

Literacy Learning for Survivors of Trauma

Acting "Normal"

by Jenny Horsman

L'auteure présente un aspect des résultats d'une recherche qui a examiné l'impact des abus de l'alphabétisation chez les femmes et après avoir compris cet im-

fact, explore d'autres approches aux programmes d'alphabétisation.

It may not be "abnormal" for women to have experienced trauma and so to have learned crucial survival strategies.

the impacts of abuse on women's literacy learning.¹ The research study was sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. I interviewed literacy workers, learners, counsellors, and therapists who were interested in reflecting on their concerns and experiences in relation to issues of violence and adult literacy learning.² I had two central questions for interviewees: what impacts of abuse do you see in your literacy program/your work? How can/should literacy programs address these impacts of violence? As I talked to learners and workers during the research process, I heard over and over again about their frustration—learners feeling that their failure to learn must prove they are stupid, and workers struggling with feeling incompetent as they question what they could do better. This frustration confirmed the need for the research, and for changes to literacy work to follow from it.

The deficit model

There is a common tendency in literacy work to slide into an approach where the deficit is seen as residing in the learners. In societies where literacy is highly valued and

taught during compulsory schooling, it is easy for literacy work to frame the learner as the "problem," with a deficit of skills, and to lose awareness of the learners' strengths and knowledge, and of the socially-framed nature of the problem. In the deficit model, only the individual literacy learner needs to change, society can be left unaltered.

Learnings from the therapeutic field offer reframings of old problems to help us to work differently in literacy. However, this discourse can easily be a slippery slope to new deficit models for literacy work with those who have experienced violence. A therapeutic focus simply on individual "healing," implies that the person is sick and can be well. Sandra Butler eloquently critiques "individualized, de-contextualized, and de-politicized healing." "Healing" should not be seen as an individual problem. It may not even be "abnormal" in this society for women to have experienced trauma and so to have learned crucial survival strategies which they continue to bring to all future situations. The goal of literacy work with those who have experienced trauma should not be simply to support their individualized "healing" or to help them to become well, or "normal." Trauma survivors should not be seen as "poor souls" in need of healing. It is, however, the responsibility of literacy workers, funders, and others in the field to recognize that all literacy learning must be carried out in recognition of the needs of survivors of trauma. Those needs should be "normalized" as an everyday part of the literacy program. What some of those "needs"³ look like and how they could influence literacy work will be examined in the rest of this article.

Exploring violence and trauma

In my interviews I heard about an

enormous range of violence. I was told about childhood violence in the home and in school, about adult violence in relationships and in the classroom, and about the ways in which the current and past violence impinged on learners' and workers' safety and on women's learning as adults. Workers frequently talked of how isolated they felt with the stories of violence, of their knowledge of the absence of safety for students, and of their own fears that they, too, were not safe. I was disturbed by the prevalence of the stories and by the statistics about women and girls' experience of violence, which suggest that the experience of violence, rather than freedom from it, is "normal."

During the study, I shifted from speaking about "violence" to using the term "trauma." I preferred the term trauma, as the emphasis of the term is on the reaction of the person and draws the focus away from the degree or amount of violence experienced. Judith Herman provides a clear definition of trauma:

Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.... They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (33)

Although this therapeutic term creates new problems by taking attention away from the agent that causes the trauma, it does draw attention to the impact of trauma, which leads a person to experience subsequent violence as also traumatic.

They have an elevated baseline

of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger. They also have an extreme startle response to unexpected stimuli, as well as an intense reaction to specific stimuli associated with

the traumatic event. (Herman 36)

This awareness seems valuable to help workers realize, for example, that loud and aggressive talk in the classroom might evoke extreme terror in some learners, or to notice that learners may experience government pressure to get into the workforce as controlling and terrifying. Many learners described how the pressure brought back earlier experiences of being abusively controlled.

The therapeutic literature suggests that the sensitivity of the trauma survivor is abnormal, in comparison with some assumed “normal” level of arousal. Events which provoke a reaction are described as “minor stimuli” (van der Kolk *et al.* 3). The perspective on how major the stimuli “really” are, is that of someone who has not experienced trauma. The survivor would not describe the stimuli as “minor.” I think it is crucial to be able to understand major reactions to levels of violence (that some might see as minor), and to question the implication that “healing” from trauma is a process of no longer reacting “unreasonably,” and of moving from abnormal to normal.

Several survivors I interviewed described the sensitivity they felt they had gained from experiencing trauma as a valuable asset. They spoke, for example, of their ability to sense the danger in a situation, or to sense someone’s intentions. Some suggested that their experience would be different if their sensitivity were valued and sought out, rather than feeling they must hide it and act “normal,” disguising their discomfort.

In the literacy field, as in the rest of society, there seems to be little focus on the extent of women’s experiences of violence. This silence allows the preservation of the implication that a “normal” life is one in which violence is not experienced.

Responding to impacts of violence in literacy and the issue of presence

One literacy worker wrote to me about the experience of a student in her class:

She thought she pretty much had sorted out her childhood but Math has brought it back *big time*. She is going to keep a journal—she’s very articulate and observing. We are talking a lot as she struggles but the struggle is really extreme and I’m worried.... Yesterday she managed to blank completely for an hour so that she arrived too late to write a make-up test—now she’s wondering if she really needed to miss the original test. She made arrangements the night before to get here at a particular time, she ate a particularly soothing breakfast—her partner knew this was *the plan* for the day—then all of a sudden it was an hour later and she hadn’t left. Later she remembered a conversation with herself about what time class really started and so when she really needed to get here! When she arrived she couldn’t feel her lower extremities at all. A couple of times through the test she was having trouble breathing. I did every-

thing I could—let her talk about it—gave her help with the questions to make it more like a class and not a test, etc., etc. but she was determined to go on with it. Finally she quit and left—she was okay I think—I urged her to figure out how to care for herself in the afternoon.

Therapists and counsellors I interviewed often spoke of experiences of trauma leading to dissociation. Therapists use this term to refer to a process whereby a person who is experiencing unbearable trauma distances herself from it. This strategy, learned at the time of the initial trauma, becomes an ongoing process which a survivor may unconsciously slip into when something triggers memory.

One caution I have about the concept of dissociation, and particularly some of the more medical interpretations of it as “disorder” or ailment, is the way in which it suggests that “normal” is to be present, and “abnormal” to be dissociated. This either/or approach can easily erase the complexity of degrees of presence and the wide range of factors which could

“They have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger. They also have an extreme startle response.”

lead to greater or lesser presence in any particular situation. As I stated earlier, it is important to avoid sliding into pathologizing learners as “ill” if they dissociate, and diagnosing who is dissociating and who is merely “daydreaming.” I chose to use the word “presence” in order to focus on the nuances of presence, and to create a positive way of speaking about the

“Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.”

challenge for learners to explore what hinders and supports their presence, rather than focussing learners' attention negatively on dissociation, or "not paying attention," as a problem.

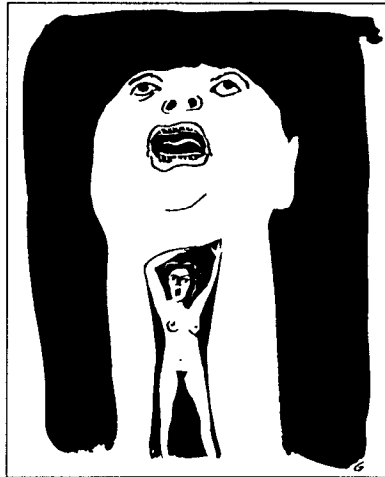
Literacy workers are very familiar with the idea that many learners have difficulty paying attention for any stretch of time, and that many often appear to be daydreaming or bored. This discourse of "inattention" can lead some literacy workers to identify those who are not paying attention as not serious students, or not motivated. Others might think about learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or fetal alcohol or attention deficit disorders. Still others might judge their own teaching as not interesting enough and be continually looking for ways to make the class more stimulating or interesting in order to hold the learners' attention better. Whatever the judgment as to the cause, the result is likely to be frustration for workers and learners alike.

Greater efforts at stimulation may even be counterproductive to creating a relaxed learning environment. One instructor told me that she worked with many students who, although they were in the class regularly, frequently were so spaced out that they did not even recognize work that they had done as their own. She said that, just as missing schooling as children had meant that they did not get a good grasp of the material overall, as adults they were also missing class, even though they were physically in the classroom. So again, they were having trouble making meaning for themselves and understanding the whole. As a consequence, students often told her that they must be stupid because, if they were in class and still had not "got it," then there was no other explanation. This learner frustration makes it crucial to search for explanations which lead to new possibilities for learning.

Recognition by programs, that many learners have difficulty staying present for a variety of reasons, could become part of the everyday discourse in the programs. The difficulty of

staying present could be mentioned when a student enters a program. It could become part of the talk about what will be happening in the class or group and part of staff and volunteer training.

The concept could be normalized and space created for learners to notice when they are less present and what is contributing to it. Do they have crises happening in their life? Are they having nightmares and trou-



Gail Geltner, *Untitled*, 1985

ble sleeping? Are they uncomfortable? What do they think or feel about the topic of the class? Are they anxious and panicked? Has something triggered them and connected them to an earlier trauma (a tone of voice, the sound of chalk, the ringing of a bell, a quality of light...)? If spacing out is named as something many learners struggle with as they seek to learn literacy, and the classroom is made into a place which is accepting and supportive of the variety of challenges learners will be facing, then, rather than repeating the childhood shame and covering up, learners can work at becoming more aware and conscious of what is happening for them.

Learners should be encouraged to strengthen their awareness of their degree of presence, to build knowledge about what they need to stay present and what they learn from leaving, and learn to ask for what they need to support their learning processes.

"All or nothing": living with crises

Several therapists talked about survivors as frequently showing opposing patterns at the same time. For example, they spoke about women moving between taking complete control and abdicating control; complete trust and no trust at all; a defended self and no boundaries or self-protection at all. They spoke of women switching between extremes and having enormous difficulty with ambiguity. They suggested that it would be healing for women to learn to find middle ground. One therapist stressed that if one pattern is present you could expect to see the opposite also there.

Another aspect of "all or nothing" that therapists spoke about was a tendency for survivors to make enormous, "heroic" effort, but to be less likely to carry out daily ongoing work. I was told that the idea of daily effort gradually leading to change was often unusual to survivors. Those who grew up in violent and chaotic homes may have had little experience of seeing regular effort lead to results. As children, such learners are unlikely to have been given the support or space to work at learning something regularly, or to do homework regularly and see the results of their own persistence. One therapist said survivors are often amazed that what they need to do is consistent daily activity. She said they are aghast that it is something so boring and routine that is required.

Several literacy workers who work in full-time community college programs said that many of their students who come in at the beginning of the year ready to make an enormous effort, convinced that this time they will just "do it," drop out soon after, when they are not doing brilliantly. Instructors are often frustrated, wondering how to help the students stay in for the long haul. The insight that such students may not have had practice with the concept of daily work leading to change, or have knowledge of "middle-ground," sug-

gests new ways to think about approaches to help them to stay in a program and learn successfully.

Counsellors also spoke of another dimension, of the "all or nothing" concept as "totalizing." This is explained as a tendency to move instantly from experiencing one example to concluding "it is always this way." For example, one mistake means "I always make mistakes, I am stupid and nothing will change it." Or, "You let me down once I can never rely on you, you always let me down, I will never trust you again over anything." Small failures are complete failures. Clearly this could be very problematic for literacy learning, undermining any possibility of seeing mistakes as part of learning and of continuing to practise writing or reading regularly.

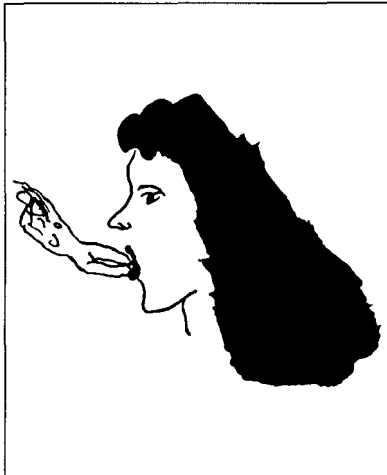
Curriculum which could help to make "middle-ground" visible, and included more exploration of what leads to successful learning, would be useful to all learners. One literacy worker suggested that another way of characterizing and making "middle-ground" visible, is to think in terms of "good enough." Perhaps a variety of modes of helping learners to see their gradual progress would be useful. Portfolios of work, for example, could be used to help learners see the shifts in their own work for themselves. Mentors and role models might also be able to support learners, by describing times when they have continued in the face of frustration and failures, and revealing that although daily work may be boring, it is part of the process of reaching a goal.

"All or nothing" ways of relating to the world can mean that trauma survivors live with regular crises. Instructors talked a lot about the crises in learners' lives and the energy they consume. Therapists and the therapeutic literature talk about how scary it can be for someone who is used to living in a state of crisis to live without crises. A group of workers described crises as a way of "putting off success and change." One learner said that after living with crisis all her

life she had no sense of who she would be if she were not in crisis.

Trust and boundaries

Trust, or the attention required to assess whether it is safe to trust, is another of the issues which workers and counsellors spoke about as taking up energy and impeding the learners' presence in the program. A survivor described the problem as profound:



Gail Geltner, "Out With It," 1983

The first thing I learned, in a long list of strategies to survive my childhood, was not to trust anybody. The second thing I learned was not to trust myself. (Danica 17)

Many ways of working to help to build learners' trust in their own knowledge, trust in their ability to judge the safety of a situation and the trustworthiness of others, could be developed and used more consciously in literacy programming. Many processes which are already used by some teachers, such as journal writing, timed writing, followed by reading aloud and group work, might help to build such skill.

To be trustworthy, workers have to learn to respect their own boundaries and the boundaries of others, as well as support those who do not have good boundaries to learn to create them. Counsellors spoke about the importance of workers coming to recognize when their own boundaries

have been crossed, noticing their own anger as a guide to that, and learning to put back in place the clear limits that are necessary to avoid feeling burnt-out, "used" and angry at those who make demands. The ability to re-instate boundaries when they have slipped is an important skill to model for women who may not have learned even the simple right to keep boundaries. In contrast, literacy workers often spoke about how hard they found it to create any limits and boundaries for themselves. A typical example of workers' ambivalence was one worker's account of closing her door after class and trying to ignore when students knocked. When we talked about it, she realized that she had never given herself permission to tell students when she was and was not available to them and to ask them to respect her "boundary." Instead, she said she felt angry that they hammered on her door when she needed to get office work done. Perhaps more often, workers talked about not even setting such basic limits, feeling they had to stretch to meet their students' needs, which were too critical to be denied.

Much therapeutic literature describes the connection between trauma and difficulties creating boundaries.

This impaired ability to trust one's perceptions and act on them also extends to setting appropriate boundaries. The essence of sexual abuse is having one's most intimate boundary—the skin on one's body—violated. (Mitten and Dutton 134)

Some literacy workers spoke of trauma leading to building a "wall" or being completely exposed, and saw problems created from being over-defended or under-defended. Counsellors and therapists stressed that to be trustworthy was to avoid "rescuing" even when asked, as to do so is to collude in the suggestion that the survivor cannot act on her own behalf and can only be "saved" by someone else taking over.

An obvious aspect of boundaries must be clarity about touching and the negotiation of touch. A hand on the shoulder, a pat on the back, or a hug that may seem a supportive gesture for some, could be invasive and traumatic for others. That basic respect for the boundary between one person's body and another's is important if the classroom is to be a place where a survivor can relax and feel safe. Alternative ways—words and looks of encouragement—to show support and encouragement or sympathy need to be found. The classroom offers quite a challenge for those who are not comfortable being too close to others, or close to men in particular. Working together at a computer or in a group at a table could be extremely threatening for some students. The proximity of an instructor coming up behind a student to help, or towering over a student who is sitting, could be a trigger. A male instructor would need to be especially sensitive to what might trigger students and take particular care around issues such as touch, closeness, and relative height.

Safety and telling stories

Much good literacy practice includes learners writing about their own lives. Learners are often asked to keep "response" or "dialogue" journals where the instructor or facilitator writes a reply or reaction after each journal entry. Beginning literacy students are asked to tell a "language experience" story, where an incident from their own lives becomes the basis for their own reading.

I want to draw attention to the energy that learners have to put into deciding what they will say or write and into worrying about whether they will be shamed. This tension and fear is another distraction from the task of developing the ability to read and write with ease. One therapist suggested that learners may be continually asking themselves "If I tell this, can you hear, or will I have to take care of you?" and "If I tell this, can you hear, or will you shame me?"

That doubt takes us back to the question of trust. When learners have built some trust that the classroom is a safe place to take risks in learning, they may be tempted to be more open with the stories of their lives. Disclosures make a demand on the instructor and on other learners to be able to "hear." But, safety, in the literacy program, is 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 where they are safe from violence or hearing disturbing accounts of violence in the lives of others.

Several therapists stressed that if the focus of the literacy program is only on pain, a crucial opportunity to create a space for hope, for belief in the possibility of change, and for discovering joy in learning is lost. Several therapists and literacy workers stressed the importance of knowing when to shift the energy in the classroom from pain to pleasure, and make space for fun and humour. One literacy worker drew on her own experience when she observed that children in violent or alcoholic families are often not allowed to be frivolous, to laugh and play, and that the humour in such homes is often hurtful teasing, where those with less power are exposed to put-downs and made the butt of the humour. This literacy worker thought that it was very healing to create possibilities for humour, joy, and laughter that is not at anyone's expense. In her practice, she integrated a range of playfulness and fun with a non-judgmental atmosphere where learners could also speak about their pain. Finding an appropriate balance between a space for the telling of pain and for experiencing pleasure and joy would be creative and extremely challenging for literacy workers.

Many literacy workers talked about the challenge to create a safe space in their programs. This was especially true where racism between groups created tensions, and where participants had connections and relationships outside the classroom. In such circumstances, the power of the in-

structor to create a respectful and safe environment for all is often limited. Yet program workers spoke of how stressful and active a role they played to try to create a safer space.

In programs serving people on the street, the commitment to create a place that is safe for all learners requires an active "policing" role on the part of workers, to make sure learners do not bring weapons into the program and to remove anyone who is violent or abusive from the program. Although workers spoke of the importance of the safer space they were creating, they also spoke of the exhausting task of enforcing it and the tension of being the recipients of anger unleashed when they barred students from the program. They stressed that creating a safer space is an ongoing challenge which forces them to recognize the power dynamic in which they impose limits and struggle continually to maintain them, in the face of the threat of violence.

Conclusion

Seeing the complexity of awareness needed for both workers and learners around such issues as presence, trust, boundaries, and crises, adds awareness to the question of why learning to read is such a difficult and lengthy process. Where the struggles around each of these issues are ones which a literacy learner has to carry out in private—to reveal her difficulties in these areas is to have herself judged as "abnormal"—then energy is required not only to struggle with the difficulties, but also to hide this struggle.

It is crucial that, within the literacy program (and perhaps also more broadly in education), the range of what is "normal" be broadened and the discourse opened up to include awareness of the struggles that many learners, whether survivors or not, have in a broad range of areas. If the challenges learners face are made an active part of the curriculum, then all learners can benefit from exploring what it takes to be fully present in the classroom and from the knowledge

gained from the times of less presence; from discovering a deeper understanding of ambiguity and middle ground rather than staying with the stark contrasts of "all or nothing"; from considering crises and how to live both in and out of crisis; from examining questions of trust in terms of the possibility of trusting their own knowledge and trusting others in the class not to judge and put them down; from learning to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others; from deciding which stories to tell when; and from creating a safer place to learn.

The silence about the widespread experience of violence, and the impacts of such experiences on learning, limit the possibilities for literacy learning. The funding constraints and bureaucratic structures which shape literacy work are blocking the recognition that a whole range of learning is integral to the literacy learning process. Unless the challenges many learners experience are recognized, the accessibility of literacy will be limited to those who can learn fast and easily. The pressure for survivors of violence to learn, while "acting normal" and disguising the impacts of experiences of violence on their learning will slow, or even block, learning for many women. This silence must be challenged and new practices and policies developed to enhance women's learning.

A discussion paper, "But I'm Not a Therapist: Furthering Discussion about Literacy Work with Survivors of Trauma" briefly introduces all the findings of the research study. I hope to be able to publish a book which explores the findings in-depth in 1998 and I am also seeking funding for several follow-up projects. For more information, contact CLOW: (416) 699-1909 or fax (416) 699-2145, email cclow@web.net or the author: jhorsman@idirect.com.

In this short article I cannot list the names of all those who have spent time talking to me, who have supported and challenged me throughout the process,

and who have believed in the work and made it possible. I can only offer a collective thank you to the many people who are part of this work.

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¹This study focused on women literacy learners' experience of violence. Further studies are needed to explore the particularities of men's experience and women's experience in other educational settings. However, many of the implications for literacy programming for women emerging from this research would strengthen literacy learning and other educational programming for all students.


²I identified key contacts in five regions (British Columbia, Prairies, Central Canada, Atlantic, and North) who each identified women interested in talking to me. Overall, I talked to approximately 150 people, mostly women, in focus group ses-

sions, individual interviews, and through computer networks.

³I want also to recognize that not only learners, but also literacy workers, are survivors of trauma. Such experience will have impact on their work and teaching, just as learners' experiences have impact on their learning.

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SEX, POWER, & THE VIOLENT SCHOOL GIRL

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“Too embarrassing to talk about ...”

— Grade 11 girl

Life can be unfair; some people just sit there and take the harassment. I think it's time we **take a stand** against harassment — **Grade 10 girl** ~ Who cares about harassment, as long as nobody's getting raped, even then who cares? **Just take it** — **Grade 10 boy** - I am too big; **nobody touches me** — **Grade 9 boy** - I think the sexual harassment was the worst thing I had to go through. The guy who was bugging me would corner me and try to make me kiss him. It was very disturbing and **it made me feel very scared**. Every time I walked by a big group of guys they always sang a song, stared at me, or made kissing noises. I feel very insecure when this happens so every time I see a group of guys I take another route to my destination. **They think it's a joke** and it's not sexual harassment, **but they don't know that it's serious** — **Grade 11 girl** - I told the teacher but she did not do anything — **Grade 9 girl** - Many other female students have complained about the male teacher **but so far nothing has happened** — **Grade 9 girl** - **The zero tolerance policy is irrelevant if not enforced** — **Grade 11 boy** - I think this happens to pretty much every girl but **even if the school tried to do something it wouldn't stop**. If they wanted to they'd just find a different time and place to do it. And you know it — **Grade 11 girl** - This is stupid. Everyone knows this happens, but retards like you waste other people's time. **Nothing you do can stop this**. So stop making people do this shit. Even if it did happen to someone, it's not like they will admit it happen [sic] to them. Most people in “the real world” lie about it — **Grade 11 boy** - Being a male, I haven't quite experienced a lot of sexual harassment/discrimination. **When I hear a fellow male friend comment negatively on a woman I become mad**. I was raised to respect everyone for who they are, both inside and outside. If children grow up respecting one another, their children will be raised and taught the same values and so on and so forth. To rid the world of harassment and discrimination will take two to three generations — **Grade 11 boy** - Depending on the person who does it, the extent at which he/she does it, and **whether or not it is insulting to me is how I decipher what is or isn't sexual harassment/discrimination**, not on what is dictated to me on a piece of paper — **Grade 11 girl**

These comments are taken from a 1997 survey of high school students who were asked to comment on the subject of sexual harassment in their learning environment. All remarks remain anonymous.