

Feeding Our Whole Selves in the Literacy Classroom

by Jenny Horsman

A woman is invited to bring her whole self to learning when food for the body is combined with a broad range of nurturing elements—belief in her potential to learn, acceptance of emotions, recognition of spirit and the need to find meaning in life—in a comfortable educational setting. I focused on creating an environment of respect and a “space” where women could bring their whole selves to learning in the Women’s Success Course at Parkdale Project Read,¹ a community-based literacy program in downtown Toronto. This was an intensive women’s course which met three afternoons a week for thirteen weeks, January to April 2000.

Through the Women’s Success Course² I hoped women would come to believe they could make changes in their lives, begin to dream and imagine what those changes might look like. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening were the means to carry out this work, but the focus was not on learning to read or write. Our curriculum included three themes: internal and external supports for learning, bringing the whole self to learning, and making change. These themes allowed us to bring self-care and nurturing directly into the curriculum. As we focused on taking care of the body in our curriculum, women became more conscious of their need to eat healthy food and the factors that got in the way of this self-care. Gradually, the myriad of health problems women were dealing with were revealed. Many of these problems, I’m sure, were due to stress, malnutrition, and the aftereffects of trauma on the body.

Although the program had always supplied coffee and cookies, for this course we offered more healthy snacks: crackers, peanut butter, fruit, and a selection of herbal teas. We chose inexpensive foods in order to model the possibility of eating healthily even on a budget, buying bargain apples by the bag and additive free peanut butter in bulk at the health food store. Several of the women were diabetic, so eating the right food at the right time was a big challenge. Some of the women with diabetes said that seeing cookies led them to feel deprived of pleasure and unable to “treat” themselves because of their illness,³ so we decided collectively not to keep cookies around.

These snacks and drinks seemed to help students simply to feel more comfortable as well as feed the body and mind so they were more able to pay attention and learn. I encouraged students to help themselves to snacks whenever they chose. This gave them a chance to move, a moment to reflect, to look after themselves and/or to opt out of an activity when they needed. A regularly scheduled break might also have helped to provide structure and the security that there would be a time to relax for a moment. Women in the course said the freedom to turn their back on the group, while they focused on making a drink, gave them the space to stay with a challenging task or calm their emotions.

New supplies led to new conversations about feeding our bodies, minds, emotions and spirits. When women asked about the herbal teas, I explained why I try to drink them instead of black tea. Soon the women were trying them and noticing that they felt more relaxed when they drank chamomile tea. We began noticing our level of self-care and how we felt when we had eaten, or gone a long time without food. One woman gradually began to bring lunch to eat before we began class; others snacked throughout the class. We found we were more able to cope with our emotions, more resilient and less frazzled when we had eaten well and were not wired by sugar or caffeine.

Gradually, as we incorporated a range of learning activities focusing on self-care and valuing the self, and named the prevalence of violence in our lives, women began to acknowledge to themselves that they ate poorly and let self-care slide when they were feeling bad about themselves. We all began to see how failing to eat well was often less about lack of knowledge or money (though those were both factors) and more a form of self-harm. I now think we must be careful to avoid teaching about nutrition, or budgeting, as simply a need for information. In literacy and life skills, we must avoid a “you should just” tone that suggests living well is just a matter of knowing what to do! Instead, a tone of mutual exploration may make it possible for students to learn new information and explore the possibilities of new behavior.

When we held sessions focused on eating well, women seemed interested in a range of questions about living on a limited income, cheap places to shop, sources of free food, as well as questions about healthy diets, unfamiliar foods and cooking different ingredients. But, repeatedly, it became clear that self-care is not possible when someone feels worthless. Now, I think of the struggle for self-care as a continuum that includes nurturing, neglect and punishment. Learners and teachers alike are on that continuum, and on any given day are doing better or worse at nurturing ourselves. Even as I wrote this article about food, I noticed myself not taking the time to eat because I felt I hadn’t really worked efficiently enough and shouldn’t stop until I had finished a draft!

When we began to talk in the group, carefully, encouraging each other to avoid critical judgments of ourselves or others, we all began to notice patterns of neglect such as cooking a meal for the children, but not eating oneself. Sometimes the actions felt closer to punishment—eating foods we knew hurt us, not eating for a day or more, ignoring warning signs as a diabetic, giving money away when there was no food in the house and no more money to buy it. I was horrified when I thought I saw a connection between these actions and the self-mutilation—such as cutting the body—described in the therapeutic literature as a

common aftermath for victims of violence.

Food, or the lack of it, can, it seems, be used as a type of punishment, to create a feeling of control, to express anger, or simply to feel anything⁴, just as effectively as a knife. This awareness helped several women in the group fully realize their patterns of neglect were their way of hurting themselves and they began to seek to change. Later, women came with hard-won accounts of careful self-nurturing: eating the right foods; buying all the essential foods at the beginning of the month so they would still have the basics when money ran out. Women who were struggling acutely with these issues continued to explore them with their counselors, but also knew their continuing challenge to care for themselves would be met without judgment, and with some understanding and plenty of encouragement, when they came to class.

During the Success Course there was time before and after class which many women used to explore self-care: to write in their journals, read, or just relax with a cup of tea and a snack and listen to music. This flexible time meant women could make choices about when to attend and how to best take care of themselves as they learned to balance their learning and other activities. A learning environment in which women felt valued and safer was important to encourage women to take up space. Aside from the corner with foods and drinks, there were lamps, music, flowers, quotes, posters, and prints that inspired and brought greenery and open windows into our windowless room, as well as an easy chair with a cozy quilt. When women arrived to find the lamps lit, music playing, the kettle

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boiling and food spread out on the counter, they clearly felt welcomed and nurtured 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 explore the possibilities of having “worth,” of self-care and believing they could learn.

Through the experience of a nurturing learning environment combined with a curriculum theme “bringing the whole self to learning” the course provided “space” for active reflection. We observed the ways in which body, mind, emotion and spirit can get in the way of learning and explored how each aspect can be enlisted to strengthen learning. As women explored first what each aspect meant, then mourned losses and “hurt” to that aspect of themselves and began to build strategies and discover new strengths, they rebuilt hope and belief in their ability to learn through enlisting their whole selves to support learning. The availability of healthy food was a central element supporting learning—literally and metaphorically nurturing the whole self. We learned that when a woman experiences such nurturing and respectful treatment regularly, the continual reminder that others think she merits respect and care can be a crucial step for her in beginning to value herself, a first step toward beginning to learn successfully and imagine new possibilities in her life.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ I created this course as an opportunity to put into practice the learning from an extensive research study exploring the impact of violence on learning. I have written up the research in *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education* and numerous articles available at www.jennyhorsman.com. The research and publication was funded by The National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources Development Canada.

² More detail about this course, and the learning activities used, is included in *Moving forward: Approaches and activities to support women’s learning*.

³ I don’t want to suggest an oversimplification of questions of diet and diabetes. In our group we asked a colleague who also lives with diabetes to lead a discussion to explore the challenges of eating well with diabetes.

⁴ The reasons for self-mutilation are complex. Many accounts are offered in the therapeutic literature, one straightforward one is offered in *The Courage to Heal* (Bass and Davis, 1988).

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