningful impact. In short, adopting an adaptive learning mindset doesn't just transform individual learners—it transforms facilitators, teams, programs and the communities they serve.

That's what makes this approach so exciting: it's not just a set of techniques, it's a way of seeing learning, people and programs differently. It reminds us that every learner matters, every moment counts and every experience is an opportunity to make learning meaningful. For anyone stepping into adult literacy—new practitioners, seasoned facilitators or entire organizations—the invitation is the same: embrace adaptive learning, trust the process and watch how it transforms not just the learners in your room, but your entire learning community. ◇

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Adaptive Learning Practitioner Checklist

Before the Session:

- ☐ Identify 1-2 core learning objectives for the session and develop your framework or compass.
- ☐ Prepare at least one or two alternate pathways (e.g., extra challenge task, remedial resource).
- ☐ Plan for your check-in points (quick assessments, discussions, polls, observations).
- ☐ Set up choices for learners (different activities, formats or sequences).
- ☐ Get familiar with any tech tools you'll be using (keep it simple!).
- ☐ Choose activities with varying levels of complexity.

During the Session:

- ☐ Explain Adaptive Learning with your learners, include them in this process! Let them ask questions and understand the "why" and "how".
- ☐ Observe learner engagement and participation actively.
- ☐ Listen for clues about confusion, excitement or boredom.
- ☐ Offer choices when possible ("Would you like to do this or this next?")
- ☐ Give immediate feedback—quick, specific and encouraging.
- ☐ Adapt in small ways—change pacing, groupings or activities if needed.
- ☐ Identify Moments of 'Ick' or Moments to Adapt—change pacing, groupings or activities if needed. Chat about these moments with the group.

After the Session:

- ☐ Reflect: What went well?
- ☐ Reflect: Where did learners respond best?
- ☐ Reflect: What could I adjust next time?
- ☐ Gather quick feedback from learners if possible (even 2-3 sentence reflections).
- ☐ Write down one thing you'll try differently in the next session.

Quick Reminder:

You don't have to adapt everything for everyone all the time.

Focus on small, responsive moves that build learner confidence and progress.

Explain Adaptive Learning to your learners and involve them in the process.

SUBMITTED BY **Kristin Dmytriw**

Strategic Conversation

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learner-centred
establishing trust
radical

White Spaces & White Fears: Speaking from a North African Woman

SUBMITTED BY **Amira Nanis**

In order to write, we must tell our stories. In order to tell our stories, we must be true. And in order to be true, we must show our experiences and embrace our emotions.

Coming to North America has shaped my understanding of **freedom and happiness** and I have come to see that the Western idea of luxury is nothing but an illusion. The truth is, **privilege determines who gets to thrive.** Privileged people reap the benefits of this world, while **foreigners, immigrants and Indigenous peoples** are left with the scraps. We are forced to work three times harder just to earn a fraction of the respect others receive automatically. And even then, respect is not guaranteed.

We are expected to be **grateful but not outspoken,** hardworking but never demanding, strong but never too bold. We must disguise our true selves because, to white people, we are **too different, too aggressive, too much**. But the truth is, this so-called "kindness" that many privileged people exhibit is **just a mask**—a disguise for the deeper issue at hand: **racism**.

For white people, the word racism is deeply uncomfortable. It makes them defensive rather than reflective. Instead of acknowledging their privilege and responsibility, they often say, I know I'm privileged, without truly understanding what that means or what they have done to benefit from it. This is what I want to explore in my conversation:

- The difference between feeling unsafe and feeling uncomfortable
- How words and discussions shape the flow of a conversation
- Why fragility is used as a defence mechanism against accountability

What is White Fragility and What Does It Really Mean?

White fragility is the discomfort, defensiveness or even anger that white people experience when their privilege is challenged. It manifests in dismissive reactions, guilt-driven silence or shifting the conversation away from accountability.

I Am Different. So Are You. Let's Talk About It.

Difference should not be feared—it should be understood. But often, when we speak our truths, we are met with **resistance rather than curiosity**. Why is it so difficult for some to simply listen?

Being Unsafe vs. Being Uncomfortable

There is a difference between feeling **unsafe** and feeling **uncomfortable** in a conversation about race and privilege. Being uncomfortable means confronting truths that may challenge your worldview. Being unsafe means being in actual danger. Too often, white discomfort is mistaken for a personal attack, while the actual safety of marginalized people is ignored.

Radical Welcome: A practice, not just a feeling

Radical welcome is the intentional act of creating space where people—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—can show up fully, speak honestly and be heard without having to soften their truth to be accepted. It requires courage, humility and a commitment to equity.

5 Key Components of a Radical Welcome

Emotional Honesty
Welcome real experiences and emotions—even when they challenge norms or make us uncomfortable.

Active Listening Without Defensiveness
Respond with curiosity, not correction. Resist the urge to explain or defend when someone names harm.

Power Awareness
Understand how social power, privilege and positionality show up in conversations—and act to balance them.

Accountability and Repair
When harm happens, acknowledge it, take responsibility and stay engaged in repairing the relationship.

Centring Marginalized Voices
Shift the focus from dominant comfort to collective safety. Let the most impacted lead the truth-telling.

It's time to stop tiptoeing around the truth.
Let's talk about it. ◇

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Let's talk about it.....

Scenario 1

Scenario:

Intake Meeting—"Too Direct?"

Setting: A small, quiet office. Emma is friendly, kind and well-meaning. She's also nervous about "saying the wrong thing." Nadia has agreed to share her learning goals, but quickly notices the tension in the room when she starts talking honestly.

Emma:
So, Nadia, we're really happy to have you here. I just want to learn a bit more about your background and goals. What brings you to our program?

Nadia:
I used to teach back home. University-level English. Here, they told me I have to "start over." I want to improve my writing and figure out how to work again. But it's… hard.

Emma:
(smiling nervously) Yes, yes… that must be hard. But you're here now, and that's what matters, right?

Nadia:
(pause) I don't like when people say that. "You're here now." It feels like you're ignoring what I've lost. I'm tired of being told to be positive all the time. Can I be honest?

Emma:
(visibly uncomfortable) Oh—I didn't mean it that way. I'm so sorry if I offended you. That wasn't my intention.

Nadia:
I know. But I need to be able to say how I feel, even if it makes people uncomfortable. I have to start over in a country that doesn't see me the way I see myself. That's real.

Emma:
(takes a breath) Thank you for saying that. I… guess I feel a bit defensive because I try so hard to be welcoming. But maybe I need to listen more and fix less.

Nadia:
(softly) That's all I need. Just let me speak without having to soften everything for you.

Emma:
You're right. This is your space too. Let's start over—with honesty this time.

Reflections

- Nadia's honesty created discomfort—but that discomfort was a gateway to truth.
- Emma initially deflected ("that wasn't my intention"), a classic move rooted in fragility.
- But when she leaned in instead of pulling away, the conversation shifted.
- This is what "radical welcome" looks like—not always easy, but transformative.

Let's talk about it.....

Scenario 2

Scenario:

"Uncomfortable or Unsafe?"

Setting: A virtual adult literacy tutoring session over Zoom. The learner, Amina, is a newcomer woman from Pakistan working hard to improve her reading and writing. Her tutor, Jan, is a white Canadian volunteer in her 50s. Amina is articulate, determined and direct. Jan is friendly but struggles with confrontation and tends to avoid uncomfortable conversations.

Amina:
(with calm assertiveness) Jan, I wanted to say something about yesterday's lesson. When I was reading and you said, "We've gone over this so many times already," it made me feel like you were frustrated with me. It felt like you didn't believe I was trying.

Jan:
(visibly flustered) Oh... wow, okay. I wasn't expecting this. I'm starting to feel a bit unsafe right now. This feels very confrontational.

Amina:
(surprised) I'm not trying to confront you. I'm just telling you how your words made me feel. I thought this was a space where I could speak honestly.

Jan:
I understand, but your tone is making me really uncomfortable. I don't feel okay continuing this session. I think I need to talk to the program coordinator before we go further.

Amina:
(pauses, takes a deep breath) I see. That's disappointing. I came here to learn—to have a real conversation. But now I feel like I've done something wrong by speaking up. I'm not yelling. I'm not being rude. I'm just being honest.

Amina:
(quieter) I've seen this before. When someone like me speaks up, we get labelled as difficult. Or the session ends. Or someone reports us. And that's what makes me feel unsafe—not being corrected, but being silenced.

Reflections

- Amina's directness is a strength and reflects her trust in the learning environment.
- Jan's discomfort is valid, but her use of the word "unsafe" is a misapplication—it shuts down dialogue rather than opening it.
- When white educators mislabel direct communication from racialized learners as aggression or "too much," it creates real risks: exclusion, labelling and lost opportunities.
- Discomfort is part of growth; genuine safety means having the courage and capacity to navigate those moments with care and respect.
- In CALP settings, building cultural humility and emotional resilience is essential for tutors supporting diverse learners.

I'm a download

Reflective Questions for CALP Staff

How do I typically respond when someone gives me direct feedback—especially if it challenges my tone, actions or assumptions?

Do I become defensive, or do I stay open and curious?

Have I ever used the word "unsafe" when what I was actually feeling was uncomfortable?

What impact might that have had on the person speaking to me—especially if they were from a marginalized group?

Do I expect certain communication styles (e.g., soft-spoken, "polite," indirect) to be the norm?

How might these expectations silence or misinterpret colleagues or learners who come from different cultural norms around communication?

How can I make room for emotionally honest conversations—even when they're difficult—without centring my own discomfort?

What would it look like to sit with discomfort in service of trust and equity?

SUBMITTED BY **Amira Nanis**

Images by Naomi Bly

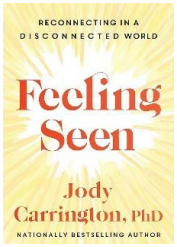
Continuing the Conversation...

If you are interested in learning more about conversation, add these titles to your bookshelf or library holds list.

Caring is Everything: Getting to the Heart of Humanity, Leadership and Life

BY DAVID IRVINE

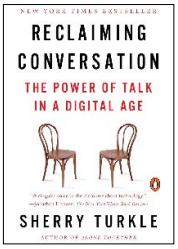
This book is an investigation into a simple but profound idea: caring is everything. The stories within shine a light on the many dimensions of caring that so often go unnoticed and unacknowledged, but are vital to organizations, relationships and life itself.



Feeling Seen: Reconnecting in a Disconnected World

BY DR. JODY CARRINGTON

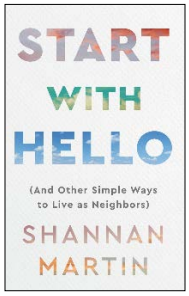
Allowing yourself to see and be seen—and doing the same for those around you—is the single best action you can take to build true connections and make things better in work and life.



Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

BY SHERRY TURKLE

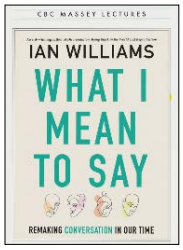
Sherry Turkle investigates how a flight from conversation undermines our relationships, creativity and productivity—and why reclaiming face-to-face conversation can help us regain lost ground.



Start with Hello

BY SHANNAN MARTIN

This practical, compelling book shares simple practices for living as a more open-hearted, empathetic neighbor who sees past what divides us, looks for common ground and is rewarded with vibrant and enduring friendships.



What I Mean To Say: Remaking Conversation in Our Time

BY IAN WILLIAMS

Enough small talk. Let's get right to it: Why can't we talk to each other anymore? What makes good communication? And how do we restore the lost art of conversation?

Ian Williams shares the following tips for fearless conversations:

1. Be better listeners
2. Assume the best of each other
3. Choose honesty and truth over politeness
4. Make time for sprawling conversations
5. Practice forgiveness

Strategic Conversation

strengths-based
establishing trust
hopeful

Where You End and I Begin

SUBMITTED BY **Lisa Berry**

"Why does it feel like no one hears me?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I finally ask for help, people just do things for me, not help me."

"Can you tell me more?"

"I want to be able to do things for myself, and then they do it for me instead."

"What kind of things?"

"One thing is, I want to be able to understand the forms I am supposed to do at work."

"Who did you ask for help?"

"My co-worker. Then they just filled it out for me."

"Did you tell them you want to learn?"

"I said I want to learn to do stuff better. They did it for me, and I still don't know how."

"Can I share a story with you?"

"Ummmm, ok?"

As it was, the house I lived in no longer worked for me. The front door didn't close properly. The inside was old wallpaper that was peeling off. The outside paint was faded. The fence had fallen down in two places. It all felt like too much, and I didn't know where to start or if I could even do all that needed to be done. I had people in my life who said they would help, though I couldn't ask them since I didn't know where I needed to start. It didn't feel like my home anymore.

I sat and looked at my house on the inside. I knew that the building was ok. I could use what was already there without having to start again. I knew I needed some things to be different, like the spare room that mostly sat empty.

I sat outside and looked at the yard and fence. I used to love sitting by the tree and listening to the birds. Now all I heard was the traffic and people passing through my yard. I wanted this to be a space I felt I belonged.

When my one auntie came to help, she said I needed a craft room like she has at her place. I don't do crafts.

When my neighbour saw me outside, he said I needed a six-foot-high fence so no one could see me. That also means I could not see out.

My friend said I needed to repaint everything with bright colours like they had at their home. Bright colours feel like too much.

I respected all these people. All their homes seem happy. Since my home was such a mess, maybe it was me that was the problem. Maybe I am wrong and they are right.

I sat again and thought of what I wanted my space to look like and what I needed. I knew I could do some of these things on my own, like painting. I also knew I needed help with other things, like the fence.

Where you end and I begin...

Let's keep talking about it.....