



*Violence and Learning:
Taking Action*

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Edited by Mary Norton

Copy edited by Phyllis Grace Steeves and Debby Waldman

Desktop publishing and cover design by *jmurphy designs*

Cover art by Rhea Jansen

Photographs by Fay Holt Begg, Judy Murphy and Heather Ward

Illustrations by Fay Holt Begg

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Literacy Alberta

#302, 1300 - 8 Street. S.W.

Calgary, AB

Canada

T2R 1B2

Telephone: 403-410-6990

Fax: 403-410-9024

email: office@eLit.ca

website: www.literacy-alberta.ca

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Additional acknowledgments are included in the chapters that follow.

— Jenny Horsman, Judy Murphy and Mary Norton

Spirit Calling

By Ann Mortifee¹

*In my heart I hear Spirit calling me
Calling me, calling me
Calling me home.*

*In my heart, I hear Spirit calling me
Calling me, calling me
Calling me home.*

*Call me into my life
Call me into my love
Call me into my fire
Call me into my heart
Call me into my voice
Call me into my sight
Call me into the beauty path way.*



¹ *Spirit Calling* is reproduced with the kind permission of Ann Mortifee. *Spirit Calling* was one of the songs that lit our way during the VALTA project.

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*The Violence and Learning:
Taking Action
(VALTA) Project*

*Jenny Horsman
Judy Murphy
Mary Norton*

The *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project invited literacy and adult educators to share and build knowledge about the impacts of violence on learning and ways to address them. Through workshops, an online course, *Changing Practices* research projects and other activities, we three co-facilitators and the Project participants explored ways to break silences about violence and to create environments to support learning for all. The intention of this book is to share what was learned from the Project and invite further exploration.

In chapters that follow, Project participants report on their research about applying what was learned in the VALTA course to their practices. This introductory chapter and the next one provide a backdrop for reading the reports. They also describe some of what we learned about ways to support learning and research. Chapter Three includes the Project evaluators' report.

Pathways to the Project

Although initiated in 2002, the VALTA Project was grounded in earlier research and practice and in the intertwining paths that we—Jenny, Judy and Mary—traveled to our shared belief in the importance of taking action about violence and learning. We decided to introduce the VALTA Project in this publication by revisiting these paths and the learning, hopes and dreams that shaped the Project activities and how we worked together.

Jenny's Path

In 1987, I was interviewing women in Nova Scotia for my thesis about women and literacy. When I was asking questions I thought were about the literacy practices in their daily lives, most of the women told me about past and present experiences of violence. I began to notice connections between violence and difficulties learning through their stories of shyness, school absence, and school failure. In that study I wrote about violence as the backdrop against which was set the women's desire for literacy to change their lives. Violence remained in the background in that writing, but my questions continued as I thought about the role of violence in contributing to difficulties women have learning in childhood and as adults (Horsman, 1990).

When I returned to Toronto and started a women's group in my local community literacy program, the theme I chose for one class

was childhood. One day we read Rose Doiron's story about her abusive childhood (Doiron, 1987). In spite of my new questions about the impact of childhood violence on adult "illiteracy," I thought little about the impact of reading this book. I did not stop to wonder how many women in the group might have experienced violence as children and might find reading about Rose's experience too painful a reminder of their own lives. The next day, one member of the group called me to apologize for what she had said. I couldn't remember what she'd said, but told her she could speak about anything in the group. Later, she told me her comment had been "things happen to children that shouldn't." Even saying those few words, this woman felt she had revealed far too much about her own painful childhood and she was terrified because she had broken a long-held silence.

My acceptance opened within her a floodgate of her experience with violence. I was at sea—I wanted to help, but I was in over my head and didn't know how to respond. My solution was to find a way to be a support within the expertise of literacy work. I offered to tutor her. I suggested we use reading materials about women's and girls' experiences of violence, and that she could write whatever she chose. That suggestion launched us on a challenging eight-year tutoring relationship, and an intense, ongoing friendship. It also led her eventually to therapy, and to increased comfort with reading and writing to express herself. She faces her ongoing challenges with more choices and possibilities, though these "choices" are still relentlessly limited by poverty, poor health and the inadequacy of legal and social support systems.

Early in the tutoring process I found the material we read together disturbing, and I sought the help of a therapist myself to begin to explore whether I had personal issues with violence. I also found a counsellor in the local community health centre who was willing to support me and give me wise advice on how to work responsibly with this student. This tutoring led me to more and more questions about connections between violence and particular reading difficulties. It also led me to believe that literacy programs must make space for tutoring of the sort we were doing together. I wrote often about this work (e.g. Horsman, 1996, 1994), but I began to want to learn much more about how violence affects learning and about how to support learning.

I designed a research study to probe deeper. National Literacy Secretariat funding gave me the opportunity to embark on the study and to travel across Canada listening to literacy workers and trauma therapists in a wide range of settings. My journey began to

interweave with Mary Norton's and Judy Murphy's when Mary took on the task of setting up focus groups in Alberta and, along with Judy, participated in the Edmonton focus group on the issue. Eventually—after much rich input, discussion and analysis, and one-on-one conversations in groups and online—this research led to the book, *Too scared to learn: Women, violence and education* (Horsman, 1999).

The book became a starting point for more research and for projects that would try to put into practice in adult education programs what I thought I was learning through this research. My work continued to intertwine with Mary's and Judy's during these years as I travelled to Alberta to collect more data, check out analyses, and offer workshops. One key finding was that, in the face of violence, it is important to teach to the whole person—body, mind, emotion and spirit—recognizing that each part could be damaged by violence, and that each can either block or support learning. Although I recognized this intellectually in my workshops, I was still talking and engaging the analytical mind (mine and others)—not teaching holistically and drawing on the whole person. In Saskatchewan, a wise elder pointed out this contradiction, and I felt challenged to learn how to teach differently.

I began to see that the work Mary and Judy were doing with art and music to engage students in a process of reflective learning was an important piece I was not yet exploring. In a New England project where I co-lead training, adult educators in many different settings tried making changes to support learners who had experienced violence (Morrish, Horsman and Hofer, 2002). Creative approaches, along with naming the presence of violence, became central in all the educators' work. They used quilting, collage, yoga, meditation, and creative writing in their programs and learned that this creative exploration can make an enormous difference for learning. Bringing in flowers, food, and everything possible to create beautiful and nurturing classrooms, the educators learned that these apparent "frills" were actually fundamental to support learning for women who were all too familiar with violence, poverty and making do, but who had little experience of expansiveness, hope and possibility.

When Mary attended the final institute of the New England project, which showcased educators' insights and the practical changes they had made, she began to see the potential of integrating my focus on supporting learning in the face of violence with the exploration of creative approaches to learning that she and Judy had been pursuing.

Mary's Path

I first met Jenny during a summer visit to Nova Scotia, about the time that she was doing her thesis research. Our paths continued to cross during the 1990s at conferences and through a national project to facilitate workshops about teaching literacy from a feminist perspective (Nonesuch, 1996). In my work as a coordinator and facilitator at The Learning Centre, I was aware of the presence of violence in learners' lives and had followed Jenny's writings on the topic. Getting involved in Jenny's research was an opportunity to reflect and learn, with others, about how to shape my practice to account for experiences of violence.

Meanwhile, I had met Moon Joyce, a Toronto-based singer, educator and artist, whom I later contracted to facilitate a two-day "Getaway" for participants at The Learning Centre. On the first day of the Getaway, I participated and watched, amazed, as Moon drew 30 people together in song. The next day, during a writing workshop, I noticed how readily people wrote and rose to share their writing with the group. I became curious about how singing seemed to have prepared people for the writing. I resolved to find out more about possible connections between singing and learning.

By this time, I had started to sing again myself, sparked in part by meeting Moon. I had grown up singing and had introduced singing in my earlier work as a children's librarian, but I had sung less and less as I moved into other work and studies. Following the Getaway, I facilitated a new Challenges group with women at The Learning Centre. The participants identified "speaking up" as an issue they wanted to address. I took on the challenge of leading singing with the group and, later, with the group's support, at a second Getaway.

By now I had met Judy, who coordinated the Alternative Learning Program (ALP), and we had begun to run together. During our runs, we explored our respective interests in using singing and art as avenues for learning, and the idea for a *Drawing out the Self* (Norton and Murphy, 2001) project came together. In 2000, Judy and I introduced a bi-weekly *Drawing out the Self*² course with women from The Learning Centre and ALP. That course and a subsequent one, in the fall of 2001, provided context to research

² The *Drawing out the self* project was funded by the Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association (ECALA). The research was carried out as part of the RiPAL Network project, which was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada, in partnership with Alberta Learning.

how singing, art and movement help women explore different ways of knowing and learning. In interviews, women who had completed the course talked about how art helped them think and see things more clearly, express themselves, and open up. They commented that singing boosted their self-esteem and how, in some cases, songs became mantras for getting through tough times or provided words to express feelings.

Our learning and continuing interest in the *Drawing out the Self* process led Judy and me to imagine a project where we could support and encourage other facilitators to explore the use of creative learning approaches in literacy programs. Meanwhile, in the fall of 2001, I had begun working with a group of women at The Learning Centre on an action research project about community resources and services. As it happened, all of the women in this group had participated in one of the *Drawing out the Self* courses, and we continued to use art and singing as ways of connecting and exploring in this group. As women identified resources they knew about, some also told about how they had had to access those resources, such as social services (welfare) or the food bank, after they had left abusive partners. One story led to another, and it soon became clear that all of the women in the group had experienced or were experiencing violence in their lives.

During the time I was working with the women's group, I attended the final institute of the New England project that Jenny described (see p. 5). While engaged in an arts-based activity during the institute—I was doing embroidery—I mused about the women's group at The Learning Centre and their experiences of violence, about the *Drawing out the Self* work that Judy and I were doing, and about Jenny's work and the New England project. As I stitched away, I decided to talk with the women at The Learning Centre about how the issue of violence had been coming up each week, and about whether they wanted to focus their research in that area.³ I also began to imagine a project that would build on Jenny's research and practice, the New England Project, and Judy's and my work with creative approaches. In an "aha" moment, violence and learning, which had been a backdrop in the *Drawing out the Self* work, shifted to centre stage.

³ The action research group at The Learning Centre decided to research resources and services for women who were experiencing or had experienced violence. In preparing for the research, they continued to share stories, from which they developed a presentation about violence and learning. They made the presentation to literacy educators and learners, community health workers and staff in community agencies. I continued to work and learn with this group throughout the VALTA Project.

Judy's Path

As a visual and kinesthetic learner, I have been passionately interested in how art and movement could be used as non-verbal ways of expressing feelings and thoughts. I have been curious about how art and movement can increase understanding of ourselves, act as a healing power, or simply invite creative fun. The VALTA project provided an opportunity to not only explore these aspects further but to have them intertwine with work and explorations that Jenny and Mary have done.

The story of my involvement with VALTA began when I was coordinating the Alternative Learning Program (ALP), a literacy and academic upgrading program at the Edmonton John Howard Society. At this time, events and opportunities for putting ideas into action combined to bring Jenny and Mary into my work and life.

When I was at ALP, four women in the space of one month experienced physical abuse from their partners. Feeling concern for these women and unsure of how to offer the best kind of support, other participants in the program suggested that all the women in ALP be invited to a series of meetings to talk about issues of violence. We met weekly over pizza lunches to share stories, discuss how to be supportive, and learn more about the topic of violence. We invited staff members from the Victims' Assistance Program and Family Violence Prevention Centre to share their expertise. One woman initiated the development of a resource binder about community support groups for the classroom. For me, the awareness that I had of violence being part of the fabric of our learning environment at ALP moved from its place of silence into the public arena, in a way that was positive and needed. Serendipitously, at about this time, I joined the focus groups that Jenny led in Edmonton. I began to see the overt and covert types of violence experienced by some of the ALP participants as part of a larger social picture.

With an interest in providing a wholistic approach to learning and having the intention of bringing balance to ALP's programming, I began to make space for experiences that responded to body, mind, emotions and spirit. ALP participants, staff and I began participating in three-day camping and hiking trips to the mountains; playing volleyball and baseball; skating; doing visualization and breath work; writing creatively; and doing yoga, photography, drama, drawing and singing. At this time, holistic learning activities were offered as independent activities. It was

later when Mary and I began working with groups of women in *Drawing out the Self* that I began to pay more attention to how these activities—breath work, movement, art, and music—could be integrated and woven into the fabric of what we were already doing in our programs, courses and workshops.

From 2000 to 2001, I coordinated the *Women's Journeys in Self-Discovery* project, hosted jointly by the Edmonton John Howard Society and the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton. This project invited women who were either involved with the correctional system or at risk of being involved into an integrated literacy and life-skills program. It offered a variety of learner-directed approaches for personal exploration and growth. Mary was the project's evaluator, and we had ample opportunity to discuss the project, our work with women, participatory approaches to learning, issues of violence (named but not explored in the project) and wholistic activities. Our early morning runs created both place and space to weave ideas, dream dreams of ideal programs and share our respective interests in music and art.

As the *Women's Journeys in Self-Discovery* project was winding down, Mary and I were ready to facilitate *Drawing out the Self*, a research in practice project that invited women into learning through art, movement and music. Through *Drawing out the Self*, I was excited to learn more about aspects of art and movement that held fascination for me, in particular how to invite people to come into "voice" through non-verbal, creative activities. Women shared their experiences of participating in art-making and movement. Art and movement encouraged women to open up and express their feelings. It helped them to access their inner knowledge and at times brought unconscious thought to the surface. Women commented on the art: *(It) helped me to think and see things a little better. It helps me open up to people.* They said that *movement relaxes the body. It gets you in the mood to try to get to the next step.* As with the *Women's Journeys* project, issues of violence were felt or heard but were not a focus of the project.

With hindsight, I understand now that the work at ALP, *Women's Journeys*, *Drawing out the Self*, exploring wholistic approaches to learning, Jenny's research in violence and learning, Mary's research at The Learning Centre with music, women and learning, and my own passions about art and movement in learning were like pieces of a collage. As separate images, they all had value and meaning. Drawn together as they were in VALTA, they created a more comprehensive and expanded picture and offered new levels of understanding.

Developing the Project

Following the New England institute which Jenny and Mary attended, we began to spin and test the ideas that we eventually wove into the VALTA Project. In January 2002, Mary discussed the idea of a provincial project about violence and learning with National Literacy Secretariat staff members who encouraged us to prepare a project proposal. We were excited to have Literacy Coordinators of Alberta (now Literacy Alberta) sponsor the proposal in partnership with The Learning Centre Literacy Association, as this broadened the scope of the Project beyond a single program. We hoped to work with literacy and adult educators from a range of settings.

In February, Jenny facilitated three workshops in Edmonton about violence and learning⁴—one with staff from community agencies, one with literacy and ESL educators, and one with women from literacy and adult education programs. Encouraged by the response to the workshops and with the workshop processes providing a context, we began to write a proposal. We wanted to build on previous research and practice about violence and learning, explore creative approaches to learning, and use research in practice to develop new understandings of effective literacy practice.

We also wanted to keep the goal of supporting learning central to the Project, while continuing to understand that it is vital to break silences about violence in order to focus on learning.⁵ We were aware that some educators firmly believe that the topic of violence should not be approached lest it open a “can of worms.” There is a fear that educators will head into the terrain of therapy with no boundaries, unleashing horrific tales of violence that have been waiting to be told. However, we have learned that when we recognize the impact of violence on learning and look at the intersections with therapy, clearer boundaries can be created and the detailed stories of violence are usually told less often. Throughout the Project, we aimed to address issues of violence in ways that made it more possible to focus on successful learning and avoid sliding into therapy or detailing experiences of violence in the classroom.

⁴ Registration fees and a grant from Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association (ECALA) made it possible to hold the workshop.

⁵ Jenny’s research has led her to argue that it is vital to address the impacts of violence on learning if we are to support learning for all (e.g., Horsman, 1999, 2001a, Morrish et. al. 2002).

With these ideas and beliefs in mind, we planned two key cycles for the Project. In the first cycle, a workshop and an online course would provide opportunities for in-depth learning and reflection about violence and learning, and about how to support learning. In the second cycle, participants would be supported to extend their learning by doing *Changing Practices* research in practice projects. Throughout the Project, we also planned to work with participants to raise awareness about violence and learning, make connections with people involved in related work, and share what we had learned through conferences, workshops, newsletters, and this publication. We were very excited when our funding proposal for the Project was approved.

Inviting Participants

In May 2002, we co-facilitated a two-day workshop to introduce the VALTA Project and invite participation. We also developed a booklet about the Project, sent it to literacy and adult educators across the province, and invited people who wanted to participate to send in an application form that described their interests in the Project.

Eleven women⁶ answered the invitation to participate. Others expressed interest but were unable to become involved at the time because of prior commitments. Two women who applied had to withdraw at the start of the Project because of changes in their circumstances, so nine women participated in the first cycle. At the time, these women worked in one or more areas of adult literacy, adult education, and special education; and as coordinators, administrators, group leaders and consultants. They lived and worked throughout Alberta, in cities, towns and villages. Together, we ranged in age from mid-20s to 60s.

The women were drawn to the VALTA Project because they were familiar with the idea that violence affects learning. They had heard stories of violence from students with whom they had worked. Some had firsthand experience with violence. Their knowledge, experiences and desires to make a difference were starting points for learning together.

⁶ The Project was not limited to women participants, but only women applied.

The VALTA Course and Workshops

We knew from numerous workshops that it is difficult to introduce quickly the topics of violence and learning in enough depth to acknowledge the extent of the issues, understand the impacts, and explore practical approaches to address the problems. It is also hard to focus on all these aspects in short workshops, and they can easily become overwhelming. In planning the Project, we dreamed of drawing educators together to take an intensive longer-term course. Knowing that people from around the province would not be able to meet face-to-face on a regular basis, we planned a 12-week online course. Given the topic, we also knew that it was vital to include some face-to-face meetings, so we began the course with a two-and-a-half-day residential workshop. We also met in other workshops during the second cycle of the Project. With Jenny taking the lead in designing and facilitating the course, the three of us worked closely to develop and co-facilitate the workshops. (The course outline and description of activities are included in Appendix 1 and a sample course module is found in Appendix 2.)

Participants began the course with initial readings on the issue of violence and came together for the first workshop with some trepidation. Although some of us knew at least one or two other participants, many of us were meeting each other for the first time. During the workshop, we began to share and further our thinking about violence, prepare for the online course, and get to know each other. As facilitators we sought to set a supportive tone of curious questioning about every aspect of the experience and a sense of a shared journey of exploration and learning.

From October 2002 to the following January, we and the participants “talked” to each other online as we challenged ourselves to deepen our understandings of how violence affects learning. We looked at the hidden impacts of violence and the value of moving the issue into the light by acknowledging the presence of violence in many women’s lives and its inevitable impact on learning in diverse situations. We considered ways to create conditions and content for learning by acknowledging spirit, emotions, body and mind and the role each can play to block or enhance learning. We explored the complexity of control, connection and meaning in the face of violence and the importance of each for learning. We looked at the importance of self-care in the face of the costs of bearing witness to violence or the effects of violence.

A range of activities encouraged us all to bring our whole selves to the process of learning about these issues and to explore creative

ways to deepen our understanding. We explored various ways of “knowing” through exercises with movement, sound, visual media, creative writing, observation and reflection, as well as the more usual analytical reading and discussion. Online, we were able to share our thoughts about our learning through this exploration. The next chapter provides more detail about the creative approaches we explored, along with other approaches we introduced to support learning.

Supporting Research in Practice ⁷

Although valuing the opportunity to teach and learn through the online course, we were excited by the idea that Project participants could do more than learn approaches that had already been developed. During the course, we had read research about violence and learning and reflected on how it related to our practices (Horsman and Norton, 1999). The *Changing Practices* projects were an opportunity for participants to do research themselves. We saw these projects as a way for participants to explore an area of practice, to examine its effects systematically, and then to share what they had learned with others. Eight participants from the first cycle of the Project decided to take this opportunity.

In a January 2003 workshop, participants reviewed what they had learned from the course and began to plan their projects. They worked on their own and talked with each other and us about an area of practice that they wanted to explore. They mused about related ideas and questions on which they wanted to shine a light. We didn’t worry about honing in on specific research questions, knowing that questions would emerge and shift along each project’s way. Each participant received a copy of *A Traveler’s Guide to Literacy Research in Practice* (Norton, 2003). Back home, participants prepared a brief proposal and began developing a budget.⁸

As people worked on their projects, we continued to communicate online. Participants described their projects and reported on developments. We posted and responded to questions about research. In particular, we explored notions and approaches to “informed consent,” drawing from published resources and a conversation

⁷ In planning the research in practice cycle, we drew from the experiences and resources of the RiPAL Network project. This project supported literacy and adult educators to do research about their practice and included an online course, workshops and meetings. For information, go to: <http://www.nald.ca/ripal>

⁸ The Project budget included funds for stipends for doing the *Changing Practices* projects. Funds could be used to pay participants’ time, and for supplies and resources related to the project. In general, funds allocated to participants’ time did not begin to cover the actual time they spent on their projects.

with people experienced in community-based, qualitative research. We also explored ideas about the “lenses” we each bring to our research, and about how these lenses and our various identities shape what we see and hear in our research. Judy and Mary also visited with Project participants to hear about their research, discuss processes and options as needed and, in some cases, to take part in project activities and meet the women involved. These visits also provided Judy and Mary with a sense of the geography and context for each participant’s work.

By May, most participants had completed their projects and data collection and it was time to move onto analysis and writing. This was the focus of the third workshop. By the fall, participants had prepared drafts which we shared and read before a final workshop in November. Drafts were revised and completed in the following months, with face-to-face and online feedback and support from Jenny, Judy and Mary.

Writing the research reports—and providing support for the writing—was challenging and time-consuming in a range of ways. In the May workshop, taking a lead from participants who had facilitated writing groups, we brainstormed fears about writing and ways to address them. In providing feedback, we struggled with questions related to authorship and with expectations about “what counts” in the field of published research. For instance, in one case, we found that we could not “hear” an author in her writing. We knew her to be a warm, engaged and present facilitator, and this was not coming through in her report. In talking with her, we learned that she had purposely distanced herself, thinking that was what was called for in a research report.

Our feedback process entailed fairly detailed suggestions about analyzing and organizing, along with some editing. This level of feedback likely reflected our awareness that the reports would be published, that they would be “out there” for all to read. In providing this feedback, we wanted to help shine a light on what each participant had learned, but we were also mindful about not assuming the authority of the work and not imposing our voices. Sometimes we encouraged authors to dig deeper in their analysis, also mindful that this would require more time and energy. Participants were gracious about receiving feedback, and some shared how they felt about it. A couple said that as this was their first time doing research, they hadn’t had any previous models for writing.

In any case, the writing and feedback process entailed an ever-stretching deadline, which both supported and challenged participants. Some participants were not able to complete their

projects or the writing, as demands of life and work intervened. As we celebrate the writing of five participants, we also want to acknowledge the work of all the participants, and the insights and learning they shared along the way.

In chapters that follow, you will read about how five VALTA Project participants explored ways to create environments for learning in their *Changing Practices* projects. In the context of co-facilitating a women's writing group, Laurie Kehler observed and reflected on the ways that she applied what she had learned from VALTA to her work as a facilitator. As a co-facilitator with Laurie, Janet Bauer focused on the various ways that she and Laurie created a safe space for learning. Heather Ward also facilitated a women's group, using creative approaches to prompt and support reflection on self-concept. Brenda Squair drew from VALTA resources to plan and facilitate two workshops for practitioners about violence and learning. While focusing on breaking the silence and strategies for tutoring, Brenda found herself reflecting on the process of facilitating the workshops while "living beside" her own experiences of violence. For her project, Fay Holt Begg embarked on a personal exploration of holistic learning. She observed and reflected on changes in herself and on the resulting shifts in how she worked with learners and tutors in her literacy program. We hope that reading the chapters will encourage you to explore or continue to explore ways to support learning in literacy programs for all learners.

Broadening Awareness

Part of the intention of VALTA was to broaden interest and awareness of the issues of violence and learning. Newsletters, workshops and displays at the Alberta Provincial Literacy Conferences⁹ and a workshop and display at the Research in Practice Institute in Newfoundland¹⁰ served to raise the profile of the issues. Working with an advisory committee also helped link adult literacy and anti-violence work.

With VALTA Project participants and the steadfast support of the conference organizer, we were able to include a series of workshops in the 2003 Provincial Literacy Conference (PLC). Through the workshops, we shared what we had learned from the *Changing Practices* projects and about using creative approaches. Together

⁹ The Provincial Literacy Conference is sponsored by Literacy Alberta (<http://www.literacyalberta.ca>)

¹⁰ Three of the VALTA participants presented a workshop about their *Changing Practices* projects at the Research in Practice Institute in St John's, NFLD 2003. For a report on the Institute, go to <http://www.nald.ca/ripal>

these workshops created a presence that helped to draw attention to the issue of violence and learning. Even those who didn't choose to attend the workshops were aware of them.

Aware of the challenges of communicating the importance of the issues of violence and learning to people who aren't already curious about this topic, we also set up a resource room at the 2003 PLC. The room provided an opportunity for conference participants to get a sense of the kinds of approaches that we had been exploring to support learning, to visit with Project participants and us, and to check out reading materials and a broad range of other resources. (More about the resource room is included in the next chapter.) In addition to these activities, Project participants shared what they had learned about violence and learning in their programs and communities in various ways.

Pathways Leading out of the VALTA Project

As the end of the VALTA Project drew near, we began to imagine how the approaches and learning could be woven into the fabric of professional development. We have each been exploring how to create supportive environments and incorporate creative approaches for workshops, focus groups, courses and meetings that we facilitate. We hope that the VALTA course will be offered again in the future, but we advocate that the topics of violence and learning be addressed directly and indirectly at all levels of professional development for literacy and adult educators, and in turn in all learning programs.

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*Creating Environments
to
Support Learning
for All*

Jenny Horsman

Introduction

As co-facilitators in the VALTA Project, Judy, Mary and I share a belief about addressing the impacts of violence on learning through acknowledging the presence of violence and through using creative approaches to support holistic learning. We also believe that no education setting or practice can disregard the presence of those who have experienced violence and that education and training at all levels must recognize and address the impacts of violence on learning. We have come to see that addressing violence and learning creates programming that is effective and interesting for all participants.

We had less clarity about what applying these beliefs would look like in the design of the VALTA course and workshops¹¹ but had many insights from previous research and practice, including my research studies on violence and learning (Horsman, 1999); projects which put the learning from that research into practice in adult education programs, especially the New England project (Morrish, Horsman, and Hofer, 2002); and Mary and Judy's explorations of using art, movement and singing to invite women into learning about themselves (Norton and Murphy, 2001).

As we came to put these insights into action in the VALTA Project we continued to explore the nuanced balance of ingredients that support learning for all. We wanted to model and explore approaches which might be useful in literacy programs so that when VALTA participants considered changes to try in their programs, they would have experienced these approaches themselves. In this chapter, I describe some of these approaches and our reasons for introducing them. In later chapters, you'll read how VALTA participants introduced similar approaches in their *Changing Practices* projects.

¹¹ As described in Chapter One, the VALTA Project included an online course and four two-day workshops. The first workshop introduced the course. The second concluded the course and introduced the research in practice phase of the Project. Research in practice was also a main focus in the last two workshops.

Creating a Safer Environment

Acknowledge Violence without Telling the Detailed Stories

I came into the VALTA Project with a fundamental belief in the value of acknowledging violence—without telling detailed stories of violence—as part of creating a safer learning environment. By acknowledging that many people in educational settings (facilitators as well as students) have experienced violence and that such experiences will affect learning, there can be a possibility of greater presence and more integrated learning. The fear that violence will be spoken of in detail can lead to closing down, absence, terror, or a choice not to participate at all. Recognizing the presence of violence and its impact on learning breaks silences, which are often long held. It also creates the possibility of moving from the slippery and dangerous territory of self-blame, shame and embarrassment about educational failure toward ground from which to begin reflecting about the self, learning from violence, opening up to the possibilities of change, and participating successfully in desired learning.

As discussed in the first chapter, Judy, Mary and I were clear throughout the VALTA Project that it is crucial to keep the goal of supporting learning central at all times, to address issues of violence in ways that make it more possible to focus on successful learning, and to avoid sliding into therapy or into detailing experiences of violence in the classroom. We continued to explore ways to create a balance between telling and not telling about violence, and about what that might look like in the VALTA course and workshops as well as in literacy programs. Our desire was to create a safer learning environment where there was no pressure to hide anything, but where relaxing into learning was possible.

Before the Project started, we encouraged participants to think about counseling or other resources to support them if they needed to speak fully about their own experiences, or about the impact of course material. We normalized the possibility of needing support as nothing to be ashamed of and as something to be considered ahead of time and prepared for. We wanted to give the message that there is no shame in having experienced violence or in finding that the powerful feelings of the experience return, even when one thinks it has been thoroughly addressed. We were influenced by Tanya

Lewis' (1999) theorizing which challenges the idea that we can never "get over" violence and "leave it behind" and instead suggests that we work to "live beside" our past experiences, knowing there is always the possibility that a current experience may easily slip us back inside difficult memories. As facilitators, we wanted to model the idea that it is important to find a place to tell where one can be heard supportively rather than silenced, closed down, or not truly heard because those listening close down and are unable to listen well.

Throughout the course and workshops we tried to create environments and ways to talk about violence without participants experiencing pressure to tell or listen to personal stories. This careful balance was met with enormous appreciation by one participant, in particular, who had experienced violence and knew firsthand about its impacts. Although eager to address the issue of violence and learning, she was extremely anxious at the beginning of the Project, worried she would be expected to talk about her experiences and open up memories from which she wanted to distance herself. In practice, we noticed that during the workshops some participants spoke generally of having experienced violence and that details of their experiences were sometimes shared in exchanges during breaks, when participation in the conversation could be by mutual agreement and those who didn't want to participate could easily avoid joining in.

The challenge to acknowledge violence in a safe way was compounded, given the purpose and focus of the VALTA Project. We wanted to examine violence, what constitutes violence, and how it operates in society and affects learning. Of necessity, we would be speaking, reading, and watching images of violence. To open up content about violence as safely as possible, we selected materials carefully. For example, when showing a video, we chose to play as little as possible of explicitly violent images while still making clear points about the nature of violence. In the first workshop, before we introduced difficult content, a therapist facilitated a session about how to protect ourselves emotionally in the face of violence. We also warned participants about the content and invited them to pay attention to what they needed to do to take care of themselves. The therapist attended portions of the course workshops and was available to participants if they wanted to talk with her. Throughout the Project, when we introduced images and materials that opened pain and the possibility of despair, we also offered creative and life-affirming exercises in an attempt to balance pain with pleasure.

Encourage Self-Care

During the course we encouraged participants not to simply tough it out when something was difficult, but instead to be gentle with themselves by passing whenever any round or activity felt too risky, and taking a break when they needed to. We hoped this might lead to an awareness that when we make ourselves endure we sometimes expect others to put up with things as well. We invited participants to figure out what they needed and tried to foreground our interest, availability and caring as facilitators, to notice and check in with a participant when it felt appropriate, and to encourage participants to talk with us if that would help them determine what they might need to take good care of themselves.

We recognized that participants might often have different and sometimes conflicting needs. Wherever possible, we were ready to explore with participants how to create a supportive setting, allow options and encourage them to make their own choices about what worked for them. We saw the creation of safety as a collaborative process involving participants and ourselves, but with us taking the lead to raise options and present processes. For example, during one workshop a participant caught up on sleep during some of the time designated for working alone. Our encouragement that this was a good use of her time seemed particularly important for her ability to be present during other sessions. As well, it modelled an approach of trusting students to participate in the best way they could to support their own learning, avoiding any judgment of laziness or lack of commitment. We also found that it was extremely valuable to have three of us as facilitators, as we were able to discuss issues, explore our different reactions, consider various approaches and notice different details. It also meant that when one of us led a session, two could observe reactions and check in with a participant if it seemed necessary.

We recognized it is always risky to reveal the self, particularly when focusing on challenging and disturbing material. We brought participants together early in the process with the intention of helping them feel more comfortable with each other online. Many said this initial contact was crucial to how comfortable they felt and to how much they revealed during the course. When participants posted online, we tried to ensure that one of us, as a facilitator, quickly posted a response so participants would not feel that they were unsupported in sending out their words. In particular, when posts were particularly “raw,” we made sure the response was quick and validating. Gradually participants also took on encouraging and offering care for each other, online and in workshops.

Value Everyone

We worked actively to create an environment where everyone felt valued. We discovered it was very important to acknowledge and create room for all the fears of inadequacy that participants might have. Participants revealed doubts about their ability to participate well for a variety of reasons: they had experienced violence or had not; had little experience as literacy coordinators or were in other adult education roles and settings; were younger than others in the group; were only used to formal academic courses or had not taken on studies in a while; were unsure about art, music or other creative expression; or were unfamiliar with yoga, movement or visualization. We wanted to suggest that it was “OK to be whoever you are,” but also wanted to go further than that. We tried to encourage participants to see that the group needed them, with their skills, knowledge and experience, and with their discomfort, unfamiliarity, and doubt. We sought to demonstrate that we valued each group member and their approach to participation through all the stages of the Project. We also encouraged participants to value each other and each others’ ways of participating in the shared experience.

Self-Reflection

As facilitators, we tried to be self-reflective throughout the Project and to invite that stance in participants. We wanted to be clear that we all have our own issues with violence, whether minor or major. We wanted to recognize the impact of all violence and to avoid the idea that less violence doesn’t count or interfere with learning. We wanted it to be acceptable to express strong emotions or feel unable to think clearly—to not be “together” all the time. We wanted all of us in the Project to think about ourselves and our own needs. We valued a stance that said that we are all on our own road, that we may have struggles of different intensities at different times, and that each person’s journey is unique, but that from our own experience and experiences we have observed, we can offer examples to prompt reflection.

As facilitators we were seeking another aspect of balance, namely a recognition that a facilitator does not work through her own issues or look for support from the group, but neither does she present herself as if she has everything worked out. We believe that facilitators can learn from participants in a group, but that facilitators should not use the group to work out their issues or expect to be looked after by the group. Again, we experienced the

value of being co-facilitators who could ask each other to take over if our own issues came up or if we found aspects of our activities particularly challenging. We wanted to model that self-awareness is crucial, but that having it all sorted out is not!

Inviting the Whole Self to Learn

Through my research, I learned that violence affects the whole self and that people who have been through violence often feel fragmented and stuck. Body, spirit, emotions and mind are all affected by violence. Recognizing this, we wanted to explore ways to invite people to bring their whole selves to learning.

Physical violence can cause injuries to the body, but all forms of violence can contribute to many illnesses and create stress which damages the body still further. Violence can lead to a tendency to avoid being present in the body—the site of violation—which can make it harder to notice bodily needs such as good food and self-care. This can lead to more illness, as well as difficulty attending to learning. It can also lead to a tendency to self-harm and addictions.

Violence can damage the spirit, leading a person to feel worthless, hopeless and to develop a belief that nothing can change. Such feelings make it hard to embark on challenging tasks such as education, and hard to persist in the face of discouragement or slow progress. Having experienced violence can contribute to depression and other emotional struggles and sharpen sensitivity to all violence, so that loud voices, anger and tensions in a classroom or other learning settings can become terrifying.

In the aftermath of violence, any stressful experience can lead to fear or even terror and can close the mind down. Experiences of violence can lead some to escape into the mind, leaving behind the messy body, emotion and spirit. Even then, the slide into feeling stupid and unable to concentrate may remain present. For those who have been systematically mistreated and devalued, or for whom school itself has been a site of violation, the possibility of escaping into the mind may have been utterly eroded and belief in the ability to think and learn destroyed.

Each part of the self can either hinder learning or can be enlisted in each person's challenge to discover her own brilliance. Creating learning environments which nurture the whole person, and introductory curriculum and teaching approaches which draw in the whole self, can enormously reduce the power of these impacts to block learning and can greatly enhance learning possibilities.

Education which recognizes the whole person has been advocated not only by those exploring the impact of violence on learning, but also by those who argue that a holistic approach leads to stronger and more diverse learning. Research and practice about learning styles and about multiple intelligences (e.g., Viens and Kallenbach, 2004), have demonstrated the value of recognizing learning through various modes. Holistic approaches to learning are also found in many indigenous and spiritual traditions of education and are an element of popular education traditions.

Create Environments that Nurture the Whole Self

Environments for learning can nurture all parts of the self and invite people to bring their whole selves to learning. The physical environment can provide comfort on many levels. Flexible, comfortable seating makes it possible for people to sit with ease and to shift into different groupings. People can move out of their seats to a floor that is inviting, perhaps with mats or cushions. This shift may make it possible to prevent the pain and discomfort of the body from blocking learning. It can bring a calm and centredness that aids learning and enlists the body and body knowledge in the learning process in a myriad of ways.

Objects such as puzzles, pipe cleaners, plasticine, massage balls or worry beads can all form part of an environment where students have permission to move as they need, where “fiddling” is not just tolerated, but invited. Often, especially in childhood, fiddling or other movement is seen as unacceptable. But for many, fiddling supports concentration, calms emotions, lengthens periods between smoke breaks, and makes it easier to stay more fully present in the body. Frequent refreshments, and the permission to leave the room when needed, all help to foster the presence and comfort needed to pay attention to learning.

A beautiful, calm or energizing environment, created with colour, flowers, pictures and other aesthetic comforts, can feed the spirit, help participants to feel valued and to feel that the time to focus on learning is precious. A space to retreat to with an easy chair; music; supplies to draw, colour or fiddle; a blanket; or even a teddy bear can all calm the emotions and create comfort and pleasure.

Strange as it may seem, it is not all that common to find a learning environment that stimulates curiosity, interest and a relaxed thoughtfulness rather than tension and competitiveness. Such an environment is created most easily through the stance of the

facilitators and fellow learners and includes genuine interest, freedom from judgment, and exercises and approaches that build community and generate support from fellow learners. Such environments recognize that the mind works better when the rest of the self is cared for and that breaks from stretching the mind are needed, too. These environments also acknowledge emotions and include space in which they can be felt and expressed.

During the VALTA workshops, we tried to pay attention to all these elements of the environment. Each workshop was held in a different setting—a retreat centre, a penthouse room with a panoramic view of Edmonton’s river valley, a rustic lodge in the Rocky Mountain foothills, and a light-filled hotel suite. We balanced the lower cost of the retreat centre with the cost of the lodge, arranged a special rate for the penthouse, and were gifted with the use of the suite so that we could experience “abundance” while staying within budget. We brought flowers and afghans and took care to arrange the rooms to appeal to our senses and our comfort.

We encouraged participants to reflect on the effect of their surroundings and to consider how to create a nurturing environment to encourage students and practitioners in their programs to bring the whole self to learning. We also encouraged participants to think about how to introduce these elements into their own environments for online and independent learning during the course.

Use Creative Approaches

Creative approaches such as visual arts, music, creative writing, movement and visualization can support bringing the whole person to learning by drawing on different ways of knowing. For learners in literacy programs who have come to believe their minds do not work well, creative approaches can draw on other strengths and lead to insightful reflection that may have been limited due to mistreatment and deprivation. Creative approaches can also be a fun variation from the usual, and so hold attention and interest or provide a break from challenging mental learning.

Because creative approaches may be unfamiliar and surrounded with messages about who is a “real” singer, artist or writer, they can also be intimidating and challenging. It is important to focus on process, rather than product, and with sensitivity to participants’ fears of being shamed and embarrassed. For those who regularly escape from their body into the mind, an invitation back into the body can also be scary.

Creative activities can also be misunderstood because they are fun and different from expected class activities. They can appear to be only distraction and relaxation, not part of the real work of learning. But they can also generate much excitement. Learners are surprised by the insights gained through creative processes, by their increased creativity as they practice different approaches, their increased sense of connection with others, and the new knowledge they gain as experiences of the process are shared.

During the VALTA workshops, we explored how to integrate creative approaches as important ways of learning and knowing, not simply as a diversion or break. We invited participants to be fully present, to reflect and reveal themselves to others with a wide range of activities. Choosing and decorating a hat to represent the many roles and responsibilities in our lives was a surprising introductory activity that helped us to reflect on ourselves and see each other. We took risks, felt a little silly, and were unsure what purpose the activity might serve. But reflecting back at the end of the course, participants suggested that activities such as these were important in setting a tone, building trust, and revealing the many dimensions of learning that were possible in the course.

In the workshops we used breath work and movement, singing, and visualization to draw us all more fully into the room, into the group and into our learning together. Breath work calmed us and helped us become centred and focused. Movement woke us up, brought us more fully into our bodies and helped us realize our power. Singing helped to link us to each other and to something greater than ourselves. It spoke to or shifted our emotion, fed our spirits, encouraged us to believe in our abilities and sometimes challenged us. Singing and visualization also gave us pleasure and helped us to relax and unwind at the end of a day so that we slept well and returned renewed the next morning. Sound occasionally communicated or indicated our individual moods.

We also encouraged participants to learn and reflect through creating sculpture, pictures and illustrations, and to speak or write about what became visible through that process. We introduced these approaches so that participants could experience the value of them, prepare to try them on their own during the course, and imagine trying them with students. At the same time, we were also integrating them to enhance and broaden the dimensions of learning throughout the project.

Activities during the online component of the course included analytical readings and discussion to increase formal knowledge of

each issue. We also included creative reading and writing, observing and experiencing movement, listening to and producing music, examining and creating visual forms, and observing and reflecting on what each participant saw in their literacy program or learning centre and the interactions there.¹² We encouraged participants to challenge themselves by trying out modes they were less familiar or comfortable with, and then observing their reactions and insights. We included a vast array of exercises, hoping to entice participants to pick and choose, explore and pursue greater depth in a mode or on a theme that seemed fruitful. We hoped to spark, surprise and catch interest in the broad range of possibilities, but discovered that although a broad array was enticing, it was also intimidating. Participants felt that they should have done more. The analytical readings felt especially onerous. Another time we would try to recognize the possibility of those feelings and take care not to overwhelm or contribute to a sense of inadequacy.

In the online course, as in the workshops, different approaches were included not simply for the experience or the variety, but to enhance the depth and dimensions of the exploration of the theme. For example, one of the first themes was examining the complex layers of violence and the ways in which issues of violence are silenced in our society. They disappear from view almost as soon as they are raised and with very little broad change resulting. We explored this theme through visualization, a powerful extract from a novel, other fictional reading about violence, observing and creating violence prevention posters, exploring hiding and revealing through using layering with wax crayons and scraping off layers, listening to songs about violence and exploring sound and silence in a range of ways, as well as through a selection of analytical reading. In each activity, participants were invited to reflect, to document their reflections in any mode they chose, and share thoughts, feelings and new insights with the rest of us online.

In keeping with our aim of self-care, we tried to encourage participants to engage with the course material in whatever ways felt right to them. We invited them to stretch themselves a little, to challenge themselves to try out modes they were less comfortable with, to experiment, explore and to notice their own reactions and set their own pace without making a judgment about better or worse ways to participate.

¹² A description of the course activities is included in Appendix 1 and a sample module is included in Appendix 2.

The Facilitator is a Whole Person, Too

During this chapter I have spoken often of the participants in the VALTA Project. As co-facilitators, Judy, Mary and I also saw ourselves as participants, and participated in the course and workshops as fully as we could. We believe it is extremely important to ask not only participants to bring their whole selves to learning. If we are inviting others to risk and experiment with new approaches, as facilitators we need to take the same risks and be part of the same exploration. We need to take a reflective stance if we are to bring our whole selves to facilitating and to teaching.

The Value of Co-Facilitation

The value of working in a team of co-facilitators was evident as we tried to bring out whole selves to facilitating. Frequently, we were each aware of different nuances and had paid attention to different aspects of the way holistic exercises were working and received. We had different experiences ourselves in exercises and were able to draw on this variety to help us shape the next activities. For example, when Mary introduced a singing round that many participants found hard, Judy and I were able to share how bad it felt to feel that we had “failed.” Mary could see the importance of coming back to the song later, which allowed us all to enjoy the experience of successfully completing the song.

Extending the Invitation to Experience and Create

As described in the first chapter, we set up a VALTA resource room at the Provincial Literacy Conference (PLC). We were fortunate to have been given a spectacular light-filled suite for this purpose, and invitations to drop by were included in the conference program and packages.

The room provided the opportunity to sample the kinds of approaches we had explored to support learning, to visit with Project participants and facilitators, and to check out reading materials and a broad range of other resources. It was also a chance for visitors to nurture body, mind, emotions and spirit. In the room there were healthy snacks, a kettle to make tea, a yoga mat and

bolster and an invitation to feed and relax the body. Crayons and modeling clay provided an opportunity for simple creativity to rest the mind, while a wonderful array of books, resources and people to talk with stimulated and fed the mind. The beautiful and relaxing environment with music, flowers and comfy chairs nurtured spirit and provided a calm and pleasing resting place for those who wanted a break from the intensity of the rest of the conference.

We were delighted with the way the space was used as people shed their jackets, belts and shoes and lay down on the floor to stretch out their backs, poured herbal tea and sipped while they browsed through reading materials, or simply sat quietly to gather themselves before returning to the conference. Many talked to participants and us about their own, their students' or their friends' difficulties with learning. While one or two told us that the issue of violence and learning should not be opened up, or that opening it up wouldn't help, many came to talk about the importance of drawing attention to the issue. We were excited by the response to the availability of this resource room and hope that a similar place will be available in future conferences.

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3

VALTA
Evaluation Report

Barbara Sykes
Ann Goldblatt

Introduction

The VALTA Project was initiated in 2002 as a means of exploring and addressing the impacts of violence on learning for adults in literacy and community learning programs. The Project emerged from a growing awareness among literacy practitioners of the prevalence of violence in the lives of the women participating in their programs and of the profound impacts of this violence on how women learn. By engaging practitioners in a process of learning and action, the Project sought to extend awareness and understanding about the impacts of violence on learning and about how practice could more effectively address these impacts. In addition to this central goal, the Project set out to raise awareness and understanding about the impacts of violence on learning in literacy programs, other organizations and communities across Alberta.

VALTA was framed as a “research in practice” project, the key elements of which were shared learning and discussion through workshops and online connections, participation in an online course, and design and implementation of a *Changing Practices* research project. Through these major Project strategies, participants were engaged in a process of reflective practice that aimed to strengthen their ability to address issues of violence and learning. Although VALTA was a broadly based learning project, there was a particular emphasis on exploring and integrating holistic learning approaches as a means of addressing the impacts of violence.

We, Barbara Sykes and Ann Goldblatt, were contracted to evaluate the VALTA Project. In addition to collecting evaluation data, we took advantage of opportunities to be more personally involved in the Project by being present at and participating in workshops. To the extent that we were able, we sought to experience the Project firsthand and to gain a deeper understanding of what it was like for participants. For us, this involvement offered invaluable learning—about the Project, about the impacts of violence on learning, and about ourselves. We are indebted to the Project participants and coordinators for including us in this process and being so open to sharing their stories with us.

This report reflects the learning that emerged through evaluating of the VALTA Project. We acknowledge that there is bound to be learning for participants that was not captured by evaluation efforts. Moreover, data collection yielded a great wealth of material, not all of which can be included here. It is our hope that we have been able to do justice to the profound learning that emerged from the Project.

We begin the report with a brief description of the evaluation purposes and process. The majority of the report focuses on the learning that emerged from the evaluation beginning with the personal and contextual factors that underlie engagement in the Project and moving on to name Project outcomes (what difference did VALTA make?), elements associated with the outcomes (what made a difference?), issues and concerns, and the experience of participating in VALTA. In the final section, we reflect on the learning from the perspective of its implications for future endeavours. Throughout the report we have used the words of participants to illustrate the learning.¹³

The Evaluation Process

Our Evaluation Approach

The research approach that we used to evaluate VALTA was one of “interpretive inquiry” in which we sought to understand the lived experiences of Project participants. We engaged with the participants in a spirit of mutual learning, hoping that they would gain from sharing their stories as we gained from hearing them. Throughout the Project, we made efforts to seek out diverse perspectives and to be mindful of individual voices as well as being attentive to shared perspectives.

An important element of our evaluation approach is to work collaboratively with Project participants to ensure that evaluation learning is relevant and meaningful to them. In this Project, we worked closely with the Project coordinators to develop evaluation questions and focus the inquiry. Also, in recognition of the knowledge and expertise of participants, we made efforts to seek their input as to the relevance of our evaluation questions and approaches. Once we had collected data on the first phase of the Project, we shared the learning with participants and engaged in dialogue with them to deepen our understanding of the learning.

¹³ Quotes from VALTA Project participants are noted with side bars.

Evaluation

The evaluation was oriented to learning about the process, impacts, and experiences of the VALTA Project. Discussion with the Project coordinators established the following as the primary purposes of evaluation:

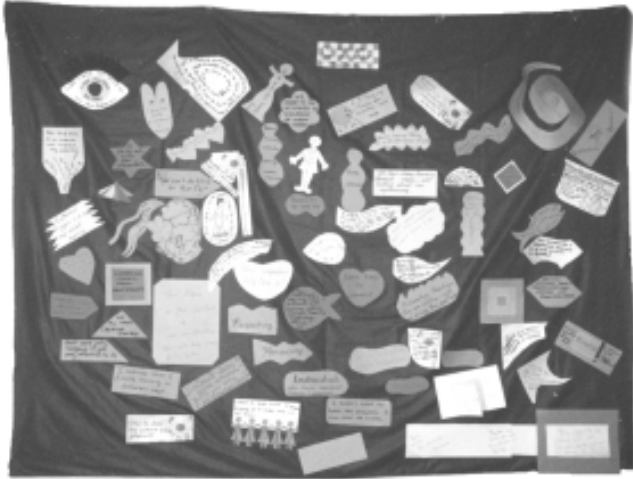
- To inform the Project as it unfolded by offering an evaluative perspective to Project development and implementation and by providing timely evaluation learning about what was working and what needed revision.
- To identify the differences the VALTA Project has made for participants and for their programs: personal change, program change, change in communities in which programs are located (What were the actual outcomes of participation in the Project?).
- To identify the key elements of the VALTA Project in facilitating/supporting change in knowledge, understanding and practice (How did the Project contribute to outcomes?).
- To learn about the participants' experiences in the VALTA Project (What was it like to be involved?).

Data Collection and Interpretation

In keeping with the evaluation purposes and our interpretive evaluation approach, we relied on qualitative methods of data collection that would allow for understanding participants' experiences at a deeper level. We hoped to collect data primarily by means of telephone interviews with each participant. With this in mind, we developed open-ended questions and sent them to participants by e-mail, indicating in a cover note that we would be telephoning them to set up a time for an interview. Although we encouraged participants to respond through a telephone interview, we also offered the option of responding in writing by e-mail or post.

Data collection was designed to be congruent with the two main phases of the Project. Thus, we sent the initial set of questions to participants as the first phase was coming to a close. Eight (8) participants responded by means of a telephone interview only, one (1) responded by e-mail, and one (1) sent an e-mail response and

participated in a telephone interview. The second round of data collection took place at the end of the Project when the research project phase had formally ended. However, several participants were still involved in completing their research projects at this time. Of the eight participants who remained engaged in the Project, seven responded to the evaluation questions, six (6) through telephone interviews and one (1) by e-mail.



As noted above, we also attended and participated in Project workshops where we collected data through group conversations, informal individual conversations, and observation. During the second workshop, we shared learning that had emerged from the first set of data and sought to deepen the learning through discussion. In addition to collecting data from Project participants, we interviewed the three Project coordinators as a group.

Evaluation Findings: Summarizing the Learning

Learning about Engagement in the Project

We began our discussions with participants by seeking to understand what it was about the VALTA Project that engaged them or, in other words, what moved them to become involved. Learning about engagement is important in that it sheds light on the experiences of participants and addresses the question of why learning about violence and its effects is relevant to their practice. Moreover, it adds to our understanding of the contexts in which participants practice and in which their learning will be implemented. Through our discussions we learned that:

1. Participants were in a state of “readiness” to engage in a project focusing on the impacts of violence on learning. This state of readiness was marked by:

- Heightened awareness of violence as a social issue, widespread and pernicious awareness of a connection between violence and learning
- Wondering, questioning, curiosity about the relationship between violence and learning and about how practice could effectively address this relationship
- Awareness of a gap in understanding and practice, recognition of something missing
- Readiness to engage in a learning process but uncertainty about what this would entail.

There are many situations in which learners have come into my office and I've known that there is more to the story than what they are saying. I've had questions about how I could facilitate literacy learning in a way that deals with the issues people are carrying with them, including issues of violence. The Project seemed a perfect opportunity for me to do this.

2. Participants were engaged by the Project because it resonated with their own experiences in working with learners who had experienced violence. For some participants, engagement was reinforced by their personal experiences with violence and the relevance of the project to their own struggles and successes in dealing with violent relationships.

I was motivated to participate because of the experiences of the students I've worked with. They have revealed the most amazing things about violence in their lives. I have seen so many students who did not learn to read well in regular schooling, and many of them told stories of violence in their backgrounds—from bullying at school, to beatings at home, to incest. These stories were not revealed immediately but came up after time and trust had been established. I knew there was a connection between the violence and their learning but I couldn't be clear about it. I knew that I needed information and skills and the VALTA Project seemed like a wonderful opportunity.

I've come to see that almost all our students have some experience with violence. Through the ESL programs I've been doing, I'm aware of the extent of state violence and control that many people have experienced.

Also, there was my own personal experience with violence which was a catalyst, and the work I did to get through it. I thought that if I could do that myself, I could help others to do it.

3. Another factor underlying participation in the Project was its potential for making a significant impact on awareness of violence as a critical social issue and on the capacity of practitioners to address the effects of violence. It afforded an opportunity to **strengthen practice** such that it would be more **safe, holistic, effective and relevant** to peoples' life experiences. Involvement with other practitioners in the pursuit of learning was seen as a means of generating a **collective consciousness** and **decreasing the sense of isolation** that many practitioners feel in their work.

I think it will have a significant impact. It's an amazing project. Literacy workers will feel better equipped to work in practical ways with people in our programs. Hopefully, the legacy will spread beyond this group. We need to raise awareness about these issues.

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Literacy coordinators come from a lot of areas of life and bring different experiences. The Project can offer a way that I can be more effective and also prepare tutors to work differently. The work is quite isolating—we all do our own things. So the Project is important in offering an opportunity for more of us to have a common understanding.

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This is a subject that needs to be discussed and brought to the public light more. Many times, people feel helpless in knowing how to deal with violence and those of us in education roles need to be very aware of issues, public feelings and ways to help those in violent situations.

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Through this Project, we can develop a body of knowledge that can be integrated into literacy practice and other fields.

Learning about Outcomes of VALTA

Although the evaluation had a number of goals, the key focus was on learning about the **outcomes** of the Project; in other words, what difference did the VALTA Project make for the participants and their programs? All of the participants were able to name important outcomes that they attributed to being involved in the VALTA Project. While the outcomes were many and varied, we feel that they are captured by the following major categories.

1. Learning

While learning is a prerequisite for all of the outcomes, it is also a critical outcome in itself. There was consensus among participants that profound learning had emerged from their involvement in the VALTA Project. They talked about the extent to which the Project had been “eye-opening” and how it had deepened their understanding of the impacts of violence on learning. Although there was some awareness of the issues before the Project began, it is evident from the comments of participants that their **knowledge and understanding increased substantially as a result of VALTA**. In particular, there was significant learning about:

Violence and Its Effects on Peoples’ Lives

The stories of participants drew attention to how much they had learned about the nature and extent of violence in peoples’ lives, specifically:

- The pervasiveness of violence and the range of experiences of violence (for example: domestic violence of various kinds, state violence and control).
- The impacts of violence on peoples’ lives and the myriad ways in which it affects learning (for example: fear, loss of confidence).
- Understanding how the experience of violence may be manifested in many different ways (for example: appearing as lack of motivation or hostility).

I didn't really learn anything new about the prevalence of violence in society, but I had never quite put it all together before. It was kind of difficult to take—the natural tendency to “ignore” painful knowledge. But it was good to face the big picture in that way. Also, I hadn't really considered at all that violence could impact learning in subtle ways that weren't obvious. It really opened my eyes.

I have a much greater understanding of the ways in which violence diminishes faith in oneself, belief in ones’ ability to learn, ability to make decisions that affect the self...violence can reduce a person to feeling like an object. And objects don't think.

For me, there have been learnings about the impacts of violence, how to address them in the program. Violence impacts learning by creating fear, loss of confidence, inability to make decisions, or emotional instability (to name a few results) in the learner—which may look like lack of motivation or poor attitude. So far, I've learned that simply

recognizing certain behaviours as possibly caused by violence rather than student indifference or “attitude” is important to the way I deal with the student.

How to Address the Impacts of Violence on Learning

All participants spoke to their **increased knowledge of how to address issues of violence**. In doing so, they named four major areas of learning that they viewed as central to changing practice:

1. The accounts of participants spoke to how much they had learned about how to **create a safe environment for learning**.
2. An important area of learning was about **how to interact more effectively** with people based on a far deeper experience of understanding their lives. This involved recognizing the importance of building caring and respectful relationships with program participants.
3. There is evidence of learning about a wide range of **skills and strategies** that can be used in working more effectively with people who have experienced violence or other issues in their lives.
4. As a result of VALTA, participants were much more attuned to the importance of **bringing the whole self to learning** and were aware of many ways in which this philosophy could be effectively integrated into their practice.

I've learned the value of becoming whole, of “bringing the whole self” to learning.

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My learning has included:

- ✓ Respect the feelings and thoughts of others
- ✓ Show people how important it is to take care of themselves
- ✓ Understand how important it is to feel good about oneself before learning can take place
- ✓ Being helpful to victims without destroying yourself mentally—being removed enough to be useful
- ✓ Healing from violence is not a fast process and it will always be with you, even though there are very effective ways of dealing with it.

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I've learned various techniques—songs, stretching exercises and others. I've used lots of these weekly in my sessions.

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There has been some major learning for me. For instance, we don't need to name violence; what we need is an atmosphere for the learner to name it if they choose.

Doing Research in Practice

Participants invariably viewed the research project component as an important and valuable learning opportunity. For the most part, they felt that they had **increased their capacity to undertake research in practice**. In terms of specific learning, no strong themes emerged that reflected a common experience of learning. Participants' accounts suggest learning in three areas: learning related to the research process in general, learning about the stance of the researcher relative to the subject, and learning about the specifics of doing research such as how to design interview questions.

I learned how to take myself out of it—with my eyes, can I be objective? What can I use to back up what I perceive?

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I learned that I needed to be less narrowly focused in my research. If I hadn't become more aware, I would have been discounting information that I thought didn't suit what I was doing.

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Time is a very important element of research—you need the time to reflect, mull over things.

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I learned more about the importance of having a framework or pattern for what you want to do. Structure is important. For me, part of it was getting over the fact that social research or research in practice is not like 'scientific' research. You've got to be willing to be flexible.

2. Personal Growth

Evaluation findings point to **profound personal awareness and growth** for participants that can be attributed to participation in the VALTA Project. The reflective learning process offered participants new perspectives on their experiences that led to increased self-awareness and understanding. Some participants spoke of the extent to which their involvement had **increased their self-esteem and confidence**. Others emphasized the importance of VALTA in moving them forward on their personal journeys such that they were able to be comfortable outside the boundaries of their established 'comfort zone.'

I've gained so much from the Project in terms of understanding myself and some of the things that have impacted my life and affected my behaviour. Participating in the VALTA Project has really opened a door for me in the sense that, for the first time, I've been able to connect some disparate sections of my life and make some sense of them. VALTA has given me a lot of tools to use in my personal journey. I expect that what I've learned will continue to affect me as it has given me the desire to learn more and a renewed determination to become a more whole person.

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I had to stretch out of my own comfort zone. I learn effectively in standard ways. This has been really different for me. I have more empathy and understanding of what it's like for students to be presented with a learning situation that's different and not necessarily comfortable.

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It's done incredible things for my self-esteem and confidence.

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I'm just plain happier! Not that I was unhappy before, but I'm more relaxed and put more pressure on myself. I say 'no' more easily, ask for what I need more easily and spend less time worrying.

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I've been trying to use a lot of it in my personal life. I've been living the VALTA Project since I began it. It has generated a lot of discussion at home, with my children and their friends. I've tried to encourage this sort of discussion and I think it's had some impact.

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I have found this initiative to be the most rewarding and factual, and the most holistic of any course or program that I have been involved with. I have found that I have brought my whole person into all aspects of this initiative.

3. Increased Capacity to Address the Impacts of Violence on Learning

VALTA set out to strengthen the ability of participants to address the impacts of violence in their practice. The accounts of participants offer evidence of the considerable extent to which this desired outcome was achieved. In many cases, participants have **overcome their own fears** and **discovered strengths and capacities** they didn't know they had. They are more able to hear about violence and to respond in supportive ways without feeling the responsibility of solving others' problems. Perhaps most importantly, VALTA has **inspired a passion among participants for making a difference in the lives of people who have experienced violence.**

In all cases, participants felt that they had more to offer to people in their programs who had experienced violence. They were aware of how their increased knowledge and skills could be implemented to strengthen their practice and felt an increased confidence about applying their learning. Not all of the learning could be implemented during the course of the Project but participants were able to speak to an increased capacity to make changes in their practice and an intent to take action. Beyond an individual capacity to make change, some participants felt that, thanks to VALTA, they had an increased appreciation of their **power to influence change in their field.**

I feel that I have something to offer now. The strategies may seem small but they're important. Just having someone not turn away is important.

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Seeing ourselves as having the power to influence change is hugely important.

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I had been so scared before that someone would disclose violence to me. I found out in this course that it wasn't so scary. Things that were scary are not scary any more. It gives me hope that learners can be supported in such a healing way...that will in turn improve their chance at succeeding at learning.

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When I first came into VALTA I was terrified that I'd have to talk about my own experience. For me to go from that fear to doing a whole workshop on it is huge.

Once the VALTA Project was underway, participants very quickly began to **integrate their learning and insights into their practice.** The changes that they have made in practice have been numerous and diverse, ranging from changing physical environments to working differently within the community. Research in practice projects afforded an important opportunity to implement learning. However, substantial changes were also made prior to these projects as participants applied their learning to many aspects of their work and their personal lives. Space prevents us from illuminating all of the changes that participants have made in their practice but we offer the following glimpses of how learning has been implemented.

- Connecting/interacting with program participants and tutors in new ways: with **increased sensitivity and sharing of control**—being more sensitive to a diversity of experiences and backgrounds.

- Incorporating ways of **bringing the whole self to learning into practice**—singing, relaxation exercises etc.—using holistic learning approaches more spontaneously.
- Developing and collecting **materials/tools for use in learning opportunities**.
- Making **changes in the physical environment** to ensure comfort, safety, sense of belonging.
- Making **changes to processes** such as registration and program evaluation.
- **Sharing learning/influencing others** (passing it on): encouraging people to reflect on their own and others' circumstances and to become more sensitive, modeling different ways of interacting, offering workshops to tutors and others about the impacts of violence on learning and how to address these impacts.

I'm more aware of the physical environment in which our program takes place. I've changed the office space—re-organized and painted, added more artwork and colour. It's a space I feel better in myself because it's more relaxed and comfortable. A student recently said, "I feel so much better in this room." I want the program space to be a place where students feel welcome and comfortable.

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The way I talk to students and tutors is different. I'm giving them more control over what they do. I think I'm more understanding of the circumstances of students, more sensitive. My goals were to learn something new and to be better at my job and I feel that I'm there. These things have happened.

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I've incorporated many of the ideas I've learned into tutor training and training with paid facilitators—also, to some extent into the volunteer handbook and in one-on-one conversations. It has had an impact on the tutors and facilitators. It helped them to understand more about the impacts of violence. They know that I'm there as a support for them.

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I used what I'd learned in VALTA. When I organized my course, I was very conscious about creating a safe environment, making space for varying levels of participation, and offering a wide range of activities (including breathing and visualization).

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My research question was: With all this new knowledge, how could I go about changing my practice? I consciously applied my learning in the writing course that we designed and ran.

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Impacts on my practice: allowing time to listen so the student can get on with learning, taking care of myself so that I can hear, finding ways to use the student's story to enhance learning if that's what the student needs/wants to focus on, or finding materials/methods that help the student focus on other aspects of learning.

The emphasis on self-care throughout the Project had an impact in that all participants had become **more aware of the importance of self-care**, for themselves and others. However, the extent to which they had been able to incorporate self-care practices into their lives varied considerably. For some, this had been a significant outcome of involvement in the Project. Others came to appreciate the importance of self-care but struggled with trying to make it part of their lives.

It's the first time in my life that I've accepted the idea of taking care of myself as a good idea. I've learned that it's okay to take the time to treat myself well—not run myself into the ground. I'm paying more attention to how I'm sleeping. I've instituted boundaries at work that make me feel much better.

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I'm a lot better at self-care. I've had a truckload of stress in these last few months. I could have put a lot of pressure on myself but I decided not to do that and I feel okay saying that.

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I'm still really bad about self-care. I do it in the classroom for others but I don't really do it for myself. I've changed in little ways but I haven't really focused on this.

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I've found that I've used lots of what I've learned in my own life. I'm more mindful of comfort and when I'm not comfortable and more conscious of what I'm feeling about things. I sense when I need to do something differently. I've incorporated a lot of the strategies into my own life.

4. Broadening the Impact of the Learning

Through **taking their learning into other contexts in their communities**, participants have broadened the impact of the VALTA learning beyond their own practices. In many cases, they have established **mutually supportive connections** with other services in their communities with a focus on addressing the impacts of violence. Learning has also been shared in schools and other settings. Participants have become **change agents in their communities**, generating discussion and action that is having a ripple effect.

I'm really excited about effecting some change in my community now! I can't wait to get started on my project (as soon as I figure out what it will be...) this has been a really positive experience for me personally and I know it has helped and will continue to help me professionally.

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Because of my involvement in the Project, I was motivated to go to the Crisis Centre where there is a women's literacy group and help to plan a women's wellness conference. It was because of the Project that I was willing to talk about this.

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In a short while, it's been spreading. I've been talking to other people about it. Everyone's been doing that. It's having a ripple effect. [Another participant] and I started a writing program for street youth, mostly young mothers. We combined our resources to do this. We couldn't have done it without this Project. Having learned to share with our learners is an amazing asset.

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As a result of discussions among agency people, things have started to happen. It has all been exciting. When I saw people thinking and talking together and saw action taking place, it was very gratifying. People are wanting to come together at the table.

Learning about Key Elements of the VALTA Project

As we engaged in conversations with participants and attended workshops, we were oriented to learning about what it is that makes a difference for participants. In other words, what are the important elements of the VALTA Project that contributed to its effectiveness and to the achievement of outcomes? Asked to reflect on this question, participants were very forthcoming in articulating what they experienced as the most meaningful elements of VALTA for supporting a process of learning and change. In naming these important qualities, they have summed up the 'essence' of the Project:

1. Creation of a Safe and Comfortable Environment within the VALTA Project

Participants emphasized the critical importance of the positive learning environment that was created in the VALTA Project. They

experienced a sense of **safety and comfort** that **allowed for being vulnerable and for taking risks** in terms of what they shared. In this environment, they felt safe to confront their own issues around violence, and to question, explore and reconsider the ways in which they worked with adult learners. The environment was **responsive to the diversity of experiences** of participants and made space for a variety of styles of learning, which meant that people could “come from where they were.” Another element of the learning environment was a **sense of equality** manifested in a shared understanding that all contributions were important and equally valued and that nobody was an expert above others. As one participant put it, there was a “**culture of gentleness**” within the group.

There was the idea that ‘nobody’s an expert here.’ It made it easy to be real about what’s going on for you.

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One of the surprises at the workshop was the emphasis on play. I thought we were wasting a lot of valuable time on play. Then I realized that what the organizers had accomplished by providing a safe place to play and be ourselves was group cohesion. I feel safe revealing thoughts, concerns and ideas online to both participants and instructors. I was blown away when I realized how important this was.

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It struck me that care was taken to encourage people to participate in whatever ways they were comfortable with. As a result, the group really bonded—we came together very quickly.

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We were all treated throughout the process as a resource whose opinions were valued.

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We didn’t have to say anything if we didn’t want to but we were encouraged to.

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There was an acceptance that each participant was at a different place and in a different space. You could come from your own experience. We had different amounts of energy to expend on it. They were responsive to this.

2. Learning through Modeling

The experience of learning through modeling was profound for Project participants who drew attention to the capacity of the Project coordinators to ‘walk the talk’ or ‘practice what they were preaching.’

They modeled what they were teaching in the way that they taught: they mirrored it well.

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Broader concept of learning demonstrated by the facilitators—they could experience it and in turn be able to apply it in their work.

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Mary, Jenny and Judy practiced what they were preaching. I'd read a lot about bringing the whole self to learning but I'd never seen it in action. They showed us what it looked like and now we can internalize those values ourselves.

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There's a huge difference between leading and directing, and while direction was offered, in choice of reading materials and activities, we were led—these three women were examples of what they taught: awesome!

3. Learning by Doing

Another recurrent theme was the power of learning by doing. Participants were not just told or shown how to develop a more holistic way of working; they were deeply involved throughout VALTA in the practice of bringing the whole self to learning. The Project clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of experiential learning.

Learning by doing is very powerful.

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The best part was being actively involved in different holistic learning options. I learned so much more this way than just reading about it.

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We learn by doing: first by taking part in art, music, and movement activities at our workshops, then by being encouraged to continue activities of that type while taking the course.

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The self-care and the holistic approach were really powerful. Here we were creating silly hats, looking after ourselves and having a good time and I wondered, "When are we going to start learning?" Then I realized that we were learning. We weren't just given strategies to use—we were doing it. It's more powerful when you do it yourself.

4. Being Connected with Others and Being Part of a Network

One of the elements that participants found most meaningful in VALTA was the sense of **being connected with others in the project in relationships of mutual trust**. Group cohesion developed very early on through the workshops and this fostered comfort, closeness and a collaborative ethic among participants. They experienced a sense of community that imparted an energy to the work of the Project.

It was really helpful to have that energy (of connection). Just knowing everyone was there was a huge thing.

I felt a sense of community—I asked for and received input from the group.

There was intensity, honesty and bravery in the sharing in the last meeting.

The workshops solidified us as a group and we got to know the facilitators. In online courses, there is often a difference between what is said and what is meant. It was not so in this Project because we knew the people we were communicating with.

The personalities within the group were very different but it worked very well. A lot of connections were made and there was fostering to work with those connections. Within the group there was a lot of comfort and closeness.

They led us to be a very cohesive group with trust in each other. One of the key supports for me was the rapport we shared which began with the first weekend meeting. I admit to finding the activities a wee tad strange...and I thought it was pretty airy-fairy until I realized how close we had become and how much trust there was within the group. That's where I knew I wanted to learn more and be able to create that kind of atmosphere among learners in my program.

5. Experiencing Support from Coordinators and Participants

Support emerged as a critically important component of the Project, making a difference to participants in terms of their ability to deal with the challenges they faced in moving forward with the work. The Project coordinators were a major source of support,

offering **unlimited encouragement, feedback and helpful ideas**. The fact that this support was offered proactively was significant for many participants who indicated that they have difficulty asking for help. The coordinators were “always nearby to answer questions or offer guidance” and they did so in a way that recognized and respected the strengths of participants.

It was also clear that the participants themselves were a key source of support for each other. **They offered encouragement, acted as sounding boards for ideas, and validated the thoughts, feelings and experiences** that were shared. Although none of the participants contacted the counsellor who was involved in the Project, they noted that knowing she was available to them and that they could contact her if they needed support made a difference. The two participants who worked on their research project as a team derived considerable support from the partnership.

Leaders were very supportive, available ... [Judy] was incredible from the get-go. She was amazingly supportive. Her personality was important ... she was someone I could talk to. Having mentors is an important part of how I learn. She would ask, ‘How are you feeling?’, encouraging listening to what your body is telling you, letting you know it’s ok not to be ok and on top of things. That was the greatest support.

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I felt comfortable knowing that we had support if we needed to speak to a counsellor or therapist. Also, the other participants support and validate the thoughts and ideas that are shared.

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The support we got from the facilitators was a really important element. It allowed for members to become partners in offering support. There was never any hierarchy. They modelled support.

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Their faith and respect for our knowledge and experience made a difference. A lot of it was them, how they were with each other and with us.

6. Project Structure

Participants drew attention to the structure of the VALTA Project as contributing to the achievement of outcomes. They mentioned a number of elements of the structure, one of which was the amount of **time allotted for learning and for applying the learning to practice**. Another important element of the structure was the **diversity of learning opportunities**: through workshops, reading,

online discussion and research projects. In particular, having workshops scheduled at key points throughout the Project was extremely valuable in terms of reinforcing learning, strengthening supportive relationships, and seeking input. In the section below entitled “Learning About the Experience of Being Involved in the Project,” we offer more specific details about the major Project strategies: the workshops, the online course and the *Changing Practices* research projects.

Reflecting on Concerns and Issues: What Didn’t Work Well

Although the focus of our inquiry was on outcomes and the factors that contributed to outcomes, we also sought to learn about what did not work well for participants in their experiences of VALTA. However, it should be noted that participants’ responses were overwhelmingly positive and they had little to say about any problematic elements or issues. The most commonly mentioned issue concerned the **large volume of reading in the online course**. Some participants indicated that they felt badly or uncomfortable about their failure to complete the readings even though they knew that they were not expected to read everything.

Only two other concerns were raised by participants. One related to a perception of deadlines for completion of work as being ‘soft’ with the result that it was easy to postpone the work. The other issue was that participants received very little pay for the hours that they put into the Project.

Learning about the Experience of Being Involved in the Project

As noted above, we were attuned to learning about the experience of participating in the VALTA Project. To a large extent, the experiences of participants are reflected in their comments in the previous sections. In this section, we turn our attention away from outcomes and project elements to consider what it was like for participants to be involved in the Project.

Not surprisingly, participants talked about beginning the Project with very mixed feelings: excitement on the one hand and apprehension and anxiety on the other. Excitement centred on the mental challenge and the opportunity for learning afforded by the

Project. Doubts about participation in the Project related to feelings of uncertainty and discomfort about the involvement it would entail. Some participants felt anxiety about having to revisit their own experiences of violence, and others worried about how they would be able to deal with confronting the issue of violence so directly. Participants described the initial period of the Project as a time spent sitting with their doubts and their feelings of discomfort, uncertainty and fear. The approach to learning that was used in the workshops was unfamiliar to many participants who expressed concerns about their ability to move beyond their comfort zones.

Once the Project was underway, these doubts and anxieties quickly gave way to excitement as participants experienced new ways of learning in a safe environment. They became willing to take risks and to shift their own boundaries. As the unknown and uncomfortable became known and comfortable, participants experienced the Project as “fun,” “exhilarating,” “affirming,” “special” and “magical.” Part of the exhilaration was feeling that they were being challenged to think differently and, they said, “stretch our brains.”

In the section below, we consider more specifically participants’ experiences as regards the three major Project strategies.

1. Workshops

Participants identified the workshops as the most meaningful and enjoyable experience of the Project. They experienced the workshops as **fun, encouraging, confidence building and hopeful**. Workshops created a sense of group cohesion and being in it together. They offered a safe environment that set the stage for developing **mutually supportive relationships**. Participants emphasized that communication in the online course was greatly strengthened by the relationships that were developed in the initial workshops.

The philosophy they were working with was very important. Bringing the whole self to learning—singing, breathing, creativity—helped people to relax but also to be very focused. And it was fun. Given the topic, it could have been very different. But it was a hopeful, encouraging, motivating experience.

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By participating in the workshop, we learned how much easier it is to learn when we did not feel threatened in any way. For example, nothing we said was ever put down, options were given if we felt

uncomfortable in a situation and, as a result, we formed a very comfortable group. It was much easier to focus on learning in this situation.

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The workshop offered the opportunity to see face-to-face where people were coming from. This was important, especially with the sensitive nature of what we're doing. We were talking about the sort of topics where 'Aha' moments are slow clarity that dawns on you. The biggest thing that happened was awareness—you can see that it makes sense. Things that I've seen through my lifetime and now I'm connecting the dots. You become aware of how big the issue is and see that there are people willing to get down and dirty and deal with it. It's inspiring and makes me want to be one of them. We were learning from what we already know.

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The workshop was incredibly important in providing us with a sense of cohesion and defining a sense of purpose. The face-to-face thing was important because we could carry on online after that. The workshop helped us to understand that the support was there in each other and in the facilitators. It was easier to talk freely after we had established a safe environment. The way it was facilitated was really important—they were practicing what they were preaching. They modeled the idea of bringing the whole self to learning. It was a totally good experience—a great way to start. I sang all the way home.

2. Online Course

The online course was experienced as an invaluable means of exchanging and building on ideas. Participants appreciated the opportunity to engage in dialogue around the readings and to deepen the discussion over time. As noted above, the relationships formed in the workshops meant that participants could be more open and authentic in seeking and offering input online. Most participants indicated that they had enjoyed the readings. However, there was substantial agreement that the reading load was too heavy. Even though participants were aware that they were not required to read all of the articles, many felt that they were not doing justice to themselves or to the Project if they did not complete the readings and as a result, they felt caught in a dilemma.

The online component of the course is magic. We talk to each other, toss out ideas, and it's amazing to see the different perspectives on reading and learning.

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The online connection was wonderful. Without it, we would go back into our projects and get isolated. It was an excellent form of communication.

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I have enjoyed the participation in the online course. I am learning so much from the others and they have also provided the affirmation I needed in some areas. I was feeling a little swamped when I started my new position but now I am starting to pace the work that I have to do. I also sometimes need a 'nudge' from others to get back into what I am supposed to be doing.

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The online course has been awesome. We have total freedom to respond as we choose. It's great because you can rewind your conversation and add thoughts. You don't have to wait until it's your turn. You're able to mull things over and come back at it—there's time to think.

3. Changing Practices Research Projects

The research in practice project component of VALTA was experienced as both challenging and exhilarating. Each person's experience with the *Changing Practices* research projects was different and each encountered different challenges in doing the work. For some, deciding on a project was a significant challenge and many participants recounted feeling somewhat intimidated about taking on a piece of research. The research process was unfamiliar to most participants and as a result, it is not surprising that designing and implementing the research projects entailed some struggles. Adding to the challenges for some were the constraints imposed by their work or community contexts. In some cases, there was little support for carrying out research projects or very limited time and resources available. Other issues related to ethical concerns associated with doing research on neighbours or infringing on the goals of research participants. A number of participants drew attention to the struggles involved in shifting from a linear, 'hard science' mindset to one that took a more open and flexible approach to inquiry. Writing their research reports was difficult for most participants, the major problems being the large amount of data they had collected and the challenges of organizing the material in a written format.

Despite these struggles, participants described the experience of doing a research project as a positive one overall. Not only was it an opportunity for learning, it also demonstrated their ability to do research in practice. In particular, participants generally derived great pleasure and satisfaction from their projects and from making a difference in the lives of others.

It was really hard to write the report. I couldn't write out the results in a straight line — it was very circular. It was hard to get a starting point.

It was sort of difficult. I'm a linear, literal person and this felt kind of loose to me. It seemed like I wasn't really doing research and I felt that I had to justify it to others. Also, I had concerns about my research goals infringing on the goals of the people in the course. I felt selfish having my own goals.

It was very difficult because I'd never done anything like this before. It was totally new territory and I doubted my own ability to do it. It was a huge issue—taking something that was personal to me into the public realm. But I learned that violence affects everyone.

I really enjoyed the experience entirely. It felt like a treat to have the opportunity to do this.

Reflections on Learning: Conclusions and Implications

In this evaluation inquiry we set out to learn about what difference the VALTA Project made for participants and to identify the elements of the Project that contributed to these differences. The voices of the women who participated in VALTA offer rich learning about the experiences and outcomes of involvement in the Project.

The practitioners who took part in VALTA spoke eloquently about the difference the Project had made for them in terms of both personal growth and a strengthened capacity to address the impacts of violence on learning. Moreover, they spoke to the extent to which they have acted on the learning, integrating it into their practice in diverse ways. A key outcome of the Project was greatly expanded knowledge and understanding about violence, and about its profound effects on women's learning and about how to effectively address these effects through programs and practice. Through sharing their experiences, participants also shed light on what it was about the Project processes that contributed to the outcomes. By articulating these critical elements they have offered valuable learning for future efforts to address the relationship between violence and learning.

The learning that emerges from this inquiry clearly demonstrates the value of the VALTA Project in addressing the effects of violence on learning in literacy and adult education programs. Participants invariably felt that their practice had been strengthened as a result of taking part in the Project. In light of their own increased

awareness about the pervasiveness of violence and its effects on learning, participants expressed concerns about the general lack of awareness among literacy and adult education practitioners as regards this issue. They stressed the importance of “moving forward with this” and strongly recommended efforts to expand the learning such that other practitioners would have the capacity to address the effects of violence on learning. In particular, they suggested that a component on how to address the effects of violence be incorporated into training sessions for new literacy and adult education coordinators as well as into professional development workshops and conferences.

The further I go in my work, the more I see that literacy and issues of violence are connected. I think it should be part of the new coordinators' training.

The success of the VALTA Project also clearly demonstrates a potential for a research in practice approach to enhance the capacity of literacy and adult education practitioners to deal with key issues such as the impacts of violence on learning. Indeed, the VALTA Project offers a powerful model for changing practice that is transferable to other contexts and issues. A critical feature of the model is the multi-faceted design that integrates workshops, online learning and discussion and a *Changing Practice* project. However, just as important are the qualities that speak to the essence of the learning approach: the creation of a safe environment for learning, learning through modeling, learning by doing, being connected with others and experiencing support. As evaluators, we are confident in saying that the VALTA model has much to offer in informing the practice of a wide range of individuals and programs providing support to people who are experiencing or have experienced violence.

The value of this project? It's huge—and it needs to go further than to literacy workers in volunteer tutor programs. There is a great deal of violence 'underground' in Alberta, and from learners' stories, it is in all segments of society.





*Applying Learning to
Practice:
Facilitating a
Writing Group*

Laurie Kehler

Introduction

For three years, I worked with the Write to Learn and Writenet projects¹⁴ in Camrose, Alberta. Our mandate was to promote the use of personal writing in literacy programming. An important part of the work we did was traveling around Alberta and delivering *Writing Out Loud* (Morgan, 1999) workshops to literacy programs, education conferences and colleges. During these workshops, we used various prompts to invite participants to write personal stories and to share them, safely, with the group. As a new facilitator, I was surprised that many of the stories were about sadness, insecurity and fear. People would write about their complicated and stressful lives. It also became clear that many of our participants, whether Adult Basic Education (ABE) students or college professors, had experiences of violence.

In these workshops, I acted as a co-facilitator to Deborah Morgan, who coordinated the Write to Learn and Writenet Projects. Deborah is an experienced facilitator who handled emotional participants and disclosures of abuse gently and constructively. I was thankful for her skill and happy to have someone else deal with these uncomfortable situations.

Through my work with these writing projects, I was introduced to Jenny Horsman's work about the importance of recognizing and discussing that violence can affect the way people learn and participate in society. While attending one of Jenny's workshops in Edmonton, I became aware of the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project and decided to become involved.

The VALTA Project offered me a unique opportunity. I would have the chance to learn about the issues surrounding violence and learning along with a group of other interested people. This learning would be both academic (which I was comfortable with) and holistic (which I was curious about). After we had learned about some of the impacts that violence has on learning and some alternative ways to approach learning and teaching, we would have a chance to step out of our comfort zone and apply our learning to our practice.

This learning opportunity attracted me not only because it was applicable to my work, but because it felt safe. I was always afraid that someone would disclose issues of violence or become very emotional during our writing workshops. What would I do? What

¹⁴ For information about the projects, go to www.Writenet.ca

would the participants want me to do? I was a good fair-weather facilitator. What would I do in a storm? The VALTA Project would help me learn more and the *Changing Practices* project would help me apply it. Most importantly, this would all be accomplished in the safety of a group of like-minded practitioners.

During the VALTA course, I marinated in information. I began to form a new framework for my ideas surrounding violence—not only about how violence affects learning, but about what constitutes violence. I began to define violence as simply an action (or inaction) that causes someone to feel violated. With a mind full of new information and beliefs I prepared to step out on my own with a *Changing Practices* project.

My Changing Practices Project

Knowing my fear of uncomfortable and emotional situations, I surrounded myself with the familiar as my project took shape in my mind. I chose to frame my project through a writing group, a process I am comfortable with and passionate about. I also chose to work with a co-facilitator, fellow researcher Janet Bauer,¹⁵ whom I trusted very much. Janet and I led two-hour writing classes for ten weeks with four eager participants. Each class followed the format that Deborah Morgan designed and described in *Writing Out Loud* (2001). We began with freewriting and then moved into directed-writing prompts. With these anchors, I was ready to choose a focus for my research.

Choosing a research focus was difficult for me. I thought about what I had learned in the VALTA Project. The more I thought about the Project, the more I realized how it had affected *me*. I had become more aware of the way my actions affected the people around me, and how I reacted to other people's actions. I began to appreciate thoughtful leadership. Simple things like activities that got us moving, scheduled time to get to know the other group members and being able to participate as I felt comfortable made learning and participating easier. It seemed natural that my research focus should be on this change. So stepping out of my comfort zone (and using Janet to steady myself), I began to take a look at how my new knowledge and values affected my performance as a writing facilitator. Given my growing understanding about violence and learning, what skills and techniques could I employ to build a productive and successful writing group?

¹⁵ Janet's research focused on how she and I created a safe space for learning. Her report is in Chapter Five of this book.

Beginning the Project

Janet and I originally planned to deliver a ten-week writing course to participants at a drop-in centre for youth who live on or close to the streets. It soon became apparent that the clients at the centre were not interested in joining a scheduled meeting. There were, however, four adults interested in joining our writing course. Three women found out about the course through the Camrose Read and Write literacy program, where Janet was coordinator. Two of the women were students at the program and one woman was referred by her mental health worker. Our fourth participant was a woman I had met through my work with the Write to Learn Project. The six of us proved to be a dynamic group.

It quickly became uncomfortable to use drop-in centre space, as we were bringing no benefit to the sponsoring agency. The space felt borrowed. We soon transferred our classes over to the Camrose Read and Write Program. Immediately, the group felt at home. One participant mentioned how much she liked the switch to the Camrose Read and Write Program. She commented, "The table and music at the classroom is more comfortable than at the [centre]. Also, Janet can bring her dogs." The new space not only gave us more ownership, it allowed us to bring in different activities like planting seeds and having a makeover day.

During our first session, we lay down the foundation of our course. We talked as a group about fears about writing, and how we wanted the course to be organized. The women were consulted about everything from what snack they wanted to what topics they would like to write about. Janet and I explained that in addition to teaching the course, we were both doing research and planned to write papers about our findings. We each described our research focus and how the women could help us find answers to our questions. We asked the group for questions and concerns. Everyone seemed pretty excited and agreed to participate.

How I Did My Research

In order to collect data from the classes, Janet and I met after each class and wrote about the day's activities. We each described responses to exercises and activities and the way group members interacted. After we had finished, we would share our writing with each other and discuss the day and take more notes. These sessions gave us time to really discuss what was happening in class and what action we might take next time. The themes that we pulled out of

our discussion became the ideas behind the following week's lesson plan. This provided fluidity and constancy for the course. The notes also provided data for my research.

Once it was time to look at the data I had compiled, the work really began! As I typed out my notes, I began to pull out themes and ideas. I colour-coded and organized my notes repeatedly. Each time I did, I noticed something new. I was surprised to discover that I just kept learning. I had employed a number of strategies during the writing course in an effort to improve my facilitation skills, but I realized that wasn't what I had learned. I had begun my *Changing Practices* project to find strategies to deal with emotional situations and disclosures by my students. I came away from it with a new vision of what a classroom could be when I took the time to watch and listen.

What I Learned about Facilitating

Awareness

During the VALTA course, we read about and discussed topics including the importance of naming and recognizing violence, the hidden impacts of violence, how to bring the whole person to learning (and teaching), and how to take care of ourselves so we could keep going with our work. All of the information and discussions changed the way I looked at my role in the classroom.

Through my learning in the VALTA Project, I had become aware of issues and ideas around the impact that violence can have on learning, and what that might mean for my practice. What I learned from the *Changing Practices* project was that paying attention to the behaviors and attitudes of my participants was the most important way of providing what they needed.

Understanding Participants' Behaviors

My first insight was awareness of the issues of violence and learning. In the VALTA course, I learned how violence (in any form) could affect every aspect of a person's life. Attention span, retention, consistency of behavior, inability to sit still and low self-esteem can often be attributed to past or current violence. These are only some of the indicators that I saw in my classroom each time we met.

Having a theoretical sense of how violence affects learning, I could take a clearer look at the four women in our group. I could see and better understand their behavior. One student could not sit still. She has a beautiful soul and is a beautiful writer, but the way she participated was often disruptive for the others in our group. On bad days, her writing was choppy, disjointed, and unfocused. She would constantly talk and fidget. On good days, her writing was crisp and poetic. Being aware of the issues, I became aware of her needs and those of the other students. Every time she had a bad day, we discovered through her writing that she had had some sort of crisis the day before. When she was fidgeting and talking, she was not trying to relieve her boredom, nor was she being disrespectful. She simply had so many worries inside her she couldn't stay still.

It is always easy to notice the disruptive members. But I became more conscious of the other students as well. Those who wrote beautiful fantasy rather than personal stories and those who struggled to keep a train of thought going in their writing needed as much help as our louder participants. Each person was coping with her life in the best way she knew how. Once I began noticing more about the students and their in-class behavior and personalities, I could see a little more into their lives. I could see our writer who lost her train of thought struggling with too many domestic responsibilities and not enough leisure time. I could see our peaceful fantasy writer finally finding her individuality after years of taking care of others. This insight helped me discover what they needed of me as a facilitator. Rather than mold the students to the classroom, I began to mold the classroom to fit them.

Shaping the Classroom

Janet and I created a space and a classroom structure to help meet participants' varying needs. As we noticed what worked (and what didn't) we made small alterations, so that all of our students would feel welcome and productive. After we noticed the students fidgeting and becoming restless part way through the class, we began incorporating non-writing activities. We tried all kinds of things, from guided meditations to soft music to sculpting with play-doh. Knowing that people have different learning needs, we wanted to expose the women to different types of learning, especially learning through the senses. We brought things to touch, smell, taste, hear and see. Sometimes we wrote about our sensory reactions, other times we talked about them. Some ideas worked and we tried them again. Some ideas didn't go over well and we let them go.

Recognizing My Needs

I think that to some extent anyone who works in literacy does so because they want to help people. Some days it seemed so easy to look at the struggles of my participants' lives and see solutions. One student was being bullied by her adult son who lived with her. It was difficult not to suggest that she ask him to leave, or at least have him do his own cooking and cleaning. It was even difficult not to literally take home the woman who was living in an unsafe place. Knowing that any of these actions would be inappropriate, I had to find the balance of what I could do effectively. In the writing group, I provided a space where women were safe to share, wonder and look at their lives and futures. I provided strength and support when needed, as well as information. I asked questions but didn't judge. I worked hard to offer a solid foundation for them so that they could begin whatever journey they chose to take.

While it was important to learn to watch for clues to my students' needs, it was equally important to be able to realize what I needed. I loved teaching this group of women. But it was very difficult. Every week I saw these wonderful women struggling through their lives. It hurt my soul to hear about events and people in their past that hurt them. It was even more difficult to hear the resignation in their writing and in their voices when they believed there was nothing good in the future for them. Some days I don't know how someone could or why someone would listen to people's pain and struggles as part of their job. But I learned through the VALTA Project the importance of taking the space I needed and setting the boundaries of what I could take on and what I couldn't. To my surprise, no one thought less of me for not taking on more. The students didn't want or need one more person in authority telling them what they should do. I also learned, from the women in my class, how much beauty there is in life. I saw strong, amazing women making changes in their lives, quitting drugs, moving out, opening up to new relationships and taking responsibility (and joy) for the lives they have and the lives they want.

The Need for Balance

My being aware of and open to the issues of violence, and my willingness to follow the path this knowledge sets out, made a huge difference in the lives of my students and the people with whom I work. By realizing that our disruptive student needed a variety of writing prompts and the safety of not being judged, we

created a safe place for her. In fact, it was her only safe place. Her attendance was near perfect, despite all the disruptive and dangerous influences in her life. When we discussed the merits of our poetic student's writing, she felt creative and talented. She began writing outside of class, and began writing for other audiences as a way of expressing herself to her friends and family.

Having a clearer idea of people's needs, my next challenge was to meet those needs. We had to design the course to create an effective learning environment for every participant. The importance of balance was clear. The course needed the regularity of structure, but also required the flexibility to change according to the group's needs. We also had to balance goals. My goals for the group and the goals of the members themselves were not necessarily the same. Finally, there was the balance of leadership. I wanted the group to know that we were all equals, but someone had to make lesson plans and keep the group focused.

Balance of Structure

During the VALTA course I learned about the importance of consistency and safety in the classroom. For people whose lives have often been chaotic and uncertain, it is vitally important to provide a space where they can be comfortable to express themselves. Being able to anticipate what will happen next and how the session will play out gives participants a sense of security.

In our preparation, Janet and I created a solid structure for the course. Each week followed the same plan. As described earlier, we wrote our reactions after each class while the participants' words were fresh in our minds. From that we could decide on themes and topics that were of immediate interest for next week's class. This arrangement helped create well thought-out and engaging lesson plans.

We were very deliberate in the types of writing prompts and activities we chose. Our first session began with discussion and brainstorming of fears that participants might have about beginning a writing group of this nature. Common worries included that others would not believe their stories or would judge their lives. From that list, the group created a set of guidelines to address these fears. Everyone agreed it is important to remember that joining any new group can be scary, especially when you will be asked to write and share with a group of strangers. By asking the group to list what people might find frightening and allowing them to build a series of rules to ease these fears, we gave them some control of the safety and ownership of the group. Each student

helped design the structure of the course which simultaneously made them comfortable within it and responsible to maintain it.

Each session began with freewriting and led into directed-writing prompts. Freewriting is a timed exercise (for our group it was five minutes) which has no prompt. It is a chance for group members to write about whatever is on their minds. As an opening exercise, it allows the group to mull over the events of the week and pulls them into writing and sharing. It helps everyone to be centered and focused. It is also a great way for the facilitators to check in with each participant without using up lots of class time. Our directed-writing prompts were based on everything from quotes and photos to objects and fairytales. The ideas for the prompts came mostly from classroom discussion. At first, the exercises were light, fun and rather impersonal (e.g., "I want to write about..." and "I don't want to write about..."). As the sessions progressed, so did the prompts. They became both more imaginative and personal (e.g., "What do you *deserve* from life?").

Although Janet and I wanted the students to have the chance to write about more complicated issues, we knew they needed a chance to become comfortable in the group before sharing intimate life stories. As the group became more comfortable with the process and each other, we began asking more difficult questions. The prompts required more imagination, reflection and risk. Janet and I listened very closely as the group read their "I want to write about" and "I don't want to write about" lists. Many of the students listed such topics as events in their past, bad relationships and sad stories as ones about which they didn't want to write. We never prompted the participants to write about these things. However, when we asked them to write about their dreams, hopes, self-image and memories, they touched on many of these "don't" topics.

The structure Janet and I designed was like a spiral. We began slowly and worked our way up to the riskier work. The group bonded in the same way. We couldn't have asked the more in-depth questions at the beginning because the group didn't know each other and there was no trust. As the writing deepened, so did the friendships. This may be why the participants wrote about the topics they had earlier listed as off limits. At the start, they couldn't imagine wanting to share that information. On our last day, we wrote about "What I still want to write about." The lists included "the ups and downs, the heart love of my life that I have," "I want to find out what I am afraid of, guilty of and angry at," and "pain and happiness in life." One person wrote, "my poems would be about laughter, heartaches, and the joy of life.... How peaceful you can feel with yourself."

Choice and Control

Although the students needed consistency of structure, it was also important to maintain their feelings of ownership and control. Janet and I designed the course so that everyone could participate at a level at which they felt comfortable. When I asked the group to write about their favorite found object, one student wrote about a book she found on a memorable trip with friends while another wrote about finding herself after years of care-taking and personal illness. Both pieces of writing were beautiful, and told us lots about the writers. Any writing prompt can trigger deep, soul exploring writing. However, if a participant isn't ready for that, a prompt can also inspire humorous, informative, less risky pieces. A facilitator doesn't need to ask students to bare their souls; they will do it, or not, on their own schedules.

One day, a participant and I were discussing the writing group outside of class. She was saying that she found writing difficult sometimes, because of a past relationship (with her abusive ex-husband). She was afraid to trust another woman in our group, as they had acquaintances and family in common. I was worried that she would want to quit the group, or would spend her time feeling unsafe. When I asked her how she felt about this person being in the group, she replied, "I just think about what I'm writing before I put it down. It might be less free, but there is nothing wrong with not writing about my past. I like to write about the present. She [the other person] needs a place too." It was clear that this student wasn't getting less out of the class, she was just taking control of what she contributed. In the same conversation she said, "This group helped me get through the nights; it was something to get up [in the morning] for."

It is important to note that the women also had the option not to participate in any given activity. That could mean not writing with us, or choosing not to read their pieces out loud. Janet and I made a point of modeling different ways of participating. Janet would sometimes choose not to read her work out loud. During breathing exercises, I made a point of keeping my eyes open. We didn't want the women to feel they must participate in a certain way to be a part of the group. Our first goal was to make them comfortable in class; the next goal was getting them writing. It didn't take long before the participants were writing madly and wanting to be the first to share.

Flexibility

Once we settled into the new space and our group knew what to expect every day, there were no surprises. The only things that

changed were the activities. This is where the flexibility became essential. I had to be willing to throw away an entire lesson if needed. Even the best thought-out exercises don't work for every group every day. It is difficult to describe how I knew when to change course. I was very careful to watch the group members, when they were preparing to write, as they wrote and as they shared their writing. Even the banter between exercises provided important clues to the students' needs. I watched for signs of boredom, discomfort, fatigue and distraction, and made changes accordingly.

As an example, during one session we had a member who was obviously agitated. She was disrupting the class because she couldn't sit still and be quiet. Janet and I had planned a series of rather introspective prompts. Seeing that this participant could not keep up with the class, I changed the lesson plan mid-stream. I asked the class to write down a page full of lies. I told them to fill the page, go wild, write sideways, write with a crayon—but that none of what they wrote could be true. This energetic question encouraged a point-form list answer. The participants didn't have to keep a train of thought going. The agitated participant immediately calmed down and began writing.

Our course design was a living thing, like a house in progress. The walls and the roof were the consistent class structure. They were solid and dependable, a safe, warm place.

Balancing Goals

Balancing the goals of the group and my goals as a researcher was very difficult. Janet and I were a great match as co-facilitators. We had similar research goals as well as the same ideas and viewpoints about how groups such as ours should be handled. We had the same values of creating a safe space and the same beliefs about how the participants should be treated and respected. We had a consistent structure. Within that we could change and adapt.

My difficulty came partway during our course. I became uncomfortable with having specific motives that were different from the participants'. My ultimate purpose in organizing this group was to see how I would be able to incorporate what I learned from the VALTA course in my practice: How would my practice change, exactly? The participants had no real interest in this goal. They came to learn and socialize, and most often they were looking for something, anything, to help them make changes in their lives. I felt guilty that I was using their experiences for my goals. I was off balance.

What brought me balance was realizing that my goals and the participants' were not at odds with each other. In trying to use new values to inform my practice as a facilitator, I was in effect becoming a better, more attentive leader. This attentiveness fed the goals of the group. It was part of my research goals to try various activities and approaches to see what would work best in different situations. My goal, looked at from a different angle, was to bring the group the best possible class experience—to be what they needed.

Balancing Needs

Balancing goals reached beyond the tensions of research. Each person coming to the group had different needs. They had needs for their lives and within the group. There were two members of our group who needed to belong to a community where they felt they could contribute and belong. The first person was living in an unsafe situation and was just beginning to make positive changes in her life. She was often unable to concentrate and sit still. Her mind often drifted in and out of the class. Our second member had left an abusive relationship years before, but still struggled with short-term memory loss and shyness. She needed a quiet space to slowly put down her thoughts so she could contribute in a manner in which she was comfortable. When she was disrupted, she couldn't keep her train of thought going, and therefore didn't feel comfortable with what she had to contribute.

As a facilitator, I needed to meet the needs of both women. To meet this challenge, Janet and I would adapt the lesson plan to both draw the attention of our distracted member, and interest the rest of the group. We had frequent and regular breaks with healthy snacks and began to incorporate non-writing activities. We soon realized that the snack we provided was a substantial part of what some of our students would eat that day. We switched from cookies and donuts to fruit plates and bagels. The activities allowed everyone to do something with their hands or bodies, as well as to talk in an informal manner. Even these discussions helped ease the tension; as members got to know more about each other they began to create their own ways of working as a group.

You can't always meet everyone's needs, but balancing them is important. It would have been easy to tell our disruptive member that this was a quiet space and she needed to act accordingly or to tell our shy person that she needed to learn to work with distraction. I decided that more than anything else, these two women needed to be in class and I kept trying different things until I found a way that worked for both of them.

Acceptance

Once I became more aware of the students and their in-class behavior and personalities, I could see a little more into their lives. I became aware of what they needed from me as a facilitator. This is an important distinction. I couldn't fix their lives or force them to fit into a classroom mold for their "benefit." They never asked for that. What all the students needed was acceptance of where they were in any given moment; they needed the support found in the classroom. It became clear that my main role wasn't to extract a binder full of good writing. My job was to create a space where the women felt accepted for the strong, if struggling, women they were. I encouraged, supported and validated each participant. They felt confident with their place and importance in the group because I honestly felt that they were valuable members. I accepted them as whole people, and worked with their issues instead of around them. This did not mean I had to fix their problems or move them into my spare bedroom. The students neither expected nor wanted that from me.

Leadership and Group Roles

The ideas of group dynamics and leadership are very closely connected to those of structure and goals. A group is defined by its goals and design. But groups are dynamic, and group issues extend past the constructs of design and purpose.

By far the most exciting thing about this project was watching the group grow and form a real community. As is common in small towns, each of the members had connections outside of the writing group. Some were positive, some were not.

In addition to the classroom structure described earlier, Janet and I worked to create a safe emotional structure. While consistency and flexibility are important, emotional (and physical) safety is essential. Physical safety was addressed by the private, comfortable space where the women felt ownership. Emotional safety was addressed by directing the way the group interacted through modeling and positive feedback.

I am normally very nervous in new and potentially emotional situations. The prospect of a student disclosing painful information terrified me. I had no idea how I would react. Would my reactions be "right"? Would I do more harm than good? I decided early on that my only option was to be honest. If I was shocked, it was okay

to be shocked. I was asking the members to be honest with their emotions; it was only fair that I was as well. With that decision firmly in my mind, the others fell into place

There were many parts of this new structure. Each member was given the opportunity to participate or pass, depending on what they needed. Each exercise was open-ended, allowing the members to be as creative as they liked. We commented positively and sincerely on each piece of writing. Most importantly, Janet and I never asked the participants to do anything we were not going to do ourselves. We participated in every activity and shared only when we were comfortable doing so. Janet and I modelled, carefully, the way we wanted the group to behave. We wanted to express that there were a variety of ways to engage with the group.

With a group of this nature and size it is important to remember that the facilitator is very much a part of the way the group works. I was no longer only a teacher: I was a leader, facilitator, coach and equal participant. I was risking just as much as the other members of the group. This created a trust and camaraderie that a pure student/teacher relationship could not.

I made a point of building on the strengths and connections of the members of the group. We polled for opinions and asked for help. We had two members who had been a part of similar groups in the past and asked for their expertise and advice for writing exercises and activities. I also made a point of commenting not only on their strengths as writers but as people. Our members became very devoted to this group and I praised their dedication, skills, and determination in class and in their home lives. By my acknowledging them, their commitment to the class increased. This commitment gave the group a stable membership that slowly began to gel and form a cohesive community.

I also paid very close attention to how the writers were engaging with the exercises. Which ones worked, which ones did not work? Who enjoyed them, who did not? Were the members being literal or figurative with the prompts posed? What were they saying? What were they not saying, but implying? Sometimes an exercise just didn't work the way I expected it to. By listening closely to the words that were written and the responses of the group members, I could tell if I was doing a good job. I knew how each person was doing, inside and outside of class. I knew if I was posing appropriate questions. I could hear when adaptations needed to be made. I also could glean themes and topics for further discussion. Since these themes and topics were fresh in the participants' minds, it made our prompts more effective and engaging for the class. They felt a part of the system. They *were* a part of the system.

Recognizing My Role

So much of my time was spent planning and thinking about the class, it came as a surprise to me when the participants were not doing the same. That is not to say they didn't value their time in our classroom, but fitting a two-hour class in with work, children, and the day-to-day grind of life was often difficult. In the eleven weeks that we ran the course, one woman was being forced out of the shelter because her time was up, one was denied access to her kids despite positive changes in her life and one was living in an unsafe and unhealthy home where she wasn't even allowed to have a key. These were only some of the things going on in these women's lives in only three short months. Pretending that writing class was a priority seemed crazy. I began to get a much clearer understanding of how it would be difficult for someone to concentrate and hold their nervous energy in check. However, each woman, for her own reasons, made the class a priority. As a facilitator, it was important for me to respect the time and effort the students were putting into class. I also had to be patient and understanding when the students were not present either because they were physically absent or present but too distracted to contribute in a positive and helpful way.

The outside lives of our students played a huge role in the classroom. One incident in particular really made me realize what my role was as a facilitator. During the course of our eleven weeks together, one student attempted to commit suicide. She missed one class, and then arranged for a pass from the hospital to attend our final session. That day in her freewriting she wrote:

[My mental health worker] and Janet got me a pass to come to writing group this morning. I feel great about that. I'm glad I have some good friends around me that really care about me. I'm feeling better every day. I'm changing attitude little by little. I'm glad to be here today. The world doesn't look so gloomy anymore. I'm happy to be alive still.¹⁶

Obviously, her health and well-being were more important than attending writing class. The class, however, had become a safe and comfortable space for her to express herself. I was a teacher and a leader, but most importantly, I was someone she could count on. The class and I were there to support her, and ensuring that they did so was my most important role.

¹⁶ As coordinator of the Read and Write Program, Janet had established a working relationship with the mental health worker. Janet and the worker consulted about how to support the woman in the final session.

Conclusion

The *Changing Practices* project taught me more than I ever could have imagined. As a facilitator, my confidence grew. I was able to slow down and take a really good look around me at the women in the group. I learned to share leadership not only with my co-facilitator but with the participants. Setting personal boundaries meant I could give my full energy and heart to the class without fear of overload. I found this did not make me selfish; it made me and continues to make me smart. Good observational skills and the ability to think on your feet are the two most important facilitation skills. The VALTA Project gave me the chance to learn what needing help or even just consideration looks like. I am a better facilitator as a direct result.

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*How Did We
Get Here from There?
Creating
Safety in Learning*

Janet Bauer

Introduction

When I heard about the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project I was immediately interested, as it brought together two areas in which I already had a strong involvement. At the time, I was coordinator of the Read and Write Adult Literacy Program in Camrose.¹⁷ I was also the chairperson of the local Family Violence Action Society.

As a coordinator, I had found that the majority of students in the literacy program were living with past and/or present traumas and had had difficulties in the regular school system. I wanted to create a space and a program where they could experience security and success. I had heard about Deborah Morgan's work with writing in literacy and employment programs and thought that a similar approach would help me create the kind of program I envisioned. As I learned more about Deborah's *Writing Out Loud* program (Morgan, 2001), I saw that it used many of the techniques and ideas I was learning about in the VALTA course. I began the training to become a certified *Writing Out Loud* facilitator and wanted to see what would happen if I facilitated a *Writing Out Loud* group using what I was learning and becoming through the VALTA course. This interest became the starting point for my *Changing Practices* research project.

My Project

Laurie Kehler, another VALTA Project member, and I chose to co-facilitate a weekly women's writing group. At the time, Laurie worked for the Writenet Project¹⁸ that trains *Writing Out Loud* facilitators. Laurie and I worked together with a writing group for ten weeks, at which point other commitments took Laurie out of town. We had initially planned to wrap up the writing group at that time, but the group's commitment was so strong that I chose to continue with them on my own for another two months.

¹⁷ I wish to acknowledge the support of the Camrose Read and Write Program and the Family Violence Action Society for time, encouragement and financial support for work related to my *Changing Practices* project. I also want to thank Dean, Caitlin, Adam and Janine for cheerleading and sharing their time so I could complete the work.

¹⁸ For information, go to www.writenet.ca

Participants

At the start of the project, Laurie and I planned to form a writing group with students from the Camrose Adult Read and Write program through referrals from community organizations and from our own personal connections. We had envisioned a group of eight to ten women, which is a recommended size for *Writing Out Loud* groups. Our writing group included six dedicated writers: Kris, Wendy, Alice, Doris, Laurie and me.

All of us knew at least one other woman in the group when it started. Wendy and Kris had come to the Read and Write program to work on their reading and writing skills. Wendy worked with a tutor, and both women came to work individually in the computer lab. During those times, the two women and I got to know each other over coffee, and each woman shared her writing with me. Based on Wendy and Kris's interest and willingness, I encouraged them to join the writing group.

Alice had written for a number of years in groups with Deborah Morgan and had travelled extensively with Deborah to promote the *Writing Out Loud* process. The new writing group provided Alice with a welcome return to an activity that had brought her comfort and support in the past.

Doris was referred by a community health agency. I had a strong working relationship with two of the staff at the agency, and a reciprocal trust that we would respond with respect and compassion for each others' clients. Doris' worker at the agency knew she had a passion for writing, and felt our group would be a good opportunity for her to express this talent and create further connections in the community.

Introducing the Research to Participants

At our first session, Laurie and I introduced ourselves to the group and explained that we had met through a course about how experiences of violence can make it difficult for people to learn. We explained that we wanted to work with the writing group and learn more about facilitating groups and how to help people learn. We said that we would eventually be writing about what we learned so that we could share with other literacy workers, but that we would not use anything the women said or wrote without their permission. We also explained that the women's participation in the

writing group did not depend on their willingness to be part of our research. We emphasized that we were all there to learn about ourselves and each other, but never at another's expense.

At the last writing session in June, I gave each woman a consent form and we talked about what the form meant. I assured the women that they were truly free to choose to not be mentioned in my paper and also explained that they could choose to be mentioned by first name, full name, or a pseudonym. I explained any terms that may have been unfamiliar and encouraged the women to ask questions. Each of the women signed a consent form. They encouraged me to share whatever I felt was helpful, and chose to be named by their first names.

I was continually amazed at the personal nature of some of the things we shared within the group, and at times I felt overwhelmed with the broad freedom the women gave me to share anything. I did not want to misuse or abuse that trust. At one point during the VALTA Project, we had discussed informed consent. The guiding principle I took from the discussion was to "do no harm." It is my hope that my writing reflects the respect and admiration I hold for this amazing group of women.

Focusing My Research

I began my project with a rather undefined question—What happens when I lead a writing group and pay attention to the effects of violence? Initially I had a number of questions. Would involvement in the writing group support other learning? How would the group work? Was I able to effectively facilitate such a group?

I was fortunate to have Judy Murphy, one of the VALTA Project coordinators, as my research project mentor. During a reflection time after a writing session, Judy asked Laurie and me how we had created the safe space she had experienced within our group. She was not satisfied with our feeling that it had just happened. I began to realize that our group was "safe space" even though there were a number of reasons why it might not be. It had not happened magically or accidentally.

From conversations with the women, I understood that they each had had multiple experiences of being told they were stupid, worthless, and unworthy. Their physical, mental, and emotional

selves had been violated and humiliated by many people in their lives. So why were they willing to trust me and each other?

During a writing session, one woman began to berate herself for surrendering her children to Social Services. She described herself as a “junkie whore” as she talked about the devastating pain of being away from her sons. Another woman gently responded, “I know just what you mean. I wasn’t able to be with my kids for a long time, either.” After these women had told their stories, the other two women in the group shared their experiences. They trusted that those deep dark secrets were safe with each other. I saw the development of trust as one of the signs that the women felt safe. I began to take a closer look for the elements that got us to a place where we each felt safe to allow our weaknesses to show and risk trying new things. I wondered, “How did we get here from there?” This became the focus for my research.

Collecting Data

Laurie and I met after each session we co-facilitated to write about and share our observations, insights, and questions. We would discuss the group interaction, the writing, and our own experiences. I found that this was an effective way to learn more about aspects of the session and how we could improve our facilitation skills. During the writing group sessions, we each focused more on observing the group while the other was leading an activity. Laurie and I would sometimes see different things or expand on each others’ ideas.

During the post-session meetings, Laurie and I also planned for the next week and developed an outline for all our sessions together. We each suggested different writing ideas and decided who would lead each part of the session. Responsibilities for shopping and setting up were divided.

I continued to keep a journal after Laurie moved. The women also shared samples of their writing with me, and I kept my own writing from each session.

Analysis

I began the process of analysing data when the writing group ended. I typed and made multiple copies of my journal notes and the writing the women had given me. I looked for statements and events that continued to catch my attention. I then sorted these into themes related to my focus of “safety.” I also grouped quotes from the women and things I learned about myself. These themes helped to focus my thinking as I wrote and rewrote my paper. Eventually I saw how a

number of factors had contributed to creating a safe space for the writing group. These included creating a welcoming space, encouraging a sense of ownership, valuing the writing and ourselves, familiar routines, flexibility within routines, sharing control, freedom to choose, freedom to care for self, creating safety through writing, and respect and compassion.

What We Learned about Creating Safety

I think the first important lesson was that sharing power and control promotes safety. Every writer in our group was empowered to say “yes,” “no,” or “not now” as was most comfortable for them. Also, we honoured and supported each woman’s voice. We all had powerful and important stories, thoughts, and feelings to write and share, and others who wanted to hear them. Being “OK” wasn’t a prerequisite to coming to class. It was a ‘Come as You Are Party’ because we were free to be who and what we were, especially if it wasn’t pretty or happy. We brought our whole selves to our learning by trying different activities because we don’t all learn the same way, and because experiences of violence can separate a person’s mind from their body, emotions and spirit. The writing itself helped to create safety as we wove community and connection from all the common threads that we shared.

Creating a Welcoming Space

There were practical, day-to-day elements of running the group that were meant to create a sense of security. One of these was the physical space. After meeting a few times at another community agency, we decided to meet at the Read and Write program. The program space is on the second floor of a building on the main street and includes a large classroom, library, computer lab, rooms for students and tutors, a coffee room and offices for the literacy coordinator and Community Adult Learning Council coordinator.

The writing group met in the large classroom space around a table with comfortable chairs. I did not want the group to be distracted by new surroundings or outside people, so we kept the classroom door open while we were alone in the building and shut it for privacy when others were around.

Laurie and I believed it was important for us all to experience a sense of familiarity in our place. Each woman was shown around the literacy program space and encouraged to make herself at home. The intention was that if the women were not expected to behave like guests and ask permission for each item or activity, they would feel they were in their own space and be able to relax more.

Food and drinks were always available. The women lived on very limited incomes and often came to the group hungry. The *Changing Practices* project stipend allowed us to splurge on food items, and the group generally chose the snack for the next week. As well as making sure the women weren't hungry, we wanted another tangible way to show that we valued the women.

Encouraging a Sense of Ownership

Laurie and I wanted to foster a sense of ownership in the group and our space. One week we planted seeds and wrote about new beginnings and dreams for the future. These plants became symbols of each woman's presence in the group. Each week the women carried their seedlings into our room, watered them, and watched for new growth. This was the first time the women became involved in the practicalities of setting up and clearing away for our time together. The new sense of ownership and involvement led to helping with making coffee, setting out supplies and cleaning up.

Valuing the Writing and Ourselves

Laurie and I purchased a variety of papers, pens and pencils solely for the group. Although this wasn't intended to enhance feelings of safety, it did say something about the value we put on the writing: what the women had to say was worth having good tools! We all chose paper with pictures of clouds for free writing one morning, and the paper itself prompted some of the writing. Kris often chose paper with pictures of roses and commented that she liked roses and no one brought them to her.

Laurie and I decided to publish a collection of favorite writing. Each writer was asked to choose pieces that had special significance for her. The collection was taken to a local printer and assembled. On Laurie's last day we had our own book party. We celebrated with cake and coffee, and each writer received three copies of our book and a rose.

For one session we wrote about inner and outer beauty and brought in a basket of lotions, shower gels, and bath salts for the women to take home. These small things are so often left out on tight budgets, and one woman commented that she felt feminine and pampered.

Familiar Routines

One week we changed the meeting day to accommodate other commitments. Most of the group were unable to attend on the alternative day, but phoned to say they would be away or came in to find out what they would be missing. Still, we found the change was disruptive for the group, so we made a point of keeping the meeting time consistent after that.

Laurie and I believed it was important to have routines. I knew that my children were more relaxed with familiar routines, and I trusted my instinct that the writing group would also be more relaxed with routines. By following a set routine, the women would always know what was going to happen next. There would be no frightening surprises. Each writing session followed a similar pattern. We started each session with free writing and then introduced one or more prompts for further writing. After writing, we read our pieces aloud to the group, if we chose to, and responded to each piece that was read.

We were fortunate to write with Deborah Morgan in the group for two sessions. She taught us to respond to the writing—“I really like the way that you said that”—and to the writer—“You sound really excited about seeing your boyfriend this weekend. Do you have something special you like to do together?” Initially Laurie and I commented on each piece of writing shared, and eventually the women in the group began to respond to each other. In the last session with Laurie, the women all wrote about how much it meant to them to hear the comments or, as Kris called them, our insights. A lot of our connecting came through sharing our responses with one another.

Flexibility within Routines

Flexibility with the writing prompts was important. I learned not to come with a set plan for the writing sessions, but instead to come with some options and check with the group at the start to have a sense of where we might go. I tried to save prompts that I suspected could be potentially more sensitive for times when the group was

feeling close and safe. I watched and listened carefully to body language and conversations. Profane language and angry movements (i.e., banging doors or cups) were indications that I needed to start with gentle writing prompts. For example, I held off on using a prompt to write about broken glass on a day that one of the women came in talking loudly about a man's recent mistreatment of her. I suspected that writing about broken glass could provoke memories of violent incidents and should be kept for a time when the group had established a feeling of closeness and calm. Another time, a woman thought she had finally found a roommate and apartment. When that fell through she was reasonably edgy and distracted. I knew that would not be a time for potentially emotional prompts.

Sharing Control

One of the first goals I had was to foster a sense of control for each woman in the group. During the VALTA course we had discussed how traditional school experiences can limit students' control over their learning or rob them of it altogether. Some students may experience almost no freedom to choose time, place, content or method. Even something as simple as when to go to the bathroom or get a drink may be determined by someone else.

In addition to experiences they may have had in school, the women in the writing group often had little or no control over many parts of their lives: the type and availability of work, finances and education, custody of and access to their children, relationships dominated by violent partners and parents, and a social system which offered them few opportunities to make meaningful substantive changes on their own terms. It was imperative that they knew they had control within the writing group.

In my *Writing Out Loud* training, as in the VALTA course, I'd learned about the importance of setting group guidelines. I saw this as one way to share control. At our first session, Laurie and I led a discussion about some of the fears a person might have about writing and being part of the group. Talking about fears gave the group the opportunity to address them as we created guidelines about how we would work together.

Fears About Writing

I am afraid...

- My handwriting is messy.
- My spelling and grammar are wrong.
- My sentences don't make sense.
- My words don't sound right.
- I'll sound different than everyone else.
- I'll get laughed at or made fun of.
- No one will think my ideas are important or interesting.
- People will judge me and my writing.
- People will know what I'm thinking inside.

In the writing group, we all created the rules. No one was asked to do anything we didn't all agree on. Setting guidelines is important to any writing group, but for women who have experiences of violence, it becomes even more essential. The world is full of dangerous places and experiences for them, and there must be a feeling of control if they are to feel free to try something new or difficult.

Group Guidelines

- No judging.
- What's said in the group stays in the group.
- Anyone can pass.
- All writing is good writing.
- Spelling, grammar, etc. do not matter.
- Take time out if you need it.
- Have fun and enjoy yourself.
- Remember, we can always add to these guidelines any time we want. They are ours.

Freedom to Choose

An integral part of the VALTA Project and the *Writing Out Loud* process is the freedom to decline participation in an activity without repercussion. A writer is not required to write on a given prompt or to share anything. Laurie and I found that the women shared every piece of writing. I was concerned that they had gotten into the habit of sharing everything and might read something they would have preferred to keep to themselves, or avoid writing on something they did not feel prepared to share with the whole group. I had written on one prompt and then questioned if it was something I wanted to give to the group. I chose to pass on that one, saying that I wanted to keep it to myself, in the hopes that my doing so would encourage others to make the same choice if they wished.

As a student in school I had experienced the absolute block that can come with having to write about a subject for which I had no inspiration. I knew the result was never my best work or in any way insightful. I did not want this for the writers in the group. My experiences in the VALTA workshops around being able to choose for myself helped me to feel safe enough to try things I wouldn't have done otherwise. Being free to say "No" made it easier to say "Yes." During the VALTA workshops, we were regularly invited to stand and take part in a in a movement activity. When I felt I was truly free to stay seated, without repercussions, I was able to stand and join in and enjoy myself. I was learning to care for myself by having control and making my own choices, and as a result, feeling safe enough to dare new things. I wanted to share this freedom within the writing group.

On two occasions in the writing group, we all chose individual writing prompts from slips of paper. Laurie and I prefaced both activities by saying that not all prompts are appropriate or comfortable or even inspiring, and that the women were free to choose another slip. One week we had written and talked a lot about the hardships and frustrations of being moms. The women had each been single and/or noncustodial parents, and had shared experiences of deep pain as mothers. The next week I asked them if they wanted to write about the strengths that had come out of those times. (Often they found it harder to talk about strength and joy than pain.) I asked each of them if they were okay with that. They needed the freedom and the control to choose in order to feel safe going further with such emotional work. Doris said she didn't know yet what she would say, but wanted to see where the writing would take her. They had developed an amazing trust in the group and the writing, and felt ready and able to face many emotionally loaded areas from weeks of writing and sharing together. They wrote extensively that day.

Freedom to Care for Self

On the day we wrote about strengths, Wendy asked for a break before we came back to share, and moved about the room clenching and unclenching her hands, bending and stretching. She knew she had control over her own time and body and was able to go further with her writing because of it.

During the months we wrote together, each of the women lived through stressful times. It didn't take long until they felt comfortable enough to say they needed a smoke break or snack, or

even to leave the room. Strange as it may sound, I knew we had created a safe place when the women walked out of the room. They understood that we supported them taking care of themselves. Their comfort was more important than sticking to a schedule or completing an exercise. We all found a sense of safety and comfort in letting go of all the things we “should” be doing. I also saw that the women always came back to the room or the group when they were ready. This was a departure from the lessons I had received as a student teacher about keeping control of the class. I find it bizarre now that it was phrased that way to me. My instinct again told me I was on the right track sharing control.

Alice came one day obviously stressed and depressed. She shared that in her writing and always read, even though she was often in tears. The writing was a haven and support for her. She said and wrote how being part of the group became part of her self-care, and its existence carried her through some difficult days.

Creating Safety through Writing

I found that the writing itself helped create safety. Deborah Morgan (2002) sums it up:

Writing and supportively sharing our stories can be an insightful and pleasurable means to self-discovery, personal validation, literacy skills development, connection to the community and increased emotional and physical well-being.
(p. 4)

The very act of writing down—sharing, getting out all those parts of one’s life that get in the way of learning—became liberating. The unmentionable and unacceptable were written and talked about and the writers were supported and affirmed. Perhaps by allowing some of those pains and blockages out, there was room for light and learning.

In our first session with the writing group, one of the writing prompts we used was, “What do you want to write about? What do you NOT want to write about?” The women all wanted to write about “nice” and “easy” things. They were quite definite that they DID NOT want to write about addiction, abuse, loss, mental illness, prostitution—all the painful and consuming things in their lives. Yet those are the very topics that the women sometimes chose to write about, even though we never presented those topics as prompts.

One of the great strengths of the *Writing Out Loud* approach is that the prompts are about simple, everyday topics, which give writers the freedom to write on a surface level or engage more deeply. For example, one of the prompts we used was to write about our favourite shoes. One of the women wrote about wanting a pair of knee-high boots that she could wear with short skirts so she could feel pretty, while still covering the scars on her legs. She could have easily written about shoes without mentioning her scars. During the sharing time, she talked about the after effects of some of the more severe beatings she had endured and how they had affected her vision of herself as a woman.

In our last session with Laurie, we asked the women to write about what they had found surprising in the group. Kris wrote about how the prompts had "...made my thoughts and mind produce such meaningful and real subjects," and how the writing had "made me dig deep into my inner feelings about the truth of my life." She also wrote that "we all grew from each writing class and (it) gave us a purpose to be here." Writing and being in the group had helped Kris talk about parts of her life in ways she hadn't before.

We also asked the women, "What do you still want to write about?" In contrast to their answers in the first session, the women's responses suggested a desire to use writing to reflect on challenges and possibilities in their lives and to make sense of their experiences:

I want to write about the positive, the good, and the genuine in me. I want to find out what I am afraid of, guilty of, and angry at....I want to write my prayers.

—Doris


I'd like to write about pain and happiness in life, to dream all things, childhood experiences, what we want to do for ourselves, and accomplishments and failures we have endured.

—Kris

If we had something that bothers us, we could write, and have the others share similar thoughts and talk about how to deal with what we wrote.

—Alice

It is impossible to know where an idea will take a person, and sometimes what I thought was a fairly simple prompt led to deep and insightful writing. The following is Kris' response when given a cinnamon heart and asked to write for the length of time it took to dissolve in her mouth:



It is hot, sweetens my breath.
Now it is almost burning my mouth.
It reminds me of a warm heart inside of me.

When it's starting to burn my mouth, it reminds me of the pain
Our hearts hold inside ourselves from the long years
We have been alive.

Now my hand is sore and my tongue is burning
As it melts away in my mouth.

Now it reminds me of how our pain goes away
As we get to be healthier,
As we grow from our heart's being in pain,
To a healthy loving person God gave us life to be.
—Kris

Fortunately, writing this way allows writers to choose where and how far they want to go with an idea or feeling. We each seemed to know when we were able to go deeper, and as the group became closer, we felt safe to try new or difficult things together. At times this meant going on gut instinct.

Respect and Compassion

I think the greatest strengths that Laurie and I brought as facilitators were genuine respect and compassion. I never felt that an emotionally honest response created a distance between my students and me. I was particularly concerned about the choices one woman was making, and told her how concerned I was for her safety. Rather than acting challenged and withdrawing from me, she stayed open to talking. We created a safety plan for her for the days to follow. At day's end, when I found myself revisiting things she had told me, my learning about self-care from the VALTA course provided a much-needed relief. I was grateful to already know what I needed to do for myself as I had planned for this eventuality with my husband. I wasn't so strongly affected by every story I heard, but I have felt that my ability to be open to and moved by the relationships I built with my students allowed for a connection that could not exist behind a wall of purely distant professionalism.

Conclusion

Initially I thought that as a facilitator it was important for me to be mindful of creating safe learning spaces and bringing the whole self to learning while working with those familiar with violence. As I confronted my own fears about writing, both with the group and for this project, I came to believe that we all need to be free to make choices, care for ourselves, and learn in the ways that best suit us. We need the support of other learners around us, and we need to be gentle with ourselves and one another when learning doesn't come easily.

In the last session with Laurie, I wrote about my thoughts about being in the writing group:

I am surprised by the depth of this experience. I could understand the theory behind writing this way, but I think I had to live it to know it. So the writing this morning has surprised me—not that we have felt safe and connected, but that everyone did and that this group has meant as much as it has. I am surprised by my own joy in writing.... To write for my own enjoyment and self-discovery has been a wonderful serendipitous experience.

I do not know how I could do my work without the learning and insight I have gained from my VALTA experiences and the writing group. Kris, Alice, Doris and Wendy are amazing and courageous people who consistently blessed me with their graciousness, courage and willingness. Our time together was filled with laughter, hope, joy, pain, frustration, strength, fatigue, compassion, caring and challenge. I am forever grateful.

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*Facilitating Reflection
about
Self-Concept*

Heather Ward

Introduction

In 1999, after 12 years in the field of Early Childhood Education and Development, I accepted a position working as the adult literacy coordinator at the Learning Centre in Hanna. One of the responsibilities of my position was and continues to be to coordinate the adult literacy volunteer tutor program. I embraced the change and felt a renewed sense of finding the perfect employment opportunity to complement my interests and experiences.

Eager to participate in all opportunities for professional development, I found a manual for *Writing Out Loud* (Morgan, 2001), a program that offered participants a way to achieve both personal and academic growth through creative writing. I had been searching for a way to connect learners to one another and to offer a support circle to the women who shared the bond of being intimidated by the written word. I felt the program would suit learners' needs perfectly so I enrolled in an online course and became certified as a *Writing Out Loud* instructor. As a course practicum, I facilitated an ongoing writing group with learners in my program.

To introduce the VALTA topic to learners and support staff in the Learning Centre, I created two bulletin boards outside my office. The theme of the first board was, *Are you in the right frame of mind to learn?* I used clip art, and a copy of an aboriginal medicine wheel, a display on holistic learning, suggestions for optimizing personal study space, and the thought-provoking question *"Is violence an issue?"*

Who are you was the heading for another bulletin on the topic of self-concept. The silhouette of a woman surrounded by questions encouraged reflection. Both boards also held handouts and telephone numbers for support services in the area.

Through the weekly writing group,¹⁹ the participants created a strong bond with one another as they developed trust and shared personal life stories. Writing prompts were simple and left room for as much or as little freedom as participants desired. It soon became evident that each of the participants had compelling stories to tell. Many of the themes were the same: recalling feelings of embarrassment, shame, or inadequacy in some area of their life. I quickly recognized that in many ways I wasn't able to address the needs of the learners. I had not been trained to respond to the learners who had experienced violence in their lives. Learners

¹⁹ I wish to acknowledge the women from the Hanna Literacy Program *Writing Out Loud* group for opening their hearts and souls on this journey of reflection and discovery.

sharing stories of past or current abuse in their lives left me feeling unsure of my own role or wondering how I could serve as a support to those in my program who were so clearly reaching for it. I wanted to be able to foster learners' abilities to move their lives forward in positive and productive ways.

I began searching for something more to offer learners. Coincidentally, a pamphlet for the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* Project crossed my desk. I enthusiastically responded to the application and was invited to join. I recognized the VALTA Project as an opportunity to expand my knowledge on the ways in which violence, or experiences of violence, can affect lives and learning for many individuals, even in the years after the experience.

As I participated in the VALTA workshops and online course, I continued to work with the writing group and to explore ways to apply what I was learning in my program.²⁰ As the course progressed, I was more intent about responding more thoughtfully to the situations learners shared with me. My interest in fostering their abilities to move forward in their lives led me to do a *Changing Practices* research project about self-concept.

The Research

When contemplating the topic for my *Changing Practices* project I started by considering the needs of those who came to the program to improve their literacy skills. As a coordinator, I had quickly learned that my role is multi-faceted. Individuals who join literacy programs often bring concerns in their personal lives that can make it difficult to learn. They often lack confidence that they can stick to a program and meet their goals, so the coordinator assumes the role of cheerleader, enthusiast, and supporter.

Time and again I revisited the concern I had regarding the way learners felt about themselves. They didn't really seem to believe in their own capabilities, which was made evident by their repetitive use of phrases such as: "I can't," "I won't ever," "It's no use,"

²⁰ I also applied the knowledge I gained through the VALTA Project into other areas of my life. I led a weeknight violence awareness workshop with eight junior high boys. They discussed the impact of violence on their lives and on society in general, and created posters and planned how to form a group to speak out against violence in their world. I also facilitated a weekly writing group within the school system for students referred by the school resource counselor. This provided the opportunity to address issues of violence and learning with the 15 children in the program. While none of the children were directly involved in my *Changing Practices* project they benefited from what I had learned as a member of the VALTA team.

“It’s hopeless,” “I’ve been told” and “I know I’ll fail.” I wondered how anyone could have success in a literacy program if they didn’t truly believe in themselves.

It’s weird how it can change. One day I think I am so smart—look at me—I brought up five kids, but then another time I think to myself—you’re just stupid and you’ll never learn—someday people will find out how dumb you really are and then what?

Here’s some advice I guess for people when they think kids don’t matter. They do. Kids turn into adults like me who feel bad most times because of those things that weren’t supposed to matter back then. I remember and for a long time I thought I was rotten and that was why I wasn’t loved. I was un-loveable. Hmph, takes a long time to change your mind.²¹

One of the questions that kept returning to me was “Had past negative experiences of the literacy learners in my program—experiences they were now sharing in the writing group—influenced their self-concept?” I felt strongly the answer was yes. In my readings I found:

It is ultimately our ability to withstand or understand the treatment we receive as children that determines what we think about ourselves as adults. (Vanzant, 1998)

Inside each of us rests a silent message about what’s expected of us. We may never say it out loud, we may rebel against it, refuse to do it, but somehow we always know what it is. And it has a powerful effect on how we run our lives. (Sher, 1994)

I was led to wonder what I as a literacy practitioner could possibly do to help the learners see themselves in a more positive light. Was it even possible?

Clarifying My Question

I started to plan my project with the question, “How can I change literacy learners’ self-concept?” While *self-confidence* is defined as the “faith in one’s own judgment or ability” and *self-esteem* is defined as “self-respect or an exaggeratedly favourable opinion of oneself” (Webster’s, 2001), *self-concept* has been described this way:

The totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence.

²¹ Quotes with side bars are from participants in the *Changing Practices* project. See the discussion about consent and confidentiality on page 106.

In the beginning, I was fairly confident that I could do my project on ways that I could change the self-concept of learners in my literacy program. It quickly became evident that no one can change another's self-concept, and that the project participants would be responsible for any changes within themselves.

I also wondered, "Is it possible for individuals to change their own self-concept?" In my reading I found:

There is a growing body of research that indicates that it is possible to change the self-concept. Self-change is not something that people can will, but rather it depends on the process of self-reflection. Through self-reflection, people often come to view themselves in a new, more powerful way, and it is through this new, more powerful way of viewing the self that people can develop possible selves. (Franken, 1994, p. 443)

This led me to think about ways to encourage and support literacy learners as they engaged in self-reflection. My question became, "What are some ways to encourage reflection in literacy learners about self-concept, and possibly foster changes in self-concept?"

Planning the Project

With my question in mind, I planned to bring together a group of women learners on a weekly basis. Although reflection about self-concept was the focus of my project, I also wanted to explore ways that using creative activities could encourage women to take a closer look at self-concepts and the influences that had helped shape them. I felt that by using a variety of creative learning methods the women would feel more relaxed and interested in the sessions than they might if I used just one method such as writing. As well, creative approaches can invite learners to bring their whole selves to learning. As Jenny Horsman (1999) notes:

I felt quite comfortable about introducing creative approaches, since I grew up with lots of materials and opportunities to try different activities. I was encouraged in my art and I sang in choirs for many years. But I am aware that not everyone is comfortable with singing or some of the other activities. So, I thought about how to introduce activities so that people would feel able to try them.

Engaging the whole person in creative learning processes can open possibilities for learners to move from the "stuck" place of trauma, and of being unable to read, to create more effective programming for literacy learning.

I also wanted to provide opportunities for project participants to explore new settings in order to broaden knowledge and language. Change in settings would also be a chance to see how women carried themselves outside of the regular meeting room, and to allow them the security of the group while engaging in a new activity.

I also hoped that the project would be a way to share power in the literacy program. In working with learners, I had noticed that they frequently exhibited a blind trust or a position subordinate to me. I felt this way of relating to me reflected their self-concept. In many instances learners in literacy programs have felt powerless in their lives. I felt certain that the most detrimental thing I could do was to make a learner uneasy with herself. By supporting the person and recognizing and supporting the development of a positive self-concept in each of them, I hoped that learners would have a better chance of finding success within the program. So I knew I needed a way to share the power in the program. I wanted the participants to know we were in the project together, and that I was learning too.

Involving Participants in the Project

I originally thought I would create a project group with an entirely new group of learners—specifically with those who had experienced violence in their lives. Then, at one of my meetings with my writing group, I spoke about my project, thinking that one or two of the women would be interested in participating. As it turned out, they had all had relevant experiences, including living through war, the personal tragedy of rape or knowing the pain of parental or spousal abuse. While the experiences were as different as the women themselves, the effects were similar: violence had shaped all of the women's lives.

I decided it was beneficial to the project to involve the women who had already developed trust with each other and me. We would be able to skip the step of getting to know each other and developing the relationship where we would feel comfortable speaking of the ways violence had influenced lives and shaped self-concept. I invited women from the writing group to take part in the *Changing Practices* research project.

Before starting the project, I conducted private conversational interviews with the potential participants. I wanted to take the time with each woman to explain the research I was doing, as well as provide each with the private opportunity to decline taking part. One individual did in fact choose not to join; she felt that participating would jeopardize her personal safety.

Gathering Information

The initial conversational interviews were an opportunity to learn how the women felt about themselves and what shaped their feelings. I did not have a set of interview questions, but approached each conversation with some general topics in mind. I started the conversation and followed the women's leads. The conversations provided a starting point for the women and me so that later we could look back to see if there had been shifts in self-concept. I did not tape record the conversations as I felt the women might be uneasy with the tape recorder. Instead, I wrote notes.

I listened to him (my ex-husband) all the time because I knew he was smart. But I never agreed with him on the soul things. My soul cannot only just feel, but it can see, hear, and experience. When I lived with my first husband I never thought about these things.

Once the project was underway, I took notes during and after sessions. I observed and noted responses to activities and changing ideas, concepts, and behaviours of both the project participants and me as the researcher. In observing, I drew from my training and experiences as an early childhood educator. I tried to describe what I saw without making inferences or drawing conclusions. I noted such things as body language, social interactions, whether affirming statements were used, the delivery or degree of comfort when speaking out in the group, the ability to offer new ideas, and participants' ability to speak to their own personal needs.

At the end of the project, I used a series of exercises to invite women to reflect about their involvement in the project. I also asked women for copies of their writing and drawings.

Consent and Confidentiality

When I met with each participant before the project started, I explained that she could review information I collected from her during the interview, check it for accuracy and change what I had documented before I used it in any context.

Throughout the initial interviews, I continually asked for verification of what the women were sharing and allowed them the opportunity to clarify or make changes. At the end of the interview I read everything back to the participant word for word. Each participant gave me permission to use the information.

I also asked participants for consent to use information as I collected it during the project. For example, if I took notes about something a person had said or done, I asked for permission to

write it down and use the information. I offered all participants anonymity, and assured confidentiality to every individual who chose to share information with me. On occasion within this report, and on the author line of the booklet created during the project, some participants' names are included at their request. In all other references to the participants, anonymity has been maintained.

Analysing Information

To analyse the information I had collected, I read the interviews and my notes, trying to get a sense of where people were coming from, if they were changing, and if there were shifts in how they viewed themselves. I found it helpful to devise a list of questions that could be applied to all the information I had collected. These included:

- Who is speaking?
- What are they saying?
- Are they being consistent?
- What are some possible reasons they might feel the way they do?

My responses to the questions helped me to look for patterns and draw conclusions. I also compared notes from the interviews and observations at the start of the project with those made toward the end. I also looked for similarities among the women, and whether there were some concepts or changes that they all shared. When I noted inconsistencies, I reflected about why they were there.

Facilitating the Project

I arranged to use a meeting space in the Learning Centre on a weekly basis. I found comfortable seating and tried to make the space inviting to the participants. I also arranged for another staff person, who was doing a work placement program at the Learning Centre, to participate as a co-facilitator. I had taken facilitator training and knew the value of having a co-facilitator who might see things that I missed and could spell me off as needed.

I assembled the materials and planned the exercises I would use with the group. I knew I would follow some of the principles of the *Writing Out Loud* program, including the free writing exercise that would begin each session. As well, I planned to use other methods and exercises I found or developed that were appropriate to address the topic of self-concept.

In my project planning, I had anticipated that each session would follow the same format that included:

- Welcoming time for re-connecting
- Time for free-writing to release concerns brought to the group session
- Interactive time to share with one another
- A planned application designed to uncover the various components of self-concept
- Quiet time to collect thoughts individually.

Every session closed with a return to the group and a positive send-off with the assignment of listing and sharing things for which the learners felt grateful. In keeping with my interest in sharing power, I planned and prepared activities for each session, knowing that the plan might change according to participants' responses and interests.

Each session also included an awareness of the group-operating principles that the participants had created when the group was first established. Principles included preserving the privacy of group members, respecting others' opinions, preserving the confidentiality of what was shared, and being able to choose to not participate in an activity.

In the next section, I describe how I used creative approaches to encourage self-reflection, discuss how the women responded to the approaches, and share some of their reflections. Later in the paper, I report on my observations about changes in learners' participation and in their self-concept.

Using Creative Approaches

To stimulate reflection I used approaches that included movement, singing, poetry, writing, drawing, painting, beadwork, and group interaction. I used various exercises to draw the learner in, open up conversation, and use the whole self as a means to share information.

Movement

In its definition of dance/movement therapy, the American Dance Therapy Association describes movement as a process that supports emotional, cognitive, social and physical integration. Publications about *Brain Gym* (Dennison and Dennison, 1994) describe how

movement enhances learning. As well, for those unaccustomed to sitting, a two-hour group session can be a long time to sit in one place. People will be less likely to enjoy their time if they are uncomfortable.

Stretching, bending, swaying from side to side and reaching our arms upward were a few of the moves we tried within the group. Holding hands can be a wonderful connecting movement for drawing individuals closer to one another for a particular encounter, but it can also be an exercise that not everyone is comfortable doing. Gauging the group and how comfortable they felt with one another provided an indication of whether or not the group was receptive to the exercise.

I had anticipated that the women might be hesitant to become involved in movement in a group setting. Feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness, and sometimes just the newness of the exercise can lead to hesitation. Once the women understood that they did not have to participate and were made to feel comfortable with the exercise, they took part to the best of their ability.

At least one participant was hesitant to try the movements and worried that she would not be able to “do it right.” She did manage to take part although it was evident she would not be eager to either continue or take it up at a later date. For others, the movement exercises were pleasant, as made evident by their laughing and smiles, positive comments, and improvisational movements aside from those I introduced.

Singing

The popular notion that music has the power to influence general self-concept is firmly established in the educational community.... There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence or philosophical statements describing the effect of music on self-concept. The Tanglewood Declaration states, “Music and other fine arts, largely nonverbal in nature, reach close to the social, psychological and physiological roots of man in his search for identity and self- realization.” (Choate, 1968, p.139)

If we begin to use singing more fully in literacy work and to explore its potential for enhancing literacy learning the result may lead to surprising success in learning. (Horsman, 1999)

Many of the women in the project were initially hesitant to open up and share their feelings through even casual conversation, so singing may have seemed unnatural for some. We sang in the

meeting room with the lights turned off and several candles burning. I think the darkened room proved inviting for those who worried about feeling embarrassed. We sang songs such as *Tower of Strength*, introduced to me at one of the VALTA Project meetings:

I am a tower of strength within and without, I am a tower of strength within (2x)

Let all burdens fall from my shoulders, all anxieties lift from my mind (2x)

Let all my shackles be loose, ah hah. Let all my shackles be loose. (2x)²²

Factoring in the group experience, I felt it was quite likely that only a few women would take part in singing. Surprisingly to me, while not all were clamoring to be heard, all of the women took part, although some more softly than others. Upon reflecting on this exercise afterwards, the women expressed enjoyment at being able to use their voices in this manner, in a safe circle where they were fairly comfortable they would not be judged.

I liked singing here—in this small room with the door closed but I still can't sing in public, I open my mouth but the sound can't come out.

•

I sing everywhere, to my son, to my house, I don't care if I am good or not. So what? I love to sing.

The singing experience also led to discussion around times in the past when a few of the participants were told their voices were not good enough to be heard. This exercise helped the women to recall past experiences in their lives that may have contributed to their present self-concept.

It was nice to hear everyone. I sang quiet but I am not used to it and I never ever had a lesson—ever—so this was new to me. My Mother could sing—she sang real nice but when I tried to sing she'd say "Put the cat out" so I stopped. Well I don't think she tried to be mean but she said some people can draw—some people can sing—course I couldn't do either.

²² The original source of this song is unknown. Moon Joyce, a Toronto-based singer and educator, learned the song from Clare Mee, in London, UK. Moon introduced the song to Mary Norton, who passed it on to the VALTA participants.

Writing

We believe that writing and supportively sharing our stories can be an insightful and pleasurable means to self-discovery, personal validation, literacy skill development, connection to community, and increased emotional and physical well-being. (Writing Out Loud Instructors' Mission Statement in Morgan, 2002)

Writing and writing prompts can stir fresh ideas, trigger memories, create thoughts and help individuals to identify feelings and discover emotions. The writing process can be creative and cathartic. From their experience in their previous writing group, the women in the project were very familiar with writing. They wrote to the best of their ability, in their own language, and without focusing on spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. For those individuals who could not write, I or my co-facilitator wrote word for word as they dictated.

Each session in the project began with a free-writing exercise to explore thoughts and feelings with little direction from me as the facilitator. Participants could then choose to share or not share personal reflections with the group. For some participants, the free writing provided a release of weekly tensions and for others it provided a chance to daydream or further explore poetry. Free writing was limited to a designated time so the group had time for sharing before moving on to the more specific exercises.

One such exercise was “The Mirror.” I asked participants to look into a mirror and then respond on paper about the face looking back at them: Who was she? What were her hopes, dreams, desires? What kinds of things inspired her? Frightened her? Worried her? Discouraged her? This exercise prompted the women to connect with personal feelings they might have otherwise not recognized.

As another writing exercise to generate reflection, I handed out slips of paper with quotes on them and asked the women to respond about how the statements made them feel. Did they agree or disagree with the statement? Why or why not? The women could write their responses or speak about them. This exercise encouraged conversation and discussion, and was particularly useful when I wanted to address a specific topic or theme.

Everybody has their own opinion of others, when they look at me they might say, Maybe she is nice, maybe she is so stupid, different people will have different opinions and it doesn't bother me because I have peace with my soul. When I look in the mirror I see a human being with a nose like my father's. Nature wanted me to look this way and I appreciate nature very much.

Writing was a useful tool for the women to connect with their thoughts and express their personal reflections on the topics, thus providing a closer look at the way they viewed themselves.

Today is one of the days when I will come to writing class. I like to come here because here I meet very interesting people, where we express our opinion on different things. Here is a nice friendly environment for expression of your thoughts and to let everybody know it. It is very important that your voice be heard. I like to listen to what people like to say with their life experiences. Also in the class I like surprises—like we have to write about something I even wasn't having the chance to think about in my life. Is it not a nice surprise and good exercise for your brain?

I think that I started to see things with a different point of view and more attentively and curiously. For instance with flowers, I will not think that it is just a flower, I will now think that it is our planet earth showing her expression of love to us in the form of a flower with a big welcome to all siblings who live here. So when I look at the flower I understand it and give thanks to her for this gift to us, and in return of this love I try to care about her whatever I can. This is just one example of it. I like this group for helping my mind to stretch and exercise. What can be better than that?

—Natalia

Poetry

Poetry is a chance to play with words, to explore meanings of language and express oneself. Yet, for many of the women, the challenge of writing poetry felt daunting:

You've got to be kidding, I am no poet. I can't rhyme anything. My grandma always wrote poetry on our birthday cards but I never could figure out how she did it. Poetry? Yeah right!

Many of the participants shared the misconception that poetry must rhyme in order to be considered of value, and for this reason many had never given poetry a valid effort past the school experience. When poetry was presented in a new light—simply that of thoughts put on paper, that poetry in fact does not have to rhyme—the challenge became much more attainable.

I invited the women to write some comments on the way they felt about themselves. The earlier discussion had created questions for the women to consider: “Why do you suppose you feel this way

about yourself?" "What experiences have made you feel this way?" "What types of situations have reinforced those beliefs?" Some questions were addressed as a group, and some were left for individual consideration.

After the women had each written their lists, they shared their "poems" with one another. The freedom and the opportunity for them to place a new value on their work offered the women the chance to honor their own thoughts and words:

The rose cannot change her petal
All roses are beautiful
And nature wants her petal to be just the way it is
—Natalia

Drawing and Painting

Using art can offer a freedom to learners who have never before completed a piece a work without it being judged or graded. Having the private space to use materials in a creative way can be an entirely new experience for many. I was certain that art would allow the women to think differently about their own abilities. For those with a language or literacy barrier, pictures, drawings and diagrams may provide an easier route to expression than words.

Like singing, however, drawing and painting can be a foreign task for those who don't feel confident, or if others have experienced negative responses to their artwork or ability.

As with the other activities, people needed to feel comfortable in order to take part. Once we acknowledged that in art every line is unique and there is no right or wrong way to create, the women were able to freely use the time and materials to express themselves. In one drawing activity, I asked the women to draw themselves. Self portraits can be revealing and useful for reflecting on the way people see themselves. During the sharing time that followed, participants had a chance to talk about why they held certain beliefs about themselves that they saw in their drawings.

Draw? I can't draw to save my life!

•

You know I was never any good at painting—that was my sister's thing. I actually loved to paint until my parents made comments like that, so I stopped trying altogether.

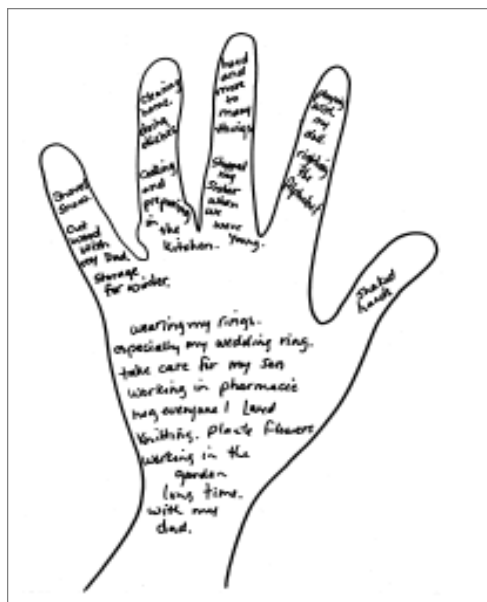
It's not that good, but hey I tried. I guess I look like that—I know I have hair like that. Well it's not that pretty but that's ok—that's me. I am appreciative of my life. Even through the bad things that have happened to me—I have learned that I can appreciate the things that are good.



One of the women drew a large heart but it was not intact. After drawing activities like this one, it was crucial to have time for women to either share their feelings with the group, or to sit quietly without having to explain their emotions. In my role as the facilitator, I needed to have a sense of how the group members felt to ensure that the appropriate action and response followed.



In another drawing exercise, participants outlined one or both of their hands on paper and listed all the things their hands had done over the years. This was a way to reflect on life situations, recall memories—both pleasant and unpleasant—and to begin sharing particular feelings. For some participants, this exercise also reinforced special capabilities that may have been forgotten, such as working in a pharmacy. In one example, the participant spoke of shoveling



snow, cutting firewood with her father for winter, taking care of her son, slapping her sister, planting flowers and shaking hands, among other activities.

In a painting activity, I invited women to paint the answer to the question, "What does this group mean to you?" Participants' paintings encouraged conversation and discussion about the support network they had established with one another.

Beadwork

As with the other creative methods, I felt that beadwork would provide a hands-on opportunity to engage the women in conversation about their private selves. I brought in a selection of beads and lacing and provided instructions to create a necklace, bracelet, or anklet that held special meaning for participants. I suggested that they choose beads as follows:

- One bead for the center to represent their spiritual self
- Two beads placed on either side of the centre bead to represent family
- Four beads on either side of the family beads to represent friendships
- Three beads on either side of friendship to represent community or other supports.

In planning the exercise, I was aware that women who did not have family stability might not want to include beads to represent family. I was ready to encourage women to create significances other than the ones I suggested.

Participants chose beads in an assortment of colors, sizes and shapes and selected coordinating lacing. Once completed, the beadwork bore special importance to the one who created it. The women shared the reasons behind their choices of beads:

Oh I plan to wear this for a long time. I like bracelets and this one is special.

•

Now I know all about my bracelet and when I look at it I will think of my family far away.

•

It's a good idea—I remembered a special friend and put her friendship on here.

Guided Discussion

I often encouraged discussion before or after other activities, but sometimes a guided discussion was an activity in itself. As an example, I asked participants to write down one positive quality of each of the other group members on small slips of paper. Then the slips of paper were given to each participant, who read them out in a sharing circle.

Many with a poor self-concept may be unable to accept a compliment or praise due to the internal voice fighting the idea.

This internal voice can be the result of years of feeling inadequate or not good enough. I wanted to use the exercise to open up a discussion around how it felt to take part in the exercise itself, and to demonstrate that others may notice or feel things about the women that they did not necessarily recognize or feel toward themselves.

The exercise was foreign to some as they were unused to hearing positive things stated about themselves in this manner. Two of the women were embarrassed by the activity, and perhaps even suspicious as to whether or not the comments were “true.” Their embarrassment was evident through body language, covering their face, blushing, and repeating phrases such as:

Oh I am not pretty! You think I have nice eyes? Hmm. My grandpa always said I had eyes like a raccoon.

Sweet? Well maybe here I am sweet, but not at home...my husband wouldn't think I am so sweet.

Although these were the reactions of some, by the end of the session each of the women seemed genuinely touched by the results.

We spoke about the appropriateness of delivering compliments, and of the difficulties someone may have in receiving a compliment, particularly if she has a poor self-concept.

Well, I am surprised to hear such nice things; maybe now I will think differently. I never knew someone might think of me as pretty.

Awareness of Comfort Zones

Through movement, singing, poetry, writing, drawing, painting, beadwork and group interaction, project participants were able to explore new learning methods, see and reflect upon how an experience felt, and feel different emotions.

While some activities were uncomfortable for some group members, participants became aware of their personal comfort zone through the experience. Talking through and sharing fears, ideas and beliefs about personal comfort zones was helpful to participants who may not have considered why they held certain assumptions about these activities. Discussing feelings of discomfort alleviated some of the tension in those who felt fear when an exercise was

presented. Acknowledging the “right to pass” without any further explanation allowed the women to refrain from sharing and not feel a need to defend their choice.

Opportunities for New Experiences

Along with the scheduled meeting times, there were opportunities for the group to meet in a variety of settings. We shared biscuits in a country tea house; had supper on a cattle farm; celebrated occasions such as birthdays, Christmas and Valentine’s Day with theme parties; enjoyed coffee in a home setting; and traveled together several hours to take part in a women’s wellness conference. Each of the opportunities offered participants a chance to explore new settings and broaden their knowledge and language base. The change of setting was also a chance to see how the women carried themselves outside of the regular meeting room, and to allow them the security of the group while engaging in a new activity.

Two of the women were initially hesitant to take part in the outings but then attended and spoke positively about the experience. Each time they had expressed hesitation I reviewed in detail what the activity would involve; what they could expect to see, feel and hear; how they were expected to dress; and if there was a cost involved. The private conversation usually ended with a statement such as “I trust you so I’ll go; I am not used to this but I trust you.”

Attending a Conference

When the opportunity arose to take the group to a women’s wellness conference in another community, the timing was perfect. The group had been together long enough that traveling together for two hours was feasible and I was confident that the women were ready to venture into uncharted territory. In preparation for the trip, I spoke individually with the women and then to the group. I was curious to know their expectations. What were their fears? How did they foresee the day unfolding? What were they looking forward to? What did they hope to come away with?

Many of the women exhibited a general trust that I was leading them into a positive experience. Few revealed apprehensions. I was somewhat surprised by this. I myself had apprehensions about the day and I found it curious that they did not. My own apprehension included concerns about how the women would feel being away from home. Would they feel comfortable? Would they tire easily of each other after an entire day together? Would the experience be positive for them? I wanted to offer the experience to the women to stretch their comfort zones even further. Was I making the right call?

The community where the conference was held is smaller than Hanna. I was expecting a relaxed, intimate conference but really knew little of what to expect, having never been there before. Arriving at the conference I was surprised and delighted to see how grand everything was. Women had arrived from near and far and the atmosphere was electric. A beautifully decorated hall was set for over 100 people. Linens, lights, flowers and sound welcomed us as we entered. The conference had already exceeded my expectations and it hadn't even yet begun.

First on the agenda was the welcoming and an address on women's health issues. Next was a presentation on *Brain Gym*²³ which included an explanation of ways in which stress inhibits learning—this was directly relevant for the women in the project group.

The *Brain Gym* presentation also included participation in exercises that the speaker demonstrated. Most of the exercises could be performed while seated, although one or two required the audience to stand and interact with one another. The movement activities in the larger group setting of the conference seemed to be a stretch for some of the women in the project group. The quick exchange of glances told me that they were uncomfortable with the idea of movement in this setting. I was thankful the women had at least some familiarity with movement through the exercises we had tried in our sessions.

Following the presentation, we were treated to a delicious lunch where door prizes, giveaways and casual conversation provided a break from the formal presentation. Gauging the mood and body language of the women, I was pleased to note that despite four hours of conference activities, they were still alert, interested and responsive to their surroundings.

The final speaker was entertaining and inspiring. She spoke on inner beauty, self confidence, assertiveness, bravery in the face of despair, blessings, and suggestions for following a light-hearted approach to infuse joy into daily living. She also spoke of “wondrous western women” who had overcome hardship and found creative solutions, and of the leadership skills and strengths they needed to succeed in their lives. It was fascinating how the presentation connected with the project participants. Many of them waited afterwards for a chance to visit with the speaker and purchase a copy of her book.

²³ *Brain Gym* is a series of movements that can be used to encourage whole-brain learning. For more information, refer to Dennison and Dennison, 1994.

Reflections and Questions

Leaving the conference, the women were exuding a new confidence; they had taken part in an opportunity that they had never dreamed of. One of the participants in particular had not been aware that such opportunities existed—certainly not for her. She noted:

I had never heard of such a thing as a women's conference—I didn't know what a conference even was—and that women could actually get together to talk about—well, women things. I was surprised too that the speakers were women—I thought they would all be men.

Hearing this affirmed that within my role as coordinator there lay a clear opportunity to offer the women and other members of the group diverse learning opportunities and chances to see, feel, and experience more of the world around them.

On the ride home, the women shared an excitement about the things they had learned. They tried out various *Brain Gym* activities in the van, and giggled about the antics of the last presenter who at one point had stood on a chair to gain attention. Amidst the laughter and gaiety I found myself wondering, what do you do with information gained but without the context to use or to sustain your enthusiasm? The women were returning to unchanged home situations although they themselves were perhaps changing. I worried that the opportunities I was providing to encourage the women to look at themselves in a positive light could, for some, have the opposite effect. Would the women begin to feel that areas of their lives were lacking? They were asking about future conferences and if we would be going to any more.

In discussion with the women, my fears were allayed. They didn't feel any negative emotions after the conference. In fact, someone expressed that she felt hopeful that her life would hold more opportunities like the conference—opportunities to which she would now be open.

Ending the Project

As a wrap-up to the project, the participants continued to meet once a week past the originally scheduled ten weeks. They continued to draw strength from the group as well as one from another. A sense of closure was needed for those who had opened

their hearts and souls and shared their innermost feelings. In a series of mini exercises, I asked participants to reflect on the project and what it meant for each of them to be involved.

I searched for a way to acknowledge the women's contribution to the group. I decided that a significant way to recognize the women would be to document their thoughts in a publication for later use in literacy programming. Using the women's words, we created a tiny book of feelings called *I feel better about myself*. Each of the women received a copy of the booklet and a small gift at the end of the last session.

What Was Learned from the Project

Importance of the Group

As noted earlier, participants reflected about what it had meant for them to be involved in the project. A number of the women wrote about the importance of the group in general, and as a place to share and be listened to.

Women also wrote about changes they had experienced from being in the group.

I would miss the group so much if it stopped.

•

I don't think we can stop now—we are just getting good!

•

You start to feel important when people want to listen to you.

•

I feel better when I have someone to talk to.

•

Before and After

Before this group I had dreams

Before this group I had an imagination

Before this group I had opportunities to express myself

After being in this group some of my dreams came true

After being in this group I used my imagination

After being in this group I have used the opportunities to express myself

—Natalia

Before and After

Before this group I had no friends, no fun, I never talked about myself, I never wrote my thinking. No talking to somebody about my troubles, no time for myself, I wasn't able to make a joke.

After this group I met new friends, I had fun, I learned to talk about myself, I was able to talk to someone about my troubles, I met a couple of hours every week with a group of ladies. There is now, with open hands, new vision, new hopes, open hearts, laughing, and I can make jokes.

—Sharar

Changes

Through ongoing recording and comparisons of my observation of the women as they took part in the group activities, as well as their involvement in the project on the whole, I was able to recognize and document small but notable changes in each of them.

Awareness and Easing of Comfort Zones

Subtle yet telling changes taking place were evident in the easing of comfort zones; the women were more likely to try new ideas presented to them with less resistance than at the beginning of the sessions. Over time, the women became more relaxed with the group members and with myself as facilitator. As evident from body language, participants were assuming a more relaxed posture, choosing to sit nearer one to another. Sharing personal items such as pens and cough drops, they also began to share personal stories much more freely than they did in the beginning and began arranging times to connect with one another outside of the group.

Changes in Self-Concept

Women's writing and discussions point to ways in which their self-concept changed.

It was hard for me to ask for help. I did terrible in school and I hated it anyway so I quit. I always thought it wouldn't matter and it didn't for a while, but then all of a sudden my job changed. There was more reading I had to do so I had to quit. I felt awful and I was afraid people would find out. I was so embarrassed before but now I learned that I am not alone—there are lots of folks who have reading problems and I actually feel better about myself because I understand now that it is just

another skill. Like I learned to sew so I can probably learn to read and just because I can't read doesn't mean I'm stupid.

•

I tried not to think about myself if I could help it—I guessed I was dumb—oh everybody knew it about me, my teachers, my brothers, they all treated me terrible—worse than the dog I bet. Sometimes I remember but mostly I try to ignore it (the memories). I used to try to ignore me—it was easier that way. When you ask me to think about me I have a hard time—I never mattered—or at least that's how I felt. I mean I probably mattered to my Mom maybe when I was really young but she couldn't see the things that went on and she was old anyway. There was no point in complaining because no one really believed it or cared. I thought I was supposed to be mature now and forget everything. Now I know that someone else will listen and feel for me, even though I can't change anything and to think about it still upsets me—but I know that someone cares and that gives me hope that I can feel better about myself.

Reflection

For some women, the process of reflection and using their imagination was also a shift.

I never used to think about anything—now I have so much to think about! The learning group gave me an opportunity to think about everything in an imaginable way, to be more understandable I give you an example. One day I was exploring the town on my bicycle. I saw an ordinary fence that was glowing like gold because the sun was shining on it. It amazed me because it made me think of how gold is a treasure, like the treasure of paper from wood. In group we write on paper and print in books which are treasures too. I never would have thought like this before the learning group.

—Natalia

•

Before group I would never turn my mind to think about things. When I came to group I started to think this way.

What Now?

As I write, four months have passed since the project ended. Four of the women have returned to the writing group eager to continue their journey into self-discovery and learning. One woman felt overwhelmed by the project process, frightened that the group was moving more quickly into a new level of comfort that she did not

share. When a much larger and longer conference came up, she was definite that it was too much for her to attend. She has yet to return to the Learning Centre.

Although this woman's hesitation at this point may be viewed as a step backward, I feel that not all progression involves action. Periods of reflection can be a time of certain growth and often distance is needed to see what is most closely at hand. Another woman who took part in the project has relocated, and unfortunately due to her personal situation is no longer able to maintain contact with the Learning Centre, although she has passed word through public agencies that she is doing well. She misses her time with the project and hopes to one day connect with another writing group.

Two of the women involved in the project are excitedly making plans to attend a three-day provincial literacy conference with literacy tutors, learners, and volunteers in attendance. The opportunities for these women and the doors that will continue to open for them are promising.

Reflections on the Research Process

As the researcher I often found myself with more questions than answers, perhaps indicative of the growth one experiences in undertaking such a project. Questions such as: Where is my energy best spent? Will my work be meaningful? To whom? How will it help the women of my program?

Some of these questions were answered along the way and others may be answered as time passes and individuals begin to feel differently towards themselves as a result of the project. Fortunately I recognized the questions as part of a natural process of learning. I also had resources to turn to, as well as the guidance of the VALTA Project leaders for insight. The leaders assured me that reflection was in fact necessary as I would uncover perhaps new ideas for direction or contemplation that would ultimately benefit my research.

Applying What Was Learned

The research from my project suggests that coordinators of literacy programs can support and sustain the development of positive self-concepts with literacy learners. The importance of encouraging a positive self-concept is advocated by others in the literacy field:

....offering each learner a positive image of herself as valuable and of worth can make such an incalculable difference, then every respectful interaction in the educational setting is of crucial importance. (Horsman 1999)

The recommendation for literacy and adult basic programs is to foster and recognize non-academic outcomes of attending a program, outcomes that build self-esteem, encourage awareness of and reflection on life and learning experiences, and increase agency. Since people with higher agency develop more varied and more useful learning strategies, working with learners on increasing agency and self-worth is a useful strategy for improving learning strategies. (Niks, Allen, Davies, McRae and Nonesuch, 2003. p. 82)

Coordinators' and support staff's awareness of the barriers which learners face in their lives can benefit both the program and the learner. Experiences with violence, dysfunctional family or social connections, past and present failures, learning disabilities, state of mental health, and a distorted self-image can all contribute to a learner's poor self-concept. While coordinators can do little to change the way a person feels about himself or herself they can do plenty to encourage learners to develop positive self-concepts. Often opportunities exist for learners to move forward in their lives, although they may not recognize the opportunities for themselves. (Appendix A at the conclusion of this chapter includes some questions that coordinators and learners might use to explore self-concept.)

I would like to imagine that literacy programs are consistently examining the barriers to learning for those entering their programs. I would also like to believe that they are also considering the self-concept of literacy learners as they tailor the type of programming

You CAN begin the process of learning if you have the appropriate supports to believe in yourself.

made available to these individuals. Changes can come about in those who have a renewed sense of self-worth and coordinators can foster self-reflection about self-concept. The statement, "You can't learn if you're no good," made by a learner in the Hanna Literacy Program, needs to be addressed by literacy practitioners everywhere.

When light falls on the dark corner of our minds where we keep our oldest assumptions—the whole world looks different. Just understanding what troubles us, realizing that each of our difficulties has a name, a cause, a logic to it, is liberating. Nothing can make you feel as helpless as ignorance, and the truth can set you free. (Sher, B., 1994)

Conclusion

My intentions for the project had been to offer women opportunities to see themselves in a new light; to learn and experience new things; to learn to recognize their positive qualities; to grow and stretch—possibly beyond their comfort zones—to explore their thoughts, feelings, and emotions; to recognize and respond to their own voice; to respect themselves and their life experiences; and to place a higher value on themselves after being a part of the group.

Through all of the project interactions I was confident I had accomplished what I had set out to do. I had offered the women the time, space, resources and materials to explore their thoughts and feelings, in a controlled setting, with appropriate boundaries and supports. I am hopeful the women will now find a way to apply the practices and methods we tried to their individual lives, without the group, and to use the overall experience to move forward in their lives.

Being a part of the group, I learned firsthand that although we come from all walks of life, we are much the same. Our desires, wants and needs are often very similar. We want to provide for our children; we wish for good health and well-being for ourselves and our loved ones; and we all want to be recognized, valued, heard and respected. We all want to have the opportunity to learn new things, we all want to feel safe, and yet we want to have others recognize our strengths. I have learned that no matter what the life circumstance, we are all women first and we all want to have a voice.

I have met brave women who are exploring the outer edge of human possibility, with no history to guide them, and with the courage to make themselves vulnerable that I find moving beyond words.

– Gloria Steinem

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Appendix A:

Questions to Prompt Reflection

A. Intake Inventory

- Why did you come to the literacy program?
- How can the literacy program help you?
- What are you interested in learning?
- What grade did you complete in school?
- Did you enjoy school? Why? Why not?
- What do you hope to learn here?
- What are your goals?
- How long do you think it will take you to reach your goals?
- Name one thing you have trouble doing.
- Name one thing you do really well.
- Think of a particular skill you want to learn. Will you learn best by: watching, listening, doing, reading?

Invite participants to complete one or more of the following sentence starters:

- I am
- I know
- I feel
- I never
- I love
- I worry
- I wonder
- I hope
- I wish
- I am thankful for

***B. Questions to Be Used Once a
Relationship Has Been Established between
the Coordinator and Learner***

- Describe yourself.
- Describe the way others see you.
- Draw a picture of yourself.
- Identify one negative quality about yourself.
- Identify one positive quality about yourself.
- What is the worst thing anyone has ever said about you? How did it make you feel?
- What is the best thing anyone has ever said about you? How did it make you feel?
- List three of your strengths.
- Why is it important that you do well in the program?
- What can the coordinator do to help you reach your goals?





*Facilitating a Workshop
about
Violence and Learning*

Brenda Squair

Introduction

In September 2002, I was hired as a coordinator for the Partnership Approach to Literacy (PAL) Project in Pincher Creek.²⁴ I joined the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project in order to learn more about how violence affects learning and I hoped to pass on some information to our tutors. From a personal point of view I was fascinated with a project that spoke out about issues of violence as I had experienced violence in my marriage for eight years. It was interesting to think that something so negative could be studied and perhaps turned into a positive.

I have learned, experienced and grown so much from being involved with the VALTA Project. Getting together with other people to discuss issues surrounding violence was a new experience for me. I was initially terrified by the thought of bringing up all the details of violence I had experienced and sharing them with others. Fortunately, this was not the goal or expectation of VALTA. I appreciated the freedom to share only what we wanted and the urging to take care of ourselves in whatever way worked best for us. This included leaving the room at any time, using different ways of creating to express ourselves (drawing, painting, writing, building with different materials), working in a part of the room that felt the most comfortable for us, singing, eating healthily, and moving through exercise or breathing techniques. The VALTA Project environment became very non-threatening and I learned about the importance of the effects of environment and self-care on the learning process. The sense of taking care of myself through holistic learning (body, mind, spirit and emotion) was totally new to me.

After leaving my husband several years ago, one of the first things I wanted to do was take courses, study and read. However, for one full year I could not focus on anything but my fear and the stress of my situation. Reading to my four young children was the only reading I could finish. Sewing, which I enjoy, was out of the question, and I dropped out of a university course because of the reading and writing expectations. Although the experience that year was very frightening and I thought I was losing my mind, this experience was one of the things that drew me to the VALTA Project. I began to wonder if many literacy students who are escaping violent situations try to get on with their lives through

²⁴ I wish to acknowledge and thank Kathy Day, coordinator of the PAL Project, for encouraging me to step out with the VALTA Project.

learning, when self-care is also needed to enhance their learning process. I started to wonder what I could share with others in the literacy field through my own experience and from what I was learning in the VALTA Project.

My Changing Practices Project

From these wonderings came the question that prompted my research project: *How can tutors support students who have issues of violence in their lives?* The purpose of my project was to develop a half-day in-service workshop for tutors and teaching assistants about the impact of violence on learning. This project interested me because by speaking aloud about violence and how it affects learning, we break the silence about existing problems and find strategies to create better learning environments. As tutors gain skills and helpful insights to deal with issues that may arise in their tutoring, tutoring sessions may be more meaningful and significant for both the tutor and the student.

The Workshop

I wanted to develop a workshop that would accomplish two goals: to open discussion about how violence affects learning and to provide strategies for tutoring. I also wanted to share the idea of holistic learning and of one's complete self being nurtured in order to improve the learning process. To plan the workshop, I drew from what I had learned through VALTA and from some related resources (see references). The VALTA facilitators and participants gave me feedback on my workshop plan, which I then revised. I presented a three-hour workshop in Pincher Creek in March 2003. I also presented a shorter version of the workshop at the Provincial Literacy Conference the following November.

Workshop Activities

This section includes directions for the following workshop activities, along with some of the participants' responses and my reflections. Copies of the workshop overheads are in Appendix A.

HOW VIOLENCE AFFECTS LEARNING

- ✓ Introductions
- ✓ What do we know about how violence affects learning?
- ✓ What if abuse is suspected?
- ✓ How does violence affect learning?
- ✓ Exploring the body-mind connection
- ✓ Exploring holistic learning
- ✓ What tutors can do
- ✓ Strategies for whole-brain learning and focusing
- ✓ Strategies for tutors
- ✓ Community resources
- ✓ Closing
- ✓ Evaluation

1. Introductions

Each person gives their name and involvement in the literacy field.

Explain that the play doh, stress balls and pipe cleaners are tools people can use to bring their physical selves to learning and to stay present. Note that some discussions could be disturbing and encourage participants to take care of themselves.

Reflection

The hands-on items were well used in the Pincher Creek workshop, perhaps because it was three hours long. In Edmonton, there was no time for group introductions but people seemed fascinated with the pipe cleaners and balloons. However, at the end of the Edmonton workshop, at least three people asked, "Now what is this pipe cleaner for?" Perhaps I didn't get the concept across very well, but people had trickled into the early morning workshop and may not have heard the introduction. The idea of having something to do with their hands, while listening, may have been a new approach to many. In any case, in comparison to the first workshop, people in the second workshop did not seem to need the hands-on items for tactile self-care.

2. What do we know about how violence affects learning?

Everyone writes freely for five minutes about whatever comes to mind about how they think or know violence affects learning. If nothing comes to mind, have them write any questions they have. After writing, participants choose one sentence from their writing and copy it onto a piece of paper with felt pens. Tape these papers up at the front of the room. Discuss. Ask if there is anything surprising in what is posted.

In a frightened state, children use the part of the brain associated with fight or flight, not the part where they can grow, create and blossom.

•

Those in a violent atmosphere learn to shut off and tune out and thus are not open to learning.

Violence causes emotional upheaval and/or physical pain which distracts and shuts down cognitive processes required for learning!

•

Violence affects self-esteem and this is linked to a student's belief in [his or her] abilities.

•

Stress—mental depression and physical ailments

•

Developed feelings of not caring

•

Lack of trust

•

Fear of making mistakes

Reflection

Starting with a writing activity immediately involved everyone in the room with a common purpose. Best of all, it gave me a chance to observe participants individually and judge the feeling in the room. At the Edmonton workshop I didn't know one other person in the room, so I particularly liked the writing at the beginning to gauge the mood and receptiveness of people.

The writing also introduced the workshop as a communication activity, where opinions are valued and respected. Participants in both workshops seemed to have a wonderful understanding of issues around violence. The examples of responses [above] show the range of ideas that were shared about how violence affects learning.

3. Types of violence

Show the overhead *Types of Violence* and discuss the points.

Reflection

I struggled with choosing an overhead on *Types of Violence* and ended up using one from *Take on the Challenge* (Morrish, Horsman and Hofer, 2002) but am still not completely satisfied with it. Perhaps putting up categories of violence seemed somehow scientific and impersonal. Is numbering the categories of violence somehow rating them? Yes! Next time I will take the numbers out, if not the whole overhead! Maybe an overhead on promoting the idea that any kind of violence is unacceptable would be more effective.

During discussion in the first workshop, the word, "victim" kept coming out of my mouth and I was disgusted with myself for using it so much. Even survivor doesn't work for me. By the Edmonton workshop I solved the "victim" problem by simply talking about "person" or "people." Interestingly, I never once used the word "victim." It simply wasn't in my mind.

4. What if abuse is suspected?

Show the overhead *If you suspect a child is....* Stress the legal importance of passing on information about child abuse to the next support system.²⁵ (In the PAL project, we ask our tutors to speak to the coordinators first.)

5. How does violence affect learning?

In groups of two or three, participants write on flip-chart paper about some behaviours they have noticed in their students which indicate violence might be an issue affecting their learning. Post papers and discuss.²⁶

Reflection

We did not have time to do this activity in the second workshop. The participants in Pincher Creek came up with a number of responses. (See p. 138.)

²⁵ In Alberta, people are legally responsible under the Child Welfare Act to report abuse or suspected abuse to a child to a delegated child welfare worker. For more information, refer to: *Responding to child abuse. A handbook.* (1999). Edmonton, AB: government of Alberta. [On-line]. Available: http://www.child.gov.ab.ca/whatwedo/childwelfare/pdf/child_abuse_handbk.pdf

²⁶ The purpose of identifying possible behaviours is not to provide a means to assess if a student has experiences of violence. Rather, it is to start a discussion about how these experiences can affect learning. Awareness can also help tutors and teachers look beyond the behaviours to try to understand why a student is behaving as he or she does.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Self mutilation Bizarre behaviour Sullen Bullying or being bullied Passive-aggressive Short fuse Absenteeism Medical problems Feigning illness Physical problems	Violent behaviour Inappropriate knowledge Inappropriate reactions Manipulation Overachieve or underachieve	Poor self-esteem No eye contact Non-confrontational Depression Unkempt Needy Inappropriate social interactions Fearfulness Self-depreciation	Distractions in class Daydreaming Close to tears Anxious around swearing, shouting or loud noise Stopped learning Talking about violence Fear of risks	Lack of concentration Pictures or writing showing violence Not trusting Fatigue Attention-seeking Inability to relate to others Unhappy Withdrawn Physical signs Poor attitudes Don't care

6. Issues that accompany violence

Show the overhead *Issues that Accompany Violence*. Discuss.

7. Break

8. Exploring the mind-body connection

Use the washer exercise²⁷ to introduce the connection between the body, nerves and brain.

Reflection

This activity is fun and a great break. I suggested that if participants were having trouble doing the exercise, they should try it at home where they weren't under pressure to feel like they were not getting it if/when everyone else was. The more relaxed a person is about this exercise, the better it works, which is also a point about being receptive to learning. (Be prepared to send the washers home with participants. Nobody likes to give them up!)

²⁷ Hang a small washer on the end of a 30 cm. piece of string. Ask participants to make the washer swing back and forth without moving the hand—just through thought. Give the direction to make it move; eg, from the front wall to the back wall. Using the same procedure, change the direction of the swinging washer, and then make it go in a clockwise circle and counter clockwise. Making the washer swing in the desired direction simply by thinking shows the connection of the body, nerves and brain. Explain the nerves in our fingertips, which respond to the brain.

9. Exploring holistic learning

Show the overhead of the medicine wheel. Discuss the importance of involving body, mind, emotions and spirit in learning.

Show the overhead *The Whole Person*. Discuss how violence can affect aspects of the whole person.

Reflection

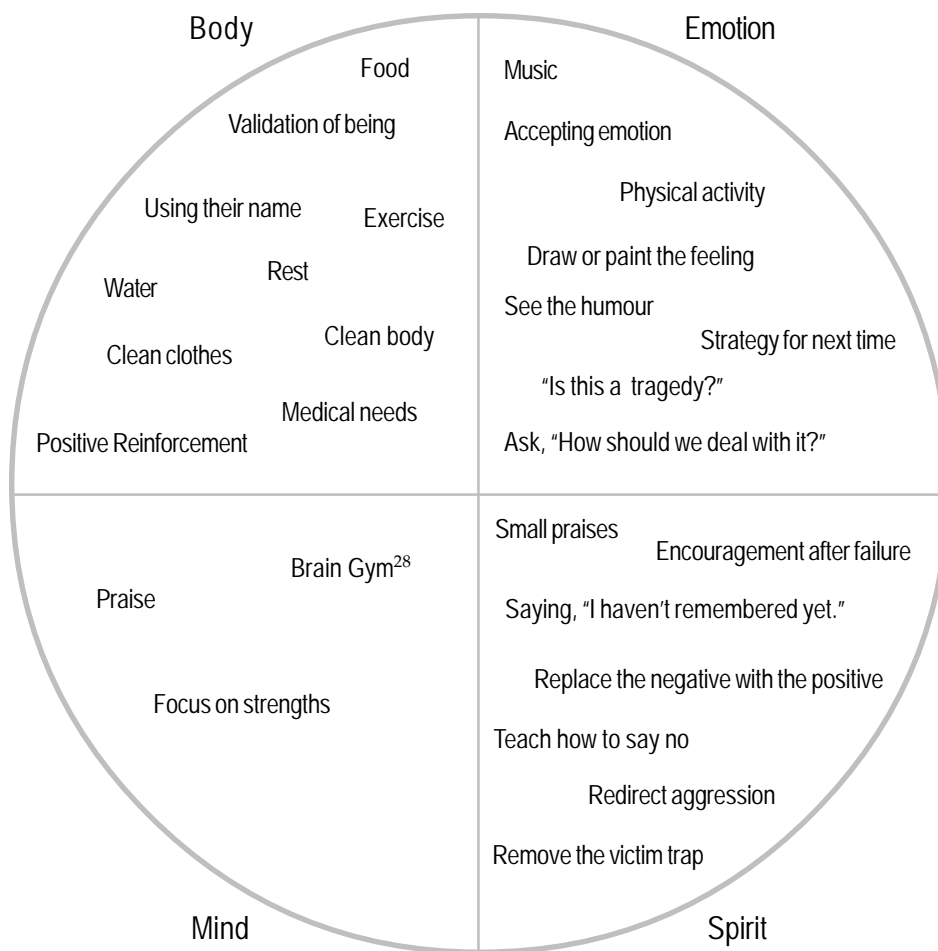
As I understand it, the medicine wheel is a symbol to help us understand ourselves and to help us try to find balance among body, mind, spirit and emotions in all that we do. One of my friends at the local High School is from the Pikani First Nation so I quizzed her about the Medicine Wheel. She used the image of a beautiful flower growing that needs to be nourished under the ground, on the ground and above the ground. If all needs are met, the flower blooms. I love the picture and focusing on the hope of every individual blossoming.

10. Bringing the whole self to learning

Draw the medicine wheel on a flip-chart page. Participants divide into groups. Each group focuses on one area of the medicine wheel (body, mind, spirit, emotions). Participants discuss what they could do to encourage students to learn through the area they are focusing on. Ask participants to report their ideas to the whole group. Write their ideas on the medicine wheel.

Reflection

There wasn't time for this activity in the Edmonton workshop. The groups in Pincher Creek came up with a number of ideas. (See p. 140.)



II. What tutors can do

Show the overhead *Compassionate, Caring Tutors Can*. Discuss.

Show the overhead. *Strategies for Tutors*. Discuss. Hand out cards and pamphlets from various resources in the community.

²⁸ *Brain Gym* is a series of movements that can be used with learners to encourage whole-brain learning. For more information, refer to Dennison and Dennison, 1994.

12. Strategies for whole-brain learning and focusing

Provide a handout of *Brain Gym* and focusing exercises. (See Promislow, 1998.) Demonstrate some exercises and invite participants to try them.

Reflection

These activities went very well. They were a break from the intensity of the discussions. I added a new focusing exercise: stand on the left foot, make a clockwise circle with the right foot, and trace number 6 in the air with the right hand. Very difficult!

13. Strategies for tutors

Show the overhead *Strategies for Tutors*. Discuss.

14. Community resources

Hand out cards and pamphlets about resources in the community such as the Samaritans, Kids Phone, shelters and AADAC (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Commission).

15. Closing

Show the overhead *Believe in your Students*. Stress the importance of small accomplishments in students' lives.

Workshop Evaluation

To evaluate the workshop in Pincher Creek, I asked participants to write about what worked for them, what did not work for them, and what could be done differently next time.

The most common comment about “what worked” had to do with the group work and interaction: Comments about that included:

- You got us all involved
- Good conversation and interaction
- Listening to the comments of others
- Groups seemed to work well
- Balance between small group / large group was good.

Regarding content, there were general comments about “well researched materials,” “good information” and “interesting” content, and a specific comment about the definitions about different types of abuse and violence. People also commented on the “flow” and organization of the content. One participant commented on the relevancy of the workshop and two others commented about applying the workshop to their work:

...very useful in my work more now with the student I am now tutoring.

•

I hope to be able to share some of this information with other TAs at school.

One participant commented about the “relaxed atmosphere” and another noted that, “We did a lot of thinking but I don’t feel I’m on overload.” There was also a comment that the stress balls, play dough and pipe cleaners were a “great idea.” As well there were some general comments that the workshop was “excellent” or “very well done.”

Although there were no comments about “what didn’t work,” one participant noted: “I was sorry to see no mention of those who become targets, because they have similar characteristics.” Suggestions for “next time” included having more *Brain Gym* activities, using role plays, and having evaluation questionnaires and name tags. One participant asked:

Would it be too threatening to have a person who has shown remarkable change or benefited from the literacy program appear and speak or write up an account of what helped them?

The evaluations of the Pincher Creek workshop suggested that I accomplished my purpose in facilitating a workshop about violence and learning. Although I didn’t include the same evaluation in the Edmonton workshop, some people came up afterwards with positive comments. I also found that participants in both workshops were familiar with many of the topics and issues. The evaluations suggest that it was important for participants to be able to share that knowledge with each other.

Insights

From the start, my hope for the workshops was that participants would leave with more strategies for tutoring. During the workshop in Edmonton, I also recognized a need to encourage hope and self-care. Facilitating the two workshops also helped me understand how my experiences of violence are with me in the workshop whether I speak directly about them or not. This led me to wonder, more, about what it is like for others who have experienced violence to attend the workshop.

Hope

The introductory free-writing activity prompted much discussion in Edmonton. As some people started talking I thought “Oh, No! They know way more about this than I do. What am I doing here!” As the workshop continued, I realized they needed strategies of hope and encouragement.

The overhead *If you suspect a child is...* prompted discussion around the lack of shelters for people, lack of funds; lack of response from RCMP; too many people in an area with problems to solve; more violence occurring when people make the effort to leave; and cultures that shun a woman for leaving her husband, leaving her even more alone. There seemed to be a sense of hopelessness.

I tried to find a positive for every negative, putting much emphasis on believing in students and their capabilities. Participants also responded with stories and strategies. One participant told of a lady who came to his program slouched over with her hair in her eyes. Nothing seemed to bring her out of herself until he brought in a keyboard, which she knew how to play. The other students complimented her and gave her honest praise for what she was good at. Gradually the hair lifted and she had a face and a positive presence in the program.

I encouraged participants to find one person to support them and to remember that people who are experiencing violence can feel that all odds are against them. We can encourage and praise people for even one small step taken when the odds seem so great. Many participants felt they were not making a difference in solving problems, and we talked about how encouragement, praise, and support may not be heeded at the time, but is remembered even years later.

We talked many times of the statistics of women returning to violent marriages. This led to encouraging participants to know all the supports available and to have information ready in their offices. One participant told about having affirmations and positive quotes in her office for people to colour. She said that after adults get over thinking that colouring is child's work, they actually enjoyed it.

I sensed that some participants were fearful about someone disclosing experiences of violence to them and felt that they must be the ones to solve the problems and find solutions. There was a general feeling of not knowing how to respond. There was much head nodding when I encouraged participants to respond by being a "side" support—by believing the person and referring them on to other sources of support. Participants also shared ideas for responding. One suggested that if you don't know what to say during a disclosure, just repeat what the person has said. This sounds like a great way to have time to get your thoughts together.

Having specific strategies can help literacy workers respond, so they are not caught with their mouths open and nothing to say! People coming from violent situations can be very sensitive to the reactions of others. Perhaps some of the "silence" issues surrounding talking about violence are because of the helplessness tutors or teachers may feel in wanting to change situations. Talking about strategies may be a useful form of breaking the silence. I also stressed the importance of not having to know all the details of the violence in order to be helpful.

The Importance of Self-Care

The discussion about hope reminded me to encourage self-care and nurturing. I think we can send messages to others by embracing these practices. One participant commented "Think of recharging ourselves like a battery charger. We need to take time to be plugged in or we are of no use to others." I like that! But perhaps it was easier for me to give participants messages of what to do to encourage others, because I am not directly aware of the situations they face.

Visiting the topic of holistic learning and self-care can benefit literacy workers as well as students. It may be that we too often assume only students have issues of violence to deal with, when in fact violence, in some direct or indirect way, affects us all.

Being a Facilitator with My Experience with Violence

Because of the work I had done in the VALTA course, the intense self-searching, interesting readings, and workshops I had attended, I had the confidence to develop and facilitate this workshop. Still, I was terribly stressed before I did the first one. As well, I had strained a muscle in my back that would not heal, so the night before the workshop I ended up in Emergency for a hip shot of something wonderful. This experience highlighted how learning in a rather stressful situation can affect the whole body.

Part of my stress was wondering if I would be able to facilitate this workshop and be passionate about issues I feel strongly about without becoming emotional. As it turned out, even though I felt passionate about a few things, I didn't get emotional.

I never actually mentioned my personal experience of violence in the first workshop. Pincher Creek is a rural community of about 7,000 people, and many people know my family. I am very conscious of trying not to focus on violence as solely a women's issue, as violence against men is a very important concern. Also, I didn't want the focus to be on my experiences. From this workshop, I learned that having experiences of violence can be a great asset to opening up communication as long as the focus does not become the individual person's self-serving interests.

The second workshop was different, as I did not know anyone and they did not know me. I briefly mentioned my own experience with violence when I introduced myself. I think the only reason I did this was to bring some credentials as to why I was doing this workshop. Then, near the end of the workshop, low and behold if one lady didn't sweetly say, "I would like to hear your story." Oh groan—and just after I was trying to emphasize the ability to help without having to know all the details of violence. Here was a real challenge to practise what I was saying, so I tried to focus on the sources of support I had when I left my husband 13 years ago.

First I mentioned the tremendous fear I felt when I first started talking about what was happening to me. I felt my husband's

presence and was always looking over my shoulder expecting him to be there, angrily bearing down on me. I emphasized that the first step was such a major one. Fortunately, I had people who were quite aware, so I didn't have to convince any of the important people in my life of the reality of my situation. I had to convince myself that it was serious, becoming unmanageable and having a negative effect on the way our children were being raised. And it was up to me to face the reality.

In the years before I left, when joint counselling sessions pointed to the need for my spouse to take responsibility for his actions, this meant we had to find a better counsellor. I told about the calls counsellors made to me, warning of the dangerous situation I was in, and of how I told them I thought I could handle it. I mentioned the many times I convinced myself it would be okay to go back, because I remembered only the positive memories. I spoke about the people who said, "Think about this or that before you do it." I told of a wonderful doctor who told me that when I could no longer take it, he would put me in the hospital as an escape, which he did. I told about the support from Social Services and of the community. At the end I said, "The best thing now is that my husband and I are on friendly terms."

Recognizing Participants' Experiences

Looking back, I wonder what others were feeling as they attended the workshop, perhaps with violence issues of their own. The importance of presenting the workshop in a warm, caring atmosphere where everyone felt safe cannot be understated. At one point in the Pincher Creek workshop, one of our tutors told her group about a very abusive situation she had been in. None of us had known anything about it. Interesting! Now I view her differently, perhaps with more respect, as a fellow traveller and for moving on. This change of opinion was very interesting to me. How do we view people who have experienced violence? Do we stereotype them? Our own views and experiences definitely categorize our views of people, as open minded as we try to be.

Conclusion

This project has confirmed for me that negative experiences can be useful in helping a person to empathize with others and provide some positive outlooks. It moves the “victim” (there’s that word I dislike) outside the role, to becoming the bearer of hope for others. Notice how impersonal that last statement is! On a final note, for the sake of my husband (for whom I still care) and for the sake of research: age is changing his outlook and confidence is changing mine.

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Appendix A: Workshop Overheads

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

1. **Private** – in the home (domestic violence)
2. **Childhood** – (experiencing or witnessing physical, sexual or emotional abuse)
3. **Violence in public space** – assault, rape
4. **Workplace violence** – sexual harassment
5. **State violence** – war, police violence, welfare

If you suspect a child is:

1. Neglected
2. Being hurt by someone else
3. Talking about hurting others
4. Talking about hurting their own self

Pass this information on to the next support system.

ISSUES THAT ACCOMPANY VIOLENCE [1]

- “Shutdown” – lose interest in learning anything when there is too much violence. An ‘insulated barrier’ can surround the mind as protection.
- Tiredness – Being controlled or put down is very wearing. A great amount of energy is being used to deal with the issues, or hiding the struggle of living with violence.
- All or nothing – no middle ground, i.e., complete trust or no trust at all, defending oneself or not defending oneself, total success or total failure.

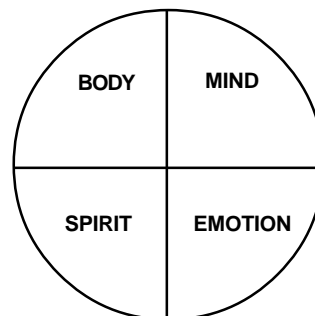
ISSUES THAT ACCOMPANY VIOLENCE [2]

- Living a life of extremes – in violent households you are either right or wrong. There is no possibility of negotiation. Being wrong leads to violence, arguing you are not wrong probably leads to more.
- Inability to concentrate – spending very little time focusing on the lessons or being fully present in the session.
- Triggers – Body posture, tone of voice, proximity of others, certain stories, claustrophobia situations, standing above them, may all be perceived as threats.

ISSUES THAT ACCOMPANY VIOLENCE [3]

- Difficulty assessing self-needs because often self-needs cannot be met.
- Hopelessness and helplessness – “I don’t care” – Belief of having no form of control so there is no point in caring because one cannot exert one’s will.
- Fear – makes it difficult to do anything.
- Anger – acting out.

MEDICINE WHEEL



THE WHOLE PERSON [1]

The whole person is affected by violence. Many feel fragmented, disconnected from the self and unable to learn.

- ☐ **Body** Violence may cause injuries or illnesses to be absorbed in the body.
- ☐ **Emotions** Fear or panic lead many to close down. Sadness may lead to anger to avoid feeling.

THE WHOLE PERSON [2]

- ☐ **Spirit** Violence convinces many that they are worthless, that they are nothing and nobody.
- ☐ **Mind** When learners have been told repeatedly they are stupid, the message may be internalized.

COMPASSIONATE, CARING TUTORS CAN: [1]

- Assess the anxiety level of your student.
- Avoid being judgmental or dismissing their complaints.
- Speak out about the unacceptability of violence.
- Teach people there are options if they want to change. Supports are available.

COMPASSIONATE, CARING TUTORS CAN: [2]

- Understand how terrifying making a change can be. Hold onto hope.
- Understand that the holistic model (body, mind and emotions) is relevant to learning success.
- Stress the importance of day-to-day successes rather than the long-term goals only.

COMPASSIONATE, CARING TUTORS CAN: [3]

- Be aware of how focused the learner is and try to find a middle ground for learning.
- Help learners become aware of “I need...” – taking responsibility for their own learning and being kind to themselves.
- Be very honest. Trauma survivors are good at watching people and sensing danger. They learn to focus on what it will take to be safe.

STRATEGIES FOR TUTORS [1]

- ✂ Never “promise not to tell.” Remember – safety comes first.
- ✂ Try not to become the counsellor. Encourage the use of other resources.
- ✂ Know what community resources are available for help.
- ✂ Use Brain Gym exercises to encourage mind stimulation.

STRATEGIES FOR TUTORS [2]

- ✂ Be aware of body language. Acknowledge personal space. Sometimes speaking face-to-face or shoulder-to-shoulder can be considered confrontational.
- ✂ Use a tone of voice that is supportive, not insulting or sarcastic.
- ✂ Try some focus-finder exercises for a break from hard work.

STRATEGIES FOR TUTORS [2]

- ✂ Be very clear about supports for yourself and your student. It is not necessary to hear all the details of the experience.
- ✂ Develop trust by avoiding getting defensive and impatient.

BELIEVE IN YOUR STUDENTS

until they
begin to
believe in themselves





*You Can Teach an
Old Dog
New (Magic) Tricks*

Fay Holt Begg

Introduction

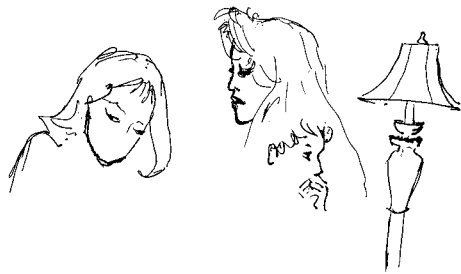
What could time spent on art, craft, music, meditation or exercise have to do with improving a literacy program? How would those activities help me teach students who had difficulty learning because of past or present violence in their lives? These activities were part of the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project course, and I wondered why.

I coordinate a rural literacy program, and had enrolled in the course with mixed feelings: gratitude for the new learning, but also some trepidation. That's because not only has violence affected some of our students, it has also been a factor in my own past.

I knew that reading about violence and its effects on behavior could create intense feelings and bring up painful memories. So did the creators of the VALTA course. They had built in course assignments in movement, art, and music. I did the assignments—serious student that I am—but admit to thinking they were a bit frivolous, not “real learning.” My attitude was “Why spend time and energy on these things when I’ve got so much to do?”

Mary Norton, one of the VALTA Project facilitators, later explained it this way: “the assignments in movement, art, and music encourage

different ways of learning and knowing, help us bring our whole selves to learning, look after ourselves, and have ways to stay present when feelings rise to the surface.”



During the course I found that by making time for fun and creativity I was more able to handle very serious and often

emotionally challenging reading. By the end of our course I was so impressed with the value of “whole-self” learning that I had no intention of doing the research phase of the project: I just wanted to continue with music, art, and movement for my own benefit in working with my students. I was quite surprised when others in our group said “that’s a research project.”

Research: careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to discover facts or principles. (Webster’s New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, 1984)

The difference between knowing intellectually and knowing in your heart, knowing with your body—it's immense. Huge.

At that point, I still didn't fully comprehend what I had learned. The whole idea of self-care was outside my frame of reference. I thought taking care of yourself meant getting enough sleep and eating your veggies, and that I knew those things—at least intellectually. It took some time to realize I had also learned emotionally and physically, changing the way I react to student stories and behaviors. In this report I hope to show how this happened and why this kind of learning was a key to improving our literacy program.

My Learning Process

At the beginning of my project, I was going on faith—faith in the VALTA Project facilitators' belief that I was “on to something” even if I didn't know what it was. I had no idea what the final product would be, or what was expected from the facilitators. (A rather scary way to go, I admit.) I felt I was fumbling my way to a finish line I couldn't see.

Over the next six months I read and experimented with creative activities. I began yoga, learned crafts and taught them to pre-teens, and designed and sewed a very fancy denim book bag with mirror decoration, appliqué and machine-stitched embroidery (freehand—on a 1974 machine) for my granddaughter. I sang, began learning to read music, and did *Brain Gym* exercises. Books pertinent to my learning seemed to appear when I was ready for them. There was a collection of research articles from the course at my disposal. More were available through Internet sources. Through these activities, I engaged in learning that was mental, physical, emotional and spiritual.²⁹



²⁹ These categories show up in modern writing, including Lohr and Schwartz (2003) and Horsman (1999), but have a longer history in the four quadrants of the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel.

Four Quadrant Learning

- Mental learning: I read books and research articles and wrote notes and reflections on learning. I was amazed to find many authors writing about integrity, emotional honesty, intuition, health, fitness, spirituality and the relationship between emotions and memory in books geared to the business community as well as to educators.
- Physical learning: I began yoga lessons, learned *Brain Gym* exercises and spent time walking outdoors. I started drinking at least eight glasses of water a day and became more careful about nutrition (okay, most of the time).
- Emotional learning: Reading about abuse and seeing some of my own past reflected in others' stories sometimes brought back old pain. Writing my reactions to readings was a challenge when feelings were raw, yet by doing so I began to make connections to my own deeply buried memories and beliefs and see the link between them and decisions I have made throughout my life.
- Spiritual learning: Integrity—acting (or not acting) on our most basic values—is spiritual. There is a spiritual dimension to changing harmful attitudes and beliefs. Honesty and kindness are spiritual. Learning to empathize with student stories (finally, I could listen instead of cringe) felt spiritual.

Personal Study Generates Personal Data

To observe personal changes, I kept a journal about work with students and events in my personal life. I observed the ways I taught students, their reactions to new methods and behavior, and changes in their learning. I recorded what was done and how it affected me.

I also took notes on the books and papers I read to inform my learning. Sometimes reading took me back to long-buried memories I'd have preferred to left covered. It helped to write in my journal about the incidents and feelings engendered and look at them calmly—as though they involved someone else—and attempt

to see what I'd learned or what I believed as the result of past events. Activities were especially helpful at such times: dancing, singing or yoga lightened my mood, and *Brain Gym* exercises helped me focus.

Data also included drawings and completed crafts as well as journal entries recording the thoughts and emotions resulting from those activities. Music was a wonderful source of both fun and emotional release, and again, activities and results were recorded in my journal.



When memories surfaced I'd feel the emotions that went with them all over again—rage, fear, anxiety. This took me by surprise and I'd have to take what was happening to me and write about it in my journal until I could understand it.



Besides keeping the journal, I returned to notes I had taken during the VALTA course. We had been guided to make observations on our work with students: on emotions present in the program, ways the students or I seemed to be comfortable or uncomfortable in our bodies, ways emotions were expressed or rejected, evidence of the effects of violence on learning. We were also to observe ourselves and our reactions. We were challenged to look and reflect on what we saw and what that meant to our programs, ourselves and our students.

My course notes showed plenty of emotion: frustration on the part of a tutor when a student failed to show up for planned tutoring sessions, humiliation felt by an adult referred to the program, relief when intake procedures focused on what participants *could* do, and shock, on my part, when a student lifted his t-shirt to show horrific scars.

Unwanted Data: Falling Apart and Driving Dangerously

The activities and journaling process seemed to help ground me during my research, and everything was going well—amazingly well—until it came time to complete the writing phase of the work. Suddenly, nothing worked. As I began writing about the gains I'd made from my research, they seemed to be slipping away. Events in both my work and my personal life took time intended for writing. Two weeks after I'd planned to put my material together, I finally began, but lost many hours of work through a computer glitch. My health took a nosedive, first with an infection, then flu.

Some part of me must have found this writing very, very—with a tremendous urge to hide under the covers and do nothing—dangerous: at one point, as I sat down at the computer, I had the eerie sensation that I needed to fasten my seatbelt. If “our body is an external mirroring of our internal state” (Promislow, 1998, p. 93), my state of mind seemed incredibly weak and frightened:

Remember that under stress we manifest all sorts of physiological changes that impact the brain/body and ease of movement.... Stuck stress-circuits put us on auto pilot with conditioned ways of responding that are ingrained and well myelinated, albeit less than desirable. (Promislow, 1988, p. 101)

Learning isn't a controversial subject, but abuse is. “Don't tell” is a message learned very thoroughly: Who wants to hear those things? Who would believe? Yet the telling is important. In Canada, 42 percent of females have experienced violence at the hands of a partner (*Maclean's*, October 13, 2003, p. 14).

There was no way for me to explain either the difficulty or the importance of my learning for my literacy work without explaining that I've also experienced violence. That meant writing about my own emotional and physical reactions to this learning. And I got sick, fried my computer, and generally needed a great boost in courage as well as an end goal in sight to accomplish it.

Learning about Learning: An Excerpt from My Journal

Last night at church we were to learn how to make a rag rug. I had spent a couple of mornings ripping sheets into 1 ½" strips, sewing them together to form one continuous strip, then winding the whole thing into balls as though it was wool.

Found out how impatient I can become! My arms got sore, and I kept tearing off the short end instead of the long end. I had real trouble doing a mundane task that required me to pay attention to what I was doing. It was boring, it was tedious, my chatterbox brain wouldn't shut up, I became really frustrated...

I thought about how there must be a better way to do this, how inept my hands were, how tired my arms were...

How do my students feel, when they try to write a sentence and have trouble spelling a word, forming a letter...how long can they pay attention when the task is entirely new and they don't even know what the end result should be...how frustrated or angry do they become? How do they learn to stick to it?

Goodness, is this how my students feel after their first lesson with me?

I had to talk to myself—gently—when I realized that my frustration was totally out of proportion to the task at hand.

"Fay (said I), it's o.k. It's only a strip of cloth. It's smaller than you. It's not worth this anger. In fact—why are you angry? Is it because you expect your hands and eyes to be coordinated—immediately—on a new task? Is it because you've got all these strips of cloth lying on the floor in a heap and you just realized they're tangled and will have to be untangled? Is it because some of them are only four feet long so will require more joins than if you'd ripped the sheet lengthwise instead of crosswise—again?

So, Fay, calm down. See the funny side. It's an old sheet, for goodness sake."

So this morning, tried again. Did the first couple of rows—and discovered old sheets torn in strips are much less forgiving than yarn. Threads come off the sides and tangle in the hook. And I lost count—yeeeks, you have to keep counting? How can I listen to the radio and count at the same time? And of course, I can't. A couple of rows into the oval, found I had 20 stitches on one side of the original chain, and fourteen on the other.

Not good. It's curling up sort of strangely.

Rip the whole thing apart, because my error seems to be in the second row. Dang. Uh-oh. The fabric strip keeps winding up as the crochet pulls apart. Now I have to untwist it. O.K. I can do that. I'm being more patient here. Sure I am. But I'm listening to the radio so have something for my brain to do besides complain.

Dang! I've un-twisted all that fabric, and as I go to re-wind it on the ball it twists again! Cheeeeeeeeeeee!

Somehow, although the result is only supposed to be a rag rug, I seem to be learning something far more important here. The only crochet I have done in my life was back in '74, when I learned enough to make a baby sweater for a friend. It was perfect, it really was—and it took me a month or more to learn enough (from a book, because there was no one to teach me) to make that simple sweater, and several more months to complete the job.

Yes, it was nice. Flawless. And that's the first, and last, thing I made with crochet, until the rug.



Oh—maybe there's something else I've learned! I did learn from a book, back then, and there was no one to teach me. What would I have been able to do if I could have asked someone for help? How important is the teacher? How much does patience on their part count?

And was I afraid to ask anyone to teach me because I feel so stupid when it comes to handicrafts. Because I don't want anyone to know how inept I am? Because I don't really want to admit that following patterns is rather beyond me at present? Because I'll need lots of time, and patience, on the part of a teacher?

Connections: Body, Mind, Emotions

The rug experiment left me humble enough to try something else far, far from my comfort zone—actual physical exercise. I'm a 'slow learner' in the area of sports, with the exception of dancing, where the music and rhythm seem to propel me along. So practicing yoga five days a week was quite a change for me. It took experimentation

to find a routine I could stick to and meet my goal: improvement without exhaustion. I found a yoga teacher to work with once a week, and tapes to use at home on other days. I also found books at our local library, and am continuing to progress. For me, yoga is perfect because you learn gradually, and build both strength and flexibility at whatever rate your body can manage. At the beginning of the VALTA course I would not have believed that *adding* to my activities could make me feel better. I even sleep better.

Many modern writers and executive advisors say the same things: exercise increases our capacity to work, improves both vitality and resistance to stress, and even moderate workouts can improve cognitive and creative capacity. (A plus for me: my workouts are definitely on the moderate side.)

Because the mind and body are so inextricably connected, even moderate physical exercise can increase cognitive capacity. It does so most simply by driving more blood and oxygen to the brain. Exercise is also believed to stimulate more production of a chemical—brain derived neurotrophic factor—which helps repair brain cells and prevent further damage. (Loehr and Schwartz, 2003, p.101)

Taking time for creative activities on a regular basis has also felt good and I really couldn't explain why, except that it was fun and fun is, well—fun. However, Loehr and Schwartz (2003), clarified a relationship between fun and learning for me:

Much like the body, the brain needs time to recover from exertion...it takes time for the brain to consolidate and encode what it has learned.... In the absence of downtime, or recovery, this learning cannot take place as efficiently. (p. 102)

So, in these authors' terms, I've created a positive energy ritual by adding yoga and music to my daily routine. Judy Murphy, one of the VALTA Project facilitators, helped me understand when she said "emotions come out physically; we know that." I *hadn't* known, but it explains why the activities made such a difference. I played piano angrily, danced for joy, typed furiously, sang with gusto. Those activities felt *so good*—and they were part of the course. Assignments. I wouldn't have done them, wouldn't even have thought of doing them otherwise. All are physical; even journal writing is physical. I type like a whiz and put my emotions outside me, where I can *see* them, and face them.

Learning: I Can Change the Way I Feel

I love learning: it's my passion. But love and enjoyment were not the only emotions involved in this learning, as reading sometimes reminded me of unhappy, frightening or sad events in my life. I couldn't keep those memories out so I decided to use my reading to learn ways of dealing with them.

One piece of information that was a tremendous help is very simple: at any time, one's body is in the same state as one's mind.

...if we think there is danger even when there isn't any, we react as if there were. The intensity of the reaction depends on how great we think the danger is...your body engages...and prepares to protect itself through confrontation or flight. Your muscles tense, your blood pressure and heart rate increase, your breath quickens, and your whole body is ready to do something. (Nuernberger, 1996, pp. 36-37)

Reading others' stories felt dangerous, and so did remembering my own. I had to keep reminding myself that to the brain, past, present and future are one, which was why I felt such intensity about past events:

The brain doesn't discriminate between thoughts or images of the past, the present, and the future. To the brain, every thought happens only in the present. Nor does it differentiate between thoughts about an actual physical reality...and fantasies.... So every thought is immediately translated into the body for action. When your mind anticipates the future or dwells on the past, your body responds as if the event were happening in the present. (Nuernberger, 1996, p. 61)

To change the tension or adrenalin rush that was part of my emotional reaction, I could deliberately slow my breathing. By relaxing my breath, I could read, or remember, without experiencing the original emotion. It felt like the difference between watching a movie of an event and living through it.

Another helpful development was learning to recall positive memories, where I had acted in opposition to the emotion being triggered at the time. The VALTA Project facilitators introduced this as a



workshop exercise, and several authors recommended the technique as something to do *before* a stressful situation. By recalling and writing in my journal about times when I acted with integrity, courage, creativity or compassion and acted quickly or was unusually effective, I gave myself a string of positive emotions to call upon when the negative seemed about to cave me in.

I also rediscovered the power of honestly expressing emotion. That's something I've always tried to do—at least, that's what I thought—but my reading brought me renewed awareness. Sometimes, I feel something and can't name it. It's not lack of vocabulary, it's lack of experience in *really feeling* what is there. There are still times when I can only describe a feeling as "uncomfortable," but I am now at least able to articulate that something's going on, emotionally. The last time this feeling surfaced, it was over pairing a particular tutor-student team together. The student needed a tutor, but on recognizing the feeling I decided to wait; later events proved my instinct was correct.

Being emotionally honest requires listening to the strong feelings of "inner truth" which arise, at least in major part, from your core emotional intelligence as it links to your intuition and conscience...what you and others feel communicates the emotional truth all by itself, in your eyes and body language, in the tone of your voice, beneath the words. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 4)

More Connections: Emotion and Intuition

Reading that intuition is an essential ingredient for management success was a surprise. I've always had intuition, but certainly didn't trust it. Yet the writers of *Executive EQ* are teaching executives to do just that:

(EQ, or 'gut reaction') sifts through the entire wealth of detail and operates covertly (below the level of consciousness), utilizing what may be described as "as if" loops tied to EQ, and draws your attention to the outcomes to which given actions may lead, and functions as an automated alarm signal—which may lead you to reject, immediately, and prompts you to choose among other alternatives—or as a beacon of incentive, which draws you towards beneficial outcomes. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 47)

If a child learns that intuition is something to disparage and that obedience is safer than decision-making, the effects may carry through to many levels of behavior. The image that occurs to me is a hospital syringe full of coloured dye being shot into my brain; it just kind of settles, and can influence decisions in areas that have nothing to do with the origin of the belief.

“Listen to your intuition.” How long has intuition been regarded as suspect and ridiculed? Think about “women’s intuition.” And now executives are paying big money to learn to pay attention to that gut instinct, and communicate their feelings to others.

...researchers...are determining that emotions provide the bottom line for rational decision-making in our lives, based on survival or social risk. Emotions are felt as bodily states, and are the means through which the mind senses how the body feels. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 81)

In my journal I wrote, “I’m wondering if there wasn’t a rather sinister reason for children to be taught not to pay attention to that little voice. Because those who *did* pay attention would be better able to make decisions about whom to trust. Maybe “Mr. XYZ makes me sick to my stomach” had a far greater meaning than a child would be expected to understand—yet that child *knew*.

...Suspend the voice of judgment. Intuition adds to good judgment; it does not replace it...the point here is that the analytical, logical mind will keep telling you how silly it is to pay attention to impressions about things the ‘facts’ can’t reveal. Your mental critic may whisper, “This doesn’t make any sense” or “It’s only your imagination” or “That can’t possibly be right.” Don’t ignore such messages. Acknowledge and make a note of them—of every impression—for future consideration.... Wait to judge until after you sense the full range of your gut feelings and intuitive signals. If, for example, your first impression is about another person’s intentions, feelings, or thoughts, be certain to seek clarification to know if you’re right. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 57)

I remembered times over the years when my intuition told me that I was in danger or should not trust a particular person. Finding out later that my worries *did* have a foundation—that my intuition was amazingly in tune with the truth—was certainly no comfort. At one point I hadn’t protected myself; at another, I hadn’t protected my children. Nuernberger (1986) says: “Whenever you face a problem

that includes a personal threat, depersonalize it so you can maintain mental clarity” (p. 183).

In both cases, had I looked at what I *could* see or do as though it involved another family, I would have called the police and laid charges. “Following your heart” may be much more than a romantic notion; it may lead, instead, to inner truth the logical mind cannot understand. After recalling those two particularly harrowing events, I thought “any normal woman would have seen, would have called the police, would have laid charges...” and understood that because of emotional trauma, I was not a “normal woman” at the time.

The Power of Belief: Believing the Labels

Normal? That’s not what you feel when you’re going through trauma. A few years ago I was working with an adult student who was attending upgrading classes, parenting children, going through a custody battle and carrying memories of incest. Keeping up with class work while dealing with her emotions proved too much, and while I knew what she was going through, the school did not. Her instructor told me the student was lazy and manipulative; she gave up and dropped out.

The effort to appear “normal” through an unstable time was too much for this woman. She told me she was “no good”—and blamed herself for failing to keep her grades up. Ellen Langer’s (1989) messages about the labels we and others place on ourselves resonates. In *Mindfulness*, she says we “experience the world by creating categories” (p. 11). Langer (1997) also says we create categories and labels and then act on the beliefs we have formed “...Rigid mindsets we hold about ourselves affect our performance” (p. 98).

I found myself recalling labels given to me—rotten kid, spoiled brat, *such* a good girl, housewife, fashion illustrator, graphic artist, skater, overeater, battered wife, rape victim, teacher, mother, good mother, good cook, literacy worker, expert, student—and the labels I seem to have placed on myself: not good enough, not smart enough, not pretty enough. I think the last three appeared when I was small and being bullied, and my reasoning was that if I were only good enough, smart enough, or pretty enough it would stop—after all, I was told (by the older, bigger, bullies) that I was getting what I deserved. (Bigger kids should know, right?)

Children don't intend to cause permanent damage to one another, I'm sure. Yet I believe that those labels were colouring my decisions long after the childhood incidents. For example, offering opinions at work took courage, but was still easier than standing up for myself in a painful domestic situation. Looking back, I was mindful enough to know I was in a bad predicament, but not mindful enough to see the obvious solution; on some level I believed I wasn't good enough, or smart enough, to raise my children on my own.

One reason mindfulness may seem effortful is because of the pain of negative thoughts. When thoughts are uncomfortable, people often struggle to erase them. The pain, however, does not come from mindful awareness of these thoughts, but from a single-minded understanding of the painful vent...mindfulness leads to feelings of control, greater freedom of action, and less burnout. (Langer, 1989, p. 202)

Looking back at my life and finding patterns of behavior which *were in accordance with my beliefs* was not a pleasant process. Discovering what I *did* believe, and why, has made acceptance of my own mistakes a little easier—not painless, but easier. Kraftsow (2002)

talks about breaking the conditioning cycle, with conditioning affecting the personality, being "expressions of things that have happened to us in our past, whether known or unknown. (p. 7)

This suggests to me that perhaps it's not essential to remember every detail of our past. It may be that we simply need to be able to look at the expressions that need changing. I personally think there's a reason for memories to *be* repressed; they seem to remain hidden until we're ready to deal with them. In my case, some seemed to be shaken loose after a car accident gave me a concussion. When I finally realized that the nightmares which followed could be recollections of real events, I was at a stage in my life where I could work with a counsellor. Now, many years later, I can honestly say I'm grateful for those memories that have surfaced; painful as they were, they explained my life to me.

Reading that others reacted to violence with feelings and behaviors similar to my own and those of some of my students was important; learning to change the way I thought about events in my past and diffuse the emotions those memories held was incredibly empowering. Looking back with older eyes, I could see that although my actions were far from perfect, I had done the best I could with the knowledge I had at the time. It follows that others

did the same—even those who caused me pain. I read about forgiveness and now understand it doesn't mean condoning bad behavior, my own or that of others; rather, it means I can release negative emotions and get on with my life.

How freeing that is!

More Learning: Freedom and Power

Early in my life I learned that I didn't have the power to change anything important to me. Nobody meant to teach me that, and it wasn't true, but that didn't stop me from learning it, as Langer would say, in a single-minded way. And while I learned other things that contradicted those beliefs on an intellectual level, it wasn't enough to change what I believed on an *emotional* level.

...most of what provokes emotion is learned...generally learned in a single-minded way...emotions rest upon premature cognitive commitments. We experience them without an awareness that they could be otherwise.
(Langer, 1989, p. 175)

Langer (1997) says that “in general young girls are taught to be ‘good little girls’ which translates into ‘do what you are told’” (p. 21). I was told that “little girls are meant to be seen and not heard” and I learned to take my curiosity to the library and stifle my sense of adventure while making my brothers’ beds and folding their clothes. Several of my references for this study contain the word “power” in their titles—a fact I didn’t notice right away—and I’m quite sure that it’s because, as a child in the 1940’s, I learned that I didn’t have any power.

...premature cognitive commitments...[are] mindsets that we accept unconditionally, without considering or being aware of alternative forms that the information can take. (Langer, 1997, p. 92)

I had no power to decide, no power to choose, no power to disobey *anybody*—the consequences could be too painful. And I think I was quite young when I “learned” that others could decide what I would do, even what I would say. “Tell Mom you did it or we’ll beat you up.” Now, there’s a dilemma—a beating from your brothers if you tell the truth or punishment from your mother if you lie well enough to be believed. Apparently I learned to lie very well under duress, because I generally received the punishment. I had no power to avoid it.

When a person believes they have no power, they have no power. They are simply unable to act. There are times...when we each need to feel angry or sad—because that is the inner truth we are experiencing right then, and there are times when it is right to feel anxious, concerned, joyful, or jealous. Unlike the mind, the heart finds it difficult to lie. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p 36)

Results: Personal Changes, Professional Changes

My definition of personal power would be the power to do something or to change something. In this research my goal was to see how involvement and experimentation with new learning and new ways of learning would change me. My journal and notes on reading have given me the data for serious reflection. Looking back over the months I realize that I've been both asking tougher questions and making clearer statements. I seem to be using the word "no" more often and more directly. I'm trusting my intuition more and am slower to anger. Changes are taking place in my personal life as well, such as telling my husband, "I probably won't be doing any housework until I've completed this draft." I was surprised to see my personal changes reflected in a report by Mary Norton and Judy Murphy (2001) about their *Drawing out the self* project:

Although participating in the course did not change women's circumstances, some participants changed how they respond to them. Participants who were interviewed reported that they felt better, had more self esteem, were more open, and were stronger and more able to say "No." ... Singing and art help women to move into other ways of knowing (e.g. non-verbal knowledge, spiritual knowledge) (p. i).

A different type of learning also boosted my "personal power" level, although I found it very difficult. The technique is taught by both yoga masters and Native American writers: shut off my "mind chatter" or "stop thinking in words." Judy Murphy explained the process well in a workshop by comparing training our mind to training a puppy. When the puppy wanders, you gently bring it back, as many times as you need to. You don't speak harshly to it or blame it for acting like a puppy. It's a new behavior; puppy will

learn. Doing the same thing with the wandering, chattering mind isn't easy, so I love Judy's analogy.³⁰ Simply quieting the mind isn't meditation, but it's a move in that direction.

Stilling the mind was begun to help me get a good night's sleep, but results went much further. When I actually accomplished this feat, it put me in a totally different frame of mind, a wonderfully calm place where ideas seemed to arrive without effort. It taught me that I can change the way I use my mind—a powerful idea that took my thinking full circle to childhood and back to the present.

Again, the results carry over to work with students and tutors. One result is that I'm healthier. Some long-standing health problems have improved, and I have more energy. And energy is so important to literacy work: not just physical energy, but mental, emotional and spiritual energy.

With that energy, I began to take on more community work as part of the literacy program, doing presentations on emergent literacy and plain-language writing while continuing with exercise, crafts and music. I believe that the program profile in the community has increased because of those efforts. This has brought new students, many with special needs, to our office.

Free to Listen: Change in Empathy

It's easier to listen now because this learning has left me more relaxed and I no longer take responsibility for student problems. Making time for relaxation and renewal—basic self-care—has paid big dividends. Because I'm no longer carrying my own bundle of intense memories, I'm less easily disturbed by student stories of violence in their past or present—I am able to listen, to really hear, without taking on the speaker's emotions. I believe that my increased ability to listen came about through the combination of reading about abuse and its effects on learning, feeling the pain, fear, or anger of the writer, and doing *something* to express that feeling, whether it was journal writing, guitar-strumming, or exercising.

So often, students have never expressed their feelings. As much as I needed to get my feelings out when the reading for the course triggered uncomfortable memories or emotions, students may also need to express thoughts and feelings before they are able to

³⁰ Judy found this image in *Path to the heart*, (Kornfield, 1993).

concentrate on literacy work. Steven Covey (1989), in *The 7 habits of highly effective people*, has a whole chapter on empathic communication, or listening to understand:

Empathic...listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world...you understand how they feel.

Empathy is not sympathy...(which is) a form of judgment.... The essence of empathic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually. (p. 240)

Sometime between the humiliation of feeling beaten by great strips of dog-eared cotton and the self-assurance of learning in new ways, I began hearing more from my students as they shared their thoughts and ideas with me. They shared not only background issues but their present learning needs and desires. I learned that one student used to sleep in a tree; he learned to use phonics to read unknown words. Being able to speak to a willing audience about life as a homeless person seemed to free him to listen and learn. I heard what it was like to be a refugee or a prisoner of war in a country not known for kindness to prisoners. Students who shared life experiences with me were much more open about their learning needs and what they wanted—and didn't want—from learning materials and tutors.

Not that I didn't listen before the VALTA Project. I did, but only to a degree—I would try to keep the student “on track,” ensuring that our time together was spent on literacy. Now I'm not afraid of what I might hear and know some students need to speak. I know I can handle my own emotions, so I make better connections with students whose backgrounds include violence.

I am now in even greater awe of students with the courage to ask for help with reading or writing. I thought I knew how it felt, because I've been continuing to study as I've worked as a coordinator—French, learning disabilities, literacy research—but I studied *from books* so I felt at least a little competence. Trying to balance my body and brain in a yoga pose, and completing the huge-hook-and-strips-of-unwieldy-fabric crochet project were totally humbling experiences. I did finish the rug, after taking it in all its knotty misery to a patient friend who tried to keep from laughing as she showed me how it's done. I really didn't have a clue how a student might feel until I made the rug.

My journal shows how difficult it was for me to express emotions or write about emotional events; again, how do students feel? For most, being unable to learn *is very emotional*, no matter what the source of the learning difficulties. I needed to remember that when memories or ineptitude (the rug) got in the way, I couldn't think or organize myself let alone do this writing.

Accepting Emotions, Creating Trust

I now spend more time with students before matching them with tutors, looking for the emotional connections that must be made rather than simply finding the student's academic needs and matching them with a tutor who has the requisite skills. I've always known that it's important for a teacher or tutor to *like* the student. Now I understand that when a student has experienced violence the connection needs to be deep enough that they feel accepted *with* their history. As program coordinator, it's up to me to be the gatekeeper, to make entering the program feel safe.

If a student seems especially fragile emotionally, I may continue working with them past the original assessment. By beginning the tutoring process myself, I have the opportunity to see how they react to errors made and requests to try new things—to take risks.

When a learner has experienced violence at the hands of others, an attempt to read a new word, compose a sentence, or explain a paragraph can feel very threatening. When your life has seemed like a danger zone, your need for safety is paramount; everything else is secondary. I was certainly in no danger while trying to sew or exercise or make a rug, so the distress I felt was totally out of proportion to the situation. It was only through writing in my journal that I made the connection between my initial failures and earlier times when someone else's disapproval could bring emotional or physical pain. By going through that process, I understood *why* new learning can feel so intimidating. Until students begin to trust their ability to learn, they may not be ready to work with a volunteer tutor.

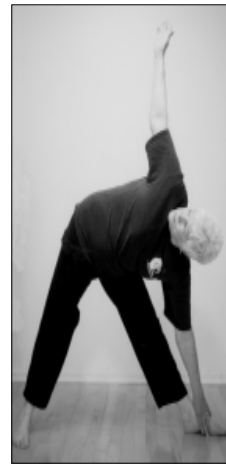
The one-on-one model of teaching or tutoring is necessarily about creating trust. Feelings are often revealed in body language and facial expressions, and I need to pay attention to those communications as well as to words, and teach tutors to do the same. It seems that we say what we think, but *show* what we're feeling. To determine which tutors will work well with students dealing with violent backgrounds, I have one-on-one interviews with new tutors, both at the time of tutor training and again before matching them with students.

Talking with volunteers about various learning scenarios lets them know what they might encounter, and lets me see their reactions. Tutor attitudes towards learners with difficulties, different ways of learning and teaching, and learning itself all affect the tutoring situation. I need to know each student and each tutor before deciding who to pair as a team.

Once students are matched with tutors, it's important that I stay in touch and encourage both student and tutor to do the same. If appointments are missed or other problems creep in, we need to know the reason. It's easy for a tutor to think the student isn't interested or motivated or that there is some fault with their tutoring. If those things happen, we can lose both student and tutor. A coordinator needs to be available, understanding the high degree of stress and risk involved in learning for many adult students. During this research I learned firsthand that genuine stress can cause genuine illness. Information on how emotions affect learning is now an important part of our tutor training thanks to the VALTA Project.

New Ways of Learning, New Ways of Teaching

Through literacy work, people who thought they couldn't learn become readers or learn to write, and often learn to value themselves more highly in the process. My own confidence increased from learning in areas other than the academic, and students showed increased confidence after learning in the academic area, which was new for them. Another participant in the VALTA Project, Genevieve Fox, said, "because I could make a buckskin dress, I could go to university." I think I know what she means—because I could learn to play a tin whistle and do yoga, I could complete this project.



We now have many more ways to approach reading and writing in our program. One student who loves 50's music read from a rock 'n roll song book, others told their stories and had them written by tutors as reading texts. Some have written their thoughts on fiction or movies, others have shared their artwork and spoken or written about their feelings on making or viewing the art. An ESL learner who spoke almost no English went for walks with her tutor, and learned new vocabulary, shapes, and colours in a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere. The words were written for her at the end of the walk, so she took her first steps in reading English as well.

Brain Gym exercises have also been introduced to some learners, and my intention is to teach them in tutor in-service as well. *Brain Gym* movements help with handwriting, and the office now has a whiteboard where students can write large and erase quickly; we also use it for spelling practice. Students have always had choices about how and what they would learn. Now there are more choices because I've become aware of more possibilities through the VALTA Project.

Intake procedures in our office used to consist mainly of finding the student's academic needs and reading, writing, spelling or math ability. We also had conversations about their school experience and other learning history, such as job skills or hobbies. Now we take it much further and it's been paying off. We talk about what it's like to learn in an area where you're unsure of your abilities: it's a risk, you take a chance. I try to ensure that both students and tutors are comfortable with the fact that learning is sometimes difficult, tedious and frustrating. I encourage them to be honest about what they're feeling at those moments, to have fun and enjoy the process. Students and tutors learn about the need for self-care, relaxation and sleep, and the value of exercise not just to stay healthy and happy but as an aid to learning.

There's more opportunity for student self-direction, and new learning materials have been provided with a greater variety of reading content. Easy-reading subjects include sports, celebrities, outdoor life, success stories, and fiction. We also know that some students simply aren't ready to make choices when they first enter the program, so I suggest they choose from two or three possibilities at their reading level. I think we have a better program than before my research project, and I know that I'm even more comfortable and confident in my role as coordinator.

Conclusion

Exploring new kinds of learning and new ways of learning has been an amazing process for me. It's hard to pin down the connection between play and emotional resiliency, but as the VALTA course continued I knew it was making a difference. Activities I once did simply because they were assignments are *now a part of my life*. I'm hooked on them because they make me feel good.

I found ample evidence of connections between movement, music, art, and learning. There is also strong evidence that these activities support increases in self-confidence, which seems to me to be an important factor in learning. I'm much better, too, at paying attention to intuition after this research, and find it especially helpful in deciding which tutor to pair with a particular student.

Finally, I'm enjoying my work even more. I'm more relaxed, which seems to be helping new students relax more quickly. I found that by making time for fun and creativity I was able to handle the serious emotional challenges that come to a literacy worker when working with a survivor of abuse. Survivors are learning, not only in my program, but in the programs of the other participants in the VALTA Project, each of whom found ways to apply our learning to situations in their communities. It's been a privilege to learn and to share.



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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: PHASE ONE ONLINE COURSE AND WORKSHOPS



COURSE OVERVIEW

Through the Phase One course, you will explore ways to address impacts of violence on learning, including ways to facilitate holistic learning. During the course, you will read and respond to articles and other resources, engage in practical activities and plan a *Changing Practices* research project.

Each of us will bring a range of experiences, knowledge, values and interests to our learning in this course. Building on those, intentions for the course include:

INTENTIONS

- Extending knowledge and understanding about violence, the impacts of violence on learning and ways to address the impacts.
- Extending knowledge and understanding about ways to bring the whole self to teaching and learning.
- Relating course content to practices / contexts.
- Critically reflecting about personal theories, beliefs and practices in light of course content and activities and vice versa.
- Developing knowledge and skills to plan and implement a *Changing Practices* project.

MODULES

The course includes six modules that will each run for two weeks. A new module will be posted in the eLit VALTA folder at the start of each two-week period. The posting will include an introduction to the topic, along with a list of readings, learning activities and activities to help you develop your *Changing Practices* project proposal.

Course activities will encourage you to bring your whole self to learning about the course topics and to adopt a research in practice stance. By practicing holistic learning ourselves, we hope to extend understanding about how to create conditions for holistic learning. A research in practice stance will help you to relate course content to our contexts and practices, consider similarities and differences and imagine practice-based changes you might make to address impacts of violence on learning.

For each module you are asked to:

- Read the key readings
- Read one further reading if you choose
- Carry out observation in your program
- Try out one or more of the art, music, movement, or other activities
- Record your learnings in a journal and share them online
- Take part in online discussion .
- Work on the plan for your *Changing Practices* project

Module One includes an orientation workshop. A concluding workshop will be held at the end of the course.

Descriptions of the course activities follow this overview.



COURSE ACTIVITIES

Exploring the impact of violence on learning has taught us that opportunities for bringing the whole self to learning are an essential support for people who have been through violence. Such opportunities also help all students learn well as they draw in different sorts of knowledge, different learning styles and multiple intelligences to strengthen learning. In this course, we hope to explore knowledge in a variety of forms in addition to the more usual reading, writing and reflection. Each module will include suggestions for specific activities within each of these areas.

EXPLORING LEARNING

During each module you will have an opportunity to explore:

- Critical material (non-fiction)
- Programs/practices
- Fiction (short story, novel, poetry) and biography
- Movement
- Music
- Visual arts

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

During each module you will:

- Reflect on changes you would like to see in your program.
- Complete an activity to help you plan a *Changing Practices* research project.

By the end of the course, you will have prepared a proposal for a *Changing Practices* project.


SHARING AND EXTENDING LEARNING

Throughout the course you will need to:

- Keep a journal.
- Post comments online.
- Develop a portfolio that reflects what you have learned.

You will bring your portfolio to the final workshop and talk about what you have included.

More background information about each of these tasks is included next. You might want to refer to this information when you work on the specific activities during each module.



EXPLORING LEARNING CRITICAL (NON-FICTION): READING AND WRITING

KEY READINGS

Each module lists key readings related to the topic. You need to read these, or as much of them as possible, as they will form the basis of discussion online.

In most modules, the key readings include chapters from Jenny Horsman's *Too scared to learn*, and from the *Source book*. Jenny's book is based on cross-Canada research that she did about violence and learning. The Source book was developed as part of a New England project where literacy workers explored making changes in their programs. Jenny was a trainer and writer for this project.

Other key readings include chapters and articles from various sources.

RESEARCH READINGS

Several modules include an article or book excerpt about research related to issues of violence and learning. As well as providing insights about the issues, these readings may introduce you to research perspectives and approaches. Some of these readings are also referred to in the *Traveler's Guide*, a research in practice resource.


FURTHER READING

Each module also suggests further readings. We hope you will choose at least one for each module to read and tell others about online.

QUESTIONS TO PROMPT REFLECTIONS ABOUT YOUR READING

You might want to use the following questions to prompt your reflection or develop your own. Some specific questions will be added as we discuss material for each module.


- What does the article or resource present or imply about violence and learning? How do these views relate to your views? To other views expressed in the course so far?
- Was there a practice, perspective, or position articulated in the article that particularly engaged or resonated with you? Why?
- Was there a practice, perspective, or position articulated in the article that you found yourself resisting? Why were you resistant?
- Have your views shifted through reading this article? How?
- How might you apply an idea from this article to your practice?



EXPLORING LEARNING CRITICAL (NON-FICTION): READING AND WRITING

For each module we also invite you to carry out some systematic observation of practice or procedures in your program and then reflect on what you see. You may choose to observe practices in another sort of program, such as a women's shelter or a counselling service, and reflect on whether there is anything you might use in your work.

There will be specific questions to draw your attention to particular themes in each module. The *Traveler's Guide* also includes suggestions about observations.



EXPLORING LEARNING CRITICAL (NON-FICTION): READING AND WRITING


We have included a long list of fiction, biography, poetry and movies to start you thinking about creative writing and biography as a source for understanding more about violence. We hope these titles may get you thinking about other titles you have seen and what they can teach about these issues.

In each module, we also make suggestions for specific pieces you might read or watch and ask questions to prompt your reflection. We also invite you to write creatively yourself as a way to explore what you know about the issues.

A NOTE ON READING FICTION AND BIOGRAPHY

Among the suggested readings for this course are a number of books and articles with difficult emotional content. Hearing or reading about violence is never easy. We've suggested these titles because some people find it useful to hear about the experiences of others, either to help develop empathy for what others are going through or to hear that they are not alone in their own experiences of violence.

That said, we want to tell you to go easy on yourself. Some people (ourselves included!) feel that they HAVE to read the stuff which is most difficult, but there are no awards given for enduring texts which are painful to us and no benefits to reading something we have to shut down just to finish. Go at your own pace. Remember that what is okay for some is very hard for others and that you're reading to expand your own knowledge. You don't have to read everything, and you don't have to apologize for not wanting to.



EXPLORING LEARNING MOVEMENT (BODY WORK): WATCHING AND DOING


Learning takes place in our bodies as well as our minds, and we want to explore this during the course. This may simply feel unfamiliar or not like “real” work. If so, notice these feelings and reflect on them as you try out a physical exercise.

Working online involves a lot of sitting and staring at the screen. In this course, we would like to get you up and moving! As well as the activities included in each module, don’t forget to take frequent breaks to stretch and breathe.

A NOTE ON BODY WORK

For some of us, learning feels safest when it’s in our heads. If we have been physically hurt or shamed about our bodies, we may have developed elaborate strategies to ignore them. In that case, being asked to move, stretch, or notice how we feel can be very threatening.

Remember there is no wrong way to do these exercises. You can pick and choose which ones feel okay for you, and you can stop part way through if you want. It’s sometimes useful to try things that are outside of our comfort zone or things that make us feel goofy or nervous but only you can be the judge of how much is okay for you.



EXPLORING LEARNING

MUSIC: LISTENING AND CREATING

We listen to or create music because it is a way to access different parts of our brains. It contains powerful messages, and it creates an emotional response. Course learning activities encourage you to explore music for learning and teaching. In each module, you will find some activities you can try. You may also want to think of other ideas to try.

Try listening to music:

- As a jumping-off point for activities; for example, free writing or collage. A sentence from the lyrics might provoke your thinking and make it easier to begin.
- To provide background noise for an activity. If you prefer silence while working, you might want to listen first, then try out other activities with the lyrics or sounds in your memory, rather than playing a CD or tape.
- To prompt emotions, feed the spirit, relax or sharpen the mind.
- To prompt reflection.

Try creating music or sound. You can sing, play percussion, beat a drum, or play any other instrument. Then reflect on how it works to help you:

- Breathe and energize.
- Exercise your voice or other part of your body.
- Express, communicate or change a feeling.
- Create a mood.
- Express a thought.
- Lift your spirits, rekindle hope.
- Link body, mind, emotion and spirit together.

A NOTE ON MUSIC


Many of us do not think of ourselves as musicians. If that includes you, don't let that stop you from experimenting with creating different sorts of sounds! Many of us have been turned off various forms of music by school lessons. Explore music in this course anyway and include thoughts and feelings you notice in your reflective writing or visual creations.

FINDING MUSIC

Obviously, much of the music we have suggested may not be in your music collection! Replace music for a specific activity, such as dance music for a movement exercise, with anything you already own and like. Let your imagination flow and think of music you can listen to and the purposes it might serve.

Some recordings may be available through your local library. You can also listen to selections or find new materials on the internet.

- Go to Google: <http://www.google.ca>
- Type in the title and artist, or a phrase from the song. For example: Beatles + “Hey Jude” or “Take a sad song and make it better.” (The quotation marks are important. They indicate that words you’ve typed are a phrase and that the program should look for them all together in that order.) Google will then return results. In some cases, you may find only lyrics.
- To search for a sound recording, try: Beatles + “Hey Jude” + sound file.



EXPLORING LEARNING VISUAL ART: OBSERVING AND CREATING

We have provided reading lists on critical materials, fiction and biography. It is harder to identify a “looking list” of visual materials! We do want to invite you to explore looking at art and graphics, as well as creating visuals yourself as another way of exploring the issues of violence and learning and experimenting with different ways of knowing.

A NOTE ON VISUAL ARTS

Even if you don’t think of yourself as artistic, try some of the visual exercises. Try to focus less on the product that you are creating and more on the process and how your thoughts or feelings change as you work.



PLANNING FOR CHANGE

The intention of the Planning for Change activities is to help you think more broadly about changes you would like to see in your program or literacy practice and to develop a proposal for a *Changing Practices* project.

The purpose of a *Changing Practices* project is to provide an opportunity for you to try out a new practice in your program or context or to focus on a practice you have been using. What you decide to do as a project will depend on your context, interests and learnings, and on your time. It is important that your project is something you can do. The project will likely be something you might do as a matter of good practice in any case, such as making the topic of violence open for discussion or introducing the topic in volunteer training. However, the research aspect of the project will be a way to examine the practice and its effects systematically, learn more about it and share what you learned with others.*

Each module of the course includes an activity to help you plan a project based on what you learned, observations, and reflections during the course. In the concluding workshop, you will share your project ideas with other course participants, get feedback and plan the next steps.

You will also receive a copy of the *Traveler's Guide*, a resource for planning a research in practice project. You will be able to consult about your project with one of the project coordinators (online or by phone), as well as pose questions and get feedback from other course participants.

** You will have support to implement the project in Phase Two and prepare a report about it in Phase Three. The VALTA project budget includes stipends for participants who complete projects in Phases Two and Three.*



SHARING AND EXTENDING LEARNING

Throughout the course, you will need to keep some form of journal, share your thoughts, questions, experiences and insights online with other participants, and develop a portfolio to create a record of your journey through the course.

KEEPING A JOURNAL

There are various ways to keep a journal—in a notebook, on loose-leaf paper in a binder or on the computer. You might try different media and genres: writing, drawing, collage, poetry. As well, try out different papers, lined and unlined, and different fonts or coloured pens. Your journal entries could focus on any of the following, as well as other areas you want to pursue:

- The readings
- How the readings relate to your context/program
- Insights, puzzles, challenges, possibilities
- Questions
- Ideas for changing practices
- Your response to the learning activities you have tried

Some people like to leave a wide margin on each page of their journal so that they can come back, review their entries and make additions.

A few possibilities for recording in your journal are included below, but you may have other ideas you want to try.

FREE WRITING

Free writing is writing whatever comes to mind when you pick up the pen. Many people give themselves a specific amount of time to write regularly—this might be every day or every week. If they can't think of anything to say they just write about how hard it is to know what to write, so that the pen keeps moving for the entire time they have allotted themselves.

You might want to try completely “free writing” for anywhere from ten to thirty minutes. Or you may want to try free writing with a prompt. We have suggested some writing prompts in each module. The extract from *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron may give you more ideas for free writing.

STRUCTURED WRITING

Some people prefer a more structured approach. Try writing down your answers to the Reflecting on Readings questions. Are there other questions you want to add to your list? Answering the same series of questions every time you work through a module may be helpful.

You may want to write down your answers to the Observation questions that are included in each module. Or you might want to write a reflection on what you did and what it felt like when you explored some of the less common course activities, such as music, visual arts, fiction, biography or movement.

You may find it useful to develop your own set of questions to answer for each module.

VISUAL RECORDS

You may want to try recording your reflection and experiences visually instead of or as well as using words. Example of visual records include:

- Collage
- Drawing
- Mind mapping or clustering. This approach uses words but presents them visually on a page.

The extract from *The Creative Journal* by Lucia Capcchione may give you more ideas for a visual journal.

TALKING ONLINE

As well as keeping a record of your developing reflections, insights and questions, it is important that you share them online so that we can develop a collective understanding of the issues.

Sometimes we will ask for each person in the course to take a turn and say something about the activity that they have tried—like a round in a face-to-face class. You will always have the option to pass, but you will need to post a note to tell us that you don't want to say anything when it is your turn so that we know you are there. Other times we will invite an open discussion—then you can stay quiet or post as many times as you want.

A FEW INITIAL GUIDELINES

Don't worry about your language or grammar. Feel free to write in a stream of consciousness. Think of it as speaking in print rather than "real" writing!

Let's try to be gentle with each other and recognize that we may be putting out thoughts in progress. Let's assume there is wisdom in everything that is said so that together we can "worry" at it, draw it out, and develop ideas further.

Remember that most of us find it hard to put our ideas out there and will often panic wondering whether we made any sense or whether anyone agrees with us—however often we write online!

Let's try to offer each other through our words the equivalent of the smiling faces and the encouraging looks that we would look for when talking face-to-face.

Some of us may have experienced violence; others may not have. Some may still be experiencing violence. Remember there are strengths and useful knowledge gained from both perspectives. Try not to judge or make assumptions about others or assume that you are being judged.

Try not to write details of violence or, if you must, please warn other readers what to expect in your subject header. Many of us may prefer to look after ourselves by not adding more details of violence into our lives.

COMPILING A PORTFOLIO

Create a portfolio about your learning. To start with, use a large envelope or accordion file to collect any items related to your learning. As well as including the products of your course activities, you could include relevant photos or documents related to observations or things you try out in your program or community.

A NOTE ON ACCREDITATION

Although this course is not accredited, your portfolio can provide a record of your learning in the course. Although we hope that everyone will be able to complete the readings and activities, grades will not be given for this work. Facilitators and other participants will respond to what you share online and in workshops.

Appendix 2: Course



MODULE ONE

This page outlines themes, readings and activities for Module One. Please go to the VALTA folder on eLit and join the online discussion. There will be a posting there to launch our work together online.

THEMES ONLINE

- Welcome, getting online, introductions
- Personal planning for taking on this course
- Introduction to holistic education

WORKSHOP

- Stepping out of the day to day, to reflect, (re)think, recreate....
- Building relationships with fellow travelers / co-learners
- Taking stock of resources for the journey (personal / project)
- Exploring various ways of learning / being (whole self)
- Focussing on understanding complexities of violence
- Beginning to share and extend knowledge about violence and learning
- Exploring ways to document our learnings
- Clarifying next steps for the course

KEY READINGS

Horsman, J. (1999). *Too Scared to Learn. Women, violence and education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.
Chapter 2 (and 3 if you choose)

Morrish, E., Horsman, J., & Hofer, J. (2002). *Take on the Challenge. A source book from the Women, Violence and Adult Education Project*. Boston: World Education.
Chapter 1 (pp. 3-17)

Cameron, J. (1992). The basic tools. In *The Artist's Way*. (pp. 9-24). New York: Tarcher/Putnam.

Capacchione, Lucia (1989). What is creative journal keeping? *The Creative Journal: The Art of Finding Yourself*. (pp. 1-22). North Hollywood, CA: Newcastle.

RESEARCH FINDINGS Raphael, J. (2000). Recovering: Is there a culture of poverty? *Saving Bernice: Battered Women, Welfare and Poverty* (pp. 73-96). Boston: Northeastern University Press: (Chapter 5)

ACTIVITIES Please complete these activities before the workshop:

- Reflect on your journey so far on the issue of violence and learning
- Read the key readings
- Complete a *Changing Practices* Activity



EXPLORING LEARNING

CRITICAL (NON-FICTION): READING/WRITING

As I, Jenny Horsman, will be taking the lead to introduce content about the impact of violence on learning and have written or co-written many of the materials we will use during this course, I want to introduce the materials in a personal way. I hope to give you a bit of context about the materials to pique your interest! I started my journey to learn more about the impact of violence on learning when I was leading a women's group. One of the students said, "Things happen to children that shouldn't"—and then called me the next day to apologize. That interaction began many years of tutoring together, and I have been focussing on this issue since then. It became my full time preoccupation in 1996 when I got a research grant to learn more about the issues.

As you prepare for the workshop please think about YOUR journey so far on this issue. You might want to write notes about this, free write, draw, chart or just think. We will spend some time in the workshop talking about our journeys to this point. Think carefully about what you might want to share, what you are not ready to share yet, and what influences your choices. You might think about your experiences as a teacher and a learner, your reading and the thinking you have done about the issue.

My journey continued as I travelled from coast to coast and up to the north of Canada to learn what therapists, counsellors, literacy learners and workers knew about the impact of violence on learning. I led online conversations and many face-to-face workshops, and read everything I could find. I tried to make sense of everything I learned and wrote about it in the book, *Too Scared to Learn*. During this course, you will be asked to read most of that book as a starting point for our work of developing our collective thinking further.

Please read Chapter 2 for the first workshop, as we will use it as the basis for a discussion about violence. You might also choose to read Chapter 3 to get you thinking about the range of violence present in the literacy classroom.

Early in 1999 I met staff from World Education, an organization based in Boston, which supports literacy work in New England. I was very pleased to learn that they wanted to

design a project on violence and learning. Much to their surprise they got funding. For the next three years, I worked with Elizabeth Morrish, Judy Hofer and staff from six literacy programs in New England to explore in depth the impact of violence on learning and to look at what programs can do to support learning. We are just finishing up a source book from that project. You will be reading that manual as well so that you can build on what we learned during that project instead of re-inventing the wheel! You'll get the completed book later in the course, but for now you have a photocopy. I hope you can bear with it.

Please read the Introduction in Chapter 1 of the Source book (pages 3-17) for the first workshop. The remaining pages of the chapter include an introduction to each of the six programs, which you may find interesting to read at some point. We will be reading examples of the sort of changes project participants made in their programs later in the course.

Your reading package also includes two excerpts from books about writing and drawing journals by Lucia Capacchione and Julia Cameron. *Look at these excerpts if you don't already know them and begin to think about how you would like to explore and document your learning.* At the workshop we will be talking about the record-keeping you will be doing during the course—creating journals and portfolios. These excerpts might give you ideas to try or help you to see what style might work for you.

If you have time I also encourage you to read the chapter included from Saving Bernice by Jody Raphael. I chose this both for its content and as an interesting example of research. Jody interviewed one woman in depth to create a picture of the impact of violence on women living on welfare; then she interwove Bernice's story with lots of information from more conventional research studies to create an interesting and multi-layered picture.

FURTHER READINGS

Choose one of the readings from this section to explore an issue about which you are curious. The further readings cover several different themes so that you can choose any of them. The themes fall generally into four categories:

- Experiences of violence for specific groups such as people with disabilities or First Nations communities; e.g., Hodgson, Ticol and Pnitch.
- Conceptions of trauma and violence; e.g., Brown, Fraser, Herman, Johnson.

- Introducing holistic education; e.g., Holistic Education Network of Tasmania.
- An example of creating curriculum focussing on issues of violence; e.g., Kivel and Creighton.

Brown, L. (1995). "Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic trauma." In C. Caruth (Ed.). *Trauma explorations in memory*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Fraser, S. (1994, March). Freud's final. *Saturday Night*. (pp.19-59).

Herman, J. (1992). A forgotten history. *Trauma and Recovery*. (pp.115-129). New York: Basic Books.

Hodgson, M. (1990). Shattering the silence: Working with violence in Native communities. In T.A. Laidlaw & Malmo, C., (Eds.). *Healing voices: Feminist approaches to therapy with women*. (pp. 33-34). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Holistic Education Network of Tansmania, Inc. Holistic Education. [Online]. Available: www.nat.tas.edu.au/HENT/

Holistic Education Network of Tansmania, Inc. A 21st Century World-View: Connectedness, Wholeness and Being (Section 5). [Online] Available: www.neat.tas.edu.au/HENT/why/section_5.htm.

Holistic Education Network of Tansmania, Inc. What might a more Holistic Education look like? (Section 7). [Online]. Available: www.neat.tas.edu.as?HENT/why/section_7.htm

Johnson, H. (1996). Theoretical approaches to the study of violence against women. In *Dangerous Domains: Violence Against Women In Canada*. (pp. 1-24). Toronto: Nelson Canada.

Kivel, P. & Creighton, A., with the Oakland Men's Project. (1997). The roots of violence. (Session 1-3). In *Making the Peace: a 15- session Violence Prevention Curriculum for Young People*. Alameda, CA: Hunter House.

Ticoll, M. & Panitch, M. (1993). Opening the Doors: Addressing the Sexual Abuse of Women with an Intellectual Disability. *Canadian Woman Studies/Cahiers de la femme*, 13, (4). pp. 84-87.



EXPLORING LEARNING

I, Mary Norton, will be participating in the course and take a lead in introducing the *Changing Practices* activities. (I will introduce myself online, along with Judy Murphy, the other VALTA project co-ordinator).

The focus of the *Changing Practices* activities in this module is “Taking Stock.” As a first step, Jenny has invited you to reflect on your journey so far. As another step, at the workshop, we will describe the contexts of our day-to-day work. To prepare for this, please set aside some time in the next week when you can slow down and take a good look around your program and community. Imagine that you are visiting both places for the first time. What do you see? What don’t you see? (e.g., in your program, your office, out the window, on the street outside...).

To help document and share your observations, complete one of the following exercises and bring the results to the workshop.

Take (or find) some photos to share what you see. Or make some sketches, freewrite or jot down some key words to document your observations.

Browse through local newspapers, newsletters or brochures and clip or copy photos, headlines or stories that will help you introduce your program/community.

Collect some small objects (hand-made or natural) that symbolize aspects of your program/community.

***We look forward to meeting you
online and in the workshop!!***

I Remember³¹

*I remember the place before I was born
Now I am born.
I gather information and put it in a basket
over my head.
I cut a path for myself through this life.
I go out to the edges and back to the centre.
I put my vision out into the world.
I let go of the results.
And return back to the place
Before I was born.*



³¹ Mary Norton learned this chant from Shivan Robinsong and Ann Mortifee. Ann learned it from a friend. The source is unknown. "I remember" was shared with VALTA participants in the third workshop.

