

Too Scared to Learn:

The Impact of Violence on Learning

Workshops October 2005
Literacy Nova Scotia

Working Safely

What guidelines do we need to set to work together safely?

What guidelines could you develop to create a safer learning environment?

Assumptions about Violence

◆ **Violence is pervasive and takes many forms.**

It is important to see the whole range of violence in one picture – including state and individual, public and private. Violence includes childhood sexual, emotional, and physical violence; "domestic" violence and stalking; rape and the threat of rape in the public sphere; dangerous working conditions, state-sanctioned violence. Racism, ableism, homophobia, poverty, sexism, and other oppressions foster violence.

◆ **Different forms of violence are intertwined.**

All kinds of violence build upon each other in one person's experience. When a woman is made vulnerable by one form of oppression, each additional violence has increased impact and deepens the first violation.

◆ **Violence affects all of us.**

All women are vulnerable to and shaped by the presence of violence. Whether or not we experience life-threatening violence directly, we all live with the possibilities of violence, and all women, and many marginalized men, are diminished daily by society's acceptance of violence.

◆ **Violence is institutionally supported.**

Violence is not only perpetrated by individuals, it is also systemic. The institutions and systems of society support and allow violence to continue. When a court gives a suspended sentence to an abusive husband, when the limitations of welfare leave a woman trapped with an abusive partner, when the only jobs available in a racist, sexist society do not allow a woman to afford safe transportation, daycare or accommodation, institutions are perpetuating violence.

◆ **Institutions harm; we all participate in those institutions.**

We cannot avoid participating in institutions that perpetuate the violence our society supports.

From: 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

Breaking silence about violence and learning

What can you create visually to draw attention to the issues? (eg. posters, signs)

What can you do? (eg. something about how your program is organized?)

What can you say? (eg. in intake interview or at the start of class)

Messages about violence a literacy program might want to give in some way:

- Many people experience violence
- Violence affects many different people (this includes students, tutors and staff)
- Violence is never ok
- Everyone has the right to be safe and free of violence
- Is someone hurting you now? You can get help.
- Did someone hurt you when you were younger? You can get help to work through the ways it still bothers you.
- If you are hurting someone it is not their fault. You must take responsibility, get help, and stop. There are places to learn how to stop being violent.
- People who have been hurt are strong survivors and should not be judged.
- If you have been through violence it may have made it hard to learn. It may still get in the way of your learning.
- This program supports all students to learn. This includes all people who have been hurt or who are being hurt now.

(Adapted from Drawing the Line: Dealing with Affective Issues in Literacy. Saskatchewan Adult Literacy Network, 2001)

Violence and Learning

Violence that happened in the past or is happening now can affect our learning. Violence affects our bodies and other parts of ourselves. Violence and trauma change how we learn new things.

We learn from violence

- **We feel the effects of violence in ways that others may not see. Or they may not understand and may judge us so we try to hide them.**

“All or nothing”

Feeling something or some person is totally good one moment and totally bad the next. This feeling could be about learning new things, or about trusting ourselves and others.

“I'm not all here”

Feeling stress about learning, or the place and people where we learn, makes it a lot harder to focus on learning. All this stress can take our minds away or cause us to leave.

“Living with crises”

A crisis can really interrupt our learning. If we experience crises often it can start to feel normal to live in crisis.

“To trust or not to trust”

Feeling like it's hard to trust makes sense when we've been hurt. To learn with a tutor or other students we have to decide how much to trust them and how much to tell them. This takes extra time and energy.

“Keeping it in, letting it out”

We share our knowledge when we write and talk about ourselves with other learners. We may feel ashamed of our knowledge of violence, but we may need to talk about it. It's hard to decide what to tell and what to hide.

It may be hard to move forward

- **We need to believe in our future to move forward. Violence may make that hard.**

“Control”

To believe in our future we need to be in control of it. But being in control of our learning may feel uncomfortable and new. We may need to test our control in what, how and where we learn.

“Connecting”

Learning with others involves trusting them and talking with them. Connecting with others like this is hard if we feel different because of the violence we have gone through.

“Meaning”

Experiencing violence and trauma makes us struggle to find meaning in our lives. Words and ideas need meaning to live in us.

“Support”

We may need extra support to find control, connection and meaning in our learning and to see ourselves as a complete and valuable person. This is our right.

We may feel broken

- **Trauma breaks us up, but our whole selves can help us learn!**

Spirit

Violence convinces us that we are worthless, and that our own knowledge is not worth believing and growing. We can find ways to let our strong spirit help us learn.

Emotions

Violence makes us angry, sad, afraid and confused. We can find ways to use our emotions to help us learn.

Body

Injury and illness is caused by violence. We can find ways to use our bodies to help us learn.

Mind

We are not stupid. We are experts on ourselves as learners. We learned to survive and we can learn new things and change.

Source: Horsman, Jenny. (1999) Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education. McGilligan Books: Toronto. Plain written version: Jo Petite, Parkdale Project Read, Toronto, Ontario.

Supporting learning in the face of violence...

Create conditions for Learning

How can you build trust and create a safer learning environment?

What can you do to create a comfortable place to learn to nurture the whole self?

What can you do to help every student feel valued and develop a sense of self-worth?

Create connections....

What connections can you develop to support and take care of *yourself* as you work with the impact of violence on learning?

What connections can you develop to support *students or clients* who have experienced violence to take on their own healing?

What connections can you develop to enable your *program* or *organisation* to take on the impact of violence on learning responsibly?

Create content/curriculum to bring the whole self to learning

How can you create content and teach in a way that will help students to move from feeling worthless through nurturing the spirit?

How can you create content and teach in a way that will help students to move from feeling stupid and begin to believe they have a mind that works?

How can you create content and teach in a way that will stop the body getting in the way of learning and use movement to enhance learning?

How can you create content and teach in a way that will stop emotions, such as fear, panic, anger, from getting in the way of learning and draw on the emotions to support learning?

Taking Up the Impact of Violence in Literacy

Taking up the impact of violence:

- ◆ **does NOT mean** we have to focus the curriculum directly on violence - though you may choose to do so if:
 - students are interested in looking at issues of violence
 - and the supports for students and instructor are in place

- ◆ **does NOT mean** we have to say this is the place for students to talk in detail about the violence they have experienced - though you may choose to invite these stories, if:
 - it is appropriate for this particular group,
 - if it is a safe setting, and
 - the supports for students and instructor are in place.

- ◆ **DOES mean** we have to create appropriate conditions for learning. These include:
 - naming that many people experience violence and that violence can affect learning¹
 - ways of working together to create safety and trust
 - a comfortable place to learn to nurture the whole self – e.g. music, times of silence, flowers, snacks, easy chair/s, beautiful pictures, inspirational quotes.
 - curriculum that engages and nurtures the whole person – body, mind, emotion and spirit.

¹ Although some students may escape from the violence they experience into their mind and excel in school, many more will have difficulties with learning.

From: 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

A Tool for Tutors and Teachers: What Can You Do?

1. Hold onto the central focus of your interaction with a student to SUPPORT

LEARNING. Think about how everything you do and say supports the ability of the student to learn successfully.

2. Help the student avoid self-blame and shame

No violence is ever the fault of the victim. Give the message loudly and clearly: “It is/was not your fault.”

3. Respect the student’s choices.

Don’t blame, shame or judge the student. You don’t know best about what she should or should not do. Notice your own language if you are saying “you ought to....” or “you shouldn’t....” you are suggesting you know what she needs.

4. Hold onto hope.

Support the student by holding a belief that she can learn, that she can make change in her life, that she is not hopeless or stupid. Help her to see that she may have had difficulty learning because of the aftermath of violence but she can still learn – in her own time, in her own way....

Hold onto hope until she can come to hope and believe in herself.

If you have difficulty holding onto hope, talk to a staff person or support worker to get help with this.

5. Help her to find the supports she wants.

Give her a clear message that she deserves the supports she needs.

Give her a clear message about what support you can and cannot provide.

Help her find a variety of supports to meet her needs.

Does she want to talk out her experiences and struggles? If so what options are available for her to talk with a counsellor, therapist or other healer? Help her find someone who she can work with. Help her to keep looking if the first, second, or third resource doesn’t work for her.

Would she like to work through her issues in another mode eg. with art, music, drama? If so are there any possibilities where she could do that? Help her find what is available.

Does she have support from family or friends? Can you help her identify who in her social network might be able to provide her with support and what support she would like from them?

Have experiences of violence led to other problems eg. addictions, self-harming... if so help her find supports that can help address those problems.

6. Help her to be kind to herself.

Help her to think about ways of being a support to herself.

For example:

What does she do when she hurts? What else could she do?

What does she say to herself when she makes mistakes? What else could she say?

7. Be a “side support”

Check in to find out whether the supports she is using are what she needs. Help her to keep hunting for the right supports if not. Listen to how it is going.

Offer encouragement that she can work through the issues she is struggling with.

Remind her to be kind to herself

When you see change, help her to see it too.

Encourage her and remember to hold onto hope for her. .

8. Bear witness to the pain only when you can do so without crossing the boundaries that are right for you

Not everyone can bear witness to pain. Think through whether you are in a position to bear witness and if so in what way.

Can you read about experiences of violence in the learner’s journal or other writing?

Can you hear or read about the pain of having experienced violence (ie. Not the actual story but the pain that there is a story)

Can you read published stories/watch videos that speak of experiences of violence with a learner who wants to see or read these?

Can you listen to details of her experiences? If so, what ground rules will you set in place and what supports do you have in place for yourself?

Give clear messages to the student if, when, and how you can bear witness.

If you cannot bear witness in the way that the student needs make sure that you help her find someone else who can.

9. Attend to yourself and your needs

Balance the pain and joy in your life – make sure that you have joys, time in nature, ways to heal and let go of the pain you are aware of.

Make use of the help of a support person – counsellor or staff person – to talk through how you are working with the student and how you are looking after yourself.

If your own issues are brought up through this work make sure you have support to work through those issues.

Adapted from: Saskatchewan level 2 kit: Drawing the line: Dealing with affective issues in literacy
Saskatchewan: Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2001. Available from:
<http://www.nald.ca/sklitnet>

Bring it all together: Planning next steps

What can you do

1. within your program/organization –

- to break silences about violence/violence and learning,
- create conditions to build trust and create a safer learning environment and bring the whole self into the learning process?
- implement holistic content and teaching approaches?

2. to connect with others in your community –

- to take care of your self
- to support students
- and enable the program or organization to address the impacts of violence on learning?

What ONE step will you do NOW and one step will you plan to do during the next year?