

"But I'm Not a Therapist":

Literacy Work with Survivors of Abuse

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Research Project on Women, Violence and Literacy Learning

by Jenny Horsman

Most of us who are involved in literacy work know that many women literacy learners have experienced violence as children or adults. We hear the stories when women write or talk about their lives. Sometimes current violence, or the aftermath of violence, leads to various crises for women in literacy programs. We often feel stretched to the limit even before these issues come up. We are trying everything we can to help women to improve their literacy skills, and we don't usually have the time or energy to look at whether experiences of violence might create barriers for literacy learning.

Many workers have told me that they are not therapists, so they can't or perhaps shouldn't try addressing issues of violence. They want to focus on helping women improve their literacy skills. I have begun to wonder whether we have to look at the issues of violence if we are going to be successful in helping women who are survivors of violence improve their skills. I am carrying out a research project to examine these issues. I am interviewing literacy workers, learners, therapists and counsellors to explore the impacts of violence on literacy learning as well as possible ways literacy programming might address these impacts. I hope to be able to talk to literacy workers, learners, therapists and counsellors -alone or in small groups - in many locations across the country.

The project is sponsored by CLOW (the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women) and has been partially funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. I have done all sorts of previous

research, thinking, writing and workshops on women and literacy issues. More and more this has led me to ask questions about women's experiences of violence. This research project is my chance to focus on those questions and ask others to participate in this process. I hope this will lead to information that will strengthen literacy work with women. (Although I am focusing on women's experiences in this study, I don't want to imply that men are not also survivors of abuse; I think exploring men's experiences needs a separate study.) In this research, I am focusing on three central questions:

1. What impacts of abuse are instructors (and other literacy workers) observing in literacy programs?

I am listening to how literacy workers, who think that violence is an important issue to examine, describe the impacts of violence they observe in their programs. My aim is to uncover the kinds of problem scenarios workers are aware of. I am prompting for a broad range and detail of observation. My experience in literacy work makes me think it would be useful to question the impact of abuse on: the individual learning process - the processes of deciphering and creating text; the attitudes and behavior brought to the individual learning process, to the class or group learning situation; and to participation in the structures and processes which are in place to run the program. So far, I have carried out interviews in British Columbia and the Prairies and am now setting up interviews in central Canada and the Atlantic provinces. I also hope that I will be able to get up North. I want to talk to a range of experienced literacy workers in a wide variety of settings and regions, who are interested in the issues of violence.



A woman who starts and stops a program several times may be terrified at thinking she has a right to do something for herself.

As the discourses of literacy practice (our frameworks, concepts and language) do not generally take up issues of violence, many possible impacts of abuse may be missed because they are described within other discursive frames. For example, it may be that a woman who starts and stops a program several times does so because, having lived with abuse, she is terrified that by simply attending the program she implies that she thinks she has a right to do something for herself. She also risks failure and thus proving to herself that she really is as stupid as she has been told. This might not be observed by a literacy worker as an impact of violence, instead it might be described within the discourse of "motivation". Such a learner might be seen as not sufficiently motivated to stay in school. In order to further explore the impacts of violence on learning and program participation, beyond the scenarios the workers already recognize, I have been prompting literacy workers with information gained from interviews with



therapists and the study of psychological literature on the impacts of trauma. In this way I hope we can add more depth to the exploration of the impacts of abuse. I hope to explore how the information framed in discourses outside the literacy field can offer alternatives to the prevalent discourses of literacy, and reframe the observations of impacts

I am just at the early stages of trying to look at what I am learning from the first round of interviews. An example might help to make my approach clearer. One possible shift of discourse is from the concept of "daydreaming" or "spacing out", often used by literacy workers, to the discourse of "dissociating", used in the therapeutic field to describe a central characteristic of people who have experienced trauma. I am not trying to suggest that one discourse is "right" or better, rather that the discourse from the therapeutic field might help us to look differently at something that occurs within literacy classrooms, and begin to find new approaches that we might not have consider previously.

One therapist suggested that a student could be supported in learning both to value dissociation as a survival skill, and to learn how to stay present for increasing lengths time when she chooses. If an instructor makes it clear that spacing out/dissociating is a perfectly normal thing that many people do and not something to be denied or ashamed of, learners might be encouraged to stay present. Learners can then begin to recognize what triggers them into spacing out/dissociating, look at what might be changed in their environment, and begin to learn what works best for them. It might also help if the door is kept open, generally making it easier for learners to actually get up and leave the room when something triggers them, rather than leaving in mind only. Teaching in small snippets, so that learners are only trying to stay present for short time, might also be helpful.

As literacy workers think through the idea of helping learners stay present and learn, many more ideas might be generated. One literacy worker I talked to recognized that her students were often spacing out/dissociating in class and so never got the "whole" of something they were learning. Consequently they couldn't understand why they just couldn't "get it" and often decided the only explanation was their own stupidity. Literacy workers might perhaps think that spacing out means learners are bored, and seek to make the lesson more interesting. Or, they might be critical of what they judge to be a learner's lack of motivation, thinking they should pay more attention. An approach which helps learners become aware of their spacing out/dissociation, to value it and learn to stay present, might reduce the frustration for learner and workers thus leading to a learner acquiring skills which might enable her to stay present more often, and consequently, learn more.



Survivors may have learned that change comes from heroic effort rather than daily repetitions.

2. How can literacy workers address issues of violence in literacy programs?

I hope that data from interviews with literacy workers, learners, counsellors and therapists will help answer this question. An analysis of the psychological literature on the commonly recognized impacts of abuse may also lead to further ideas for how issues might be addressed.



This can then be offered back to literacy workers and learners in order to explore what they see as being possible within the limitations of literacy programs, the skills and experience of literacy workers, the community context, and the supports available. The examples already mentioned begin to indicate some possible shifts in approaches.

I will explore both the limitations of the current literacy work discourses, and the value of alternative discourses to open up possibilities for new approaches in addressing the impacts of abuse. For example, I have speculated whether the discourse that focuses on the idea that the learner can do anything (which leads a worker to simply reassure a learner who is struggling, saying that she can do the work and not to worry about making mistakes), may not be useful for a survivor, and may actually work against her learning. A discourse which opens up reflection and self-knowledge may be part of an entirely different approach needed to support a survivor in unlearning the lessons learned well in childhood - that she is stupid, that she should not trust what she knows, that mistakes put her in danger.

One therapist told me that a chaotic, violent childhood and the survival of unbearable violence may have led a woman to believe that what is required to survive is supreme effort, rather than small efforts carried out on a daily basis. A chaotic household may not have had any dailiness, ordinary things done every day in the same way. When I introduced that idea to one group of literacy workers there was a lot of recognition. They all remembered learners who arrived at the beginning of a course with incredible energy and sense that they were just going to "do it" this time. The workers knew from experience that those learners often gave up soon after. But these workers did not often know what to do to help learners to settle in to steady work over a long period. The understanding from the therapeutic field, based on the idea that survivors may have learned to expect change from heroic effort rather than daily repetitions, may be useful to help literacy workers think of new approaches to help these learners stay in for the long haul and see changes in their skill level.

As I travelled across the country I have been looking for, and learning about, any model of literacy programming which seeks to explicitly address the impact of women's experiences of violence. For instance, I have been interested in programs with counsellors on staff, or with links to women's shelters, or seeking to support women's bridging from a violent relationship to employment or further education. I wanted to explore a broad range of possibilities that might be tried to address the impact of abuse on literacy learning and participation in programs. Some possible approaches might include: the concept of collaborative work with counsellors or other services, training for literacy workers, specific curricula to address particular impacts, as well as many different detailed ways that literacy teaching might be carried out to address the specific impacts literacy workers identify.



For each possibility I plan to explore many subsequent questions. For example, the question of collaboration would require examination of the feasibility of this approach. What sorts of collaborative links already exist in programs? What kinds of resources would collaboration require? What possible organizations/services could literacy programs potentially collaborate with? What might collaboration look like? What barriers are there, such as the isolation of the literacy field, the unique discourses of the field, and financial constraints? For each possibility identified through the first stage of the research, I plan to identify another series of questions to explore each possibility further and set the stage for future research.

Connected to questions of safety are issues of trust, confidentiality and the creation of boundaries which help both workers and learners remain safe.

3. What would "safety" mean in a literacy program and how is this concept understood by literacy workers?

The third question I plan to focus on is how safety gets constituted for learners and teachers in literacy programs. I am concerned that literacy programs must be a safe place for survivors to learn and teach. I want to explore how safety is understood by literacy workers and learners, as well as their issues and concerns. Connected to questions of safety are issues of trust and confidentiality and the creation of boundaries or limits which help both workers and learners remain safe. This study will explore appropriate ways of seeking to address the impacts of abuse on literacy learning through examining the issue of what approaches are responsible for teachers and learners in the literacy setting. The idea of trying out a pilot project to explore the creation of a literacy program as a "safe place" is one idea which has come up so far but which needs a lot more exploration.

At this point in my study I can only begin to reflect on a few examples. I hope to be writing in more detail soon. At the moment I feel as if I am swirling around in so many ideas and experiences that workers, learners, and therapists have been telling me, that I am not sure how clear I can be. I still plan to talk to more literacy workers, learners, counsellors and therapists.

Are you interested?

If you want more detailed information about the questions I am asking in this study, please contact me. If you have observations, experience or questions you would like to share with me, I would love to hear from you. If you know anyone else you think I should talk to - learners, workers or counsellors (if you/they are in an area where I am not planning on carrying out interviews perhaps we could "talk" on e-mail), let me know. I would also love to hear about any great resources on this subject that you have discovered.

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