



Moving Forward

Approaches and Activities To Support Women's Learning

Written and compiled
by

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Parkdale Project Read
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"One day I realized that my baby steps,
which seemed too small to count, had
taken me across the universe."

Francesca de Grandis

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Thanks and Request to Readers

I also want to thank you the reader for using this "working draft" of the manual. It is a work in progress. I learned more than I imagined possible from working with the Women's Success Course and trying out many new approaches and activities and then reflecting on how they worked and what else was needed to write this manual. In the process I added activities that I now wish I had included and modified ones that didn't work well, so some exercises have not yet been tried out. As I used the material I found that it took students time to become comfortable with new ways of working and to become more used to the in depth reflection and interaction with each other. Initially women had enormous difficulty reflecting on their own feelings, reporting their thoughts, and listening to each other. Gradually changes took place and women began to connect more richly with themselves and each other. Please don't give up and immediately assume that an exercise couldn't ever work with your group – look to see whether there are ways to work towards it. But do modify, change the order, try out different variations and new materials. I would love to hear what worked for you and what didn't, how you changed exercises, new exercises you created and the approaches you followed. Please tell me about your experiences, ideas, feelings, as you worked with this material.

I am sure you will also find errors and inconsistencies and aspects of the ordering and layout that bug you. Extracts from books are in photocopied format while we seek permission to use them in the manual. Tell me whether the inclusion of so much extra material is useful. Ann Decter, my editor, went through the manual line by line and tried to make it consistent. That led me to add new pieces, change the structure and think again about parts of my writing – so the new writing didn't get edited! Margie Adam began the design process to give us an idea of what the finished product can look like. Please let me know the problems you find and the changes you would like to see so that the next version can be stronger, clearer and easier to use.

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I will be publishing a final version of this manual, in a year or so I hope.

I would love to incorporate your ideas (credited of course) and to make improvements based on your experience in your context with your group. Please send me all your suggestions for making it a more useful tool – from the picky to the major!

Thank you.

Part I

Approaches

Background History

Unless education at all levels acknowledges the violence in the lives of women and children, along with its impact on learning, many students will not only fail to learn, but may also experience the educational setting as a silencing place, or another site of violence, where they are controlled and diminished by institutional structures or classroom interactions and shamed by their failure to learn

(Horsman 1999/2000) ¹



This package contains practical suggestions for activities and ideas for literacy programs to support learners to learn successfully and to move to a place where they are able to set and work towards meeting meaningful goals for change in their lives. The idea for this package of approaches and activities came out of a national research study, which looked at the impact of trauma on learning.²

Based on my research, I argued that many women who have experienced violence have difficulties learning and I suggested a wide variety of ways that adult education could change to support learning better. (Horsman, 1999/2000). The new approaches that came out of that research are the underpinnings of the ideas in this kit. My research indicated that control, connection and meaning will often be complicated terrain for trauma survivors. Yet, a sense of being able to be in control, to make connections with others and to believe in the possibility of meaning

1 My book, *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education* was published in Toronto by McGilligan Books in 1999 and in Mahwah, New Jersey by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates in 2000.

2 This research and publications resulting from it was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources Development Canada. A discussion paper: *But I'm Not a Therapist* formed the basis for an on-line discussion with literacy workers, administrators, and academics to develop the ideas further. This paper, and other articles on the subject, is available at www.jennyhorsman.com. The book: *Too Scared to Learn, Women, Violence and Education* synthesises both the theoretical and practical issues from this research. This work forms the underpinning of the approach presented here.

in life are all crucial to having the ability to set goals. Currently, expectations in literacy and training programs are often that new students can immediately set goals. I believe that often this is not possible for women who have experienced violence in their lives. This course focuses on work that will support women to reach a point where they are ready to set goals.

Although the suggestion that women who have experienced violence may need particular approaches if they are to learn might lead to the assumption that such women should be separated out and treated differently, I do not believe this route will serve us well. A focus on diagnosis will lead to seeing those who have experienced violence as "other", not "normal", and to suggest the existence of some category of learner who has not experienced any violence and is therefore "normal." It is important that literacy workers do not try to diagnose those who have experienced violence and treat them differently, but instead make broad changes in programming. One crucial change needed is the acknowledgement that some degree of violence is present in many, if not most, women's lives and a naming of the legacy of violence in all aspects of life, including learning and teaching. This naming is vital to move learners (and teachers) away from a sense of shame and isolation.

At Parkdale Project Read we started a special, time-limited women's group to try out new approaches suggested by the research, but the material included here is intended for use in any group or class. Although we particularly encouraged women who had a history of trauma, or who seemed to be particularly stuck and struggling to move forward in their learning to join the group, the group was open to all women in the program. Women who had not previously participated in the literacy program were also sought out through other agencies in the community.

In *Too Scared to Learn* I argue that:

...the task is not to encourage educators to believe that they must learn to diagnose who has been traumatized and then treat them differently from other learners. The responsibility of educators, funders and others in the field is to recognize that *all learning must be carried out in recognition of the needs of survivors of trauma* It is needs of trauma survivors that should be "normalized" as an everyday part of education.

(Horsman 1999/2000)

This package is one step in exploring what literacy learning could look like when the needs of trauma survivors are normalized in literacy programs.

Women's Success Course³

These materials were developed out of an intensive women's course at Parkdale Project Read. The course took place three afternoons a week over thirteen weeks (January to April 2000). We worked together from 1:00 to 3:00 each day, but women could arrive any time from 12:00 and stay until 4:00. Many women used this extra time to write their journals, read, or just relax with a cup of tea and listen to music. Some materials presented here were used in the group, others are possibilities I didn't have time to try, or wish in retrospect I had tried.

Because the new course was somewhat unusual and consequently difficult to describe, before we began we offered several sample workshops, widely advertised in the community, to help women decide whether the course was for them (October to December 1999). Initially, the workshops seemed like a great way to help women decide whether the course was for them. In retrospect, I don't think I would use them again in the same way, because even though they functioned as a non-threatening way for women to explore the possibility of joining the group, the structure didn't work for some women. At the very first workshop, a large group of women who were ready to start straight into the course, were confused by the plan for future workshops each at a different time and day of the week. I had chosen this schedule in order to reach as wide a range of women as possible, with the preparatory workshops. These women were ready to start right away. Because each session was a discreet workshop, even though many of the same women came each time I couldn't begin to build the group, to formulate ground rules or structures for our work together. Sensitive issues were raised from the first workshop. But we did not yet have regular meetings and I did not yet have a counsellor in place for students to work with when issues came up for them. Next time I would try either holding one or two workshops co-led with a counsellor, immediately before the course was ready to run. Or begin the course with a two-week "open" time when women could check it out and stop and start as they chose, allowing students to identify whether it was an appropriate course for them.

³ Participants in the World Education, Women, Violence, and Adult Education project helped me see a problem with this name as it suggests women were not successful before the course. Success in Western Society is often seen in terms of how much money you earn. Success for some is achieved at a cost to others and to the whole self and to a balanced life. Questioning what counts as success and helping women to identify the elements that are important to them could be a valuable aspect of the course.

About ten women came to each pre-course workshop, out of which about fifteen said they were keen to participate in the course. I was disappointed when only two or three arrived for each of the first few sessions in January – women who had planned to attend seemed to have changed their minds, or life had intervened. So, the goal of the workshops, which was to start with a good size group was not achieved. Though I had intended to have a closed group that could quickly begin to build trust and cohesion, I had to allow women to join over the first couple of weeks. Many women continued to attend erratically throughout the course, some attended only a few sessions but never committed to regular attendance. Others struggled to attend as often as they could in spite of many intervening problems in their lives and their families.



The focus of the Women's Success Course was more on getting unstuck than on literacy. We wanted to create a "space" which supported women to believe they might make changes in their lives, and to dream and imagine what those changes might look like. We used literacy as a means to carry out this work, engaging in reading, writing, speaking, and listening as ways to work, but not focussing on learning to read or write. Much of the writing was journal writing for women's own use, and I stressed that correctness or accuracy was irrelevant to such writing. I often spoke of the course as an opportunity for women to explore and reflect on where they come from, where they are at now, and where they are trying to go. I hoped women might begin to feel stronger about themselves as learners and as able to make change in their lives, in spite of societal and familial pressures which often offered little support and much hindrance to even imagining the possibility of change.

To expand the range of possibilities for women, and help them gain awareness of local resources, one of our three afternoons a week

was usually a workshop run by an outside facilitator. These workshops were invaluable. Women found it challenging to meet a new workshop leader each week, but each leader opened a new door, explained new possibilities and resources and gave women the experience of being treated with respect and value. Workshop leaders of different ages and ethnicities led workshops. This offered a chance for the group to experience different styles and see various role models each offering new experience that fit within our theme of the week. Leaders taught songs, yoga and listening skills; explained how to access and choose a counsellor; explored group process, working with emotions and change; led a talking-circle and showed us how to give each other massages.

I participated in the workshops, and offered assistance to the facilitator when needed. I could then pick up on ideas or tools we had learnt together in the workshop in the next week's sessions. This enabled me to expand outside my comfort zone. After our singing workshop, we sang the songs that we had learnt together, singing along with the tape we had made with the facilitator. We used this tool frequently, although I think of myself as a non-singer, and usually unable to lead singing. Similarly, after our yoga and relaxation workshop we learnt to incorporate focussing on breathing to calm ourselves as a group and help everyone to get grounded, including me!

We had a budget to pay for child-care and tickets for public transport for anyone who needed these costs covered. I hadn't anticipated the range of reasons that took children out of school and day-care and meant that women had to bring their children with them or miss the group. I always encouraged women to bring their children if they needed to and took on keeping them busy myself so that the women were able to pay attention to their own learning. Fortunately, it was often Friday when children joined us, so I was able to make sure they were busy – with all our wonderful craft supplies – because a workshop leader had the main responsibility for the group. This flexible approach had its drawbacks. The presence of children could make it uncomfortable or inappropriate for women to show their emotion or speak openly about their issues. Some women struggled with jealousy when my attention went to the children during what usually felt like the women's own special time.

Next time, I would try to make an arrangement ahead of time for the inevitable emergency, such as making use of a nearby day-care, or arranging for someone to come in to play with the kids in another room in our centre. One value of bringing the children in to

our group and "coping" is that it encouraged women to feel welcome to share whatever burdens they brought with them. It also opened up much talk about difficulties women had with parenting, when they themselves had experienced little parenting they wanted to copy. Awareness of the women's struggle to balance their own needs with those of their children has lead me now to dream of a new course, working in collaboration with an agency serving children. This course would focus on the needs of children and parents, using reading and writing as a means to explore experiences and try out new tools for parenting, recognizing the impact of the legacy of violence on attempts to parent lovingly and well. It would open new possibilities for women and the children in their care.

The quote from Francesca de Grandis, "One day I realized that my baby steps, which seemed too small to count, had taken me across the universe." became the rallying cry of the course. The reminder that even when we can't see it we are moving forward and that our efforts WILL lead to change spoke to women in the group. Women found it valuable to be reminded of these "baby steps", especially when the pressures in their lives – workfare, welfare, workers who put them down, ex-husbands harassing them, neighbours abusing them, children in trouble, limited money and more - left them reeling and feeling that there was just too much to cope with. Gradually during the course woman were noticing inner changes in their sense of themselves and by the time the support group had been underway for some time several women had made practical shifts in their lives, in spite of set backs and crises.

Our advertisements for the course read:

In this course you will:

- Write and read in each session
- Work on your own challenges
- Strengthen your ability to learn
- Begin to think about the changes you want to make in your life
- Learn about options for courses, jobs etc.
- Create your own plans to work towards your goals.

This is a course to work toward new directions!

Using these materials

Inspiration, not prescription

These materials can be used in many different types of courses. Although many were initially used in a women-only, intensive course, they are intended to be used in a variety of settings, and adapted and re-ordered in any possible combination. They are intended as inspiration, not prescription, in the hopes that many different combinations can be developed for different situations. Hunting down a range of materials can be extremely time-consuming – time that is not often available for busy literacy workers. The hope is that this collection of poems, extracts from longer works, quotes and cartoons can be used, not only for the learning activities suggested here, but also for a wide range of other activities.

The desire (and sometimes also the pressure) to be learner-centred may make teachers wary of bringing materials to the learning situation that have not been requested by students. However I think it is very important to recognize that it is not possible for learners to request what they do not know exists. This leads me to believe that it is very important for a teacher to offer as wide a range of choices as possible so that students can experience things they may not be able to imagine or think of as "schoolwork." Then a teacher can create opportunities for learners to think about what they like and don't like and why. When students have input into what they want more of, or less of, having already experienced many different options and seen first hand how participating in different kinds of activities affected them, this can help them reflect on choices in the classroom and elsewhere. Learner-centred programming should not mean that the teacher is absent in the selection process, but instead that both learner and teacher are able to contribute to the choices to be made, in an active negotiation process.



Course Formats

Participants in our three month course mostly thought they would have liked the course to be longer, from four to six months. Some would have preferred an ongoing course, unwilling to see any specific end to the group. Although one or two women would have liked to meet more often each week, most found it hard to re-organize their lives to be free three times a week and would have been happy to meet twice a week. In spite of some women's preference for an on-going course, I think there is value in a time-limited course. In the Women's Success Course the pressure to get there before it ended seemed to help some women find a way to get there regularly, even if they had to put other challenges on hold.

A two-hour class session with one hour after the end for learners to write in their journals or complete the activity, worked well. I also offered a similarly flexible hour before the class, but I would not offer that again, as women were often sitting waiting for the group to begin, and those who arrived early were disturbed when other women arrived late. I also found it hard to respond well to women who came early and were present as I prepared for the class.

Next time I might try a course with two sections. The first section could be less intensive, and run once or twice a week, for a month or even longer. New members could join at any point, to allow for the lengthy time when women are starting and stopping and struggling to believe in themselves enough to attend, to organize their lives to get there and to get used to each other and begin to get down to work. The primary focus would be on believing in yourself, working on all the barriers that hinder attendance, forming a group and beginning to work together. A more intensive stage two – perhaps three to six months – meeting three or more times a week could follow. During this time, when women are ready to attend frequently and committed to working together, more themes could be developed. The group I led was really ready to work together and address their own issues by the end of the three month course, but the intensive phase of the course was over, we were only meeting weekly as a support group.

Who is in the group?

This material can be used in women-only or mixed gender courses. The key advantage of using this material in a women-only course is that it creates a space where women are more able to speak about violence against them committed by men. Most extracts and poems included in this package are written to or about women. For a mixed gender group it would be wise to hunt out similar materials to supplement which speak to and about men.

Different groupings of learners should prompt supplementing with new materials. Materials reflecting ways of being in the world and life experiences of different ethnicities would enrich the package. This kit is in a loose-leaf format, and will fit into a binder to make it convenient to add materials – pictures, poems, cartoons, quotes, stories, essays – appropriate for your group, that you find through your own reading and hunting.

Literacy as means or end

Our course did not focus on literacy skills per se, instead, literacy work was used as a means to develop a process of reflection through which women could work towards increased strength as learners and moving towards the possibility of change. Still, many of these materials could be used in a literacy focussed group to offer reading and writing practice.

Any literacy group would benefit from spending some time focussed on developing learning skills and reflective skills for past experiences and future plans. This focus could be a regularly scheduled element, occurring once a week, once a month, the last half of each session, or in any other appropriate format.

Attendance

Attendance was always a complicated issue in our group. Several women seemed eager to join the group, but took a long time to actually attend. Some attended erratically throughout the course. Some consistently said they were going to come, that they enjoyed it and promised they would be there next time, but rarely appeared. My co-facilitator recently said that she thought that the women who were able to attend regularly didn't need the group as much as those who couldn't quite get there. I think she is right, and still question how to help women make the first step to actually get to a group more than once or twice. One woman who only attended rarely said she would get ready to

leave for class then tell herself, who was she kidding, of course she couldn't learn, and take her coat off again. I called women after they had missed a couple of classes just to ask how they were and whether everything was ok. I tried to keep in touch with students as a way of showing they were missed and that we cared that they come without making them feel guilty that they were not in class.

In spite of my theoretical approach that stopping and starting and taking control over whether and when to attend a course was a valuable stage for each learner, when the group was small or a woman was rarely there, I struggled with feeling disappointed and frustrated, concerned that if women did not attend I could not teach them. I was fascinated to hear from some of the women that they did see themselves as in the group and learning from the group, even when they rarely attended. My uncritical welcome whenever they did appear, even when they arrived at the end of class, was particularly important to one woman. She said it helped her to feel less of a failure – less critical of herself. Eventually, she did find a way to organize her life and began to attend regularly. I still wonder what would have helped some of the others who attended rarely to actually get there. I suspect all that we can do is to keep inviting them to similar courses in the future and offer no judgement or criticism about missing the last time. Then, perhaps at each new course a woman will attend a little more frequently, beginning to feel a little better about herself and her ability to learn and change, until she is ready to take a course on more fully.

There are many decisions to make about attendance. Many students may need to stop and start to feel able to take part in a group. Getting to a place where learners can attend more frequently can take time, especially if it means asserting the right to their own needs over those of husband, children, grandchildren or over the demands of case workers or medical professionals. The process of gradually becoming able to attend class suggests the need for a more open group. Yet some comfort with and trust of other members of the group may be necessary for women to open up and work on



their own issues. I was always torn between the competing needs, and chose to close the group to new participants after the first couple of weeks, but kept it open for anyone who had attended at all, to rejoin even if they only had attended once or twice. I chose to try to develop a sense of a presence of the latecomers for the rest of the group. I put everyone's name up on the blackboard and gradually each woman made her own quilt piece (see **Working Together** section). In future, I would be delighted to begin with a larger group, knowing that would mean a viable size group would attend regularly, even though many individuals will inevitably miss frequently. Groups of six to eight were excellent and full of energy, groups of two or three were usually the most chaotic and hard to work with.

I valued the mix of women who participated in the group. Those who had been through less violence in their lives were sometimes able to offer wonderful support to those struggling with a large legacy of pain. The interaction between women who were new to the program and those already in the program and apparently "stuck" was also rich, with insights offered from both locations.

When I have described the sort of course I led some have immediately assumed it is an excellent course for "pre-literacy," set up to help new students begin in the program. Others have thought it should be a program for transition from literacy to other training. I believe it can cross boundaries and help students at any literacy

level and with any amount of experience in a program "take stock" and learn more about themselves as learners. This is equally valuable at any stage in the learning process.



Choice Checklist:

- Women only or mixed gender?
- Women new to the program, long-standing students or open to all?
- Open to women outside the program or only those already in?
- Will the group have a limited time frame?
- Will it be closed after a certain point or continuous intake?
- If it is to close eventually, when should this be?
- Will childcare and transportation costs be covered?
- Will childcare offered? If so on-site or off?

Workshops

Workshops run by a variety of facilitators can enrich a course. Women who have "been there" and found their way through tough times offer a model for possibility of change, though it is important that leaders do not use a judgmental "I pulled myself up from the bootstraps so you should". That others, who have been through a lot, have made changes in their lives seemed valuable inspiration to many women. The tone that worked was one of being "a fellow traveller" with a tool or an insight that had proved valuable to the leader herself and that she could share with the group.

Workshop leaders of the same ethnoracial identity as participants seemed particularly important to offering an inspiring role model. I noticed, for example, that Black women –those brought up in Canada and immigrants from the Caribbean - really appreciated the leadership of other Black women and seemed attentive to their every word. These workshop leaders were able to make a connection and offer inspiration that I cannot give as a white woman.

Leaders from different ethnicities, cultures, ages and with different skills and styles all help to open the world for women in the group. Although there were no First Nations students in the group I led, women greatly appreciated meeting a First Nation elder and learning about and participating in a smudging ceremony and talking circle.

Different workshop leaders can bring new skills, approaches and techniques into the class. I found it a relief to realize that I did not have to be able to lead everything that I thought would be an asset in the group. Instead, I could invite different leaders in to help us all explore something new. Having participated in the workshop I could draw on insights or continue to use the new tool with the group.

A further value of inviting workshop leaders is that they can help participants to learn about other courses, programs or services in the community. I balanced the value of including workshop leaders from local organizations with choosing workshop leaders who I had personally watched at work and knew would not be patronizing or belittling.

Asking local resource people you trust can be a good way to identify new contacts in the local community. I found a counsellor from a local community health centre who was able to



Leaders Selection Criteria Checklist:

- Respectful of women learners, will not talk down to people, "fellow travellers", sense of shared struggle
- Wisdom to share in a gentle fashion
- Range of ethnicities, approaches, backgrounds – help to open the world
- From the geographical community, offer accessible educational opportunities, help learners to begin to feel able to access resources.

recommend many names of resource people in our community. One participant in the Women's Success Course commented that the workshops felt like "opening doors." When I asked if she would have liked more workshops, she said she had no idea because everything she had experienced was fascinating and new. She could not know how much more she was missing.

Support Group

Following an intensive group, a continuation of the group as a "support group" can provide a much-needed transition into new programs and support to continue to work towards making change.

After the end of our three month course we chose to meet once a week for two hours on the only day everyone in the group was able to attend. This lasted for another couple of months, then we took a break for the summer and will continue again in the fall for another two to three months. We plan to open the support group to new women to try out whether an open group with a firm structure can work and serve as a resource to more women in the program. A focus on the joys in women's lives, the struggles they are working with, and on moving forward with the changes women are trying to initiate may support women in making a transition into new learning opportunities, or in learning successfully in the ones they are engaged in.



Decisions to Make Checklist:

- Who can attend? How long will each session be?
- How often will you meet?
- Will the group be time limited, if so for how long?
- What structure will the group follow?

Bringing the Whole Person to Learning

Creating a safer space

It is crucial that literacy programs respect the "canaries" in literacy programs and seek to create a setting which is not toxic and which supports literacy learning. Violation of safety is a central aspect of trauma. This is particularly true for survivors of incest, where those who should have helped preserve a child's safety and helped the child to learn a sense of safety, instead violate the child's safety. For some learners, still involved in a relationship with an abusive man, the literacy program can be a rare place of safety. This may mean that some learners want to be there even when they are in crisis and unable to learn. It is already clear that in the literacy program safety will be a complicated concept. Some learners will want the program to be a safe place to tell their stories, others will want it to be a place safe from hearing disturbing stories. Some will want to be free to express their anger or rage, others will want a place which is safe from experiencing any form of violence, including outbursts of anger or frustration. (Horsman 1999/2000)

Creating a safer space is a challenge in literacy programs. Permission to bring the whole self to class, including all the hurt and despair, means learners may make difficult demands on each other and on the facilitator. For women who have experienced trauma making meaningful connections with others can be enormously challenging. Creating ground rules together can help to create a safer environment. Participants have to take responsibility to work towards recognizing factors that will help them feel safe. In the Women's Success Course, students were particularly aware that confidentiality was crucial. They negotiated what confidentiality meant to them. We created a list together and kept it posted on the wall throughout the course. Participants were free to suggest new rules as they recognized things they wanted to negotiate with the group.

Some rules may need to be identified by the facilitator. I created rules as I realized a need for them. For example, I added a rule that no one should tell anyone else what they should do or should have done. When I noticed we all frequently wanted to tell others not to cry, I added a rule that we could not say "don't cry" because it suggests that it is not ok to show your emotion or even to feel sad. I found myself frequently saying: "it's ok to feel what we feel." I also discovered that there was a tendency for women to



"compete" by offering a worse story after another woman described the mistreatment she had experienced. It quickly became clear that was another way of minimizing experience, suggesting it was not as bad as something else and so shouldn't be cried over. Gradually the group learned to listen to each other's pain with empathy and to add their stories without competing. It was important to name these rules so that everyone was able to bring their emotion to class.

Allowing the choice of opting out of any activity is also important for safety. If women are encouraged to "pass" when asked to take a turn in any activity, opt out by getting up for a drink, sitting out of the group in a comfy chair, or going for a walk outside until they are ready to return to a group activity, they can learn to monitor their own comfort level and take care of themselves.

Magazine boxes turned high side out so that the content of the box is out of sight and women's writing can be put away after class is a way to create the opportunity for women to control what they are prepared to share with others. To ensure confidentiality some women may prefer to make up a name to put on their box and journals. In the Women's Success Course I was clear that nobody, including me, should look in any box unless invited to. I only read or looked at sections of journals when asked. Control over their writing was clearly very important to many women. When a journal went missing this was very disturbing to one student. If the space is to be shared with another group, a locked filing cabinet might be a more secure way to ensure materials are private and access is controlled by the student herself.

Relationships between women in the group that formed outside the group are a complex area that can create challenges. There may be pre-existing friendships, women may live in the same building, attend other groups together, and new friendships may develop in the group. I encouraged women to bring any difficulties to the group so that I could mediate if necessary. However, one student dropped out partly I think because she was not comfortable with another student. These tensions probably cannot be avoided, but it is useful to be aware of them in advance, perhaps to point out to students at the start of the group that they might not want to rush into a new close friendship because problems can easily arise when women feel exposed and are struggling to develop trust. I would also be careful not to give students' phone numbers out to everyone, but to encourage women to think about whether they want to share their number in the group.



Naming Violence

It is important to make the issue of violence visible so it is clear that violence will have been a factor in many women's lives as children or as adults. Being clear that women will not be shamed for having experienced violence or for struggling with the consequences of violence may make all the difference, enabling women to feel able to be present and relaxed enough to explore their own learning. Although I wanted to make the recognition of violence visible, I did not want to use material that described violence in detail for class material, as it was clearly immensely difficult for many women in the group to hear about more violence. They had absorbed so much themselves. Women looked at the easy reading material in the resource centre and gauged their own comfort level with stories that told of violence, or their own need for self-help books that addressed leaving violent situations or "healing" from trauma.

The availability of resources and the public naming of the widespread nature of violence can make it possible for women to explore their own legacy of violence and their own ongoing struggles to free themselves from violence in less isolation and without the usual shameful silences that compound the struggles. The sense of shared struggle can provide a supportive setting in which to reflect on past experiences and imagine possibilities for change.



Material Checklist:

- Posters that say no to violence (important to ensure that the violence of racism, ableism, sexism, ageism etc. are all shown as unacceptable). (Many posters and flyers are available in Canada from Education Wife Assault and internationally on the internet. See reference section for details)
- Information on resources – hot lines, shelters, counselling, addictions etc.
- Poems – eg. Ellen Bass' poem poster – *Courage to Heal*
- Collection of self-help books especially easy to read ones such as *You Can Be Free* and *Breaking Free from Partner Abuse*.
- Easy to read autobiographies, short stories, poetry which reflects a wide variety of experiences of violence

Avoiding "Shoulds"

It is crucial that the tone in the classroom shows respect for wherever people are in their own journey. They may be living in a violent situation, using alcohol or drugs to numb their pain, angry or complaining, insistent that nothing and nobody can ever help them, everyone is out to get them and nothing can ever change. The literacy program can offer information about resources, teach tools for reflection, and can recognize why it is hard to learn, hard to take care of the self, sometimes hard to hold onto any glimmer of self worth, and often hard simply to get to the program. It is important that literacy workers avoid judging students for their current behaviour, or suggesting they could change if they tried hard enough.

Many inspirational materials or speakers can help engender hope and support students to begin to believe in the possibility of change. But there is also a fine line. Those same materials can lead women to feel blamed for not feeling hopeful, for not believing in the possibility of change or for not having made changes already. It is important to keep a balance of "inspirational" material and material and activities that invite women to recognize the forces that work against them, particularly the pressure from people and institutions in their social context. It is important to notice when women are taking on blame, to help them to recognize they are doing the best they can and to have faith that they will make change when they are able.

Yet it is hard to watch when students appear to be stuck. Therapist Liz White suggested that literacy workers need to develop the "capacity to witness" because many women who have been through violence may be depressed or suicidal, or struggling with other after-effects of trauma. I found it incredibly valuable to meet regularly with a "supervisor" so that I could vent and let go my frustration at being unable to wave a magic wand and make change for women, easing the tension of watching women when they seemed to be stuck or "spinning" as they struggled with many problems in an unsupportive society. It is important not to assume that a course is having no effect, because we can't immediately see change.

Respecting the Presence of Body, Emotion and Spirit...

For the woman who has experienced trauma, engaging all aspects of the self in a creative learning process can support integration and connection within the whole person and so facilitate literacy learning. Dawna Markova draws attention to why these connections are so important:

Milton Erickson believed that people who are traumatized get stuck in one frame of reference, in one way of thinking about the world, themselves, and their difficulties. It is that "stuckness" that imprisons us, because it knocks us out of connection with our bodies and sense. We feel as if we have lost the spirit from our lives. (1994:35)

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, and create more effective programming for literacy learning. (Horsman 1999/2000)

Helping women to develop greater integration, to bring their whole selves to learning and to learn to reflect on their lives is an important and challenging task. This sense of wholeness is crucial in supporting women to move on in their lives. The combination of a broad range of elements – a comfortable setting, food for the body, an acceptance of emotions, a recognition of spirit and the need to find meaning in life – may come together to offer women the opportunity to re-integrate themselves and learn more effectively.

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities.

Adrienne Rich

When a woman is regularly treated with respect and belief in her potential, the continual reminder that she is seen as worthy of respect can be a crucial step for her in beginning to value herself, a first step toward beginning to imagine new possibilities.

Working with Chaos

Bringing the whole self to learning can lead to a chaotic class. Women have competing needs and may conflict as they struggle with never having had enough listening, care, support, or belief in themselves. They may talk at the same time, have difficulty listening to each other, be restless, interrupt, be full of complaints and frustrations, or bring emotions that arise from daily stresses and crises in their lives into the classroom.

If women seemed to be in a particularly uncomfortable state, I tried to ask what they thought they needed to be able to participate. When the class seemed to be heading in many different directions at the same time, I often found myself writing at the blackboard or flip chart. This helped us focus together on one task and gave structure and order to the work we were doing together. It seemed to calm and focus to the room when women were rubbing up against each other. In the later stages of the support group, when women all had compelling issues, finding common ground between the women's issues was a powerful tool to allow us to work together. When returning to an image from an earlier class that everyone could connect with worked to focus us and bring us together as a group. Later, as we learned some bodywork, focussing on the breath was amazingly effective in helping everyone, including me, to ground and focus. In future I would want to explore more physical exercises to help shift energies when I felt myself struggling with chaos. I would also want to try to name the problem more frequently and create exercises to recognize the divisions as well as the connections between group members. I would want to help the group to collectively recognize issues and strategize solutions, rather than assuming I have to cope with everything that is going on.

Taking Care

Disclosures

Both clarity about boundaries between therapy and literacy and acknowledging that a simple division between the two fields is arbitrary are useful understandings for considering appropriate links between literacy and therapy. Creating a variety of bridges between the two disciplines, and making therapy and counselling more visible within literacy programs will support the capacity of learners to learn effectively. This shift also interrupts the frame that impacts of trauma are only to be addressed in isolation between a woman and her therapist, so that a woman can return to "normal" and resume ordinary life as soon as possible. Unsettling this frame is not only significant theoretically, but enables silences about violence and learning to be broken and frees learners from impossible expectations that they simply put the past behind them. It opens new possibilities for successful learning. (Horsman 1999/2000)

Women will reveal aspects of their story in a group where they are encouraged to believe they can bring their whole selves, including wounds, to the work on hand, but that does not mean we need to be "doing therapy." The group does not need to be the place for the telling of stories in full, though there may sometimes be a compelling reason why the group is the ideal place for women to tell their stories. For example, the students in a GED class led by Judy Hofer decided they wanted to meet at a separate time and talk about their lives. These students did not have access to counsellors or counselling groups available to them and so chose this off-shoot of the class as the place to explore their lives (The Literacy Project, n.d.). A literacy group may become the place to explore women's full stories, when a group and facilitator make an agreement to do this, and is most likely when there are no other appropriate places and the facilitator feels adequately supported by her program and counsellors, to support students with care.

It may also be appropriate to invite women to tell certain aspects of their story to draw out an analysis of the common ground between stories, which may help women to understand the issue further. Stories may be told for particular purposes. For example, in my group, a women's self-defence workshop leader told stories of resistance to violence which led women to tell stories of their own resistance efforts and reminded them of their own power.

I generally suggested to women in the Women's Success Group that the group was not the place to tell their full story, each woman had her own story of pain and seemed to find it too hard to hear another's story in detail. On the other hand I encouraged women to

recognize they could bring their whole self, including the legacy of the impact of violence and the pain they still experienced, to the group. This balance meant there were often brief mentions of how mistreated women had been, and tears would surface, but stories were not usually told in any detail. I stressed there was no shame in having experienced violence or in living with the consequences. When women criticised the behaviour of other women, I reminded them that our rule was we can all bring all of who we are to the group – and that sometimes that is difficult. Some women arrived angry, "spinning," upset, needy or child-like, and I worked to try to avoid anyone feeling shame for where they were "at," while helping everyone to learn. I strategized ways to find a balance between permission to bring "baggage" to the group and support to prevent such baggage from stopping others focussing and learning. Snuggling up on the easy chair with quilt or soft toys was the most effective strategy women found for creating space for an individual to settle down without disrupting others.

I encouraged women to think about the supportive people currently in their lives who could listen to them fully and found many women already had access to counsellors or therapists. Some wanted to find a counsellor, and were eager to meet local counsellors who offered free counselling. I brought potential counsellors into the class for workshops so women could meet them and follow up themselves if they felt comfortable about working with them. I always avoid suggesting counselling is the only way to address trauma issues and encourage women to look to a range of supports.

Rescuing

In a group where participants are encouraged to bring their whole selves emotions will often surface. For literacy workers who feel we must do something to make things "better," this can create a challenging situation. Frankie Armstrong's account of how she deals with strong emotions in her singing workshops perfectly describes an understanding I feel is equally important in literacy.

One of the great traps is the desire to 'rescue' people from their distress and 'make it better'. When I am faced with someone in distress it's not necessarily clear to me what is needed, but I have learnt that if I allow myself and them time to listen both between and inside ourselves, the answer will unfold. Many years ago, I remember John Southgate saying 'When you're running a group, especially if it and you are getting stuck, then trust what emerges from your unconscious. However unconnected or bizarre the thoughts and

images that come into your mind, trust that they have arrived there for a reason and use them.'

I have followed this advice, and find that if I give myself and the other person this stillness and listening, then somehow an idea or an image will come into my mind which enables me to suggest the next move. To the group this stillness can seem as if I don't know what to 'do' next. My greatest difficulty then can be with participants who want to 'rescue' the person who may be weeping or screaming or just standing there, numb. These eager 'rescuers' can be more difficult than the initial 'problem'. If I can allow the person in distress to feel contained, safe and recognized, I hold this to be sufficient. We may then, together, find a simple way through to a sense of peace, resolution and even celebration, which can make for some of the most moving and aesthetically powerful moments in the workshop. (Armstrong, 1992, p.115-116)

In my own experience, strong emotions - often of sadness followed by anger - have led me to worry about how to respond. When I have stayed calm and listened to my gut for what to do next I have been amazed to find these sessions have turned into the most exciting and affirming sessions for participants. One particularly powerful occasion occurred when we were looking at emotions. Suddenly the group moved from talking about their joy in the course to talking of their pain from childhood mistreatment. Before I knew it women were competing with each other to say that their childhood was worse than the others. For a moment I was filled with horror, feeling responsible and scared about what I had let loose. We had run out of tissues so I took a moment to ponder what to do next while I went to get a spare toilet roll for the tears. When I returned, I suggested we pull chairs into a circle and take turns speaking so each woman could be heard. We passed an object from my object basket to delineate who was speaking, which seemed also to help women to ground themselves and speak from deep within themselves.

The round that followed was filled with painful stories of neglect and mistreatment women had experienced. We all listened in perfect silence to each other, often picking up from each others' stories when their turn came, not competing, but sharing commonalities. At the end, although much pain had been opened up and we needed to spend time focussing on "bandaging the wounds" with much care, women seemed relieved to have spoken. Trusting in my gut and not trying to rescue women from their pain seemed to have helped women to put some of their pain outside themselves and feel heard and "held."

Counselling Resources

Before an intensive course begins, research what counselling resources can be made available to students in your program. Find out about individual counsellors and therapists, waiting lists, styles and terms of their work. Check into support groups and see what might be accessible to women in your program. It is crucial to have a range of counselling resources available for women who do want somewhere else to take their pain and to tell their story fully. It is also vital that women recognize that counselling is one way they may be able to seek support and their right to reject counselling that is classist, racist or sexist or for any other reasons feels damaging to them:

From day to day, I, Black Woman, continue to bear the brunt of racism and sexism wherever I go. Oh to be able to choose not to be confronted with one or the other, or both, on any given day – now, that would be the Life.

Who, then, can I turn to when I hurt, real bad?
I recall a spiritual that says, "no hidin' place down here." I find myself at therapy's doorstep. Will this counselor usher me to

insanity? Because if she does not openly deal with the fact that there is a very low premium on every aspect of my existence, if she does not acknowledge the politics of Black-womanhood, now that will surely drive me nuts. (Eleanor Johnson, quoted in White, 1985, p. 60)

Even when ideal counselling is not available, recognizing the limits of what is available may help women to understand that the problem is not in them.

Supervision/support for the Instructor

I believe all literacy workers would benefit enormously from access to a place to take the issues that are raised by working with people who have experienced violence. Often workers question how they have responded, what else they could say, how else to support a learner who is experiencing pain. Meeting with a counsellor can provide a place to explore these issues.



Counselling Resources Checklist:

- Find out whether your area has any agencies to help locate counselling.
- Check out the availability of free counselling and therapy services.
- Find out about survivors groups and other support groups.
- Find out about waiting lists, therapy styles and approaches.
- Meet counsellors to check out whether you feel comfortable recommending them.
- Consider inviting counsellors from local agencies to visit your class or give a workshop for students to meet them and learn more about alternatives.
- Support students in assessing whether any counselling they access is meeting their needs and finding alternatives

For literacy workers who are inviting students to bring their whole selves to learning this is even more vital. As Judy Hofer states:

This work of addressing issues of violence in women's lives in ways that are thorough, respectful, responsible is so incredibly difficult. So many times I knew I was "in" over my head... We were in a rural area, without public transportation and without immediate support services other than a counseling organization which did not have a good reputation among the women. Eventually, we were able to get organizations from other towns to support us. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to not do this work alone! (Alphaplus Literacy & Violence On-line Seminar, February-April, 1998, quoted in Horsman, 1999/2000)

However difficult it may be to track them down, there is usually somewhere we can find therapists or counsellors who can offer us support so that we are not doing the work alone. This cost needs to be recognized by funding bodies as a basic literacy cost. During the Women's Success Course I worked with a therapist in private practice who had expressed interest in what I was trying to do. I met with her once every two weeks and talked through many issues in the group. She helped "unhook" me from individual stories and baggage that connected to my own issues, helped me find new options and new ways to respond, to think through what had gone on in the classroom and what else I might have done. She helped me work through the unthinkable: What if I asked this woman to leave the group? Facing the difficult questions always helped me find new strategies to address the problem and helped to shift my feelings. I no longer felt trapped. Talking to her helped me refocus my directions and priorities, sent me away to try a new approach or go back to something I had let slip. Like Judy Hofer, I believe we should not try to do this work alone. When we do this work with support and the "supervision" of a counsellor or therapist we trust, the work can be fascinating, rich, full of learning and growth for the facilitator, as well as for the learners.



Key Underlying Assumptions

- Not labelling or medicalizing learners
- Not separating out those who have experienced violence but offering resources which can help everyone to learn
- Not doing therapy – not assuming that the class or group is the place for telling the full disclosure, but recognizing that there may be a continuum in particular circumstances of what seems appropriate and useful to be shared.
- Not shaming students that they bring their story to class and that the experience impacts who they are and what they bring to learning.

Creating space

"I take up space because it is my right to take up space."

Si Transken 1995:29

More often though, in educational programs, I think of the lack of notice taken of the body. I think of the limited and "make-do" space that literacy programs often use, and wonder whether these programs tend to confirm women's sense that they have no right to take up space. What does it do to women who already struggle to occupy the space of their own bodies when there seems to be little space for them in the program? When the programs seem also to have no right to suitable space and, in times of financial cut backs, perhaps no right to exist at all? Can we create the sort of literacy learning spaces which will help students feel a right to exist, and supported to claim space, claim the power of their own bodies and claim their full potential to learn? (Horsman, 1999/2000)

Creating space where women feel fully present, space which nurtures body, mind, emotion, and spirit may look quite different in each program. In a space with windows an array of plants might bring the space to life, in a basement space the same effect might be created with beautiful pictures of greenery and flowers. A room with fluorescent light might be greatly improved with several floor or table lamps to create warmer light, obviously unnecessary in a space with natural light. Each element introduced may serve several purposes. For example, serving healthy snacks might help women to feel valued and cared for as well as provide nourishment for the body. Getting up and walking to the snack area means women move and perhaps notice their body, and take a breather which might be invaluable when the work is difficult, or emotions running high.

Creating this aspect of the program could be done ahead of time, or engaged in as a group. I opted mostly for creating the space myself, and checking in during the "sample" workshops before we began for the elements women thought might help to transform the room. They suggested many possibilities that I followed up on. I think many saw the space as a gift, feeling that it illustrated my statements that they did have value, and I really did value them. Other literacy workers have told me they left the task of creating a wonderful space more to the group and it served to build the group cohesion as they created beauty together.

Creating beautiful, comfortable space

What can you bring to your setting to create beauty and comfort – to feed the senses, create a "special" space which belongs to the students, help students to feel a sense of worth, create joy and build hope?

One important element I found was an individual easy chair (more than one would have been even better) and cosy quilt so that students could explore looking after themselves. They could learn about middle-ground (instead of "all or nothing" – of having to stay in class even if it is hard, or completely miss what is happening) by opting out of an activity but staying in the room. A group of easy chairs to create a comfortable space for discussion, unlike the usual school environment, might also be valuable.

To create the space for the Women's Success Course I contacted everyone I knew to ask for donations, (including the local fabric store which gave me samples of all their discontinued fabrics) and haunted the local yard sales to get bargains – friends had plenty of things to throw out and yard sales and second-hand stores were rich resources. I was fascinated to find how important these things were to the women in the group. Our bleak, cement brick, windowless basement room was transformed from a place that several women said triggered memories of being shut in closets and basements as children, to a place they clearly delighted in and found comforting and safe - a space that made them feel nurtured and valued.

Perhaps the most important addition, that provoked comment every time and led to many discussions about the pleasure and hope women found in nature, were the flowers. All winter I rather sheepishly, feeling it wasn't quite a legitimate expenditure, bought small pots of crocuses, mini-daffodils or hyacinths, and occasionally splashed out on a big pot of mums or daffodils. Once spring came I was able to bring cut flowers from my garden. During the winter, the expense was probably less than a dollar a session, but each little pot clearly gave enormous pleasure.

By the time women arrived I always tried to have the lamps on, the kettle boiling,

**Supply Checklist:**

- Pictures, posters
- plants
- pots of flowers, cut flowers
- lamps, table or floor
- tape player/cd player, assorted cassettes/cds of various styles of music, blank cassettes to tape any favourites students bring in
- candles
- quilts or blankets,
- rugs,
- beautiful material for wall-hangings, cushions, table runners, mats,
- baskets for supplies....
- comfy chair/s

snacks out, apples in an inviting basket and music playing. Women brought in favourite tapes and I made a copy to keep in the program so that we could choose from a range of styles they enjoyed. Women clearly loved the sense of welcome and nurturing space and spoke of the message it gave them - of being valued and worth bothering with, for most a rarity in their lives. This message was key to helping them believe they could learn.

Sharing Space

If the learning space is to be shared by a variety of groups, or even with another agency, careful thought might be needed about how the space will be shared. A sense of security in the space - that the room will be the same when they return to it, that their writings are safe from anyone else reading them - may be of great importance to participants who are anxious and have little experience of safety and respect. Participants' sense that they can expand into the space, take ownership of it, experience feeling the right to take up space and be valued and have worth, because they are provided with a special nurturing space, may easily be lost if the room is not shared with care.

At the Women's Success Course, in our final stages, meeting only once a week as a support group, we found ourselves sharing our space with boxes of books gradually accumulating and being moved around the room in preparation for a fund-raising second-hand book sale. Each time we arrived there were more boxes taking up more of "our" space.

The final week before the sale when the books took up a lot of space one woman found them a major trigger. We encouraged her to find a location in the room that bothered her least. Another participant was having a tough day and we all struggled to support her. Later in a meeting with the counsellor who we met with as a "supervisor" to help us work through issues, we strategized how we might have supported this learner and carried out our planned session better. We mused about why we hadn't encouraged her to sit in the easy chair and take some space out, or tried having one of the facilitators engage with her while the other led the group. Only afterwards did we realize that we could not have reached the easy chair as it was blocked off by boxes. We too had been thrown off by the chaos of the space. It had reduced our ability to work with the chaos of the group.

We were surprised to realize that in spite of having seen the importance of the space, we had slid into our accustomed approach of "making do" and "putting up with" the situation, even though it would have been quite easy to store the books elsewhere. Somehow we realized we hadn't quite believe in our right to create a "bother" and take up space! In spite of three months of seeing how important our precious space was, I still felt it was really a bit of a luxury, not absolutely fundamental to enable us to do the work we were doing together.

Feeding the body

We need to think about what happens to literacy programming when we recognize the body more fully. Program planning and facilitation could be enhanced if we take account of the bodily needs of learners. Awareness that learners have bodies that take up space and attention to the physical space within which literacy learning is occurring could be crucial in making learning possible. (Horsman, 1999/2000)

In the Women's Success Course we gradually discovered the myriad of health problems women were dealing with, many, I'm sure, due to stress, malnutrition, and the after-effects of trauma on the body. Several women were diabetic, so eating the right food at the right time was a big challenge. As we focussed on taking care of the body in our curriculum, women became more

conscious of their need to eat and the factors that got in the way of this self-care. The availability of crackers, peanut butter, and fruit in the classroom helped many of the women to begin better self-care. One woman gradually began to bring lunch to eat before we began, and even to acknowledge to herself and to us that she failed to eat well when she was feeling bad about herself as a form of hurting herself. This seemed to begin a process of making a challenging change in her habits.



Healthy snacks and drinks can help students to feel comfortable as well as feed the body so that they are more able to pay attention and learn. If students can get up and help themselves to these supplies this can give them a chance to move, to look after themselves and to opt out of an activity when they need a moment to themselves. A regularly scheduled break may also help to provide structure and security that there will be a time to stop doing something that is challenging.

Healthy, but inexpensive foods can also model the possibility of eating healthily even on a budget. Bargain apples can be bought by the bag and salt-free, sugar-free peanut butter can be bought in bulk at health food stores. In the Women's Success group women asked about the herbal teas, when I explained why I try to drink them

instead of black tea, several of the women started trying them. They found that they felt more relaxed when they drank chamomile tea. Some were already familiar with different herbs and teas – several gradually drank herbal teas more and black tea and coffee less. They began noticing how they felt when they had eaten or gone a long time without food. After that they gave me a hard time when I just "needed" a cup of tea and I began to notice when I was feeling particularly frazzled and check whether I needed some food!



Supply Checklist:

- Herbal teas, tea and coffee (regular and de-caf.)
- Drinking water
- Juice
- Bread or crackers
- Nut butters (sugar and salt free)
- Fruit
- Vegetable sticks

Stretching the Mind

With much worry that I was wasting money, but determined to try out my sense that the decoration of the space would feed the spirit and the mind, I went to the art gallery in search of a print. I wanted something that would capture a sense of the outdoors and lush greenery to make up for the impossibility of growing plants in our light-starved basement. I hoped I could change the feeling of our enclosed windowless basement and create a feeling of openness and possibility. I spent a lot of time weighing possibilities of pictures of open fields, rich gardens, tree-filled woods, open windows.

Eventually I found a print in rich greens with open doors out to a pathway disappearing in the distance. It was a wonderful vehicle for writing from the imagination. Women could imagine, where it was, where the path led, and imagine someone taking that path. Some women found the exercise very difficult, others were

mesmerized by the idea of imagining and by learning that there was no right answer – there was no "real" story of the picture. When we had to move out of our room to avoid a threatened strike and were deciding what essentials to take with us I was delighted that one of the women insisted the picture was an essential as it helped her to dream. Clearly, this print was not an unnecessary luxury, but an essential component of the work we were doing.

A wide variety of materials can support the process of learners "stretching the mind" even discovering that they have a mind which works much better than they fear. Materials can enable women to stretch their imagination, explore metaphor and analogy, experiment with narrative order and practice memorizing. A sense of playful exploration may enable students to stretch their minds in ways they feared was not possible.



Supply Checklist:

- Prints or posters
- Sets of cards, such as Eos Interactive Cards: Saga, Persona etc. (see bibliography for ordering information)
- Co-operative Games (See bibliography for ordering)
- Collection of pictures – postcards/calendars/greeting cards/magazines
- Cartoons and cartoon strips
- Assorted objects and/or fridge magnets of as wide a variety of "things" as possible
- Playing cards
- A large roll of blank paper hung high on the wall (perhaps from the ceiling) so that a long sheet can hang down for collective writing/drawing.

Rekindling the spirit

Many survivors have written about how absolutely essential it was to their survival to be treated as a worthy person by somebody in their life. For those who experienced extreme trauma, survival can rest on that valuing. As an adult, even the slightest hint of disregard or disrespect can take a person straight back to the depths of feeling worthless. Every instructor has a responsibility to support learners to come to value themselves and discover their own knowledge...

Thinking in terms of the spirit can help us to notice approaches different from traditional self-esteem work. We need to look at what helps a person believe they are worth something, and how specific beliefs which block learning - like "I'm stupid," "I mustn't make mistakes," "I'm worthless" - can be turned around. How can we, in literacy, help someone to believe they are not stupid, to accept it is OK to make mistakes, to believe in their ability to learn and move from feeling badly about themselves? (Horsman, 1999/2000)

Many aspects of the room itself can help women to feel they have worth. Everything that creates beauty and inspiration can make a difference to learning. In the Women's Success Course I hung a large poster, a wonderful collage of women of all ethnicities who worked in the past or are working now for some sort of change in society, entitled "Women of Change," by the counter where the drinks and snacks were available. I didn't think women had particularly noticed the poster until a time when we were taking photos and many

women wanted their photo beside the poster. Clearly the power of the poster to help them imagine themselves as women of change was greater than I had realized.

After we had lit candles in glasses to set the room up like a cafe for one class, women asked to light the candles every session, commenting that they gave them a sense that



they were doing something special. When I told them that I had learned from First Nation educators to think of the candle flame as being like the human spirit - becoming a tiny flame when the spirit is beaten down, but burning stronger as we value ourselves - women seemed to find even more meaning in the candles. In our support group, lighting the candles to mark the beginning of our work together and blowing them out when we have read our closing poem, continues as valued ritual to mark the importance of the work we are doing together.



Supply Checklist

- Candles
- Inspirational quotes.....
- Poems mounted on the wall. (I mounted any poems that particularly spoke to the women when I read them as closings)
- Pictures/posters to help women to dream...

Nurturing the Emotions

Emotions can be a barrier or an aid to learning. Though many learners may be too upset to learn, emotions can't be excluded from the literacy classroom. A balance of emotion and safety is crucial. Where anger is allowed free reign, women's fears will be increased. Exploring fear, risk, safety and anger can help learners to create strategies to deal with these emotions and avoid creating blocks to learning. Workers, as well as learners, must explore their feelings and avoid getting "hooked" into old patterns. (Horsman, 1999/2000)

The space itself can contain emotions. The box of tissues gives the message it is ok to cry. Recognizing the presence of emotions gives the "space" for women to learn about their emotions and to learn to learn in spite of panic or fear and to nurture hope and joy to support learning.

In the Women's Success Course the box of tissues was often quietly pushed to whoever needed it right then and women often cried as they confronted their pain or their fears as they talked about their lives or wrote in their journals. In the beginning stages of our course one woman frequently came late, often arriving as we were finishing the group work part of our class and moving to the free hour where women could choose to stay and write or create in their journals. One day she came in at that point, was welcomed warmly by us all and settled down to write in her journal along with others. As she wrote tears poured down her face, as usual she was passed the tissues, offered a hot drink, and I asked her if there was anything else

she needed. She said there wasn't and continued to write and cry. Eventually she put away her journal and left. Gradually as the course continued she began to attend more regularly and to arrive earlier in the session. It was weeks later when she showed me the journal entry from that earlier day and I learned that she had been writing about how badly she felt about herself, about her surprise that no one was criticizing her for arriving late, and her hope that may be in this setting she could begin to move forward.

As mentioned earlier, when women were struggling with their emotions they usually moved to the easy chair to comfort and warm themselves tucked under the quilt, often cuddling a teddy bear picked from the basket of soft toys. Our bright flowers in the centre of the table (even in the middle of winter) colourful pieces of cloth on the table, soft lights, music, and hot drinks, all helped women to feel comforted when everything seemed too much and to hold on to hope that they would not only survive, but also move forward.



Supply Checklist

- Tissues
- Easy chair/s
- Quilts
- Soft toys
- Beauty.....
- Virtue cards or Angel cards
(see bibliography for ordering)

Resources

(See the Bibliography for complete listings)

Background

Brewster, Susan. *To Be an Anchor in the Storm: A Guide for Families And Friends of Abused Women.*

Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women. *Making Connections: Literacy and EAL Curriculum from a Feminist Perspective.*

**Copeland, Mary Ellen and Maxine Harris. *Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Women's Workbook.*

Danica, Elly. *Beyond Don't: Dreaming Past the Dark*

**Horsman, Jenny. *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education*

Horsman, J. (1997) *But I'm Not a Therapist: Furthering Discussion About Literacy Work with Survivors of Trauma* Toronto: CLOW (www.jennyhorsman.com)

Kovats, Moira. *Fran's Story.*

Maracek, Mary. *Breaking Free from Partner Abuse: Voices of Battered Women Caught in the Cycle of Domestic Violence.*

Napier, Nancy J. *Getting Through the Day: Strategies for Adults Hurt as Children.*

Sanford, Linda Tschirhart and Mary Ellen Donovan. *Women & Self-Esteem: Understanding And Improving The Way We Think And Feel About Ourselves.*

Web sites

www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/screen.html

www.jennyhorsman.com (especially links section)

Violence Materials

Self-Help

Bass, E. and Davis, L. *Beginning to Heal*.

*Bass, E. and Davis, L. *The Courage to Heal*.

Black, Claudia. *"It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood" – Inspirations for Adult Children*.

Davis, Laura. *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*.

Education Wife Assault. *For Men to Think About... You May be Becoming or Already Are an Abusive Man*.

Education Wife Assault. *Women with Disabilities, Deaf Women and the Domestic Violence Courts (Plain Language Version)*.

Enns, Greg and Jan Black. *It's Not Okay Anymore: Your Personal Guide to Ending Abuse, Taking Charge, and Loving Yourself*.

Gil, Eliana. *Outgrowing the Pain: A Book For and About Adults Abused as Children*.

Lawson, Stephanie and Gordon, John (Eds.). *Four Stories: Oral Histories From the Open Book*.

LeFeuvre, Joan. *Fresh Start*.

The Literacy Project. *Together We Bloom: Women Speaking Out Against Domestic Violence* (video and guide)

*Marecek, Mary. *Breaking Free from Partner Abuse: Voices of Battered Women Caught In The Cycle Of Domestic Violence*

Metro Woman Abuse Council. *Finding Our Voice: Healing Thoughts from Survivors of Woman Abuse*.

NiCarthy, Ginny and Sue Davidson. *You Can Be Free: An Easy-To-Read Handbook for Abused Women*.

Rousse, Linda P. *You Are Not Alone: A Guide For Battered Women*

Smith, Judith R. *Time to Break Free*.

St. Christopher House. *The Right to Be Free: Woman Abuse in Intimate Relationships*.

White, Evelyn C. *Chain Chain Chain: For Black Women in Abusive Relationships*.

Course Materials

Status of Women Council of the NWT. *From Dark to Light*.

Kivel, Paul & Creighton, Allan, with the Oakland Men's Project.
Making the Peace: A 15-Session Violence Prevention Curriculum for Young People.

Autobiography and Stories

Battell, E. and Nonesuch, K. (eds.) *If You Could See Me Now: Stories by Women Who Survived Abusive Relationships*

Byrnes, Josie. *Never in a Loving Way*

Danica, Elly. *Don't: A Woman's Word*.

Dueno, Aida, Santiago, Alma & De Simone, Rose Marie. *It Should Be Told: Oral Histories From the Open Book*.

Videos

Preventing Family Violence: A catalogue of Canadian videos on family violence for the general public and for professionals working in the field

Web sites

(to order violence publications and posters)

www.womanabuseprevention.com

www.volcanopress.com/posters.html